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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 19 March 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Health and Disability Green Paper

1. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Whether she has had discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the upcoming health and disability Green Paper on the finances of disabled people. [903263]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Yesterday afternoon, we set out the Government's plan to fix the broken system, which gives proper employment support to help hundreds of thousands who are out of work on health and disability grounds, but who want to be in a job; deals with the work disincentive that has been inserted into the benefits system over the past 15 years; and makes the personal independence payment financially sustainable.

Tom Gordon: In recent weeks, I have been inundated with messages from constituents who are worried sick about changes to the disability benefits system, but yesterday's announcement goes further than even the Conservatives managed, or dared, to. Disabled people already face systemic barriers in society, including in accessing health, transport and housing. Inadequate financial support already means that some of the most vulnerable have to access food banks. These cuts will exacerbate their pain, and fuel hunger and debt. What assessment has the Department made of the cuts, the impact on finances, and the harm that they will cause?

Sir Stephen Timms: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the previous Government's proposal to convert PIP from cash into vouchers, which caused huge anxiety. We made it clear in the announcement yesterday that we are not going to do that, but we will make changes to ensure that the personal independence payment is financially sustainable in the long term. That will reassure a large number of people for whom PIP is vital.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): Epilepsy is a lifelong disability that has huge consequences for the lives of those who have it, none more so than those mothers who had epilepsy and took sodium valproate when pregnant, and whose babies were harmed. Will the Minister take time to meet me and my constituent, Janet Williams, whose sons have been affected, to discuss how we can ensure that their quality of life is best supported by the Government?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend raises an important subject, and as she knows, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has set up the valproate pregnancy prevention programme. I, or a Minister from DHSC, will be glad to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those points.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): We all know that life is more expensive for someone who is disabled, and that investing in mental health and social care would give disabled people the support that they deserve. Liberal Democrats believe that if the Government were serious about cutting welfare spending, they would get serious about fixing health and social care, and the broken Department for Work and Pensions. By fixing that, we would reduce the benefits bill in the long term, but yesterday's changes, which slash the support offered to vulnerable people, will leave many people facing difficult choices. Can the Minister assure disabled people, including the 80,000 in Scotland who are still receiving PIP, that they will be listened to, their needs will be taken into account, and they will somehow continue to get the support that they need?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome the additional £26 billion being invested in the national health service in the coming financial year, for exactly the reasons she set out, and the most severely impaired people will be protected under the changes that we announced yesterday to the personal independence payment. Yes, we will be consulting—there will be a full 12-week consultation period on the Green Paper proposals, and we will be listening carefully to what everybody says in response.

Ethnic Minority People: Discrimination

2. **John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help end discrimination against ethnic minority people. [903264]

6. **Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help end discrimination against ethnic minority people. [903268]

14. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help end discrimination against ethnic minority people. [903277]

The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra): This Government are clear that someone's race or ethnicity should never be a barrier to success. As set out in the King's Speech last July, we are committed to introducing mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting for large employers; those measures will be part of the draft equality in race and disability Bill. Yesterday we published a consultation on those proposals, and announced that we have established a new race equality engagement group, which will partner with ethnic minority communities, stakeholders and delivery partners to help shape the Government's work on race equality. I am delighted that Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon has agreed to chair that group.

John Grady: Glasgow's Muslim community is characterised by its kindness and public service. Last weekend, I visited my friends at the Hillview Islamic and education centre in Shettleston, and met the convenor of the Muslim Council of Scotland, Dr Muhammad Adrees. I heard about terrible incidents of anti-Muslim hatred and crimes in Glasgow and the west of Scotland. Does my hon. Friend agree that our Muslim brothers and sisters should not have to live with that hatred, and will she set out the steps that the Government are taking to combat that?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and I completely agree with him. Indeed, I also attended a wonderful interfaith iftar in Hounslow on Friday. Islamophobia is completely abhorrent and has no place in our society. No one should ever be the victim of hatred because of their religion or belief. The Government have established a new working group to provide the Government with a definition of anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia, and advise the Government and other bodies on how best to understand, quantify and define prejudice, discrimination and hate crime targeted against Muslims.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the Minister for her commitment to mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting. However, I was disappointed to learn that the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority are rowing back on their proposals to boost diversity in financial services. I feel that risks pushing away the very best talent from the sector. Only 4% of financial services firms disclose their ethnicity pay gap. The announcement will only slow the pace of change that is needed to tackle inequalities. Does the Minister agree that initiatives that aim to reduce the ethnicity pay gap are not anti-growth, but pro-talent and pro-growth?

Seema Malhotra: Fair and equal treatment at work is a right, not a privilege. Companies like Deloitte, which I visited recently, are reporting voluntarily on their ethnicity pay gaps, and I have attended roundtables chaired by organisations such as Change the Race Ratio and ShareAction, which promote the benefits of ethnicity pay gap reporting. There has been progress; last week, the Parker review showed that there is an increasing number of ethnic minority board members in our FTSE companies. I agree with my hon. Friend that pay gap reporting can help employers to identify and remove barriers to progression for their workforces, and unleash talent from all our communities, thereby supporting economic growth, and I thank her for her work on this.

Mohammad Yasin: I was pleased to see the Government's announcement of the newly established race equality engagement group, chaired by Baroness Doreen Lawrence, a tireless campaigner against discrimination for many decades. What steps are the Government taking to recognise caste-based discrimination in law? Will that issue be the focus of the group's work?

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend references the race equality engagement group, which we announced yesterday. The group will strengthen the Government's links with ethnic minority communities, enabling effective two-way dialogue on the Government's work to tackle race equalities, and engaging on all issues. We are considering our position on caste discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, and we will update the House in due course.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): As a former NHS employee, I was shocked to hear that the Community Security Trust has found that the number of complaints of antisemitism in the NHS tripled in the 17 months after 7 October 2023. What steps are the Government taking to crack down on antisemitism in the NHS?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman will agree that antisemitism has no place in our society or in our workplaces. This is an extremely important issue, and he will know that the Home Secretary and the whole Government take it very seriously.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Aberdeen mosque and Islamic centre in my constituency was vandalised while worshippers were inside. I am pleased that the local community came together and helped with the clean-up. The University of Glasgow has published a report that says that one in three Muslim students are victims of Islamophobic abuse. Does the Minister agree that the Government and the House have a responsibility to ensure that racist stereotypes are not putting our Muslim community at risk of a rise in hate crime and far-right extremism?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is important that we tackle religious and racial hatred in all its forms.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): As well as overt discrimination, there are many hidden ethnic disparities, particularly in healthcare. Mortality rates in maternity services are four times higher for black women and twice as high for Asian women. What discussions is the Minister having with the Department of Health and Social Care to address those huge inequalities in maternity care?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There are stark inequalities in maternal health, mental health and a range of other areas, including infant mortality. She is absolutely right that that must be tackled. We are working across Government and with the Department of Health and Social Care on those issues.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Does the Minister think it is acceptable for anyone in this country to say that people should "pray for victory" for Hamas over Israel, or for anyone to celebrate the 7 October attacks as a David-over-Goliath situation? If not, why did the Prime Minister invite Adam Kelwick, who has said such despicable things, to No. 10 just last week? Will the Minister apologise on behalf of the Prime Minister to the Jewish community, who need to know that this Government will stand with them against violence, hatred and division—and, in fact, with communities of all races and religions? All communities need to be supported.

Seema Malhotra: The shadow Minister knows that Hamas is a proscribed organisation, and we will not tolerate antisemitism at any point, or in any way.

Violence against Women and Girls

3. **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [903265]

10. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [903273]

13. **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [903276]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): We will deliver a cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy, and we are already taking significant steps to ensure that VAWG is treated as the national emergency that it is. That includes embedding the first domestic abuse specialists in 999 control rooms under Raneem's law, starting in five police forces, and further extending the roll-out of domestic abuse protection orders to Cleveland and north Wales.

Darren Paffey: I thank the Minister for her answer. A constituent of mine in Southampton Itchen suffered horrendous domestic and sexual abuse while she was a serving police officer, but inexplicably the rules did not allow her to take her complaint to the Independent Office for Police Conduct, and made her a victim of the very system that was meant to offer her protection. Does the Minister agree that a woman's right to get justice should not depend on the job that she happens to do? Will she meet me and my constituent to discuss the changes needed so that we can better protect dedicated public servants such as her?

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and his constituent. Allegations of any crime involving serving police officers should be investigated robustly and independently by the police. Outside of criminal investigations, disciplinary investigations, including those involving serious assault and sexual violence, are referred to the IOPC under mandatory referral criteria, but there is more to do.

Kevin Bonavia: In my constituency of Stevenage, we have an excellent charity called SADA—Survivors Against Domestic Abuse. Such charities rely on multi-agency working to deliver essential services to those affected by domestic abuse. How are the Government continuing to support organisations in working closely together to continue to provide effective services to those who have suffered domestic abuse?

Jess Phillips: I thank SADA for the amazing work that it does. In December 2024, we prioritised confirming funding for those delivering frontline services. In the next few weeks, we will work on agreeing decisions about our wider budget that will support the Government's ambition of halving VAWG in a decade, to deliver on our manifesto commitments.

Sarah Edwards: On International Women's Day, our community in Tamworth came together to not only celebrate the achievements of women, but reflect on the important issue of the safety of women and girls. Local women Tamanna and Mckenzie took the initiative to

organise a walk-and-talk event, bringing together key organisations, including the UP Creative Hub community interest company and Tamworth Street Angels. They had never organised an event before, and they managed to pull together 50 women in just two weeks. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Tamanna and Mckenzie on that fantastic event, and on their dedication to raising awareness of such an important issue?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely, gladly. Tamanna and Mckenzie deserve all our praise. It is infectious; the first time we do such a thing often leads to the second. The rising of the women is the rising of us all.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I am sure we all agree that securing women's wellbeing is key to tackling violence against women and girls, so can the Minister assure women across my constituency and the country that the Labour Government, having promised to prioritise women's health, are committed to continuing the Conservative Government's work by making sure there is a women's health hub in every integrated care board, to ensure holistic support for women?

Jess Phillips: A Minister to my left tells me that these hubs are already in nine out of 10 integrated care boards. I can assure the hon. Lady that I am working very closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on the violence against women and girls strategy, because there are real gaps when it comes to how domestic abuse, sexual violence and other related abuses are dealt with by our health services. That will be absolutely fundamental to both protection and prevention.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers and for her ongoing engagement on this issue with the people in Northern Ireland. The name Natalie McNally will mean much to the Minister; on 18 December 2022, Natalie was brutally murdered in my constituency, along with her unborn baby. Can the Minister update the House on ongoing discussions about a UK-wide strategy for tackling violence against women that will improve conviction rates, get tougher sentencing, and provide more support for victims? We do this in the name of Natalie and the many other women who have lost their lives.

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Lady for her continued support for Natalie's family. When I was in Northern Ireland, it was very clear to me that that support had been in place. A fundamental part of halving violence against women and girls has been looking at exactly the issue she has talked about—the femicide of women, and how we can all work together in a multi-agency way to ensure that I do not have to read out names like Natalie McNally's.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Will the Minister discuss with the Home Secretary how best we can bring to account, albeit belatedly, those still surviving who aided and abetted Mohamed Fayed in the rape and sexual assault of young women and girls?

Jess Phillips: The Home Secretary and I have very much discussed that. While there are ongoing police investigations, it would be inappropriate for me to make any further comment. However, having met some of those affected, I want to see exactly what the right hon. Gentleman wants to see.

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

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The Minister and many colleagues in this place will be aware of the groundbreaking new Netflix programme “Adolescence”. It is chilling, but is rightfully forcing a national conversation about the dangerous content seen by young men and boys, with fatal consequences. Given the important role that schools play in preventing violence against women and girls, will the Minister provide an update on what is being done with the Department for Education to counter misogyny and extreme violence, in order to enable a safe future for young boys and girls?

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that including men and boys in the conversation about how we prevent future violence against women and girls will be absolutely fundamental. A huge portion of the new violence against women and girls strategy is focused on prevention, and what we can do in our schools, our workplaces and elsewhere to reach men and boys, in order to change the future.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I have been contacted by a number of women in my constituency who are victims of domestic violence, and whose partners continue to exert control over them through the family court process and the presumption that they will be able to access their children. Will the Minister meet me, or inform me of what she is doing with the Ministry of Justice to help those women escape that control?

Jess Phillips: I work hand in glove with my counterparts in the Ministry of Justice on the violence against women and girls strategy, and I have long-standing concerns—as the hon. Lady does—about the presumption of contact and family court issues. Those issues will form the subject of part of our reforms, and are being looked into. I will gladly meet the hon. Lady.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): In January, the Labour Government committed to assisting five local inquiries, including one in Oldham, into grooming gangs and rape gangs. Two months on, we have had no update from the Government about the other locations. In which towns can women and girls now sleep safely in their beds? When and where will the other four inquiries take place, and what do the Government plan to do about the other 45 towns and cities across the country in which those gangs have reportedly operated?

Jess Phillips: What the Government plan to do across the country is more than was done before. The House should expect an update very soon exactly on all the plans that the Home Secretary laid out. She said that the announcement would come before Easter, and I beg the shadow Minister to have the patience she showed with her own Government when they offered none of these things.

Topical Questions

T1. [903278] **Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): This Government celebrated International Women’s Day and Women’s History Month by accelerating action to change women’s lives. That means greater opportunities in the workplace and ensuring that our streets are safe for women and that we have better public services for our women and their families. Harnessing the talents and skills of all women will boost our economy. A 5% increase in employment among women could boost the UK economy by up to £125 billion. Women’s equality is at the heart of our plan for change and will drive economic growth for everyone.

Charlotte Nichols: According to research, 52% of integrated care boards in England, including Cheshire and Merseyside ICB, still require same-sex couples to self-fund at least six to 12 cycles of costly intrauterine insemination before they are eligible to access in vitro fertilisation treatment on the NHS. Can the Secretary of State please tell us what she is doing to end the postcode lottery for lesbian and bi couples looking to start a family?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House’s attention to the postcode lottery and the patchy access to IVF across our country. We want to make sure that everyone has fair access to high-quality care. The Department of Health and Social Care has started to make progress towards its ambition to improve access to IVF services, and we also await the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence concluding its review on clinical guidance for the provision of such services.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Parents up and down the country are anxious about the use of puberty blockers on under-18s, so I was disappointed to read that the Health Secretary has failed to intervene in an NHS puberty blocker trial, despite grave concerns about children’s safety. The landmark Cass review said that more evidence was needed, but will the Secretary of State show moral courage and common-sense leadership to ensure that these dangerous and irreversible drugs are never tested on our children?

Bridget Phillipson: The Government’s position on this issue has been clear. We have accepted all the recommendations brought forward by Dr Hilary Cass. I have met Dr Hilary Cass to discuss this issue. Given the question the shadow Minister has asked, he perhaps misunderstands the recommendations that Dr Cass brought forward.

T2. [903280] **Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): What consideration has been given to the introduction of safe leave for employees experiencing domestic abuse?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): We strongly encourage employers to support their employees who experience domestic abuse. Many already do that through their membership of the employers’ initiative on domestic abuse, which empowers employers to take action. I will be working with the Department for Business and Trade, including through the violence against women and girls strategy, to look at issues specific to victims in the workplace.

T6. [903285] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on what changes, if any, she intends to make to the Equality Act 2010? In particular, if she is going to make caste a protected characteristic, will she ensure that people of all religions that emanate from the Indian subcontinent are consulted, because that measure would severely impact every such family in this country?

Bridget Phillipson: We have no plans to change the Equality Act. As my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) set out earlier, through the new race engagement group being led by Baroness Lawrence we will consider any such questions, including the ones that the hon. Gentleman identifies.

T3. [903281] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): After an appalling rape incident on the Fuller Street bridge in my constituency, I was shocked to find that last year only 2.7% of recorded rapes in the UK resulted in a charge. What is the Minister doing to improve the charge rate and get justice for more survivors of this appalling crime?

Bridget Phillipson: I am very sorry to hear of the case in my hon. Friend's constituency. It brings into sharp focus the need to tackle violence against women and girls, and to ensure that our mission to halve its incidence is delivered. Our inheritance from the Conservatives was shocking, with far too many women denied justice, cases never getting to court, and victims being left to wait for years for justice. That is why the Lord Chancellor has made it a priority to take action to deliver justice for women.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I welcome to the Gallery the Chairman of the State Great Hural, the Parliament of Mongolia.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [903304] **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 19 March.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Last night I spoke to President Zelensky to discuss progress that President Trump had made with Russia towards a ceasefire, and I took the opportunity to reaffirm our unwavering support for the people of Ukraine.

I am deeply concerned about the resumption of Israeli military action in Gaza. The images of parents carrying their children—young children—to hospitals that have emerged over the last few days are truly shocking, as is the sheer number of those who have been killed. We will do all that we can to ensure the resumption of the ceasefire in order to get the remaining hostages out, and to get aid that is desperately needed in.

The whole House will want to celebrate the extraordinary life of Group Captain John "Paddy" Hemingway, the last known pilot of the battle of Britain. The courage of his generation, the fearlessness, the sense of duty and the service, secured our freedom, and we will never forget them.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Alberto Costa: Brain tumours kill more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer. From time to time all of us in our surgeries hear stories from our constituents that really get to us and twang the heartstrings. Last Friday, Laura attended my Sharnford surgery and told me of the tragic death of her energetic, loving six-year-old son Taylan from a brain tumour. All that she asked was for me to raise this matter nationally, and I am doing that now, but I want to go one step further. Will the Prime Minister agree to arrange a meeting for Laura, and the brain tumour support group known as Angel Mums, with the relevant healthcare Minister to discuss brain tumour research?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for doing what he was asked to do, and raising that case here. The loss of a child is unbearable, and I think that most of us, including me, simply do not know how we would be able to react. I am sure that the whole House will want to send its deepest condolences to Laura, and to all Taylan's family and friends.

I will happily ensure that the meeting the hon. Gentleman has requested takes place, so that we can give a reassurance that we are committed to supporting lifesaving and life-improving research and doing all we can to improve the way in which we prevent, detect, manage and treat cancer.

Q3. [903306] **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): Like many people in Peterborough, I am passionate about tackling low pay and insecure work, especially for young people. Next month many of my constituents will receive a welcome boost in their pay packets owing to the increase in the national minimum wage that is being delivered by this Labour Government. May I thank the Prime Minister for ignoring the voices of those on the Opposition Benches who continue to oppose our plans to make work pay, and may I urge him to go further and faster in delivering our plan for change for working people?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who does a superb job for Peterborough. We are proud of the fact that our Employment Rights Bill is tackling the cost of insecure work, and that we are delivering that pay rise for 3 million of the lowest-paid. We know that the Leader of the Opposition opposes all that. She thinks that the minimum wage is a burden, and that maternity pay is excessive. It is the same old Tories. They opposed the minimum wage in the first place; they have learnt absolutely nothing.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): The Chancellor claimed that her Budget was "a once-in-a-Parliament reset", so why are we having an emergency Budget next week?

The Prime Minister: We have delivered record investment into this country, we have had three interest rate cuts in a row and wages are going up faster than prices, which is a massive cost of living boost. That is in only eight

months, after 14 years of absolute failure. What did the Conservatives leave? Interest rates were at 11% and there was a massive £22 billion black hole in the economy. They crashed the economy; we are rebuilding Britain.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister knows why we are having an emergency Budget. It is because since the last one—since the Chancellor delivered her Budget in October—growth is down, borrowing is up and she has destroyed business confidence. Does the Prime Minister now regret raising taxes on business?

The Prime Minister: The Office for Budget Responsibility will present its numbers and there will be a spring statement next week. We have record investment into this country and interest rates have been cut. The Leader of the Opposition talks about national insurance. We had to fill the £22 billion black hole that the Conservatives left. We have invested in the NHS, schools and public services. We are pressing on with planning, with infrastructure and regulation.

I understand the Leader of the Opposition is straight-talking, so perhaps she can help us with this. Is she going to reverse the national insurance contributions increase? If not, what is the point? If so, what other taxes is she raising to fill the hole—one way or another?

Mrs Badenoch: The only black hole is the one that the Prime Minister is digging. He has shown absolutely no regret, but everybody knows that the Chancellor has made a mistake. That is why they are having an emergency Budget. Later today, Conservatives will vote to exempt hospices, pharmacies and care providers from her national insurance rise. Will he at the very least support exempting those vulnerable services from his jobs tax?

The Prime Minister: I notice the Leader of the Opposition did not say that the Conservatives would reverse the national insurance rises. That is exactly it: she wants all the benefits, but they cannot say how they are going to pay for them. She carps from the sidelines, but cannot make her mind up whether she supports or does not support national insurance rises. We have made provision for hospices and we have made provisions for charities, but we had to secure the economy. We had to fill the £22 billion black hole that they disgracefully left.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister has not made these provisions. He keeps talking about Budget benefits. Unemployment is not a benefit; businesses closing are not benefits. I asked him whether he would exempt hospices—even children's hospices—from the jobs tax. He did not answer that question. His MPs know that this could affect end of life care, so I will ask the same question again: will he exempt hospices from paying his jobs tax?

The Prime Minister: We have already invested £100 million for adult and children's hospices, with an additional £26 million in funding through the children's hospice grant, but we cannot get away from the root cause of what we were doing in that Budget, which was fixing the economy the Conservatives left so badly damaged—a £22 billion black hole. Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition will start the next question with an apology.

Mrs Badenoch: I remember when the Prime Minister made—[*Interruption.*] If Labour Members want me to answer questions, we can swap sides.

I remember when the Prime Minister made that announcement. He has forgotten, because the money he is referring to for hospices is for buildings. It is not for the salaries hit by the jobs tax. As St Helena hospice in Colchester said:

“We cannot use this funding for salaries which is where we need urgent help.”

Why is the Prime Minister not listening to hospices?

The Prime Minister: I have already set out the position in relation to hospices. The Leader of the Opposition says that she wants to swap sides—heaven forbid! After 14 years of breaking everything, we are getting on with the job of fixing it, and all she can do is carp from the sidelines with absolutely no policy.

Mrs Badenoch: Winter fuel payments have been snatched. The jobs tax is hammering everyone from business to charities. The Chancellor promised a once-in-a-Parliament Budget; that she would not come back for more. In that Budget, she said:

“there will be no extension of the freeze in income tax...thresholds”.—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 821.]

Ahead of the emergency Budget, will the right hon. and learned Gentleman repeat the commitment that she made?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady has such pre-scripted questions she cannot adapt them to the answers I am giving. I think she now calls herself a Conservative realist. Well, I am realistic about the Conservatives. The reality is that they left open borders and she was the cheerleader, they crashed the economy, mortgages went through the roof, the NHS was left on its knees and they hollowed out the armed forces. This Government have already delivered 2 million extra NHS appointments, 750 breakfast clubs, record returns of people who should not be here, and a fully funded increase in our defence spending. That is the difference a Labour Government make.

Q4. [903307] **Colum Eastwood** (Foyle) (SDLP): A lady came to see me recently who needed help. She had a disability, which means that her children have to help her cut up her food. They have to help her wash beneath the waist. They have to supervise her as she goes to the toilet. Under the Tory welfare system, we were able to get that lady on to a personal independence payment. Under the Prime Minister's new proposed system, she will get zero—nothing. After 14 years of the Tory Government and many of us wanting to see the back of them, can the Prime Minister answer one question? What was the point, if Labour is going to do this?

The Prime Minister: I have lived with the impacts of disability in our family, through my mother and brother, all my life. I do understand the human impact, but the current system is morally and economically indefensible. We are right to reform it and nobody should be defending the broken status quo. We are proceeding on three principles: if you can work, you should work; if you need help into work, the state should help you, not

hinder you; and if you can never work, you must be supported and protected. They are the right principles, and we cannot leave the current system as it is.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks on Ukraine and Gaza. I also pay tribute to Group Captain John "Paddy" Hemingway and all our heroes from the battle of Britain.

Members across the House will, like me, have heard from GPs, dentists, community pharmacists and care homes who are all deeply worried about the impact of the national insurance rise on the services they provide to patients. That is why the House of Lords passed a Liberal Democrat amendment to exempt NHS and care providers. That amendment comes before this House this afternoon, but we are hearing worrying reports that the Prime Minister will order Labour MPs to vote against it. Will the Prime Minister reassure the House and patients across the country that those reports are not true?

The Prime Minister: I start by pointing out that, because of the changes we made at the Budget, we were able to put record amounts of money into our national health service. It was vitally important that we did so. It is not right simply to oppose the measures we had to take to raise the money and at the same say, as the right hon. Gentleman does, that he wants the benefits of the increase in funding to the NHS. The two cannot sit together. We have already invested an additional £3.7 billion of funding in social care, including £880 million to increase the social care grant. We are taking steps, but the basic point remains: we cannot make the investment in the NHS if we do not raise the money. He cannot simply oppose any raising of money and at the same time welcome the money into the NHS.

Ed Davey: I think the whole House is disappointed by that reply. I hope that, ahead of the spring statement, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor will think about taking that money from the NHS, and reverse that.

I would like to turn to the issue of illegal hare coursing. Criminal gangs are terrorising rural communities across our country, from Cambridgeshire to Devon, from Oxfordshire to Wiltshire. Men in balaclavas are threatening and abusing farmers, as these criminals tear across their fields in 4x4s. Farmers are warning that it is only a matter of time before someone is killed. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that we must act urgently against this appalling criminality? Will he back our calls for a comprehensive rural crime strategy, so that we not just stamp out hare coursing but keep our rural communities safe from all crime?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue, which is a matter of deep concern. We are already developing a rural crime strategy, but we will happily work with him and others to develop it further.

Q5. [903308] **Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): My constituents in Birmingham Northfield are deeply concerned about the scourge of knife crime, and I pay tribute to the professionalism of West Midlands

police for its response to these horrendous attacks. However, there are still 1,200 fewer police officers and police community support officers in the force than in 2010, and a new bid for 150 more officers has been submitted to the Home Office. Will the Prime Minister look at this issue so that the police can do more to keep our streets secure and safe?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in commending West Midlands police for keeping his community safe. We are doubling our investment to £200 million towards the recruitment of 13,000 neighbourhood police officers, giving every community a named officer to help tackle violent crime, and we are currently working through bids with forces to ensure that we do so. I will ensure that he gets a meeting with the Policing Minister.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): We have a deeply unfair and unequal economic system, where vast numbers of people are struggling while billionaires are getting richer and richer. Does the Prime Minister really think that the way to tackle this situation is to put the onus on older people, children, and now sick and disabled people, rather than on the shoulders of the super-rich—those who can most easily afford to pay—with a wealth tax? If the Prime Minister uses the phrase "difficult choices" in his answer, will he specify "difficult choices" for whom?

The Prime Minister: We do have a proportional tax system, and we have raised tax on the wealthiest under this Government. The hon. Lady's advice would count for a bit more if her party's manifesto had not been a recipe for £80 billion of extra borrowing, which would have done exactly what Liz Truss did to the economy—that would not help any of the people she is claiming to support.

Q6. [903309] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): I welcome the Government's ambitious growth plans for the Oxford-Cambridge arc, which promise to reverse years of decline and transform the eastern region by driving prosperity, creating jobs and delivering much-needed housing. Does the Prime Minister agree that the crowning achievement of these plans would be the establishment of a world-class theme park in Bedford borough, which would transform our local economy, create thousands of jobs and opportunities, and elevate Bedford as a national hub for leisure and tourism?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise this important project, which we are working on. It is vital that we unleash the potential of the Oxford-Cambridge corridor—and, of course, Bedford—by generating growth, jobs and opportunities. We are doing that by speeding up the delivery of new infrastructure projects, slashing red tape and getting Britain building.

Q2. [903305] **Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): Many of my constituents have approached me about the inadequate treatment of young people with eating disorders. This year, despite a 30% increase in referrals, the majority of integrated care boards have cut real-terms funding. Currently, as I have seen in my own family and in my weekly surgeries, those who reach out for treatment are told, in effect, "Come back when you are thinner," increasing both the human and financial cost of treatment.

Does the Prime Minister agree that timely interventions are critical, and will he meet me to discuss how we fund them?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right: too many people with eating disorders are not getting the treatment they need. The NHS is expanding eating disorder treatment services with a focus on accessing treatment earlier and closer to home, and we are providing access to specialist mental health professionals in every school. I will make sure that he is kept updated.

Q7. [903310] **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): Labour's flagship Crime and Policing Bill is designed to tackle the rise in antisocial behaviour, theft and shoplifting that occurred under the Tories. It will grant police the power to confiscate disruptive off-road vehicles, which will help to tackle the scourge of off-road bikes in my constituency. Does the Prime Minister agree that we are the party of law and order, and that we are fulfilling our commitments?

The Prime Minister: It is totally unacceptable for anyone to feel intimidated or unsafe due to the actions of reckless and selfish individuals. Whatever the vehicle, our Bill gives police forces stronger powers to seize them immediately and put a stop to antisocial behaviour. That is our plan for change in action, making our streets and communities safer.

Q9. [903313] **Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Con): Having had 14 years to get ready, Labour came into power with no plan to reform welfare. Now, in a panic because of their economic mismanagement, the Government are cutting benefits for disabled people without consulting them at all. It probably says in the Prime Minister's folder that the High Court ruled that the Conservatives' consultation was too short, but at least we consulted. The Government are not consulting at all. Will the Prime Minister explain why he is doing things to disabled people and not with them?

The Prime Minister: No, what it says in my folder is that the Conservatives had 14 years—[*Interruption.*] They did not need to consult; they just had to get on with it. They had a majority of 80 for their last five years of Government. They are now carping on about some of their ideas. They had 14 years and they did not implement a single one; they simply broke the system. They are in no place to lecture other people.

Q8. [903312] **Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): According to the charity Shelter, there are more homeless children in my city of Edinburgh than in the whole of Wales. That is an appalling legacy of 18 years of SNP Government. Does the Prime Minister agree that there should be no homeless children, and will he work with me, the Scottish Parliament and anyone who will listen to end child homelessness in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: The situation that my hon. Friend describes is an appalling indictment of the SNP record. The Conservative party left record homelessness in England. The SNP record is equally shameful: a record number of children in temporary accommodation. We are investing £1 billion to tackle homelessness, abolishing no-fault evictions and building 1.5 million new homes.

Meanwhile, the SNP has cut its affordable housing budget. It has had the largest settlement since devolution. It has the power and the money; now it is time that it started delivering.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): This morning, I received an email from Santander informing me that the Bognor Regis and Rustington branches in my constituency are both set to close. With four other bank branches having shut across the constituency in 2023 alone, the most vulnerable members of our society are being gradually cut off from essential banking services. Small cash-based businesses will also struggle to deposit their takings, faced with the added burden of travelling to Chichester or Worthing, making it even harder for them to operate. What decisive action is the Prime Minister taking to guarantee that people and businesses in my constituency and across the country are not left without access to cash and vital banking services?

The Prime Minister: We are rolling out 350 banking hubs across all communities. I will happily arrange for the hon. Lady to have a meeting with the Minister to discuss how that might affect her constituency.

Q10. [903314] **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): First, let me welcome the Prime Minister's announcement of £200 million from the National Wealth Fund for the industrial future of Grangemouth. Today, I want to ask specifically about the workers facing redundancy. Given the assurances from the Prime Minister on 18 February and repeated by Anas Sarwar, the Scottish Labour Leader, as recently as 4 March, can the Prime Minister confirm that the guarantee given on 18 months' paid protection will be honoured for all those workers losing their jobs due to the Grangemouth refinery closure, including the shared services workers, and will he say how the payment can be claimed by all those affected?

The Prime Minister: Petroineos has said that every employee made redundant will get 18 months' full pay. The Project Willow report, which has come out today, describes how we can support a sustainable industrial future for Grangemouth, which is incredibly important, delivering jobs and economic growth. As my hon. Friend references, I have announced £200 million through the National Wealth Fund to secure the site's long-term future, and that is backed by the £100 million Falkirk and Grangemouth growth deal and the training guarantee to support workers into good jobs. Those are all actions that we are taking on this very important issue.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Today, the House of Lords considers the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2025, which diverge from the proposals of the inquiry report and the Government response. The regulations introduce new exclusions, treat victims inconsistently and downgrade some previously agreed awards, such as that for my constituent Owen Savill. Will the Prime Minister remember the promise made to victims such as Owen and think again?

The Prime Minister: The victims of this scandal have suffered unspeakably. I am pleased that at the Budget we set aside £11.8 billion to compensate them for this appalling scandal. I gently point out that the Conservative

party was committed, rightly, to the compensation but did not provide a single penny in the column to pay for it. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority has been established and it began to make payments last year, with over £1 billion of interim payments having been made. We remain completely committed to co-operating with the inquiry and acting on its recommendations.

Q11. [903315] **Anneliese Midgley** (Knowsley) (Lab): Everyone is talking about “Adolescence”, the series by Knowsley’s own Stephen Graham and Christine Tremarco, which highlights online male radicalisation and violence against girls. The creators of the show are calling for screenings in Parliament and schools to spark change. Will the Prime Minister back the campaign to counter toxic misogyny early and give young men the role models that they deserve?

The Prime Minister: Yes. At home we are watching “Adolescence” with our children—I have a 16-year-old boy and a 14-year-old girl. It is a very good drama to watch. The violence carried out by young men, influenced by what they see online, is a real problem. It is abhorrent and we have to tackle it. We are putting in specialist rape and sexual offences teams in every police force and doing work on 999 calls, but this is also a matter of culture. It is important that, across the whole House, we tackle this emerging and growing problem.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have long called for a UK-EU youth mobility scheme. Polling has repeatedly shown that the majority of Brits support the idea, including my constituents in Epsom and Ewell. A well-structured and controlled scheme would show that the Government are serious about providing opportunities for young people and backing British business. Will the Prime Minister stop sitting on the fence and finally commit to a youth mobility scheme?

The Prime Minister: We are working closely with our European colleagues, and the EU in particular, on a reset of the relationship. We will not be returning to freedom of movement—I have made that clear repeatedly—but we are making good progress.

Q12. [903316] **Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): The previous Government failed to properly support further and adult education over the past 14 years. In contrast, the Prime Minister’s personal commitment to technical qualifications has been encouraging. Last year’s Budget provided a welcome boost to some parts of the sector, but need and demand are outstripping available funding. Skills are crucial to the Government meeting their mission to deliver economic growth, build 1.5 million homes and transition to a green economy. Will the Prime Minister reassure me that the funding model will be reviewed, so that we do not see colleges having to turn away people who want to gain the skills that our country so desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that further education plays a critical role in giving young people the skills and confidence that they need, and the training that we need for the future. We are investing £400 million in education for 16 to 19-year-olds this year,

and our levy-funded growth and skills offer will create jobs in key industries. I can assure her that the funding will deliver enough places for young people.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Large spending announcements for defence would make people think that Britain is marching to war, but the Ministry of Defence is bumbling along with procurement systems that are better designed for peacetime. Will the Prime Minister use his good offices to bring British industry into this fight, and quickly?

The Prime Minister: Yes, but the Opposition did leave a bit of a mess that we are clearing up, having hollowed out our armed forces and having not made the investment that we needed in our defence. We have announced the largest sustained increase since the cold war to 2.5% by 2027 and 3% in the next Parliament, subject to economic circumstances. We are getting on with the job and clearing up the mess that they left.

Q13. [903317] **Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): My constituency has the greatest number of high-rise buildings with dangerous cladding in the country. On Friday, I visited Stratford fire station. Our brilliant local firefighters told me that 77 high-rise buildings in Newham and 165 in Tower Hamlets are covered in hazardous materials, with many of them deemed unsafe. Thousands of my constituents have been calling for justice for years. What are the Government doing to ensure that private developers are held to account for the dangerous cladding on high-rise buildings that they have built?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that remediation has been far too slow, and everybody deserves a safe and secure home. We have signed a contract with 54 major developers who will pay for or fix over 1,700 buildings, and we are accelerating that progress. We will take tough action against those who evade their responsibilities. We will recover taxpayers’ funds and make sure that those responsible pay up and fix unsafe buildings quickly.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): I come to this Chamber every week to ask sensible questions—*[Interruption]*—and I expect sensible answers, but all I get is glazed expressions and waffle from those on the Government Benches. I want to ask the Prime Minister a simple question on behalf of all the net zero sceptics. If we became net zero tomorrow, by how much would that reduce the Earth’s temperature? It is a simple question.

The Prime Minister: Net zero is of course not easy, but it is a huge opportunity to boost our growth, our jobs and our economy. The hon. Member knows my views on that. He complains, but Reform would have better ideas if it stopped fawning over Putin. I understand that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) wants to be Prime Minister, but he cannot even lead a party that fits in the back of a taxi.

Q14. [903318] **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): One in five disabled people in social housing, and one in three disabled private renters, live in inaccessible housing. One of my constituents with severe fibromyalgia and post-traumatic stress disorder lives in a first-floor flat

with no lift access. As we build the 1.5 million new homes that the country needs, will the Prime Minister ensure that they are built to be accessible and adaptable so that disabled and older people can live independently for generations to come?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that everybody needs to be able to access a home that is suitable for them and meets their needs. The planning rules already mean that councils must consider the needs of disabled people when planning new homes. We will go further, setting out our policies on accessible new homes very shortly. We are boosting the disabled facilities grant by £172 million, helping more people to make vital improvements and live independent lives.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): Despite Ukraine being the victim in Russia's illegal aggression, President Zelensky has shown leadership to his people by committing to the US plans for a ceasefire. However, it is clear that Putin is playing for time and is still carrying out daily attacks on the Ukrainian people. Is now not the time to take those frozen Russian assets, seize them and give them to the Ukrainian people to strengthen their hand at the negotiating table and punish Russian aggression?

The Prime Minister: On both points, last night, following the discussions yesterday, I spoke to President Zelensky to discuss the way forward. On the wider question of assets, it is complicated—it is not straightforward—but we are working with others to see what is possible.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): The release of Project Willow today is a step forward in securing good jobs and an industrial future for Grangemouth. However, the Government need to work at pace to ensure that the recommendations in Willow are acted on. Will the Prime Minister outline what steps he will be taking to ensure that barriers to a rapid transition at Grangemouth are removed and investment is progressed as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising Grangemouth again, for the second time in this session; that is because it is centrally important. He will have heard what I had to say about the projects that we are looking at to ensure the long-term future of Grangemouth, the interim measures that are being taken and, of course, the £200 million of the wealth fund that I announced just a few weeks ago.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Prime Minister and I disagree on much—the family farm tax, the national insurance jobs tax and the cut in winter fuel payments—but we surely agree that the common good is built on public order. Crossbows in the hands of killers cost lives: they cost the lives of three innocent women last year. The previous Government moved to consultation over a year ago on the regulation of crossbows, their sale and use, and yet we have heard nothing since. They are as powerful as guns, as silent as knives. Will the Prime Minister agree for one of his Ministers to come to the House before Easter to give us a clear instruction about what the Government intend to do before any more lives are lost?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this shocking issue; he is right to do so. The case he refers to is truly shocking, as I think is agreed across the House. We are working on this and I will make sure that he gets an update so that he is across the detail of what we are doing.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Most Members of this House will be aware that the welfare system can be a nightmare to navigate and does, indeed, need reform, but could we have less of this rhetoric about the Prime Minister's £5 billion package of disability benefit so-called reform being moral? There is nothing moral about cutting benefits for what may be up to a million people. This is not about morality; this is about the Treasury's wish to balance the country's books on the backs of the most vulnerable and poorest people in this society.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is a passionate advocate on this issue and has been for a long time, and I pay tribute to her for that. However, as she rightly acknowledges, the current system is broken. This is where I disagree with her: I think that one in eight young people not being in education or training—that is a million young people—is a moral issue. All the evidence suggests that someone in that situation at that stage of their life will find it incredibly difficult ever to get out of that level of dependency. That cuts across the opportunity and aspiration that are the root of my values, and Labour values, about how we take working people forward. I do see it as a moral issue and I will not turn away from that. I am genuinely shocked that a million young people are in that position, and I am not prepared to shrug my shoulders and walk past it.

Point of Order

12.38 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The shadow Minister for Women, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), just before Prime Minister's questions, stated at the Dispatch Box that imam Adam Kelwick posted that he prayed for victory of Hamas over Israel. That was totally inaccurate. He made absolutely no mention, in the post to which she referred, of Hamas or against Israel; that was added wrongly by the shadow Minister. He, in fact, called for prayers of peace. The truth is that Adam has spent years working on countering extremism and even uniting people through food and conversations when rioters came to attack his local mosque in Liverpool last year. I ask that the hon. Member correct the record, and I remind her that should she have made such statements outside the House, there would possibly be legal action. What advice can you give to Members to ensure that they do not abuse parliamentary privilege by slandering people?

Mr Speaker: I am not responsible for hon. Members' questions, or for Ministers' or shadow Ministers' answers. I do not want to extend this question, but I can assure the hon. Lady that the Table Office will be able to advise her on how to pursue the matter. I am sure, without doubt, that it is on the record and that people will reflect on that.

Food Products (Market Regulation and Public Procurement)

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

12.39 pm

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

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the Groceries Code Adjudicator; to require co-ordination between the Groceries Code Adjudicator and the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator; to make provision about public procurement in respect of British food products; to make provision about the labelling of food products; and for connected purposes.

I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

In March 1917, at the height of the first world war, the then Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, sent a letter to an Orkney farmer, Charles Paterson. He wrote:

“In the nation's interest I urge you, at whatever personal sacrifice, to overcome all obstacles, to throw your fullest energies into the work, and to influence and encourage all who assist you, so that every possible acre shall be sown.”

At that time, there was no question at the heart of Government about the vital importance of farmers in the isles and across the country. In the century since, farmers have continued to play their part in supplying the nation's table, but their incomes have stagnated. The market for agricultural produce in the UK has not been a free market since at least the end of the second world war. Successive Governments have intervened through the payment of public subsidies to farmers, initially in the name of food security and more recently in the name of cheap food for consumers. That intervention has, over the years, distorted the market and allowed a range of unfair practices to be hardwired into the system.

As a consequence, the market today has a handful of behemoth retailers—the supermarkets—at the top, hundreds of thousands of farmers at the bottom and a variety of processors, distributors and others in the middle. Everyone takes their cut and then, at the end of it all, the farmers get whatever is left. The power imbalance between the supermarkets at the top and the farmers at the bottom is more pronounced than any other market I can think of, and it is well documented that those at the top who have the power wield it to their own advantage.

The extensive debate that we have had in this House in recent months has laid bare the shocking truth about the lack of profitability in farming. Just last week a new report from the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission found that real incomes for farmers had stayed stock-still for the past 50 years.

Shortly after the autumn Budget, a group of younger farmers in my constituency came to see me and brought with them their farm accounts. They were despondent in pointing out to me that their businesses earned a net profit of 0.7% on their capital. They were not much cheered when I pointed out that they were doing better than many of their contemporaries, as figures from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs show that the average return is as low as 0.5%. One of those farmers was the great-grandson of Charles Paterson, a seventh-generation farmer who works the same land

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

as his great-grandfather. We really could not ask for a better illustration of the shift in priorities of our Governments over the past 100 years.

This cannot go on. Farmers are seeing a rapid withdrawal of funding support. In England, the accelerated withdrawal of basic payments, followed by the closure without notice last week of the sustainable farming incentives, has left many farmers desperately worried about the viability of their businesses. Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the removal of the ringfencing of money given to devolved Administrations for agricultural payments leaves farmers there feeling vulnerable to adverse change. That is why this market now needs direct and meaningful intervention. Without it, we risk losing domestic food production and any notion of food security. If, as the Prime Minister says, food security is national security, his Government should act urgently to allow our farmers to get a fair price for the food they produce.

I was in government when the Groceries Code Adjudicator was set up. I do not think anyone believed that the GCA would be the last word in the regulation of the food supply chain, but we all took the view that it was better to have something than to have nothing. Twelve years on from its creation, the limitations of the adjudicator are apparent for all to see. The office has fewer than 10 staff, all seconded from other public bodies, and it is funded by a levy on supermarkets. To expect an operation of that size to take on some of the largest retail businesses in the country is laughable. It is hardly surprising, then, that businesses supplying supermarkets are reluctant to make complaints, especially when the office has not issued a single fine in its entire existence. Cases that are pursued end up with settlements and non-disclosure agreements.

Since publicising my Bill, I have spoken to a number of producers who have told me about their experience at the hands of supermarkets. Just yesterday, I spoke to a businessman who had been a supplier of Brussels sprouts to a large supermarket. His company had, on the basis of undertakings made to it by the retailer, invested significantly, borrowing £400,000 to build a state-of-the-art packing facility. In 2022-23, that one supermarket accounted for 47% of its business. Then, in February 2023, the company was told by the supermarket that its supply was no longer wanted for that season. For that business, the news was a hammer blow, and despite it being a prima facie breach of the groceries supply code of practice, the GCA initially declined to intervene.

I would love to say that this was an isolated incident, but the GCA annual survey conducted by YouGov suggests that it is not. It found that 42% of suppliers would not raise issues because they believed the retailer would find out and that there would be consequences. The experiences they described included de-listing without reasonable notice, undisputed invoices not being paid according to agreed terms, retrospective changes to supply agreements, running a promotional activity at the supplier's expense, and much more.

Practice among supermarkets shows a wide variety of behaviours. Seven of the retailers were judged to have improved or at least stayed the same, with Sainsbury's coming out on top with a net improvement score of 10.34%. Unfortunately, seven others—Home Bargains, ASDA, Tesco, Ocado, Iceland, Morrisons and Amazon—

were scored as having worsened by varying degrees, with Amazon's performance being judged to have worsened by a whopping 21.38%. Amazon was also scored as having complied with the code "consistently" or "mostly" only 46.96% of the time.

Yesterday's *Daily Telegraph* reported that ASDA was threatening a "price war" to regain the market share it had lost in recent years. For farmers, that is a chilling prospect. If supermarkets are about to embark on a race to the bottom, we can be pretty sure that it will be farmers, not company executives or shareholders, who will be expected to take the hit.

It is not for us in Parliament to pick a winner in a fight between supermarkets, but they should know that we are watching. Any supermarket that thinks it can rebuild its balance sheet on the back of Britain's farmers might find itself in front of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and it better have some good answers when it gets here.

My Bill has support from MPs across political parties; it is sponsored by Liberal Democrat, Labour, Conservative, Plaid Cymru, SNP, Green and Democratic Unionist Members. It also has wide geographical support, with sponsors from Shetland to Cornwall and across the four nations that make up the United Kingdom. I am grateful for the support I have received from the farming unions, the Country Land and Business Association, Scottish Land and Estates, the Tenant Farmers Association and the Countryside Alliance. That is a remarkable coalition of people who all understand that if we fail to act now, before too long there may be no industry left to protect.

Charles Paterson's family in Orkney still works the same land to this day. If we want to keep farming communities alive for generations to come, however, we need to act now to make it happen. That is why the Bill is necessary and why I seek the leave of the House today to introduce it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Alistair Carmichael, Jayne Kirkham, Sarah Bool, Jenny Riddell-Carpenter, Charlie Dewhirst, Sarah Dyke, Ann Davies, Seamus Logan, Ellie Chowns, Jim Shannon, David Chadwick and Tim Farron present the Bill.

Mr Alistair Carmichael accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 June, and to be printed (Bill 203).

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (SECONDARY CLASS 1 CONTRIBUTIONS) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7),

That the following provisions shall apply to the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 3 December 2024 (National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill: Programme):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Question agreed to.

National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Speaker: I can confirm that Lords amendments 1 to 20 engage Commons financial privilege. Having given careful consideration to Lords amendment 20, I am satisfied that it would impose a charge on the public revenue that is not authorised by the money resolution passed by this House on 3 December 2024. In accordance with Standing Order No. 78(3), that Lords amendment will therefore be deemed to be disagreed to and is not available for debate.

Lords amendment 20 deemed to be disagreed to (Standing Order No. 78(3)).

Clause 1

RATE OF SECONDARY CLASS 1 CONTRIBUTIONS

12.51 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments 2 to 19 and 21, and Government motions to disagree.

James Murray: I welcome the opportunity to consider the Lords amendment to the Bill. I thank Members of both Houses for their careful scrutiny and consideration of the Bill, and I place on record particular thanks to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Lord Livermore, for his invaluable support and for so expertly leading the Bill through the other place.

During consideration of the Bill in the other place, 21 amendments were made, 20 of which we will address today, but before I do so directly, let me remind both Houses of the context for the Bill. When we entered government, we inherited a fiscal situation that was completely unsustainable. We have had to take difficult but necessary decisions to repair the public finances and rebuild our public services. The measures in the Bill represent some of the toughest decisions that we have had to take as a result. To restore fiscal responsibility and get public services back on their feet, we needed to raise revenue, including through the measures that the Bill will introduce. Many of the amendments from the other place put at risk the funding that the Bill seeks to raise, so let me be absolutely clear: to support the amendments is also to support higher borrowing, lower spending or other tax rises. With that in mind, I now turn to the first group of Lords amendments.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Minister has talked about the growth mission, which is the Government's *raison d'être*, but last week we found out that the economy had shrunk. Has he done any work to find out how much that 0.1% drop will cost the Government? It will have huge tax implications.

James Murray: As I have set out to the hon. Gentleman in a number of debates in recent weeks, the Government have had to take difficult but necessary decisions to restore fiscal responsibility after the completely unsustainable situation that we inherited from the Conservative party. That fiscal responsibility and economic

[James Murray]

stability are essential for greater investment in the economy, which is the bedrock of the growth that we are so determined to pursue.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Will the Minister outline how many billions the Government will spend this year, what percentage £22 billion represents in that amount, and—if I may be so greedy as to ask an additional question, Mr Speaker—how much the flatlining of the economy has cost the Government compared with that £22 billion? I put it to the Minister that the impact of the national insurance contributions rise has been much greater than that of the mythical £22 billion alleged by the Government.

James Murray: I am not clear from the right hon. Gentleman's intervention whether he finally accepts that we inherited a £22 billion black hole when we entered government. I know that several of his colleagues have sought to rewrite history, but the facts are there. We inherited a completely unsustainable fiscal situation, with pressures and a £22 billion black hole, and we had to take difficult but necessary decisions to remedy that. It was important to do so, because without the basic fiscal responsibility and economic stability that a Government should deliver, investment, which is the basis for growth, will not happen.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Minister speaks about facts. Is he aware of the fact that when the Labour party won the election, the economy was growing, and is he aware of the fact that it is now shrinking?

James Murray: I am very aware of the fact that we inherited an economy and a fiscal situation in a mess. That was completely unsustainable, and it was our duty as a Government to address it. No responsible Government could have let things carry on as they were, with the fiscal situation the way it was. That is why we took the action we did.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I will not, as I have already given way several times and must make progress.

We had to take those decisions to put the fiscal responsibility back at the heart of government, to return economic stability to the public finances, and to have the basis for the investment on which we can grow the economy and put more money in people's pockets.

Lords amendments 1, 4, 5, 9 and 13 relate to the NHS and social care providers. The amendments seek to maintain the employer national insurance contribution rates and thresholds at their current level for NHS-commissioned services, including GPs, dentists, social care providers and pharmacists, as well as those providing hospice care. As Members of both Houses will know, as a result of the measures in this Bill and wider Budget measures, the NHS will receive an extra £22.6 billion over two years, helping to deliver an additional 40,000 elective appointments every week.

Primary care providers—general practice, dentistry, pharmacy and eye care—are important independent contractors that provide nearly £20 billion-worth of NHS services. Every year, the Government consult the general practice and pharmacy sectors.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One question raised regularly in my constituency relates to GP surgeries. The national insurance contributions will hit them immensely hard. GPs tell me that their only choice is to reduce staff and cut back appointments. The Minister mentions £22 billion extra for the NHS, but if GP surgeries and health clinics are reducing staff and reducing their capacity to deliver services, is that not a step down in what is delivered in my constituency and beyond? Will he reconsider the measures given the impact on GP surgeries?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the question of GPs and the funding and support that the Government are providing them. We are investing an additional £889 million in general practice, which brings the total spend on the GP contract to £13.2 billion in 2025-26. That is the biggest increase in over a decade. The changes to the contract will improve services for patients and help to make progress towards the Government's health mission—shifting from analogue to digital, from sickness to prevention, and from hospital to community care—as set out in the Prime Minister's plan for change. That support for GPs is an essential part of what the Budget, including the national insurance measures we are debating, delivers.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Age UK in my constituency has told me that the employer NICs rise will cost it £50,000 a year. Does the Minister agree that it is impossible to improve the public sector by taxing the public sector?

James Murray: We inherited public services that were on their knees and needed urgent support. Part of the reason why we took the difficult but necessary decisions at the Budget last October was, of course, to restore fiscal responsibility, but it was also to get public services back on their feet. That is not just about the public services that people across the UK enjoy; it is also about ensuring that we have the stability for economic growth. If we do not have a health service that works well, we do not have a healthy population who can go to work. If we do not have a transport system that works well, people cannot get to work. That investment to get public services back on their feet after 14 years of Conservative control is essential for the experience of people in the UK, but it will also ensure that we have the economic growth that will enable us to put more money in people's pockets.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Murray: I will make a little progress. I have spoken about GPs, but the Department of Health and Social Care has entered into consultation with Community Pharmacy England regarding the 2024-25 and 2025-26 community pharmacy contractual framework. The final funding settlement will be announced in the usual way, following the consultation.

1 pm

Dr Luke Evans: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way yet again. The National Pharmacy Association announced for the first time ever, in 104 years, that it is planning action by reducing services because of the implications of the Budget. One of its requests is the release of an independent report commissioned by NHS England on the future funding of pharmacies. Now that the Government are in charge of NHS England, will the Minister ask his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to release that report before the consultations finish, so that the public and the pharmacies can see exactly what the financial situation in that independent report will be?

James Murray: Reports on work that the Department of Health and Social Care is carrying out are a subject for Ministers in that Department, but on the funding that I am speaking about, the final funding settlement will be announced in the usual way, following the consultation that is under way.

The NHS in England invests around £3 billion every year on dentistry, and NHS pharmaceutical, ophthalmic and dental allocations for integrated care systems for 2025-26 have been published, alongside NHS planning and guidance. On social care, the Government have provided a cash increase in core local government spending power of 6.8% in 2025-26, including £880 million of new grant funding provided to social care—funding that can be used to address the range of pressures facing the adult social care sector.

Dr Hudson: The figures that the Minister is presenting, along with the answer that he gave to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and similar to the Prime Minister, involve money going into sectors that will not mitigate the national insurance rise. Will he confirm that sectors such as hospices, social care, GPs and pharmacies will have some support, rather than tell us about money that is not going to help people with regard to the jobs tax that is coming in?

James Murray: The various organisations or services that I am talking about, whether GPs, pharmacies or organisations that provide social care, receive money from Government, and the way that those discussions take place is by considering pressures on the providers of those services in the round—that is the way the negotiations take place. Direct support for employer national insurance contributions obviously applies to central Government, local government and public corporations, which is much the same way that the previous Government approached things under the health and social care levy. Pressures on social care or GPs, as I have been outlining, are considered in the round in terms of their funding settlements, and as I said, the £880 million of new grant funding can be used to address a range of pressures facing adult social care.

Sir Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, but let us look at children's hospices, which will be down £4.9 million. Most funding for children's hospices does not come from the Government; it comes from communities and from people supporting them. Can the Minister, at the Dispatch Box, assure children's hospices such as Acorns in the west midlands

that they will not be down the money that they will be losing through extra NI contributions, and that that £4.9 million will be replaced by the Government for children's hospices?

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning hospices, and perhaps I may set out the Government's position on hospices and some of today's amendments. The Government recognise the vital role that hospices play in supporting people at the end of life, and their families, and they also recognise the range of cost pressures that the hospice sector has been facing over a number of years. We are supporting the hospice sector with a £100 million increase for adult and children's hospices, to ensure that they have the best physical environment for care, and £26 million of revenue to support hospices for children and young people. The £100 million will go towards helping hospices to improve their buildings, equipment and accommodation, to ensure that patients continue to receive the best possible care.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The point that Opposition Members are trying to emphasise is that the Government appear to be giving with one hand, but taking away with the other. The hospice sector is just one example of many sectors that have been adversely affected by the Government's cruel tax.

James Murray: As I said a few moments ago, the way that the Government support central Government, local government and public corporations—that is Departments and other public sector employers—is the same way that the previous Government responded to the health and social care levy. That is a standard way in which the Government offer support for employer national insurance costs.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Murray: I will make some progress.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Will the Minister give way on that point?

James Murray: No, I will make some progress. The Government want to shift healthcare out of hospitals and into the community, to ensure that patients and their families receive personalised care in the most appropriate setting.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Southern Area hospice, which is located just outside my constituency, has to raise £3.6 million per year, or £300,000 per month. It is not Government funded, as has been mentioned, so what reassurance can the Minister give to those currently using Southern Area hospice for end of life care that the Government will do the right thing and support our hospices by not including them in the increase to national insurance contributions?

James Murray: I have explained how the Government are approaching employer national insurance contributions and the support that they offer for central Government, local government and public corporations. That is an established way of responding to changes to employer national insurance contributions, which the previous Government did—

Sir Roger Gale rose—

James Murray: The right hon. Gentleman is being so persistent. He must have an amazing point to make, so I will give way to him. I wait with bated breath.

Sir Roger Gale: It is an amazing point, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will get it, because it was clear that the Prime Minister did not get it at Prime Minister's questions. Let's tell the real truth: the money that is being given by the Government—taxpayers' money—to children's hospices such as Shooting Star and Demelza hospices, is for buildings. The national insurance increase is directly hitting the people who do the work on which very sick children depend. Why is that imposition being made?

James Murray: The £100 million that the right hon. Gentleman alluded to is important funding to help hospices improve their buildings, equipment and accommodation, to ensure that patients receive the best care possible. As I said a few moments ago, there will be £26 million of revenue to support children and young people's hospices. More widely, the Government provide for charities, including hospices, through the wider tax regime, which is among the most generous in the world. That included tax reliefs for charities and their donors worth just over £6 billion for the tax year to April 2024. Finally, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, all charities, including hospices that are set up as charities, can benefit from the employment allowance that the Bill more than doubles, from £5,000 to £10,500. That will benefit charities of all sizes, particularly the smallest.

Sir Gavin Williamson: The Minister knows that that is funding for one year, and mainly for buildings, as he has admitted. This will be a cost on hospices every single year going forward. It will be cumulative and mean that hospices have to ask their communities for more and more, just to give that basic help. Will he commit to funding children's hospices by the £4.9 million that the Government are taking off them every year, or not—yes or no?

James Murray: The points I was making before I gave way to the right hon. Gentleman are recurrent features of the tax system. The support through the tax regime for charities and their donors, which was worth more than £6 billion in April 2024, is a feature of the system that happens every year. The increase in the employment allowance from £5,000 to £10,500, which will benefit hospices that are set up as charities, is a permanent change that we are making through the Bill.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): As is evident to many hon. Members, the Minister has, for the first time, found himself unable to answer some very straightforward questions from Opposition Members about the difference between the allocation of funding for capital expenditure and for current expenditure, and the impact that that difference will have on our hospices, children's hospices, GPs and others affected by Labour's jobs tax.

I am sure Members of the House of Lords who brought these amendments back will also have noticed that the Minister has been unable to answer those questions. Prior to the Bill going back to the House of Lords, will the Minister agree to speak to the Chancellor or the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to get a clear

answer to the questions that have been raised today about which money will be available for capital and which money will be available to offset the national insurance charge increase?

James Murray: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman felt that I was being unclear—I think I was being perfectly clear on the Government's position. He may not agree with that position—he is entitled not to—but on the employer national insurance contribution changes I have been very clear that the Government will provide support directly to central Government, local government and public corporations, such as Departments and other public sector employers, as was the case under his Government with the health and social care levy. That does not apply to GPs, dentists, hospices and the other organisations that we have been discussing today.

The important point that I was making, which I hope was clear to him and his colleagues on the Conservative Benches, was about the wider support that the Government are providing to hospices, the funding that we are providing to GPs and the discussions we are having with other primary care providers. That is the context in which the Bill has to be seen. We are able to take decisions around funding for public services because of the difficult decisions that we took at the Budget last year, and this Bill implements one of those decisions.

At Prime Minister's questions earlier today, it was noticeable that when the Prime Minister asked the Leader of the Opposition whether she would reverse the national insurance contribution rise that we are bringing in through the Bill, she refused to commit to that. I am unclear exactly what the Conservative position is—[*Interruption.*]

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Murray: I think one of the Conservative Members said that he will update me in his speech later. I may have misheard him, but I think I heard him say that he will confirm later whether the Opposition will reverse the national insurance changes we are making, so I look forward to that update.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Will the Minister explain to the House how it is right for the Government to cover the extra national insurance contributions of those working in the public sector, for example in hospital provision, but it is not right to do that for those working in hospices, in end of life care? How can that circle be squared? Why will they cover the national insurance contributions for those working in hospitals that are treating people, but not for those working in hospices that deliver end of life care?

James Murray: The fundamental principle is about which organisations the Government will support in response to the changes to national insurance contributions. The approach the Government are taking, which is in line with the approach taken by the previous Government in the health and social care levy, is for the Government to provide support for Departments and other public sector employers for additional employer national insurance contributions. As I said to the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), that means central Government, public corporations and local government. Primary care providers are independent contractors and will therefore not be exempt from the changes.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Minister makes the point that this is secondary for primary care providers. However, he does not acknowledge that primary care providers still do not know how they will be compensated by the Government, as I hear from dentists, community pharmacies and social care providers in my constituency. We are very close to the start of the tax year and those small businesses are providing critical primary care services in our communities. How can they operate when the Minister obfuscates and says other people might talk to them at a later stage about the money that they might receive? Would it not be easier for the Minister to accept the Liberal Democrat amendment from the House of Lords and clear up this matter today?

James Murray: For clarity, primary care providers who are independent contractors will not receive the direct support that the Government provide to Departments and other public sector employers. The pressures that those providers face are considered in the round before funding is provided to them, so the solution is arrived at in a different way from the way suggested by the hon. Gentleman.

As I set out earlier, the revenue raised by the decisions set out in the Bill will help fund public services, including those provided by the NHS and other social care providers. The amendments would put much of that funding at risk, so to support these amendments is to support higher borrowing, lower spending or other tax rises.

1.15 pm

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): What advice can the Minister give Thames hospice and Alexander Devine children's hospice service in Maidenhead, which are looking at a £300,000 and £50,000 increase in bills respectively? Is he saying that they should cut services, or is he expecting residents in our constituencies to raise more money for them, for it to be given directly back to the Chancellor?

James Murray: I do not know the situation of those hospices, so I will not give them direct advice on managing their operations. More generally, I have set out the Government's approach to providing direct support for Departments and other public sector employers. It depends how hospice care is provided. In many cases, integrated care boards are responsible for commissioning palliative and end of life care services to meet the needs of local populations. Where hospices are commissioned by the NHS, contractual arrangements should be discussed with the integrated care board at local level.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): The Minister has a capital budget and revenue budgets. We are talking about a small amount of money—£4 million or £5 million—so will he consider switching £4 million or £5 million from the capital budget to the revenue budget? Opening up that opportunity would have merit, and would help these very vulnerable organisations.

James Murray: I have set out the Government's approach to supporting Departments and other public sector employees when it comes to the changes to employer national insurance contributions. As I said to the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for

North Bedfordshire, we are taking the same approach that his Government took to the health and social care levy. We are talking about the wider pressures faced by organisations, be they GPs or hospices, and what we can do to support them and their processes. We are considering the pressures on them in the round. I have made a considerable number of points about Lords amendments 1, 4, 5, 9 and 13. In the light of those points, I urge the House to disagree with those amendments.

I turn to the Lords amendments relating to charities, local government and special educational needs transport. Lords amendments 2, 7, 12 and 16 seek to exempt charities from the changes to employer national insurance contribution rates and thresholds. The Government recognise the crucial role that charities play in our society. We recognise the need to protect the smallest charities; that is why we have more than doubled the employment allowance to £10,500 pounds, meaning that more than half of businesses, including charities with national insurance liabilities, either gain or will see no change next year.

As I have noted, it is important to recognise that all charities can benefit from the employment allowance. The Government provide wider support for charities via the tax regime; tax reliefs for charities and their donors were worth just over £6 billion in the tax year to April 2024. Again, the amendments would put much of the funding that the Bill seeks to raise for public services at risk, so supporting these amendments is support for higher borrowing, lower spending or other tax rises.

Dr Luke Evans: After yesterday's announcement about benefit changes and benefit cuts, the Government have said that they want more people to go into work. A lot of help to get people into work is delivered by charities, so we are expecting a greater need for such charities. How will they cope if they are being taxed through further NICs? They will have to reduce their services and their ability to provide support, so there will be a gap in the market. Will the Minister explain how the Government intend to bridge that gap?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing attention to the very important reforms that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions set out in this House yesterday, which are a crucial part of getting people back into work. Further details on interventions to help people back into work will be set out. We recognise that charities may, in some cases, provide that support, which is why many of the elements of support for charities in the tax regime remain so generous. There was £6 billion for tax relief for charities and their donors in the tax year to April 2024 through features that will continue in the tax year that we are entering. The employment allowance is more than doubling from £5,000 to £10,500, which will benefit all charities in this country. Charities, particularly small charities, will benefit directly from changes that we have made to the employment allowance. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker—I thought you were going to intervene on me.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Minister is making a lengthy contribution; I am just waiting for a conclusion.

James Murray: In that case, I will not take any more interventions, and I will make speedier progress. I will address Lords amendments 3, 6, 11 and 15, which relate to employers who provide transport for children with special educational needs. In the Budget and the recent provisional local government finance settlement, the Government announced £2 billion of grant funding for local government in '25-26, which includes £515 million to support councils with the increase in employer national insurance contributions. That funding is not ringfenced, and it is for local authorities to determine how to use it across relevant services and responsibilities.

Lords amendments 8, 10, 14 and 17 to 19 together seek to maintain the current threshold for businesses employing fewer than 25 members of staff. When it comes to protecting the smallest businesses, the Government are taking action through this Bill by increasing the employment allowance from £5,000 to £10,500, as I have said. That means that next year, 865,000 employers will pay no national insurance at all, and more than half will see no change, or will gain overall as a result of this package.

Finally, Lords amendment 21 would require the Government to conduct assessments on the economic and sectoral impacts of the Bill. As we have discussed previously in this place, the Government have already published an assessment of this policy in a tax information and impact note published by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. That note states that as a result of the Bill, around 250,000 employers will see their secondary class 1 national insurance contributions liability decrease, and around 940,000 employers will see it increase. Around 820,000 employers will see no change. The Office for Budget Responsibility's economic and fiscal outlook also sets out the expected macroeconomic impact of the changes to employer national insurance contributions.

I hope that hon. and right hon. Members will understand why we are not supporting these amendments from the other place. Through this Bill, the Government are making difficult but necessary decisions in order to fix the public finances and get public services back on their feet. The amendments from the other place require information that has already been provided, do not recognise other policies that the Government have in place and, most seriously, undermine the funding that this Bill seeks to secure. I therefore respectfully propose that this House disagrees with the amendments, and urge all hon. and right hon. Members to support the Government on that disagreement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. This debate has to conclude within two hours of its start, so we will have a six-minute time limit, other than for Front-Bench Members. I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): I rise on behalf of the official Opposition in support of Lords amendments 1 to 4, 8, 10, 14 and 21.

Before I dive into the detail, I want to get a little nostalgic. One year and six days ago, I opened Second Reading of the National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Act 2024, which cut national insurance for some 29 million working people across the country. What a difference a year makes. At the end of my speech that day, I posed a simple question to the shadow Minister, now the Exchequer Secretary, which

was really bugging me at the time: how will Labour pay for all its many spending commitments? I asked specifically what taxes Labour would put up, and called for Labour to just be straight with the British people. Alas, no straight answer was forthcoming, but now we know the answer, don't we? It is just a shame that Labour gave it to us only after the general election.

Labour promised not to raise national insurance, and that it was on the side of British business. It said that it would deliver economic growth; how is that going? The fact is that the Chancellor is delivering a £25 billion tax rise on jobs across the country. That will stifle growth, hold back British business, and harm public services. This Labour national insurance Bill will, unbelievably, take the tax burden to its highest level in history on the backs of working people.

We are debating a series of amendments tabled and voted through in the other place with the aim of mitigating at least some of the damage to three vital parts of our economy and our communities: healthcare providers, charities and small businesses. Lords amendments 1, 3 and 4 seek to exempt from the measures care providers, NHS GP practices, NHS-commissioned dentists and pharmacists, providers of transport for children with special educational needs and disabilities and charitable providers of health and social care, such as hospices, as we have heard. That is because we have been warned that as a direct result of the national insurance tax hikes, we could see fewer GP appointments, reduced access to NHS dentistry, community pharmacies closing, adults and local authorities paying more for social care, and young working families being hit with even higher childcare costs. We have to avoid that.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Would the hon. Member reverse this national insurance tax change? What spending would he cut to do so?

Gareth Davies: If the hon. Gentleman looks back at the record of proceedings on earlier stages of the Bill, he will see that we voted against it. If he looks at our record in government, he will see that we cut national insurance for 29 million people across the country. As I have said so many times in this place, why are we not debating the Government's creation of an £8 billion quango in Great British Energy? Why are they spending £7 billion on a rebrand of the UK Infrastructure Bank? Why are they spending £9 billion on giving up our sovereignty to Mauritius? Let us start with those discussions; we can then have a real debate.

Lords amendment 2 recognises the role that the voluntary sector plays in the provision of essential services by seeking to exempt charities with an annual revenue of less than £1 million from the national insurance rate rise. Charities with an income of less than £1 million make up some 95% of registered charities and undertake vital work in all our communities, yet this Chancellor will force charity staff and volunteers across the sector to raise £1.4 billion more to cover this tax rise next year alone. Supporting this Lords amendment would prevent so many services provided by the third sector from being reduced, or even removed altogether.

Lords amendments 8, 10 and 14 seek to exempt the smallest businesses—those with fewer than 25 full-time employees—from the proposed cut to the threshold at which an employer is required to pay secondary class 1 national insurance.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The hon. Member mentions small businesses. Local hairdressers in my constituency have been in touch with me to say that given the difficult economic picture, these NICs rises will mean that they cannot take on apprentices this year. Does he agree that this NICs rise is a tax not just on business, but on education?

Gareth Davies: Absolutely. To be fair, I do not think the profound impact of this tax is appreciated by Labour Front Benchers. The hon. Lady has pointed out yet another area in which it will have an impact—tax on education. I could talk about the impact on universities as well.

Sir Julian Smith: Does my hon. Friend think that the Government have assessed the loss of tax revenue that will result from this measure? In North Yorkshire, almost all of the jobs that would have been created in small businesses over the coming year are now being repressed, leading to a loss of income for the Exchequer.

1.30 pm

Gareth Davies: To answer simply, I do not think the Government did that assessment before announcing this tax rise, but with plummeting business confidence, declining economic growth and forecasts for economic growth that are consistently downgraded, the profound impact on businesses and growth—as I was saying—is clear for all to see.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I listened carefully to your answer to the Minister's question about what you would cut if this change were to be reversed. You have not been clear about whether you would reverse it, but I listened carefully to the answer, and what I heard you say—*[Interruption.]* I am so sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. The shadow Minister referred to GB Energy and the National Wealth Fund. Will he clarify whether he is really saying that he wants to reverse record levels of investment in energy infrastructure and innovation jobs, and in jobs across this country, to stabilise our economy into the future?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I remind hon. Members that interventions should not be short speeches. The hon. Lady is absolutely right; looking at the Chair should hopefully prevent her from saying the word “you” repeatedly.

Gareth Davies: The problem with that intervention is that the chairman of GB Energy himself disagrees about the number of jobs that it will supposedly be creating. I have set out clearly some of the things that we would do differently, and the different choices we would make from the choices this Labour Government are making.

When we talk about small businesses, and about the impact of this national insurance tax increase on businesses as a whole, the Minister and other Labour Members incorrectly suggest that only the largest businesses will be forced to pay this jobs tax. As I have told them consistently in every debate we have had on this Bill, that is simply not the case. Village butchers, high street hair salons and community pharmacies are not what most people would regard as large businesses, yet businesses such as those will be hit. If the Government really want

to ensure that our smallest businesses are exempt from at least part of this damaging tax, they should support the Lords amendments that are before us today.

Sir Gavin Williamson: We know that the Minister is having to defend the undefendable—he has got a certain Matt Hancock about him in how he does it with zeal. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. Does the shadow Minister agree that the people who are paying for these increases are taxpayers? They are people who are working hard. I was talking to a manufacturing business in my constituency that was going to give its employees a 4.5% pay increase, but can now only afford to give them a 2% increase. This money is coming out of the pockets of hard-working people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I remind hon. Members that language should be respectful at all times.

Gareth Davies: The jungle awaits the Minister, clearly. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; in fact, the OBR has clearly demonstrated in its analysis that 76% of this tax increase will be passed on to working people. That is a manifesto breach if ever I saw one. Not only that—the Institute for Fiscal Studies has made clear that this tax increase will not just have an impact on working people. It is the lowest-paid people in our country who will be paying for it, which is another under-appreciated and under-commented fact for the Labour party.

Sir Roger Gale: It is worse than that, is it not? The money that is being paid to bail out Demelza and Shooting Star children's hospices is being generously donated by people who have already paid tax. Those working people are effectively being taxed twice on the money they are generously giving to support some of the most needy children in this country—needy in terms of health. Is that not absolutely appalling?

Gareth Davies: Yes, it is. My right hon. Friend is exactly right; the Government are giving a small amount with one hand and taking a larger amount with the other, but the bottom line is that it is all taxpayers' money. It is a double tax on those people who now face the brunt of this tax increase.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Will the shadow Minister give way?

Gareth Davies: I will make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman will allow me, and then give way.

This tax, purely and simply, is a financial penalty on 940,000 businesses—that is how I look at it. The analysis shows that it is going to cost businesses an average of £26,000 per year per employer. Not content with ruining farmers' futures through the immoral family farm tax, the Chancellor wants to hammer them with this Bill, too. She is going to make pubs, cafés and restaurants stump up more to cover her jobs tax, without regard for the impact on our high streets or the communities they serve. She is going to squeeze the creative industries, from theatres to film producers, in a desperate attempt to keep this circus on the road. It is crucial that we understand the impact that the Bill will have. That is why Lords amendment 21 requires the Chancellor to

[Gareth Davies]

carry out a review within six months of the Bill's impact on the sectors I have described as well as on farming, creative industries, hospitality, retail and universities.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): The shadow Minister has mentioned cafés, and when we have been debating this point previously in the House, I have mentioned Basil's café in Tunbridge Wells. It now informs me that it is having to put its prices up because of the NIC rises. Does the shadow Minister think that we are going to see a bump in the inflation figures as a result of this tax?

Gareth Davies: I remind the House that inflation has already gone from 2% to 3% under this Labour Government, and in fact, the OBR scored the Hallowe'en Budget as inflationary. The hon. Gentleman is right that when these tax rises hit, they will be passed on through higher prices. I hope that that will not put pressure on inflation, but it will inevitably do so.

The combination of factors and how they are affecting businesses, including cafés, is not always appreciated either. The national living wage is going up. Conservative Members have welcomed that—we implemented the national living wage—but it is about the context in which it is going up: national insurance is on the rise and business rates relief for hospitality businesses and high street businesses is being reduced from 70% to 40%. All those things are compounding the impact on cafés, such as the one in the constituency of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin). They will be devastated, inevitably leading to job freezes or job losses, which I will come to.

From healthcare to charities and small and medium-sized enterprises, I have made the consequences of this Bill clear since it began its stages in the House. Today, the Government have one more chance to change course, because what many people across the country want to know is this. What is this Bill for? We were told that it was a one-off tax rise to fix the foundations of the economy. We were told that there would be no more tax rises after this, yet we find ourselves just a week away from an emergency Budget, with speculation rife that other taxes may have to rise because the Chancellor will not meet her own new fiscal rules. Some are suggesting that Labour will break another pre-election promise and not unfreeze the income tax thresholds in 2028, but will rather extend the freeze to pay down their new debts. That surely cannot be true—the Minister himself gave me his personal assurance in this House that income tax thresholds would be unfrozen from 2028. I would like him to reconfirm that promise to me today, in order to end the speculation.

This is vital context for Members as we consider the amendments before us today. If more tax rises will be needed—if the original justification for this Bill is now void—why should we stomach the Bill's terrible consequences? Why should Labour MPs have to go out and defend this to their constituents? Why should we allow the Government to punish the sectors that the amendments before us seek to protect? In fact, why must we stand here and see this entire Bill implemented at all?

One impact that hits every sector of our economy is the impact on jobs. Just yesterday, we heard Labour talk about the importance of lifting people out of welfare and getting them back into work, and it is right to do that. As Conservatives, we know that the dignity of work and the security of a regular pay cheque is what lifts us up as a country and lifts families out of poverty. The tragedy is that this Bill has caused so much concern and so much uncertainty that employment is already declining in anticipation of its passing. The Office for Budget Responsibility tells us that the Bill will depress workforce participation for years to come.

Put simply, this Government are cutting welfare to boost employment, while at the same time boosting taxes, which will cut jobs. No wonder business confidence has completely and utterly nose-dived. It is inexplicable and entirely avoidable.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The shadow Minister says it is inexplicable, and I agree that on the face of it, it is. However, is one possible explanation for fiscal misadventure on this scale not that the Government Benches are filled with people who have scarcely any understanding of the real economy, much less what it means to try to start, run and sustain a business?

Gareth Davies: That is right, and it is an important point, because the decisions made by this Government are having such a profound impact on people in the real economy. I simply say to the British public that if they are unhappy with the decisions being made, they have to change the people making them. [Interruption.] Unbelievably, I am getting heckled on that point. The hon. Member for Hamilton and Clyde Valley (Imogen Walker) should get out and talk to the average businessperson in her constituency. She might quieten down significantly.

The Minister implied that the Government had no choice, and he still seeks to ask me what the Conservatives would do differently. Others on the Government Benches are trying that, implying that there is no other alternative. The Minister should look at the £70 billion of wasteful spending commitments that I have already listed, including the quangos, such as GB Energy, the pay-offs to the unions without any reform or productivity gains, and the billions of pounds being surrendered as part of the surrender deal to Mauritius. We have growth on the decline and inflation, debt and unemployment on the rise. We have a Chancellor on the brink, and confidence crumbling. We may not be able to kill this Bill, but we have our chance now to dent the damage. I urge Ministers and Members across the House to do the right thing and to support these amendments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Due to the length of Front-Bench contributions, Back Benchers are now limited to five minutes.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to rise to speak to Lords amendments 1 to 19. I want to speak about what makes a good tax system and, in particular, optimal tax theory, which is a topic that is as thrilling to me as it is no doubt to the entire Chamber.

A good tax system is defined by neutrality, simplicity and stability, as set out in the Mirrlees review. A tax system designed along those three principles will raise the maximum revenue with the minimum economic impact. Each of the amendments in isolation might seem reasonable, but together they introduce individual exemptions that make our tax system less neutral, less simple and less stable. The amendments would make our tax system worse.

Today, we are discussing raising national insurance contributions from the largest employers to fix our broken public services and invest in our prosperity. Three quarters of that £23 billion of investment is from the richest 2% of businesses, while we are reducing contributions from the 250,000 smallest businesses.

Dr Luke Evans: The hon. Member talks about simplicity. If that is the case, why is the Government splitting the NICs? They could have introduced an increase on employees at the same time as the increase on employers, but they have decided not to do that. That would have been a simple measure to raise taxes, without creating this complication. How does that tally with his theory?

1.45 pm

Dr Sandher: It is a pretty well established introduction to the tax system to have both employee and employer NICs. The point about simplicity is about where the tax is levied. I will come to the specific point that the hon. Member raises later in my speech and hopefully provide some illumination.

The revenue we are raising will be used to invest in our nation's prosperity: insulating our homes, rebuilding our crumbling schools and hiring more nurses to care for our loved ones. It is about getting costs down and creating good jobs. It is about rebuilding this country after, frankly, more than a decade of despondency and despair.

The amendments before us represent bad policy that puts that at risk. As I may have mentioned in this House once or twice before, I used to be an economist. I can tell the House that a good tax is one that raises revenue and does not introduce perverse incentives. A good tax ensures that resources go to activity because there are higher levels of productivity. A good tax system introduces three principles. The first is neutrality: it treats similar activities in similar ways. The second is simplicity: it is straightforward and easy to implement. The third is stability: it is predictable.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The hon. Member is talking about productivity and growth. How does he square that with the additional tax on early years care? That care allows parents to work. If parents cannot work and employers cannot afford to bring young people through, how are we going to get the nation working? Nurseries are on their knees and they cannot take on more children, because there are strict rules about ratios and the amount of space each child takes.

Dr Sandher: First, there is more funding going into the early years, but I will deal with the tax side as I speak to the specific amendments.

Each amendment seeks to carve out an exemption for something, and I am sure that Members across the House identify with and, indeed, support some of those

individual exemptions. However, if we were to pass the amendments, they would give specified sectors advantages not enjoyed by others.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): It seems to me that the hon. Member's issue is not with some of the amendments, but with all of them taken together. Why does not he not back some of the amendments?

Dr Sandher: I do not, because that would introduce exemptions and perverse incentives and make the tax system less clear. It would make the tax system as a whole less efficient. I will come to the specific ways shortly.

Let us start with non-neutrality. Lords amendments 7, 12 and 16 would create non-neutrality between small charities and non-charities. That would incentivise more social enterprises to be charities instead of businesses. Lords amendments 8, 10 and 14 would create an additional NICs band for small businesses, thereby disincentivising them from growing. Under those amendments, if a business saw its revenue go over £1 million or it employed more than 25 people, all of a sudden it would incur a NICs charge. That is a cliff edge. It would introduce a perverse incentive and reduce productivity and economic growth.

Dame Caroline Dinanage (Gosport) (Con): I am pleased that the hon. Member is talking about growth. He talks about perverse incentives. What possible kind of perverse incentive could he have in mind when removing a jobs tax from a children's hospice, which cares for children and families going through the most unspeakable heartbreak? Where is the perverse incentive in that?

Dr Sandher: As I think I have set out, the question is not about carving out an exemption for this establishment or that establishment; it is about how we create a tax system overall that is simple and efficient. It is about ensuring that businesses and other organisations are operating more efficiently. I say this to the hon. Member: when the Conservatives were in government, they did not propose abolishing national insurance for all hospices. They should follow their arguments to the end of the line. I will move on, as I am conscious of the time.

The amendments would also reduce simplicity in the tax system. We are not exempting specific sectors or, indeed, specific establishments from this tax. Overall, Lords amendments 1 to 19 would complicate the tax system and reduce stability. Raising rates is accepted policy; introducing special rates for specific sectors or establishments is not. It would make for a less efficient tax system that is complicated to govern, expensive to enforce and more prone to fraud. This is not a predictable way of making tax policy. It is not neutral, it is not simple, and it is not stable. It is bad policy that all of us in the House should oppose.

All this may sound dry, but it matters to our constituents. Bad taxes do not just harm economic growth, but bring in less revenue. That means fewer appointments in the NHS, it means fewer new teachers, and it means less insulation in our homes. We are elected to this place as legislators. We have a duty to make policy that works, and that involves distinguishing the whole from its parts, ensuring we do not introduce loopholes and carve-outs that weaken our tax system, and governing responsibly.

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

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Notwithstanding what was said by the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), the Lords amendments were clearly not designed with the aim of creating a simpler tax system. They have been sent to us to consider because they may create a fairer society, and that, in my view, should be a driving force in our consideration of them today and in the work of this House.

Such is the strength of feeling in the other place that it has sent us 21 amendments, and such is the strength of feeling on the Liberal Democrat Benches that we will support every single one. Taken together, they offer exemptions for health and care providers, for small charities with an annual revenue of less than £1 million, for transport providers, for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and for small businesses with fewer than 25 employees.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Rowcroft hospice in my constituency is impacted greatly by the Bill, as is Bay Care, an excellent social care provider. Both those organisations are having to make challenging and difficult decisions about how many people they can employ and how they can support people in their communities. Does my hon. Friend share my fear that this will result in the shunting of costs on to our core NHS services?

Daisy Cooper: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. One of the main problems with this particular measure is that it is so self-defeating. It is effectively robbing Peter to pay Paul. I have said it once and I will say it again: this jobs tax is damaging to growth, and self-defeating for our health and care services. We Liberal Democrats have opposed it, and throughout the debate on the Bill we have suggested alternative ways—fairer ways—in which the Government could raise the same amount of revenue. We have also asked the Government, if they are indeed pursuing this measure, at the very least to exempt health and care providers.

The Government will not get hospitals out of a financial hole by taxing the GPs, dentists, pharmacies and care providers who prevent people from needing to go to hospital in the first place. The Government will not alleviate the pressure on hospitals by taxing hospices, which will now be forced to withdraw services from people who are trying to die with independence and dignity in a setting of their choosing, rather than in a cramped hospital corridor or a sterile ward. The Government will not keep people out of hospitals by levying a tax on the very health and care charities that provide vital services for those who are vulnerable—warm spaces, friendship for the isolated, financial advice, welfare support and social care. The Minister said that extra money would go into social care, but we know that the money allocated to it in the Budget is dwarfed by the increase in national insurance contributions. We cannot save the NHS unless we fix social care.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): There are many similar examples, but Quantum Care in Hertfordshire, a not-for-profit social care business, says that its costs will rise by £1.7 million in national insurance contributions alone, which will also have an impact on council and social services. That is certainly not solving our health and social care problem.

Daisy Cooper: As a fellow Hertfordshire Member, I have met representatives of Quantum Care a number of times and have heard the same reports as my hon. Friend. This is extremely worrying for our social care providers, who are very clear about the impact that this measure will have. They will have to put up their costs, they will have to hand back contracts to local authorities, and they will not be able to provide the level of care that many vulnerable people require.

The measure will also have a huge impact on small businesses and high streets. As I have said before, high streets are the most visual and visceral indicators of whether the economy is working in their area. If small businesses see their local high street going down the pan, they will lose confidence in their local economy. Pubs, hospitality companies, retailers, beauty salons and day centres are the glue that holds our communities together, but they are also the engines of local growth. Small businesses are crying out for assistance. What makes them feel so overwhelmed is the cumulative impact of all the measures that we are seeing from this Government: the national insurance increase, the rise in business rate bills, and the new obligations that are imposed by the Employment Rights Bill without the resources to manage them.

Throughout the passage of the Bill before us, we Liberal Democrats have set out alternative ways for the Government to raise funds. The Government say that this measure will raise £25 billion for the NHS, but the Office for Budget Responsibility says that when behaviour change and reimbursement in the public sector are taken into account, it will raise just £10 billion. We believe that that money could be raised from different sources, from the digital services tax to the gaming tax to reforming capital gains tax so that it is fairer and raises more money than it can currently raise because of the way in which the Government have addressed it.

This measure will destroy growth, decimate parts of our high streets, and cause vulnerable people to lose out on vital services. That is why we Liberal Democrats have opposed the increase in the jobs tax, and it is why we ask for, at the very least, an exemption for our valuable health and care providers.

Rachel Blake: Lords amendment 21 calls for a review of this policy. I will come to the practical reasons for my opposition to it shortly, but first I want to focus on the cause of the problem and the cause of today's debate.

The last Government presided over economic chaos, scaring businesses away from long-term investment. The last Government failed to invest in the skills that are required in the vital sectors about which we have been hearing today. The last Government left the NHS on its knees, in desperate need of long-term investment. It will be hard to take the serious steps that will put the country back on its feet, but I believe that the measures we are debating today are necessary. What a contrast we see now: a Government laser-focused on economic stability, a Government determined to invest in skills for the future, a Government who are already reducing the NHS waiting list thanks to a £23 billion investment. That is the outcome of this policy, which is part of a package of measures to stabilise our economy and enable us to invest in public services.

I have to admit that I have been struck by the passion and commitment of Members on both sides of the House who have spoken about important public services. I talk to representatives of those services regularly myself, and I firmly believe that the investment that this Government will be able to make in childcare, in early years, in breakfast clubs, in the NHS and back into local government, where it needs to be, will in the round create the more sustainable public services that we so desperately need.

On the practical reasons why I oppose Lords amendment 21, the OBR has already considered the implications of this policy—

Joe Robertson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Blake: I will not give way.

Jobs data is already publicly available that will enable everybody to analyse the impact of this policy, and there has been a detailed assessment of it by HMRC. I firmly believe that this amendment will not deliver on the objectives that our country needs.

2 pm

Dame Caroline Dinéage: I rise to speak in support of the Lords amendments, and I direct the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I want to talk about the services that are so integral to our communities, because they are the ones on which our constituents rely. I am talking about GP surgeries, dental practices and pharmacies. I am also talking about our community hospices; the charity hospices that care for our loved ones through the most difficult and heartbreaking of times; the hospices that our constituents work so hard to raise funds to keep going, including our children's hospices.

I listened very hard to what the Minister said, and he talked really dispassionately about difficult decisions. Has he no shame? This is a choice, and the Government have chosen to impose this jobs tax on children's hospices and the services that support families going through the most unimaginably difficult and painful of times.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend speaks with so much knowledge and passion, and she is a real advocate for her constituents. When we look across the Chamber, we see that the Labour Benches are threadbare. Is that not testament to the fact that Labour is actually trying to defend the indefensible?

Dame Caroline Dinéage: That is absolutely right. There are over 400 Labour MPs, but just four of them are sitting there to try to defend this indefensible jobs tax on our most vulnerable. They should be utterly ashamed of themselves. Do they not have children's hospices in their constituencies? Do they not have hospices and other settings that their constituents work so hard to raise funds for? They should be absolutely ashamed of themselves.

Joe Robertson: Perhaps I may suggest an easy decision, rather than a difficult one? The Government, instead of giving £9 billion away to Mauritius, should use some of that to support social care and charities.

Dame Caroline Dinéage: That would be an excellent decision, and I am sure the Naomi House children's hospice and Jacksplace, which do so much invaluable

work to support families going through the most unspeakable difficulties in my area, would advocate for that.

I want to talk about childcare settings, which ensure that our smallest but most cherished family members are cared for and given the very best possible start in life. It is incomprehensible that the Government have taken this decision to imperil some of the businesses and services that our constituents most rely on—nursing homes, for example. The owner of one nursing home, with 35 years of service in the Gosport constituency, told me that the tax rises in the Budget will add £90,000 on top of its annual costs. This business is particularly vulnerable because a very large proportion of its bed spaces are occupied by local authority patients. Its costs are going to go up by 12% this year, driven mostly by changes to the minimum wage and this jobs tax—the national insurance contributions change—on his 75 members of staff. The council, which is having difficulties of its own, can provide only a 4% uplift to cover it. Quite simply, this an existential threat to his business, and he is not alone.

It is the elderly, the vulnerable, disabled people and their families who are going to pay the price, and we know that these costs will go to those having to foot the bill. If people are not privately funded, some nursing homes will be forced to hand back their local authority contracts and increase the proportion of beds commissioned privately. Since the Budget, I have received messages from individuals who have already seen the cost of care going through the roof. One wrote to me:

“Directly due to the increases in Employers National Insurance contributions the Chancellor has managed to cause an increase of 7.8% in my brother's care home fees that are already north of £8000 a month... I shudder to think of the overall cost nationally of this increase across all those with relatives and loved ones in care.”

I also want to talk about early years settings. Early years providers are facing a squeeze that many just will not be able to stomach. Just as care settings have their revenue dictated by local government, nurseries are limited by childcare ratios and the fees they get from their local authority for their 30 hours' free childcare. Hopscotch nursery, which looks after 1,900 children across my region, has told me that these changes will add £1 million to its overheads. It says that, in order to make up the shortfall, it is going to have to put its fees up by 10%, and that 10% will be passed on to my Gosport constituents. How can parents in Gosport face such an uptick in fees? What assessment have the Government made of the impact that will have on parents, on people dropping out of the jobs market or out of the workforce, and, most especially, on women? At the end of the day, we all know that when it comes to childcare, rightly or wrongly, the buck always stops with us. What will be the disproportionate impact of this on women?

I could mention so many other organisations that are facing the prospect of scaling back their activities. They include hair and beauty salons, which are warning that this will result in billions of pounds lost, and many will shut up shop or encourage staff to go freelance. They have previously taken on so many apprentices, but they warn that by 2027 there will be no apprenticeships left in this sector because they will be too expensive.

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

The common thread is that this national insurance change will hit businesses for which labour is the highest cost and there is no digital solution, and businesses that are unable to find efficiencies because of the nature of their overheads. The amendments passed in the Lords would go some way towards alleviating those cost pressures. In many cases, they would be a lifeline for the businesses and services that our constituents so desperately rely on, and those that by their very nature are reliant on the public sector for revenue. I urge the Minister to change his mind, to show some compassion, to show he cares, to listen to his constituents and to support these amendments.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I am on record previously as calling for more support for hospices, but I have been contacted by a number of constituents about the issue of home-to-school transport for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. That relates to Lords amendments 3, 6, 11 and 15, and I wish to consider those today.

For many children with SEND, their school transport is a lifeline to education, friendships and independence. Without it, these children risk being cut off, left behind and denied opportunities that they deserve. If these Lords amendments are rejected, local councils and transport providers will struggle, families will face uncertainty and, I believe, the fundamental right to education will be compromised. This is not just a technical change to national insurance rates and thresholds; it is a direct threat to the futures of vulnerable children and their families. These dry words on a page have a massive impact in the world outside this place.

There is a genuine fear that the cost of removing these Lords amendments, which will ultimately see more children kept out of school, will actually be greater than the additional revenue raised through the national insurance changes. In reality, to exempt SEND school transport from the national insurance rise is not going to bankrupt the UK. We know that local councils, even with additional funding, are already struggling with the impact of 14 years of austerity. I believe that we could certainly raise the money we need if we had a wealth tax and introduced other changes to capital gains tax. I would appreciate it if the Minister explained why we are unable to compromise on this issue and find a way to exempt SEND school transport from the changes he proposes.

Dave Doogan: It is almost three months to the day since we were here in this Chamber on Third Reading. The SNP and other parties warned at that stage of the very real, dire consequences for organisations, businesses, charities, hospices and so on. It certainly does not give me, or anybody else on the Opposition side of the House, any pleasure that those threats have come to pass. There is no pleasure in that whatsoever.

The British Chambers of Commerce spoke last month of a “powder keg of costs” for businesses, with 82% of firms surveyed saying that they faced the potential of staff lay-offs, wage freezes or cancelled promotions in the workforce, which will be a terrible drag on the economy. Last month saw vacancies in the UK contract at the second-fastest rate in nearly five years, while wage growth has slumped to an almost four-year low. If we want the evidence of what business thinks of this change,

it is there in the figures: 300,000 small business owners surveyed last month said they intend to lay off employees in order to cope with Labour’s national insurance increase.

The economic impact is now becoming absolutely clear. Last week’s GDP figures show the UK economy shrinking in January. On Monday this week, the OECD downgraded the UK growth forecast for both this year and the next. The reality under Labour is that economic growth has fallen in four of the past seven months. The national insurance grab represents an extraordinary and unforced error in fiscal policy. If Labour genuinely has confidence in this move, then it should have no issue whatsoever in agreeing to Lords amendment 21 and publishing an impact assessment of its national insurance increase. What the Minister detailed as an impact assessment was in fact an analysis. An impact assessment deals not with the numbers, but with output in the real economy—the effect on business. The Minister knows fine that that is not what he is talking about.

On GPs and Lords amendments 1, 4, 5, 9 and 13, the Scottish Government will be investing—or compensating, rather—£13.6 million in general practice this financial year to support GPs in Scotland alone, obviously, to retain and recruit staff in the face of the change. But Scotland’s GPs, any more than England’s, Wales’s or Northern Ireland’s, should not be paying the price for UK Government decisions. Labour’s decision to increase national insurance contributions is a catastrophe for GP practices and for charities across Scotland—the relevant Lords amendments are 2, 7, 12 and 16.

There are 7,000 charities in Scotland at risk from this Labour Government. Marie Curie faces a £2.9 million inflation to its costs, with £75 million across the charitable sector in Scotland. The Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals alone is exposed to a £400,000 recurring pressure from this Labour Government. Scotland’s public sector faces a £700 million recurring pressure, which, with the Government’s compensation, still leaves a £200 million shortfall. Scotland is again being punished for choosing to invest more in its public services and paying people who deliver those services better.

The Government regularly attack us by saying, “What would you do?” I will tell them what I would do: £30 billion by rejoining the single market; £16 billion by introducing Scottish income tax rates; and £43 billion from a wealth tax of 1% on assets over £10 million. But this Labour Government will not go after multimillionaires. They would far rather go after the disabled, hospices, family businesses, GPs, farmers, councils and charities. That is what these so-called socialists are intent on doing.

In conclusion, Labour’s fiscal bonfire is what my colleagues in the Scottish Government have had to deal with to try to ameliorate and protect communities from Labour’s economic ineptitude. But even fiscally incompetent Unionists—a cadre in whose number I include the Minister—must realise that the Scottish Parliament cannot exist simply to ameliorate and protect Scottish public services from the United Kingdom’s decisions. Devolution can only ever be a temporary face-lift for the crumbling foundations of Unionism. As the Union crumbles, I shed no tears, but I wish it was not ripping the economic heart out of Scotland on its way down.

Wendy Morton: I would like to start with a gentle reminder, if it is needed, that Labour promised in its manifesto not to raise national insurance. Yet we are here today because Labour broke that promise. We are

here today because right hon. and hon. Members in the other place tabled some very important amendments to the Bill, which are, rightly, now here for us to consider. Let us also not forget that Labour colleagues voted against protecting small family businesses; against protecting hospices; against protecting GPs; against protecting care providers; against protecting small charities, including air ambulances; against protecting providers of school transport for children with SEND; and against protecting nurseries. Now they all face the jobs tax.

Sir Roger Gale: My right hon. Friend will recall that the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) referred in his speech to perverse incentives. Is it not perverse that the Government should, while exempting the health service, be taxing doctors, dentists, hospices and children's hospices, which are, effectively, all part of that same health service?

2.15 pm

Wendy Morton: My right hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. I find it hard to believe that we are listening to those arguments being made by Labour Members. The unintended consequences of the Labour Government's choices are not just disappointing but callous. They are so harsh on some of the most vulnerable communities and vulnerable people in society.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: My right hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does she agree that it also shows a deep lack of understanding by the Labour party of the way our communities are constructed and the organisations we rely on so much to keep them going?

Wendy Morton: That is exactly the point. What we see instead is Labour Members continuing to blame their economic inheritance. That is simply not correct. The chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility said:

"Nothing in our review was a legitimisation of that £22 billion".

I wonder what the former Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, makes of all this. In the run-up to the 2024 general election, he endorsed Labour.

What many people now see is a Government who do not really understand the role that so many charities play in supporting the NHS, communities, older people, young people, families, and patients—people who are sick and sometimes terminally ill. For example, why would they protect the public sector and the rest of the NHS from the national insurance tax, but not general practice? Analysis from the Institute of General Practice Management estimates that it will cost each practice an average of £20,000 a year. How many staff hours is that equivalent to? How many hours of a GP's time or a practice nurse's time is that?

I have spoken to a number of local charities, and we have heard from others today. Every pound that the Labour Government squeeze out of them through the jobs tax is an extra pound that cannot be spent on frontline services—an extra pound that they have to find just to stand still. I find it so hard to believe that this Labour Government are also taxing those who provide vital hospice care. How can they talk of helping palliative care with one hand, while clobbering hospices and care providers with extra taxes with the other?

I can be cynical at times but I see a complete lack of business expertise, knowledge or experience among those on the Labour Benches. Just visiting businesses is not enough to understand how a business operates. I speak to them in my constituency on a weekly basis. The chair of the CBI has stated that

"business has been milked as the cash cow".

We simply cannot expect small businesses, or indeed any business, to just be squeezed and squeezed, thinking, "Well, they'll just increase their costs and pass them on to the end user." The end user cannot afford them, as we have heard this afternoon. Ultimately, something will have to give: hours, training, development and jobs.

Just yesterday, we were in this Chamber debating the Government's welfare reform. At the heart of the issue, I really believe people want to get back into work. They need support to do that, but they also need employers and businesses to have vacancies so that they can support them back into work. What I, like others, see in this legislation is the Government taxing businesses out of creating the vital jobs that this country so needs to get the growth that we do not have at the moment.

As I mentioned, attendance on the Government Benches is somewhat threadbare, giving the appearance that the Government do not care. We have heard from Labour Members who do care, just like we on the Opposition Benches care. I draw my remarks to a conclusion by urging Members on the Government Benches and those listening outside to reflect very carefully. We all have the opportunity today to do the right thing—to protect and help charities and hospices and, by virtue of that, to protect and help some of the most vulnerable in our country and society. We have the opportunity to protect jobs and help businesses to create opportunities and, by virtue of that, to help working people who aspire to a better life. I end quite simply by urging those on the Government Benches to think again and to do the right thing.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I wish to express my deep concerns about the Government's national insurance changes and the devastating impact they are having on essential services in my constituency. The amendments put forward by the Liberal Democrats in the Lords are crucial to preventing this policy from inflicting serious harm on GP practices, care providers and the wider health system.

Take our GP surgeries, which are vital to healthcare in Lewes and beyond. I have been speaking to local healthcare providers in my community over the past week. Unlike private businesses, GP surgeries cannot pass their costs on to their patients. Every extra pound spent on national insurance is a pound less spent on patient care, staffing and appointments. The Government's failure to exempt them will mean fewer face-to-face consultations and longer waiting times, contrary to the Government's claimed objectives. The Liberal Democrats' Lords amendments 1, 4, 5, 9 and 13 would protect GP surgeries, NHS-commissioned dentists and pharmacists by keeping their national insurance costs at a sustainable level.

Social care providers are facing the same predicament. A domiciliary care provider in my constituency is already struggling to recruit and retain staff due to rising costs.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I have a similar situation in my constituency with Strada Care, which is under immense strain, having already closed four care homes over the past seven years due to chronic underfunding. Thousands of care providers are on the brink of collapse, and many more may follow if these Lords amendments are disagreed to. With social care services already struggling, more vulnerable individuals will be forced into hospitals and be bed blocking. Does my hon. Friend agree that increasing costs for social care providers will have a devastating knock-on effect for the NHS?

James MacCleary: I absolutely agree. The care provider in my constituency faces a 9.4% increase in employer's costs, which it simply cannot absorb. These are the very people keeping elderly and disabled residents safe in their homes, preventing hospital admissions and easing NHS pressures, yet the Government have chosen to burden them rather than support them. The Lords amendments I mentioned would ensure that care providers can continue to deliver essential services without being driven into financial crisis.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The £615 cost per person reported to me by care providers in my constituency will mean that one constituent, who is paying £1,500 a week for care for her 94-year-old mother, will no longer have the money to pay for the care of her disabled brother as well, after the fees go up as a result of this jobs tax. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a shockingly unacceptable result of these changes, and that the Lords amendments introduced by the Liberal Democrats should be accepted?

James MacCleary: I thank my hon. Friend for providing such a concrete example of the real suffering these changes will cause. This is not an abstract thing; it is about real people's lives, and there are people who will suffer as a result, as in the example given by my hon. Friend.

I will move on to nurseries and early years providers, an issue very close to my heart. In my constituency, they are facing the same impossible squeeze. The rise in national insurance contributions, combined with the increased statutory wage costs, is pushing many to the very brink. The National Day Nurseries Association has warned that the average nursery will see an additional £47,000 in costs, which the Government's funding increase does not come even close to covering. If nurseries are forced to close, it will leave working parents, who are already struggling with the cost of living, without the childcare they need. If schools are exempt from this tax hike, as they should be, the nurseries that provide the very foundation of a child's education should be, too.

What makes this even worse is that the Government are not just undermining essential services, but forcing more people towards them by stripping away other forms of support. At the same time as these tax hikes, Ministers are cutting vital benefits such as personal independence payment, leaving thousands of vulnerable people struggling to afford the basics, meaning that more people will have no choice but to turn to the very care providers and community health services that are now being hit financially by these national insurance changes. The Government cannot claim to support essential services while actively driving them towards collapse. They are giving with one hand, while taking much more with the other.

I find that a gauge of the level of enthusiasm and pride that a Government have in a policy they have put forward is often the number of their representatives who turn up to support it and be associated with it. Notwithstanding the heroic contribution of the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), the emptiness of the Government Benches speaks volumes.

The Liberal Democrat Lords amendments before us today would help to prevent irreparable damage to GP practices, care providers and the wider healthcare system. I urge the Minister to back them, because failing to do so will cost not just money, but lives.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The Bill is yet another example of legislation from this Government that breaks their manifesto promises, harms local business, negatively impacts our constituents and limits the prospects of growth in my local economy of Chester South and Eddisbury and, indeed, the country.

Fundamentally, these changes will hit working people the hardest—the very people the Chancellor said would be shielded from the impacts of the Bill will be the most affected. It will mean lower wages, higher unemployment and increased costs for businesses, resulting in higher prices in the shops. Do not just take my word for it: the Office for Budget Responsibility has stated that “additional payroll costs for employers are passed through into lower wages.”

When I speak with business owners in my constituency, they say they feel like they are swimming against the tide, from the NIC increases to the reduction in business rates relief. The recurring message from every company I speak to is that confidence in the economy is down. I must ask the Minister: how is that conducive to growth?

I will speak to two of the amendments. Exempting hospices from this damaging increase in employer national insurance contributions is the right thing to do. I have had the pleasure of visiting both the hospice of the Good Shepherd in Backford and St Luke's hospice in Winsford, which provide a vital service to the most vulnerable of my constituents at the most difficult time in their lives. They provide the very best care and support, and I encourage the Minister to visit and see for himself the warm, compassionate and welcoming environment that they offer, which reflects the attitude of the doctors, nurses and, indeed, all the staff who go above and beyond in their work.

The financial implications of an increase in national insurance contributions and the resulting consequences for services and staff will be hugely damaging. Those hospices have shared with me their challenges with recruitment and their deep concern that these tax rises will make paying their staff in line with what their colleagues receive in the NHS even harder than it already is.

Joe Robertson: My hon. Friend talks passionately about hospices. Does she agree that taxing hospices but providing tax relief to hospitals through the relief to the NHS actually disincentivises moving people out of hospitals, which the Secretary of State for Health says is his intention?

Aphra Brandreth: I completely agree with that excellent intervention. The frustration that hospices have is that in order to recruit staff, they need to pay wages comparable

to what NHS staff receive, and this change is making that virtually impossible to do. Hospices requires a highly specialised workforce to provide the levels of care and dignity that they offer to patients. Without the proposed exemptions, I am unsure as to the sustainability of the hospices that serve my constituents.

The second issue I would like to mention briefly is the impact on transport for children with special educational needs. As we know, the complex needs and challenges of SEN children varies from case to case; some will need specialist transport to and from school, for appointments, or just for everyday tasks. Many of these young people are vulnerable children, to whom process and routine matter. They might have a driver with whom they have built a bond and who understands their needs; they might be a highly anxious child, or perhaps a non-verbal child who has a driver who can use British Sign Language.

For my constituents in Chester South and Eddisbury, specialist transport is of the utmost importance. Our communities are isolated and rural, and parents and children rely on this vital service. There are no transport alternatives in many areas. People cannot get a bus—not even one without a specialist driver—leaving many of my villages cut off with no public transport options at all.

Daisy Cooper: In my constituency of St Albans, which is not particularly rural, many children with special educational needs have to travel a great distance, because we do not have enough special school places. Does the hon. Member agree that this is an issue that affects children right up and down the country?

2.30 pm

Aphra Brandreth: The hon. Member makes an important point. It does not matter whether we are talking about a rural or an urban community, these young people often have to travel large distances, and we really need to think about their welfare. In my constituency, they literally have no other option. If we make this service effectively unaffordable, we are just taking away that option from SEN children.

In conclusion, I simply say to the Minister and to Government Members that they should consider the real people behind these decisions, the support that will be taken away from vulnerable people and the vital services that will no longer be affordable because of this inexcusable tax increase.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have three more speakers. If anyone intervenes, I will not be able to get all of them in.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I rise to speak to Lords amendments 1, 2, 3 and 4. The Liberal Democrats are extremely concerned that this tax rise risks dire consequences for social care, primary care, the NHS, hospices and charities, many of which are delivering vital healthcare in the community. Thousands of care providers are already on the brink of bankruptcy, and this national insurance increase risks tipping them over the edge.

The OBR estimates that this hike will bring in £10 billion a year rather than the £25 billion estimated by the Government, once employers change their behaviour in response to the tax and once public sector employers are compensated. Yes, we know that finances are stretched, and that the Government inherited an incredibly difficult situation, but the Government could have raised that amount of money through much fairer tax changes, and we Liberal Democrats have come up with many suggestions. For example, they could have reversed Conservative cuts handed to the big banks; increased the digital services tax; doubled the rate of remote gaming duty; and introduced a fair reform of capital gains tax, so that the 0.1% of ultra-wealthy individuals pay their fair share. This may be something particular to Totnes, but many wealthy constituents have told me that they wish they were being asked to pay more tax.

The Liberal Democrats have called on the Government to exempt social care providers and GPs from the employer national insurance tax rise. On average, the tax rise will cost each GP practice an estimated £20,000 a year. The Government have announced an additional £889 million in the 2025-26 GP contract, but have failed to spell out how much of that they believe practices will need to use to pay the additional tax burden, and how much will be left to meet unmet patient needs. What is clear is that the national insurance rise will mean that the uplift to the GP contract is in fact far smaller than it appears, because a proportion will need to be returned directly to the Treasury—robbing Peter to pay Paul, as many Members have said.

What assessment have the Government made of how much of the recent uplift in the GP contract will practices need to use to offset the rise in national insurance? Rowcroft hospice, which is in the constituency next door, but which serves us, says the NIC rise is expected to add £225,000 to annual costs. One of my GP surgeries says that its costs will go up by £187,000, and the Devon Mental Health Alliance estimates the cost increase at £375,000, potentially resulting in a loss of 25,167 staffing hours.

One GP said to us:

“I have been a GP for 10 years and a doctor for 15. It is exhausting and, frankly, I just feel like giving up. This is not an attractive or stable job for training doctors.”

The Devon Mental Health Alliance, which is a strategic partnership, uniting five leading charitable organisations in Devon, said:

“As a sector, we play a critical role in easing the burden on the NHS by preventing thousands of people from needing GP appointments, hospital care, or sitting on waiting lists for treatment. By addressing health issues at their root and offering early intervention and prevention, this sector acts as a frontline defence, reducing demand on overstretched NHS services.”

It cannot fill the black hole by increasing revenue efficiencies or risk management. The organisation estimates costs of £375,000 next year and, as I have said, that could mean losing 25,000 staffing hours. That would mean that more people in Devon with complex needs will not be able to access its services.

Minister, at a time when we have a mental health crisis across all ages and communities, this extra financial impact on voluntary sector services is short-sighted and will only heap more pressure on the NHS. If we do not value the work done in primary care, particularly by GPs, we are putting the health of our constituents

[Caroline Voaden]

across the country at risk, putting more pressure on GPs who are already working at full capacity and threatening reforms to the NHS, which has already been brought to its knees by chronic underfunding over the past decade. I strongly urge the Government to reconsider the NICs rise for GPs, social care providers and all of those working to support health and wellbeing in the communities that we represent.

Just to finish, I would like to echo what others have said about the total absence of Government Back Benchers who have felt able to come in and speak in support of their hospices, their social care providers and their voluntary sector organisations, because they could not come in here and defend a Government policy that they know is indefensible.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): I rise to speak in support of these Lords amendments, and I will speak today on those that would protect small businesses with up to 25 employees.

In Wales, more than 99% of all businesses are small or medium-sized enterprises. Of those, nearly 95% are micro-sized, meaning that they employ between one and nine people. For all the protections that the Government say they have put in place for small businesses, the increase to employer national insurance contributions will still hit these enterprises hard.

There is a lack of home-grown Welsh businesses developing beyond the micro-enterprise level and becoming larger businesses themselves. We need a Government who will step up and support local businesses to grow. Unfortunately, this Government are doing the exact opposite, as it is estimated that an employer of 40 people on an average salary is about £29,000 worse off a year under the national insurance changes. Why would Welsh businesses now be incentivised to grow and take on more staff given this extra cost? It is worth noting, too, that the OBR forecasts that 76% of the cost of the national insurance contributions increase will be passed on to workers through higher prices and lower pay rises.

The Government have said that small businesses will be shielded from the national insurance increases through the changes to employment allowances. However, when asked specifically how many businesses in Wales will benefit, the Government responded by saying that they did not know. This Government like to talk about growth as their central mission, but can they explain how this policy is good for growth for our small businesses in Wales? All I can see is that it is bad for Welsh business, bad for Welsh workers, and bad for the Welsh economy.

I urge the Government to support these Lords amendments to at least protect more businesses from the damage that the national insurance hike will cause. I have raised concerns previously in this Chamber that this Labour Government are not considering the needs of small and local businesses in their decisions, and these damaging national insurance hikes are only further proof that that is the case.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I rise to speak to Lords amendments 1, 4, 5, 9 and 13. These amendments tabled by the Liberal Democrats in the other place would ensure that care providers, NHS GP

practices, NHS-commissioned dentists, NHS-commissioned pharmacies, charitable providers of health and social care, and hospice care continue to pay secondary class 1 contributions at the rate of 13.8%.

With healthcare in such a dire state in Glastonbury and Somerton, it is essential that providers are not put into further financial difficulties due to increases in employer national insurance contributions. Like so many Members, my inbox has been brimming with correspondence on this matter from organisations across my constituency. The measure will disproportionately impact businesses run by women. For example, early years provider Acorn Day Nursery in Somerton has told me that it believes that the employer national insurance contribution increases, in combination with other recent funding announcements, could be the final nail in the coffin for its business, leaving families without crucial early years care provision. I have heard from hospice care providers such as Dorothy House, which provides crucial end of life care for my constituents. It will be hard hit by the rise in employer national insurance contributions, which will impact care provision for people who live in rural areas.

Vine GP surgery in Street shared with me its concerns about the impact of the changes to employer national insurance contributions, stating that it will undermine access to patient care following years of neglect from the previous Conservative Government. A constituent from Langport recently wrote to me to raise their concerns about the negative impact of the rise in national insurance on care homes. Already stretched care homes could see an increase of around £650 per employee for anyone working more than eight hours a week. That will have a knock-on impact on the cost of care provision.

Community pharmacies play an essential role in providing care in the community, in line with the Government's strategic agenda. However, if the rise in national insurance contributions goes ahead, pharmacies such as Bruton, Castle Cary, Stoke-sub-Hamdon and Martock could all be put at risk. If they go, vital frontline services for rural communities will be lost. The National Pharmacy Association has predicted that around 1,000 will close by 2027. The combined effect of changes to the national insurance contributions and the national living wage could add an extra £25,000 to each pharmacy in rural Somerset, affecting their viability. Given the rate of pharmacy closures in Glastonbury and Somerton is nearly double the national average, my constituents will be hard hit by this tax hike.

In rural areas we simply cannot afford to lose any more pharmacies or our critical frontline services. I fear that these measures will only increase the pressure on GPs and other services that will be badly impacted by this decision. I urge colleagues to back the Liberal Democrats' amendments so that we can protect frontline health providers, who, shockingly, are not included in the Government's exemption. Without it, health and early years provision across the country will be drastically reduced.

James Murray: I will respond briefly to some of the points raised in the debate. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies), repeated many points that I addressed in my opening remarks. He asked a fundamental question: why must

the Bill be implemented? My response is because of the mess that his party left when we won the election last July. I noted that he refused to say whether he would reverse the national insurance changes that we are making, despite being asked by Government Members. He refused to make clear his party's position, as the leader of his party did earlier.

The hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenege) spoke of choices in politics. She is right that politics is about choices. But she was also incapable of explaining what different choices she and her colleagues would make, since they oppose our changes to national insurance contributions. Would they go for higher borrowing, lower spending or other tax rises?

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) Poole and the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) spoke about special educational needs transport facilities. I mentioned in my earlier remarks that the Budget and the provisional local government finance settlement set out £2 billion of new grant funding for local government in 2025-26. That includes £515 million to support councils with employer national insurance contributions. However, it is not ringfenced, which means that it is for local authorities to determine how to use this funding across relevant services and responsibilities.

There was a comment from the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), although he is not in his place and I do not know where he is—perhaps he is off feeding his spider. He made a rather colourful comparison between some of my points and those made by a former colleague of his. I do not know whether he realised that in doing so he implied that the position that the former Secretary of State for Health was defending was indefensible. I would be interested to see which of the previous Government's policies he thought were indefensible. When he returns from his spider-care duties I will ask him, but in his absence, let me say what is indefensible: for Conservative Members to have voted for the Liz Truss mini-Budget. What is indefensible is what they did to public services over 14 years. What would have been indefensible would have been our letting the situation carry on as it was when we won the general election.

The Bill makes some of the difficult but necessary decisions that we as a Government have had to take to fix the public finances and get public services back on their feet. The amendments from the other place require information that has already been provided. They do not recognise other policies that the Government have in place, and most seriously they seek to undermine the funding that the Bill will secure. I therefore respectfully propose that this House disagrees with the Lords amendments.

Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 182.

Division No. 132]

[2.46 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Akehurst, Luke
Abbott, Jack	Alaba, Mr Bayo
Abrahams, Debbie	Al-Hassan, Sadik
	Ali, Rushanara
	Ali, Tahir

Anderson, Callum	Eccles, Cat
Anderson, Fleur	Edwards, Lauren
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Edwards, Sarah
Asato, Jess	Egan, Damien
Asser, James	Ellis, Maya
Athwal, Jas	Elmore, Chris
Atkinson, Catherine	Entwistle, Kirith
Atkinson, Lewis	Eshalomi, Florence
Bailey, Olivia	Esterson, Bill
Baines, David	Evans, Chris
Baker, Richard	Farnsworth, Linsey
Bance, Antonia	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Barker, Paula	Ferguson, Mark
Barron, Lee	Ferguson, Patricia
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Footy, Emma
Baxter, Johanna	Fookes, Catherine
Beales, Danny	Foster, Mr Paul
Beavers, Lorraine	Foxcroft, Vicky
Bell, Torsten	Foy, Mary Kelly
Benn, rh Hilary	Francis, Daniel
Betts, Mr Clive	Frith, Mr James
Billington, Ms Polly	Furniss, Gill
Bishop, Matt	Gardner, Dr Allison
Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Gemmell, Alan
Blake, Rachel	German, Gill
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Gilbert, Tracy
Bonavia, Kevin	Gill, Preet Kaur
Botterill, Jade	Glindon, Mary
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Goldsbrough, Ben (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Gosling, Jodie
Brickell, Phil	Gould, Georgia
Bryant, Chris	Greenwood, Lilian
Burton-Sampson, David	Griffith, Dame Nia
Butler, Dawn	Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Byrne, rh Liam	Hack, Amanda
Cadbury, Ruth	Haigh, rh Louise
Caliskan, Nesil	Hall, Sarah
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hamilton, Fabian
Campbell, Irene	Hamilton, Paulette
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Harris, Carolyn
Carden, Dan	Hatton, Lloyd
Carling, Sam	Hayes, Helen
Charalambous, Bambos	Hazelgrove, Claire
Charters, Mr Luke	Hinchliff, Chris
Collier, Jacob	Hinder, Jonathan
Collinge, Lizzi	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Collins, Tom	Hopkins, Rachel
Conlon, Liam	Hughes, Claire
Coombes, Sarah	Huq, Dr Rupa
Cooper, Andrew	Hurley, Patrick
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Ingham, Leigh
Costigan, Deirdre	Irons, Natasha
Cox, Pam	Jameson, Sally
Craft, Jen	Jermy, Terry
Creasy, Ms Stella	Jogee, Adam
Crichton, Torcuil	Johnson, Kim
Curtis, Chris	Jones, Lillian
Darlington, Emily	Jones, Louise
Davies, Jonathan	Jones, Ruth
Davies, Paul	Josan, Gurinder Singh
Davies-Jones, Alex	Joseph, Sojan
De Cordova, Marsha	Juss, Warinder
Dean, Josh	Kane, Chris
Dickson, Jim	Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Dixon, Anna	Khan, Naushabab
Dodds, rh Anneliese	Kinnock, Stephen
Dowd, Peter	Kirkham, Jayne
Downie, Graeme	Kitchen, Gen
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Kumar, Sonia
Eagle, Dame Angela	

Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Opong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David

Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris

Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Jo

 Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartledge, James
 Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Duffield, Rosie

White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Ayes:
Kate Dearden and
Keir Mather

NOES

Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eastwood, Colum
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Oly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Hanna, Claire
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James

MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James (*Proxy
vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Forster*)
Morrisey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Mohindra*)
Ramsay, Adrian
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua

Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
**Nick Timothy and
James Wild**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

2.59 pm

More than two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords amendments, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2.—(James Murray.)

The House divided: Ayes 310, Noes 183.

Division No. 133]

[2.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur

Antoniazzi, Tonia
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Richard
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee

Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia

Footy, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben (*Proxy
vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
MacNae, Andy

Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie

Reid, Joani
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Swards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Jo

White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartledge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eastwood, Colum
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim

Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Kate Dearden and
 Keir Mather

NOES

Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Oly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Hanna, Claire
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James (*Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 Miller, Calum

Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim

Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wishart, Pete
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Nick Timothy and
James Wild

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 2 disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 3.—(James Murray.)

The House divided: Ayes 314, Noes 187.

Division No. 134]

[3.11 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Ady*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna

Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus

Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben (*Proxy
vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette

Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe

Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reid, Joani
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh

Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Kate Dearden and
Keir Mather**

NOES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)

Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blackman, Kirsty
Bool, Sarah
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Doogan, Dave
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Eastwood, Colum
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen

Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Oily
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James (*Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca

Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory

Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wishart, Pete
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
 Nick Timothy and
 James Wild

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 3 disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 4.—(James Murray.)

The House divided: Ayes 313, Noes 190.

Division No. 135]

[3.23 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel

Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul

Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise

Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate

Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth

Tellers for the Ayes:
Kate Dearden and
Keir Mather

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett

Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex

Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinéage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eastwood, Colum
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Hanna, Claire
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel

Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James (*Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David

Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom

Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Nick Timothy and
James Wild

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 4 disagreed to.

Clause 2

SECONDARY THRESHOLD FOR SECONDARY CLASS 1 CONTRIBUTIONS

Lords amendments 5 to 7 disagreed to.

*Motion made, and Question put, That this House
disagrees with Lords amendment 8.—(James Murray.)*

The House divided: Ayes 316, Noes 189.

Division No. 136]

[3.35 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Richard
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel

Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex

De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben (*Proxy
vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise

Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate

Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin

Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Kate Dearden and
Keir Mather**

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett

Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex

Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eastwood, Colum
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdoch, James (*Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Sollom, Ian

Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline

Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
David Simmonds and
Paul Holmes

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 8 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 9 to 19 disagreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): As the House was informed earlier, Mr Speaker is satisfied that Lords amendment 20 would impose a charge on the public revenue that is not authorised by the money resolution passed by this House on 3 December 2024. In accordance with Standing Order No. 78(3), Lords amendment 20 is therefore deemed to be disagreed to.

After Clause 3

REVIEW OF EFFECT ON CERTAIN SECTORS

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 21.—(James Murray.)

The House divided: Ayes 316, Noes 187.

Division No. 137]

[3.51 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Richard
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt

Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam

Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lillian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Huq, Dr Rupa

Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reid, Joani
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David

Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Kate Dearden and
Keir Mather

NOES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân

Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blackman, Kirsty
Bool, Sarah
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Denyer, Carla
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Doogan, Dave
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison

Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James (*Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
Medi, Llinos
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Ramsay, Adrian
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna

Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick

Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:

**David Simmonds and
Paul Holmes**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 21 disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendments 1 to 19 and 21;

That James Murray, Christian Wakeford, Imogen Walker, Dan Tomlinson, Chris Vince, Gareth Davies and Daisy Cooper be members of the Committee;

That James Murray be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Opposition Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY, SECOND PART]

Winter Fuel Payment

4.3 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con):
I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to publish data on the number of eligible pensioners it estimates did not receive the Winter Fuel Payment in 2024–25; further calls on the Government to publish data showing the impact of changes to the Winter Fuel Payment on levels of pensioner poverty and the number of hospital admissions; also calls on the Government to set out how it intends to ensure that those eligible for Pension Credit receive it before winter 2025–26; and calls on the Government to apologise for the misery caused to vulnerable pensioners in winter 2024–25.

Now that the sun has come out, I suspect that many of us will quickly forget the chill of the winter—the evenings when it was freezing outside and we reached for our jumpers, and perhaps the switch on our central heating too. However, for many pensioners turning up the heating was not an option, because one of the Chancellor's first acts in her new job last year was to scrap the winter fuel payment for 10 million pensioners—something of which she gave no hint before the election, a time when voters rightly expect political parties to spell out their plans. As a result, millions of older people, many with fixed and far from substantial incomes and many living in draughty homes, missed out on £300 this winter. That money makes all the difference. In fact, for some it is literally a choice between heating and eating. At the same time, energy bills went up. Before the election, the Government did not say they would cut the winter fuel payment, but they did promise to bring our energy bills down—by £300, in fact. Instead, they are up by about £170. It was a promise so easily made and so carelessly broken.

Labour Members may not like hearing this, but let us pause for a minute to think about what this means in human terms. I remember well my grandmother in her 90s in layers of jumpers, shawls and blankets in winter, even when she had the heating on. In fact, I remember well giving her a woollen shawl as a Christmas present, because she was always cold. I would describe myself as someone who feels the cold, but I know that what I feel on a winter's day is not a patch on how someone in their 80s or 90s feels, especially if they have health problems, and I know from my time as a Health Minister about the connection between being cold and ending up in hospital.

To help get the winter fuel payment cut past Labour Back Benchers, some of whom do have consciences, the Government claimed that they were going to protect the most vulnerable because those on pension credit would still get it, but let us look at what that really means in practice—at the facts. Pension credit tops up a pensioner's weekly income to £218.15 if they are single or, if they have a partner, to £332.95 jointly. Someone with an annual income of £11,500 could be ineligible for pension credit. They may be just £1 or £2 over the threshold, but because of the cliff edge, they do not get pension credit and, as a result of the Government's cut, they would not get the winter fuel payment either. So we are not talking about rich people.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I certainly remember, and I am sure others will, the Government saying that those with the broadest shoulders would take the strain. Does the shadow Secretary of State consider those on this level of income to have the broadest shoulders?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes exactly the important point I am making, which is that if the Government thought what they were doing would affect just the very wealthiest in society, they were very wrong.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Is it not very telling that, although when this policy was voted on in this House in September the Government had a majority of 120, there are very few Labour MPs on the Government Benches to defend their own policy in this debate?

Helen Whately: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. As I said a moment ago, I do believe that some Labour Members have consciences, but I am not sure which ones. Are those with consciences the ones who are hiding away from the Chamber because they feel guilty and do not want to hear this debate, or the hon. Members here who are actually going to stand up in support of pensioners and join us in the Lobby later.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I am looking forward to the opening speech of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), because if we see the same sympathy that he showed for people in his “Newsnight” interview last night, we should be in for a treat.

When the Government put forward their proposals, they claimed that they were going to save £1 billion. However, the amount of money they would be paying out with the increased uptake of pension credit was going to cost £3.5 billion at that time. Does the shadow Secretary of State have up-to-date figures on whether this policy will actually deliver a saving for the Government?

Helen Whately: One of the things we would very much like to see is a full set of figures from the Government, but my hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Government said they wanted everyone who was eligible to sign up for pension credit and therefore be able to access the winter fuel payment, but if everyone had actually signed up for pension credit, the Government would not have saved the money they set out that the policy would save.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Department for Work and Pensions states that it works to a planned timescale of 50 working days for processing applications. However, on 9 December, in response to my written question, it turned out that, at its peak just before the coldest period, it was 87 working days. Even now, the answer is that it takes on average 56 working days to get pension credit sorted. That is a problem, because the Government directed people to pension credit who cannot then get access to it when they need it, at the coldest time of the year. Is that not a despicable decision?

Helen Whately: Yes. My hon. Friend makes a really important point. He has been every effective in his use of parliamentary questions to scrutinise the Government and get data from them—they do not like to give it

willingly. He identifies the long delays for pension credit approvals and therefore access to winter fuel payment. Some will have applied before the deadline for pension credit and got the whole way through winter without getting money, or even knowing whether they were going to get any money. We know well from charities such as Age UK, which represents pensioners, that pensioners are very reluctant to get themselves into debt. If they did not know whether they were getting the payment, they would have been very reluctant to spend money in the hope that they might.

Several hon. Members rose—

Helen Whately: Let me make a little progress and then I will be delighted to take more interventions from colleagues.

The Chancellor has previously argued that winter fuel payments should be means-tested and cut for the richest pensioners, but who here thinks that someone on an income of £11,500 is rich? Age UK estimated that over 80% of pensioners living below or only just above the poverty line would lose their winter fuel payment.

The issue is not just that low-income vulnerable pensioners miss out on help with their heating because they are just above the pension credit threshold—the problem is worse than that. Last summer, the Government knew that over 800,000 people may be eligible for pension credit but did not claim it, meaning that they, too, would miss out on the winter fuel payment. The Pensions Minister at the time, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), assured us that the Government would get on top of that. In fact, she told us that her target was to have 100% of those eligible for pension credit claiming it. But here we are many months later, and still around three quarters of a million eligible pensioners are not on pension credit. That is another promise easily made but easily broken. There has been a woeful failure by the Government to close properly that gap, despite all the coverage the winter fuel payment received.

Of course, we knew that this would be hard. We, too, had pension credit uptake campaigns in Government. More people signed up, but still many did not. I expect the Government knew that they would fail, too. Their officials would have told them, but it was easier for them to assure the press, the charities and their Back Benchers, “Don’t worry,” just as we have heard their Ministers do about the welfare reforms in the last 24 hours. For them, it was easier to wait for the spring to come and hope that everyone would simply forget. Well I say to them, “We won’t let you forget.” Nor will millions of pensioners and their families: 10 million pensioners are missing out on help with their heating, among them around 1 million of the most vulnerable people in our country, quite literally left in the cold by this Labour Government. That will not be forgotten in a hurry.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. It is absolutely right that we ask the questions we are asking today. The statistic that has shocked me most in this debate is that of the millions of pensioners who lost their winter fuel payment, 44,000 are estimated to have been terminally ill. Is she as shocked as I am by that statistic?

Helen Whately: I was indeed extremely shocked by that statistic; that is one reason why we need to have this debate today and try to get some of the data out of the Government. They were at the time, and continue to be, incredibly reluctant to share whatever they know about the impact of this cut on people, including the terminally ill.

Dr Luke Evans: Going back to data, this policy does not just impact pensioners, because the Government seconded 500 extra staff to try to deal with pension credit. We know, from another written answer, that those staff came from the services handling child maintenance, counter fraud, compliance and debt, so there is going to be an ongoing impact. Do the Government not need to be transparent about the impact on the Departments that have had to move staff across to try to deal with their own policy?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes an important point about transparency, and he recognises that this policy has had an impact not only on pensioners, but on other parts of Government, and therefore on other constituents. It is another thing that I hope the Government Back Benchers in the Chamber are taking note of, to pass on to their colleagues who, for some reason, have chosen not to be present to discuss this topic this afternoon.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is being exceptionally generous in giving way. Does she agree that the Government need to be completely transparent about the costs of this policy? It has been estimated that it will cost the NHS—already pressed—£169 million. We know from NHS England that 100,000 extra people aged 65 or over have been through A&E this relatively warm winter. Is this policy not a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul?

Helen Whately: My right hon. Friend, given his experience in this area, will know very well the connection between heating and health, particularly for older people. The Government must surely ensure that they understand the knock-on impact of the cut to the winter fuel payment on older people's health, and therefore on admissions to hospital and on hospitals' ability to cope. As we know, there are then the consequences for older people, who, when admitted to hospital, often end up having long hospital stays, with significant loss of independence and reduction in quality of life as a result.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Helen Whately: I will continue, because I know that many Members wish to speak this afternoon—at least on the Opposition Benches.

From the moment the Government announced this policy, we were deeply concerned about the impact it would have, which is why we led the opposition to the cut, and why we forced a vote on it back in September. The vote was a chance for Labour MPs to make a stand. Instead, 348 Labour MPs chose to support the winter fuel payment cut. We then saw the Government trying to avoid telling people the impact the cut would actually have, so we are trying again today.

I put it to the Minister that now is his chance to be straight with people. What did the Government know when the cut was announced? Did they know how many pensioners would miss out? Did they know how many would end up in hospital? Their own report from 2017 found that cutting the winter fuel payment could cause nearly 4,000 pensioners to die. Did Ministers ask if that was likely to happen this winter? I would be happy to give way to him if he wanted to answer my questions right now, but, given they have not been answered for months, I fear he will not.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Whately: I will in a moment—I was hoping the Minister might have answers, but he does not.

To this day, the Government have not published a full impact assessment setting out the truth about their policies. Is that because they do not know themselves, or because they do not want to admit the harm that they were willing to do?

Thanks to the effort of colleagues and the public, we have, however, been able to glean some information in the months since. The Secretary of State admitted to the Work and Pensions Committee that she had seen internal modelling showing that 100,000 pensioners would be pushed into poverty because of their political choices. Thanks to a freedom of information request, the Government were forced to publish their equality analysis, showing that 71% of people with a disability would lose their winter fuel payment, while official NHS data shows that the number of over-65s attending A&E this winter soared by nearly 100,000 compared with last year, despite this being a less cold year.

And now, as I have said, it feels as if spring is here. It is time for the Government to be honest with the public and tell us what this policy has done in practice. I hope they will not tell us that they did not monitor the results, because that surely is not credible. It is time to tell us how many eligible pensioners did not receive the winter fuel payment this year; time to tell us how the cuts have hit pensioner poverty; and time to tell us what those cuts did to hospital admissions. Ministers need to know this information so that they can prepare responsibly for next year. Back Benchers need to know this information so that they can represent their constituents effectively. And the public deserve to know the consequence of the actions of the Government they elected.

Deirdre Costigan: Will the shadow Minister be honest with the House, and honest with pensioners: how many would be affected, and by how much, by the means-testing of the state pension, to which the Leader of the Opposition is committed?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am sure the Member understands that the shadow Minister is always honest. Perhaps she would like to clarify what she has just said.

Deirdre Costigan: I ask the shadow Minister to be straight with the House, as she asked the Minister to be.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That is two strikes. Again, I ask the hon. Member please to clarify her question.

Deirdre Costigan: Will the shadow Minister tell the House how many pensioners would be impacted by the Leader of the Opposition's plan to means-test the state pension, and by how much?

Helen Whately: I do not want to fall into the same trap as the hon. Lady did when she made those accusations. What she has just said does not describe the position of the Leader of the Opposition. I also remind her that today is an opportunity for the Government to answer questions, and that is what she should be looking to the Minister, rather than the shadow Minister, to do.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I have always said that it is absolute nonsense that somebody like me, who is still working, and my wife, who is still working, should receive the winter fuel allowance. We were going to address that, which was right—so we should have done. If that is what is called means-testing, then I am perfectly happy with that. But what we were not going to do was to take money from the pockets of the poorest pensioners in the country, and that is what this Government have done.

Helen Whately: I could not have made the point better than my right hon. Friend.

I have one final question before I conclude: what was all this for? We clearly know who lost out and who suffered as a result of the cut to the winter fuel payment, but who benefited? To govern is to choose. All those who got inflation-busting pay increases after Labour did its deals with its trade union friends were the ones to benefit. Billions for the unions, but nothing for the pensioners. This will be the legacy of yet another Labour Government. The last one increased the state pension by just 75p a week; this one have taken away the winter fuel payment.

By contrast, it was the Conservatives who introduced and protected the triple lock, which saw the state pension increase by £3,700 during our time in office; it was the Conservatives who reduced the number of pensioners living in absolute poverty by 200,000—Labour will undo that by a quarter in its first year—and it was the Conservatives who delivered nearly £12 million in winter fuel payments and cost of living payments for pensioners, because we understand the need to help the most vulnerable through the winter. It is astonishing how many people Labour has already let down in just eight months—pensioners, farmers, business owners, young people looking for jobs, and, yesterday, disabled people—in its rush to fix its financial mess.

Earlier we heard the Prime Minister say that if a party has a big majority, it does not need to consult, so the onus is on all of us here. Colleagues, and especially Labour Members, have an opportunity today to make the Government listen. It is a chance to stick to our principles, stick up for our constituents and vote to see the truth.

4.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): I listened closely to those remarks but am still none the wiser as to whether the Conservative party is committed to reversing the changes to the winter fuel payment. I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate. The changes to the winter fuel

payment have been much discussed and debated many times by hon. Members in this place. Governments make decisions and, rightly, they are held accountable for them in this place, especially when those decisions affect pensioners, whom we all want to support. This Government have made, and will continue to make, responsible choices in our management of the public finances, but also in ensuring that we deliver on what matters most.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): How on earth can the Minister say to a pensioner that he has made a responsible decision, when that pensioner is sitting at home worried about whether they dare turn up the heating when they are cold, because they cannot afford it?

Torsten Bell: I was coming to the exact answer to that: responsible choices are how we can ensure that we deliver what matters most to pensioners: a rising state pension and rescuing an NHS that was collapsing on the right hon. Lady's watch. That means we will make choices that may not always be easy—I recognise the strength of feeling on this issue in this place—but are necessary. Everyone in this House knows the economic and fiscal context.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool we have taken a proactive approach over this issue. Since October I have been working with Hartlepool citizens advice bureau to help pensioners get the support that they deserve. The campaign ends next week, but as of today we have managed to raise £885,900 of additional annual income by ensuring that pensioners get the benefits to which they are entitled. Will the Minister congratulate Hartlepool citizens advice bureau on its extraordinary work?

Torsten Bell: I congratulate it and I thank my hon. Friend, and probably hon. Members on both sides of the House, who I am sure have engaged with local charities in supporting their pensioners in the months that have gone by.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): The Minister is being generous in giving way, and I am sure that he will continue to be. He talked about making responsible choices. According to Government analysis, 100,000 pensioners are being pushed into poverty. Is that a responsible choice?

Torsten Bell: The poverty assessment, which we provided to the Work and Pensions Committee, does not take into account any increase in pension credit take-up, which I will come to shortly. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), talked about absolute pensioner poverty—the kind of poverty that should be falling every year as an economy grows. But relative poverty—a form of poverty that we look at—rose under the last Administration. Opposition Members may not like to hear this, but relative pensioner poverty rose by 300,000 under the last Government. I just gently say that when it comes to pensioner poverty, we have more to do—I take the hon. Gentleman's point seriously—but the record of recent years is not one of success on that front.

Everyone in this House knows the economic and fiscal context—the economic stagnation of the past decade, visible in flatlining wages, collapsing public

services and strained public finances. Every economist and every person in the country knows that Britain has lived through an unprecedented economic failure. In a challenging fiscal environment, difficult choices are unavoidable. The Government have set fiscal rules and we will stick to them. But, as some older Members may remember, prudence is for a purpose: to support a growing economy that benefits everyone. It is the prerequisite for rescuing our public services and rising living standards for workers, but also for pensioners.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): In my constituency, even after taking into account pension credit, 20,000 pensioners will lose out from the Government's cuts. Maggie from Waterlooville wrote to me to say:

"We have cut back on heating, we are both in our seventies and we both feel the cold."

How on earth does the Minister justify that as a responsible choice? How on earth will forcing pensioners into pneumonia or influenza help the NHS? How on earth can the Minister come here and justify treating hard-working pensioners with such disdain?

Torsten Bell: I do not think that anybody in the House is going to be treating pensioners with disdain. That is why the state pension will rise by 4.1% in April, why we have put £26 billion into the NHS and why we intend to learn the lessons of the last Administration's failure to cut pensioner poverty. [*Interruption.*] I have already taken quite a few interventions, so I will make some progress.

As hon. Members know, winter fuel payments are now targeted at lower-income pensioners. The benefit is paid to over a million households who are receiving pension credit in England and Wales or on other income-related benefits. Pensioners in receipt of attendance allowance or disability living allowance can also qualify for pension credit. Crucially, those benefits do not reduce the pension credit award and can mean receiving additional support.

I am sure that we all want to see every pensioner get the support they are entitled to, but in recent years far too many pensioners have missed out, with over a third of eligible pensioners not claiming. So since September, we have been running the biggest ever pension credit take-up campaign, building on campaigns run by the previous Government, as the shadow Secretary of State mentioned. The campaign has included adverts on television, radio, social media and advertising screens in GPs' surgeries. We have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders and partners including local councils, community groups and charities. I have certainly done that in Swansea, as I am sure hon. Members across the House have done in their constituencies.

Wendy Morton: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I welcome the fact that the Government have done work to raise awareness of pension credit, just as we did when we were in government, but that does not really reach the group of hard-working pensioners who are too proud to come forward and apply for pension credit; it is just not what they would do. The £300 winter fuel allowance was a lifeline that they have now lost.

Torsten Bell: The right hon. Lady makes a fair point. I will come back to what more work we need to do to understand the barriers to people applying for pension credit. Research shows, though, that awareness is the biggest barrier. We need to keep breaking down those barriers, but I recognise the point she makes.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it is extraordinary to be lectured about responsible choices by members of the last Cabinet, whose irresponsible financial choices left this Government with a £22 billion black hole? We have to clean that up because of their irresponsible financial management.

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend proves that, while Conservative Members may be disappointed by the quantity of hon. Members behind me, that is definitely made up for in quality.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Torsten Bell: I will make some progress, because otherwise we will be here for several days.

I take this opportunity to thank each and every organisation that supported the pension credit take-up campaign, as well as the many friends, neighbours and family members who looked out for pensioners and helped them to claim. A few weeks ago, we released the first data on the impact that the campaign has had. We have seen 235,000 pension credit applications in the 30 weeks since July, which is an 81% increase on the comparable period in 2022-23. On the question about processing rates, with over 500 additional staff allocated directly for that, we have seen a similar rise in the number of claims processed. Most importantly, that has led to almost 50,000 extra awards compared with the same period last year.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): What would the Minister say to residents in Maidenhead who have told me that they are not eligible for pension credit? He talks about responsible choices, but the choice those residents now have to make is whether to dip into their savings to pay for their energy bills or to turn off their heating at night. A Labour voter contacted me who had had to make exactly that decision, and she said that she will never vote Labour again. Is that really the change that the Government were elected to introduce?

Torsten Bell: No, the change that we were elected to introduce was to save our NHS and to return our economy to growth so that we can raise living standards for pensioners and for workers right across the country. That is the change that we were elected to deliver and that is what we are going to do.

Dr Murrison: The Minister is being generous in giving way; congratulations to him on making the best of a bad job. He knows that old people die in cold homes. In 2017, the Labour party did some research on which to attack the Conservatives, which showed that 4,000 old people would probably die in the event that we removed winter fuel allowance; we did not do that. I wonder whether he got his officials to repeat that research and, if so, what it showed.

Torsten Bell: All of us in this place should be slightly careful when talking about what is a highly sensitive subject. There is not robust analysis that can separate out different causes of excess mortality over the winter. *[Interruption.]* I will come on to answer the right hon. Gentleman's question. If we look at the excess mortality data for this winter, we see that deaths are actually down. It is hard to separate out the effects of different measures—*[Interruption.]* No, this is an important point, because some hon. Members have been looser with their language than they might have wanted to be in past debates. We have seen the level of deaths come down this winter. There are lots of things—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Torsten Bell: I will make some progress, and then I will give way further.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the Minister give way on the data processing point?

Torsten Bell: Go ahead.

Dr Evans: I am terribly grateful to the Minister. He made the point about there being 235,000 applications, which was great. In my written question, I asked about that and he came back and said 117,800 claims were awarded, but 114,500 were not. Those were clearly people who felt they were entitled to pension credit but who will now struggle. What support is available for those people, who are clearly right on the cusp and are now not eligible and do not have pension credit?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Member makes an important point. We should encourage people to apply, even if a percentage of those will always not qualify. The criteria under which people have been assessed are those put in place by the previous Administration for pension credit. However, he is right; we want as many people as possible to apply, even if some of them are not successful, for exactly the reason raised by the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—we need awareness of pension credit to be higher and we need to encourage claims, because a lot of people who are entitled are missing out. It is not always absolutely clear whether someone is entitled, for example if they are in receipt of attendance allowance.

All the progress since September that I have spoken about is a real achievement, but I am the first to say very clearly that it is far from job done. Far too many people are still missing out on pension credit. We are already building on this winter's campaign, and that includes writing to all pensioners who make a new claim for housing benefit and who appear to be entitled to pension credit. In the longer term, this Government are committed to bringing together the administration of pension credit and housing benefit, making it easier for pensioners to get support. That was also a policy of previous Administrations at different times, even if delivering it was not prioritised.

We will also undertake new research on what helps boost take-up—that goes to the question asked by the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills. There is a slight misunderstanding about people wanting to apply but being reluctant—the evidence does not support that significantly. The key problem is awareness of the system.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The Treasury always says to every new Government, “We have this jolly good idea. Just get rid of the winter fuel payment and save yourselves a lot of money.” We looked at that when I was in the Department and eventually rejected it based on two elements of the impact assessment. First, there was the point about those who were right on the cusp of poverty—80% of them, as has been mentioned, will be damaged by the policy. Secondly, there is pension credit take-up. We get hammered either way, because if we push for pensioners to take up pension credit, the savings are lost and we spend more, but if they do not take it up, they end up in poverty. That was why we rejected the idea and, I think, every other Government up until now have too. Will the Minister have another review of that and ask his team at the DWP whether they should reject this policy now, because it will not work?

Torsten Bell: On the question of savings, this measure will make savings, even taking into account the increase in take-up; the evidence of that is very clear. I will also just reflect on the right hon. Gentleman's point that his party's Government did not take up the opportunity that the Treasury presented to means-test winter fuel payments. The truth is that the last Government and the new Labour regime before that allowed pension credit to be eroded year after year by inflation. Since the period when he considered the measure, there has been over 50% inflation erosion, so the policy of the previous Government was to cut the winter fuel payment year after year. In real terms, I am afraid that is how inflation operates.

We will not just carry out research; we will put the evidence that it provides into practice. I welcome suggestions from right across the House on what more we can do to drive take-up of pension credit.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): My point relates to the cliff edge. Anne Addis from Cullompton is a 76-year-old widow. Her late husband's Army pension pushed her just £15 over the pension credit threshold. That means that she is one of 130,000 people who are worse off than those on lower incomes who continue to qualify for pension credit. Will the Minister consider introducing a taper to get rid of that cliff edge?

Torsten Bell: We have all met constituents who raise this issue, and the hon. Member is right to say that there are challenges with the cliff edge. It is in the nature of the pension credit regime, because the regime is about a minimum income guarantee. People sometimes think about it as if it had a threshold, but it is about providing minimum guarantee of minimum income, so I do not think that that is an appropriate way forward, but I would be happy to discuss this with him, as it is always useful to discuss these issues.

Mark Pritchard: Does the Minister agree with the Resolution Foundation, which I think he knows very well, and its enlightening paper “Public Pivot” from January this year, which talks about big implications for living standards? He may well know that document, although he did not actually write that one, for a change. It mentions the winter fuel allowance and states:

“Tax rises on top of lacklustre economic growth make for a gloomy living standards outlook in 2025.”

Is there not a direct correlation between living standards and this cruel cut to the most vulnerable in our society, whether in Swansea West or in the Wrekin in Shropshire?

Torsten Bell: I thank the right hon. Member, not least for his kind words about a very impressive organisation that goes from strength to strength under far better leadership than it had in the past.

I do not want to get into the details of economic forecasts and living standards forecasts—[*Interruption.*] “Please do”, Members say. Right—the reason why forecasts of living standards and of growth are often lower than we might like at the moment is that, although we talk about forecasts as forward-looking measures, what they are often actually doing is looking backwards at the disastrous growth this country has seen—[*Interruption.*] Those are the facts about what is actually going on. The only way we are going to sort this country out is to get growth going once again, and that is what this Government are trying to do—[*Interruption.*] Well, we actually are. We are currently seeing significantly faster wage growth than we have seen for quite some time.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Torsten Bell: I must make some progress. I have taken lots of interventions, and at some point even your patience may start to run out, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As hon. Members know, wider help is also available for pensioners. The warm home discount provides eligible low-income households across Great Britain with a £150 rebate on their winter energy bill. This winter we expect to find that over 3 million households, including over 1 million pensioners, have benefited. We have also set out plans to expand the scheme to cover a further 2.7 million households. We are providing £742 million in England to extend the household support fund for a further year, supporting all households, not just pensioners, with the cost of essentials. The devolved Governments will receive consequential funding through the Barnett formula.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Around 40% of properties in Glastonbury and Somerton are not connected to the gas grid. They are more expensive to heat, and people experience more fuel poverty as a result. Off-grid pensioners, who are particularly suffering, are obviously more reliant on their winter fuel payment. Will the Minister commit to developing a rural winter fuel poverty strategy for those pensioners, who are suffering now?

Torsten Bell: I have heard from many Members the point the hon. Member makes about the different ways people heat homes, particularly in certain parts of the country, including Northern Ireland. I would be happy to talk to her about that specific suggestion, having asked for suggestions earlier.

As I said earlier, our top priorities are to raise the state pension and to rescue the NHS, which pensioners in particular rely on. It is precisely because the Government have taken some difficult choices that we are committed to delivering on the triple lock throughout this Parliament. It is true that targeting winter fuel payments saves a bit over £1 billion a year, but spending on the state pension is forecast to rise by over £31 billion—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith *indicated dissent.*

Torsten Bell: I have already engaged with the right hon. Member.

Spending on the state pension is forecast to rise by over £31 billion during this Parliament, which puts that into context. What does this mean for individual pensioners? The full new state pension is expected to rise by around £1,900 a year, and the basic state pension by around £1,500, benefiting over 12 million pensioners.

Then there is the health service, the state of which is the biggest betrayal of older generations today. The Conservatives left pensioners far too often not receiving the care and support they deserve and need. We are investing and reforming the English NHS through the 10-year plan by abolishing NHS England so Ministers are accountable for the health service once again. For pensioners who have spent their lives paying into the system, our priority is to ensure a resilient NHS that gives back to them at a time when they need it most.

James Wild: During the general election campaign, we on the Conservative side had the triple lock-plus policy to prevent pensioners in receipt of just a state pension from paying income tax. Does the Minister recognise that millions of pensioners in that position will have to start paying income tax, and is he happy with that?

Torsten Bell: The vast majority of pensioners started paying income tax under the previous Government because they abolished the age-related allowance for pensioners, so the taxing of pensioners was a decision taken by the previous Government. The majority of pensioners pay income tax because of decisions taken by the previous Government.

This is an Opposition day, so it would be rude not to talk about the Opposition. It is hard to know where to start—maybe with the hypocrisy. It comes in the general form of many Opposition Members claiming that they are in favour of a smaller state, but opposing this targeting of winter fuel payments. Worse, there is the more specific hypocrisy of campaigning against this change, but not being honest about whether they would reverse it.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Torsten Bell: I will if the hon. Member will tell me whether he plans to reverse that change in government.

Lewis Cocking: Does the Minister not agree that it is the hypocrisy from the Labour party, which did not include this policy in its manifesto at the general election?

Torsten Bell: While we are on broken promises, the hon. Member promised to tell me whether the Tory party policy is to reverse the change, and I have heard nothing on that front. I will come on to manifestos shortly.

There is the specific hypocrisy of the Opposition campaigning against the change having called for it in their own 2017 election manifesto. Back then, they attacked the winter fuel payment for being “paid regardless of need”, and that is before we get to the Leader of the Opposition’s bold plans to means-test the state pension—

Dame Harriett Baldwin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister has just said that, as it is an Opposition day debate, he will speak exclusively about what the Opposition think and say. Is it your understanding, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it is in order for a Minister at the Dispatch Box not to defend the track record of his own Government?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): That is not a point of order.

Torsten Bell: I will return to the Conservatives' policy, because I was just coming to the bold plans set out by the Leader of the Opposition to means-test the state pension. Apparently, she said, "that's exactly the sort of thing" we "will look at."

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Torsten Bell: No. Apparently, means-testing the winter fuel payment is beyond the pale, but means-testing the state pension—the bedrock of pensioners' incomes—is the future. The Leader of the Opposition's self-image is of a bold iconoclast, but means-testing the state pension is not bold; it is bonkers. Never mind what the Conservatives say they would do now, what about what they actually did? Let's talk about pensioner poverty.

Sir Roger Gale: Will the Minister give way?

Torsten Bell: I will not. Pensioner poverty halved under the last Labour Government, but the Conservatives' record was higher pensioner poverty—an increase of 300,000 people on their watch. We are not pretending that all the problems facing the country can be solved overnight, but we are honest that unless we tackle the big challenges and take some tough choices, they will not be solved at all. This is a Government raising the state pension, rescuing the NHS and delivering for pensioners every single day.

Hon. Members: More!

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

4.48 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I am sure the Minister almost opposite me felt that it was a brave decision by the Conservatives on my right—in fact, from the noises off during the speech of their spokeslady, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), it may even have been a bit quackers—to choose this topic for a debate. As the Minister highlighted, pensioner poverty increased under the watch of the last Conservative Government. The Tories left the economy in an absolute state. They completely crashed it, leaving the new Labour Government a massive mess to deal with. However—*[Interruption.]* Don't worry; I am coming to some Labour-bashing now.

We Liberal Democrats are deeply disappointed about Chancellor's botched autumn Budget, however, when she balanced the books on the backs of pensioners. Yesterday the books were being balanced on the backs of people with disabilities throughout the United Kingdom. The scrapping of the winter fuel allowance means 100,000 more pensioners in relative poverty. It has been estimated that approximately 800,000 pensioners who could benefit from pension credit have sadly not taken advantage of it. Conservative colleagues to my right have highlighted that there continues to be significant delays, and they are right to say so. When I have asked questions about that, I have been told that there are 90,000 claims in the queue, resulting in pensioners going through the winter unsure about whether it is safe to put on their heating.

The Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, received evidence from a medic who said that when people get to the age of about 65 or 70, they find that their bodies begin to become less resistant to cold weather, and they have a much greater need for heating. That is why the winter fuel payment was and continues to be the right decision. In fact, I hope that the Labour party will listen to Unite, which has undertaken surveys highlighting the fact that two thirds of pensioners are feeling the cold more but choosing not to put the heating on because of their fears about bills.

Sarah Dyke: A constituent from Tintinhull who is suffering from stage 4 stomach cancer contacted me because he has recently had a gastrectomy, which has caused him considerable weight loss. Despite that, he has now lost his winter fuel allowance, which is making it more difficult for him to keep his heating on as it costs him a lot more. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must urgently reassess exemptions to ensure that all pensioners with cancer are eligible for the vital winter fuel allowance?

Steve Darling: My hon. Friend is spot on. In fact, we Liberal Democrats feel that the winter fuel allowance must be reintroduced across the board.

The Liberal Democrats want the introduction of a social tariff that supports pensioners in poverty and pensioners on benefits. We also want to ensure that the whole United Kingdom has a home insulation scheme that gets people warmer in their homes, tackles climate change and gives employment across the country for those who need it. We call upon Members to back the motion and ensure that winter fuel payments go back to pensioners, where they should be.

4.53 pm

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Before I begin, will the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), clarify her earlier comments? Does she not support pay rises for the armed forces? *[Interruption.]* She is more than welcome to clarify; I can see that she looks a bit confused.

Helen Whately: The hon. Lady asks about something that I have never said, so I was surprised to hear it.

Louise Jones: I very much thank the hon. Lady for those comments. I know she vociferously criticised pay rises for public sector workers in her speech, so I am glad to have clarified that.

The winter fuel payment was a policy that the Labour Government introduced in 1997, and it stands as one of the great achievements of that Labour Administration. When it was brought in, pensioner poverty was significantly higher than what we face today, and it made a real difference to many pensioners who were struggling with heating, eating, and many other living costs. Along with many things that that Government achieved, we had the shortest NHS waiting times in history, we brought crime down, and we created Sure Start, which made a difference to many young people's lives. We had record results in schools, we introduced the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, and we brought in the first ever Climate Change Act in 2008. All those things made a huge difference to the lives of people in this country, in particular pensioners.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Does the hon. Lady really think that going through Tony Blair's greatest hits is any comfort to pensioners on £13,500 who lost their winter fuel payment in 2024?

Louise Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his comment. It is important to stress that this was a policy that the Labour party brought in, and the Conservative party voted against it at the time. The inheritance that this Government got from the previous Government was so dire—we really cannot forget how big a black hole £22 billion is. The economic situation of this country as a whole, and the finances that the Government inherited, meant that even the Labour party knew we had to make tough choices that we would never had made if we had had the inheritance we gave to the Conservatives in 2010.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that there is a real problem with Labour's framing of its choices? Labour Members have made out that there is an absolute necessity to get rid of the winter fuel payment, but at the same time they are spending £8 million on GB Energy. They are spending God knows how much on the Chagos islands—they will not tell us—and hundreds of millions on pay rises for train drivers. Does she accept that the pensioners find it rather confusing that there is a complete necessity to cut winter fuel payments, when the Government are splurging cash on all manner of other weird projects?

Louise Jones: One reason why I decided to get into politics—I was quite happy doing something else—was because I was looking around this country and seeing the huge systemic issues that were facing us. None of those issues would go away if the Government just said, "We're going to keep giving out pots of money to people," and the hon. Lady knows that. As a proud member of the Labour party, I support people receiving fair pay for their fair work, and I support the rises that we gave to our nurses, our soldiers and our teachers. I am very proud of that. We face so many systemic issues that we know we need to make some big changes. Things such as GB Energy, which was in our manifesto that millions of people voted for, is a huge change that will make a difference.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Ind): My hon. Friend talks about manifesto commitments, and it was a clear manifesto commitment of this Government that we would provide the triple lock throughout this Parliament—something that was only ever suspended under the Conservative party. Does she agree that the £1,500 increase to the state pension that pensioners will see over the course of this Parliament will be a good thing, and put cash into the pockets of pensioners that they did not have under the previous Government?

Louise Jones: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The triple lock is a serious commitment that we are utterly committed to, and it will make a difference to every single pensioner in this country—far more than trying to pretend that we do not face the systemic problems that this country faces.

Saqib Bhatti: Will the hon. Member give way?

Louise Jones: I was going to go back to GB Energy, but why not?

Saqib Bhatti: The hon. Member is being very generous with interventions. She talked about fairness in pay. Those pensioners also worked all through their lives and also deserve fairness. What is fair about the hundreds of millions being given to train drivers as opposed to what has been taken away from pensioners? What is fair about the £18 billion, or whatever the figure is, being spent on the Chagos islands, compared with what pensioners deserve?

Louise Jones: What is fair is a 4.1% rise in the state pension and a 5.5% to 6% rise for our soldiers, teachers and nurses, and I will say that as many times as I need to say it.

Many people in this country have been grappling with skyrocketing energy bills, which have caused real poverty. Those bills have skyrocketed largely because we are at the mercy of international markets, so it is vital that we take back sovereign control of our energy and energy prices, and GB Energy is a vital part of that.

Harriet Cross: The interim chief executive officer of GB Energy has said that reducing energy bills "is not in the remit of GB Energy", so how is GB Energy going to help with energy bills?

Louise Jones: GB Energy will turbocharge renewables across the country. Once we have that, we will have more control over our energy systems and, as the hon. Lady knows, we will have control over what happens with bills.

Melanie Ward: My hon. Friend mentions GB Energy, which is headquartered in Scotland. I note that there is a Scottish National party Member in the Chamber, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who I am sure will shortly make a passionate speech about the issue. When she does so, I hope she will remember that the winter fuel payment is already devolved to the Scottish Government and that if they want to follow a different policy, they are able to, perhaps using some of the additional funding—record funding of almost £5 billion extra—that they got in the Budget this year.

Louise Jones: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I will now turn to a quote—[*Interruption.*] I hope Opposition Members will settle down. The quote states:

"we will look at Winter Fuel Payments, the largest benefit paid to pensioners, in this context. The benefit is paid regardless of need, giving money to wealthier pensioners when working people on lower incomes do not get similar support. So we will means-test Winter Fuel Payments, focusing assistance on the least well-off pensioners, who are most at risk of fuel poverty."

Does the shadow Secretary of State recognise that quote? No, and the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar) does not appear to recognise it either. It is taken directly from the 2017 Conservative party manifesto, which I understand both Members stood on. Would they like to stand up now and say whether they regret doing so?

Lewis Cocking: Last July, the hon. Lady stood on an election manifesto that did not include the removal of winter fuel payments to pensioners. Is she proud of the fact that she was elected on a manifesto that said something completely different from what she is supporting the Government in doing now?

Louise Jones: I am fully committed to bringing forward all our manifesto commitments, including the triple lock for pensioners, fixing the systemic issues facing the country and tackling the backlog in the NHS. Our record is something to be proud of so far.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Louise Jones: We can carry on with our history lesson—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, does the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) wish to intervene?

Sir Roger Gale: I intervene simply to inform the hon. Lady that it was David Cameron who introduced the triple lock.

Louise Jones: I believe it was then suspended, but I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. In his earlier remarks, he raised the valid point that no Member of this House should be receiving the winter fuel payment, and he spoke about the very poorest in this country facing that payment being taken away. We have protected the very poorest pensioners, but whenever there is a threshold, there will always be people who fall on the other side of it. I and my colleagues have been very aware of people coming to us who need us to help them find alternative sources of help.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con) *rose—*

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con) *rose—*

Louise Jones: I will just make a bit of progress and then I will let the right hon. Member and the hon. Member intervene. I do not think there is a single Labour Member who is not conscious of the impact of the decisions that we, as a Government, are making. We rightly laud our achievements, but we recognise that we have had to make tough decisions.

Pensioners are not the only group facing poverty in this country. Child poverty has rocketed over the past decade to a shamefully high level. Not one of those children ever received a winter fuel payment. Plenty of others have been facing the effects of poverty, and shamefully that includes a rocketing number of people in work. As a Labour Government, it is our task to ensure that we are ending the scourge of poverty once and for all, whether for children, people in work or pensioners.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Is one of the main causes of child poverty not the two-child benefit cap that the Conservative party introduced and the Labour party is continuing?

Louise Jones: Child poverty and the two-child benefit cap are unfortunately sad signs of the legacy that we have inherited. We need to fix the foundations of the economy so that we can start to take measures such as that that may have an impact. We have set up the child poverty taskforce so that we can start to look at that and ensure we make a real and significant difference over the next few years. We have inherited a shameful situation, and we are working very hard to do what we can to change it.

I turn to the triple lock, which I and other hon. Members have spoken about. The commitment to the triple lock is pivotal; it will see the state pension of thousands of people, including people in my constituency, increase by more than £470 this year. Additionally, as a Government we have run a campaign to increase the

uptake of pension credit, meaning that we have had an 81% increase in claims, which is good to see. We have also extended the household support fund, so that help is available for all age groups.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I appreciate the hon. Member referring to pension credit uptake. If all the people who are eligible to take up pension credit do so, how much will it cost the Government?

Louise Jones: The costings take into account the uplift in the numbers of people claiming pension credit, as they are entitled to do.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the changes made to the winter fuel payment to secure it for those most in need actually save £1 billion net, with the extra costs of the rise in those claiming pension credit? Does she also agree that the Government's choices across the board mean that we are able to make the decision to protect the triple lock, nearly double the warm home discount and get the NHS back on its feet? It is pretty shocking that we have so far not heard one example of how the Conservative party would make different choices to do those same things.

Louise Jones: Sadly, it is a feature of this debate that it is very easy for Members across the Opposition Benches to say, "You shouldn't do something," but very difficult to say what should be done instead.

Gregory Stafford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Louise Jones: I will keep going, because I have been speaking for a long time and I know that lots of Members want to get in. I am terribly sorry.

To cut to the chase, the Government are determined to fix the foundations of this country, sort out the systemic issues that we face, tackle the cost of living and deliver an NHS fit for everybody in this country.

5.7 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): This winter, pensioners across Beaconsfield, Marlow and the south Bucks villages felt abandoned by the Labour Government. Many across this country voted for a Labour Government in good faith, thinking that they would actually have a reduction in their energy bills of £300, only to discover that many pensioners were going to lose their winter fuel payment, which is a lifeline to pensioners, who have served their communities and worked hard their whole lives. It was brought in by a Labour Government and never abolished during the entire time that the Conservatives and the coalition were in power. There is a reason for that: it is fair, equitable and ensures that no one is left behind. The reason why it was not scrapped before is that a means-tested mechanism was not in place, so it was quite shocking to see that the first act by the new Chancellor was to scrap a winter fuel payment that Labour initially brought in without an impact assessment.

Oliver Ryan: Will the hon. Lady make it clear whether it is the policy of the Conservative party to reintroduce a universal winter fuel payment at the next election?

Joy Morrissey: It is clear that we did not get rid of it in the first place, and we had 14 years. The interesting thing that we keep hearing—

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): Did the hon. Lady hear the question? Yes or no?

Joy Morrissey: I think our record speaks for itself—we had 14 years. It is very interesting that the Labour party talks about tough choices. For pensioners, turning off the heat—being made to choose between heating and eating—is a tough choice. That is a choice that this Labour Government have made for the most vulnerable.

Dr Luke Evans: My hon. Friend is correct that this is about actions, not words. Labour's decision on the winter fuel payment was not in their manifesto; it was brought in with a piece of legislation that was voted on without an impact assessment and then put into place. Yesterday, we heard an announcement about disabilities that was also not mentioned in Labour's manifesto. It was brought forward with a gap before the impact assessment—we will see that in a couple of weeks' time—and it will then be taken through. Does my hon. Friend agree that the British public are being taken for fools? These are not transparent policies or policies that were put forward in a manifesto; they are being brought forward later on, under the guise of trying to do something better.

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. This is about transparency and keeping our promises to the British public, and it lays bare the truth about this Government.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): The hon. Lady talks about transparency and honesty, but is it not true that the Conservative party concealed the true state of the public finances from the Labour party when we were preparing for Government? Do they not need to reflect on their own spirit of public service and decency?

Joy Morrissey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, although the Office for Budget Responsibility contradicts what he is saying. The truth about this Government is that they talk a tough talk, but they are the masters of outsourcing every tough decision for others to make. We see that in the tough choices they have forced on small businesses across this country—whether to stop hiring, cut staff, raise prices, or close altogether in order to deal with this black hole that the Chancellor has created through her socialist spending spree—but we saw it first in stark terms in the way that the Government treated pensioners.

The Chancellor chose—yes, chose—to make pensioners make the tough choice between eating and heating. She was not able to be tough with the train driver unions, and she was not able to be tough with the Energy Secretary to stop him wasting £8 billion on GB Energy or £11 billion on overseas climate aid, but she was able to be tough with the pensioners of this country. She is a Chancellor who can be tough with the weak, but melts before the unions and her Cabinet colleagues. This is a Government who have abandoned evidence-based policymaking, such as by attacking parents who send their children to independent schools, engaging in a tax raid despite the clear evidence that it will damage the life chances of young people in both the state and the private sector.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The hon. Lady talks about abandoning evidence-based policy. Could she set out the basis for the Conservative party abandoning the UK's net zero targets?

Joy Morrissey: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution and for his advocacy on this issue. *[Interruption.]* I will respond as I go through my speech; he has made a very sound point.

This is about tough choices. We all have to make tough choices, and being in government is hard. Those of us on either side of the House who have been in government know that it is difficult, but we make choices, and then we are held responsible. Conservative Members understand that, because we were held responsible.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): On 20 November 2023, when I was the Paymaster General, I made some comments about the winter fuel payment. The right hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who is now Chief Secretary to the Treasury, wrote to the Chancellor at the time and asked whether we could confirm that we would not be removing the winter fuel payment, because pensioners would be deeply concerned. My view, having had that put on a list of options when I was Chief Secretary, was that there was no way it would be right to do so. I knew, for example, that 71% of pensioners with a disability would lose that valued and completely necessary extra funding—there was not a rationing mechanism that was efficient for the poorest pensioners. I expected to be held to account, which was why I did not do it. I was therefore somewhat surprised when, 25 days into a Labour Government, they reversed the policy that they had challenged me about several months before.

Joy Morrissey: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and one that I was going to make. This is about choices, and it is about the most vulnerable—the disabled pensioners who we did not have a way to test for. There was no mechanism to protect them, and I am very glad that my right hon. Friend chose to protect the most vulnerable disabled pensioners. By protecting everyone, we ensured that the most vulnerable were protected, and that was a tough choice that we made when in government. To be honest, I expected a Labour Government to make the same kind of choice, to protect the most vulnerable disabled pensioners, who have been negatively impacted by this choice. I would have expected better from a Labour Government.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Those of us who have been in government know that when new Ministers come to power—perhaps as innocent and heartfelt as the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell)—often ideas that have been rejected by their predecessors are put before them. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) described, officials float proposals previously rejected in the hope that new Ministers, in their naive urgency, will embrace them. I feel a little sorry for the hon. Member for Swansea West, actually: I suspect that it was his innocence, his naivety and his lack of wit and wisdom that got the better of him—and I say that kindly—for it allowed his officials to float a policy as hopeless as this one, which was rejected by those with wiser heads, such as my right hon. Friend.

Joy Morrissey: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. When we try to do the right thing, oftentimes we make a choice that has adverse consequences. What is telling about this decision was that an impact assessment was not published in advance. Many Members from all parts of the House were not fully aware of the consequences or impact of this policy, whereby 10 million pensioners have lost out this year while coping with rising energy costs and rising prices. Nearly 3 million of those pensioners are aged over 80. Some 1.6 million pensioners with a disability are now losing out.

This was a choice that the Chancellor could have avoided by being tough with her Cabinet colleagues or the unions, but she chose to be tough with the weak. This was a choice where the evidence pointed to a terrible impact, but she chose to be tough with the weak. This is a weak Chancellor in a Government who put ideology before evidence and politics before people, but it is never too late to change.

5.17 pm

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): In politics, in my opinion, it matters hugely how we make arguments. My generation of politicians, many of us newly elected, have grown up in an era of ceaseless turbulence. Our world has become more insecure, our economy has flatlined, and our democracy is sometimes strained. That means we have responsibilities as elected politicians in how we make arguments, and that matters for this debate.

First, over several decades this House has ceded too much power to unelected and sometimes unaccountable bodies—agencies, quangos and administrators. Elected representatives must have the power to change the things for which the public holds them accountable.

Secondly, the public are tired of being told that we have no choice, that our hands are tied and that we must do this because lawyers or economists said so. Our job is to make arguments to the public on the basis of principle and not solely of necessity. After all, why vote, if the people we vote for are not in charge, but lawyers, economists, quangos or agencies are? What is democracy for, if the people we elect do not control the things that affect our lives?

To restore trust in politics, we must show that politics matters. That is why it is vital that we articulate our choices in terms of principles.

Gregory Stafford *rose—*

Josh Simons: Hopefully, what I am about to say will answer the hon. Gentleman's point. [*Interruption.*] If it does not, he is welcome to come in. Let me make clear the principle behind the reforms that we are debating today: those who need support to heat their homes must get it. Nobody should be cold at home because they cannot afford to turn on their heating. When Gordon Brown introduced the winter fuel payments—

Gregory Stafford: I entirely agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has just said, but I am sure that, like me, he has received hundreds, if not thousands, of messages from pensioners saying that they are suffering and cannot heat their homes. If his point is one of principle, then clearly he must vote to overturn this policy so that the people who I am sure are contacting him as well as me will be able to heat their homes next winter, as they were unable to do this time round.

Josh Simons: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Conveniently, I shall be responding to exactly that point in a few minutes, but if he feels that I have not done so, he is welcome to intervene again.

Given that the state pension has risen by £900 and will rise again by as much as £1,900 over the course of this Parliament, the Government's changes target the winter fuel payment on the basis of the principle of need. That is the right principle. I do not believe that taxpayers should foot the bill for pensioners with millions of pounds to receive winter fuel payments. It is true that some donate the money to charity, but many do not. According to the columnist Fraser Nelson:

"A millionaire I know has a tradition every year: he buys a bottle of vintage wine with his winter fuel payment and invites friends to drink it."

Targeting the winter fuel payment is not just about the public finances; it anchors and preserves the policy in the right moral principle—the principle of need. It protects the winter fuel payment for those who need it most. Some object that although the principle of need is the right one, the changes set too low a threshold. That has not been my experience, and here I come to the point made by the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford). I represent more people of pensionable age than most Members, and many of them are struggling.

Sir Roger Gale: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Josh Simons: I will not give way at this point.

In towns such as Hindley Green and Hindley, Abram and Platt Bridge, Ashton and Orrell, pensioners who have worked all their lives are facing acute and sometimes painful challenges.

Sir Roger Gale: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Josh Simons: I will not, at this point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. May I remind Members that it is up to the Member on his feet to decide whether to take interventions?

Sir Roger Gale: The hon. Gentleman should show some respect to a pensioner!

Josh Simons: I do. I believe in laying out the argument, and once I have done so, in a couple of minutes, the right hon. Gentleman will be welcome to intervene. That, I think, is partly what the House is for.

After the announcement of this policy, I immediately entered into a partnership with Wigan Council to ensure that every pensioner I represent who is eligible for pension credit and help from the household support fund receives every single penny for which they are eligible. I made it clear to my constituents that I would not rest until my most vulnerable pensioners are protected. In recent months, Wigan council's fantastic income maximisation team have secured almost £8 million in benefits that would not otherwise have been paid to Wiganers. I have invited the team to all the coffee mornings that I host with residents every month, and these alone have secured tens of thousands of pounds in benefits for the people I represent. I have encountered much the same story again and again. So many pensioners were convinced that they were not eligible for pension credit because they had never received a penny of benefit

in their lives, and so many did not know about the household support fund, but it turned out that they were eligible. Opposition Members never wanted them to receive this benefit, but we have made sure that they get what they need and deserve.

Joe Robertson: It is heartwarming to hear someone make a speech based on his principles, and the hon. Gentleman has made it clear that it is his principles that will inform his vote on this topic. Can he articulate, very clearly, what principle tells him that someone on £13,500 is too rich to receive a winter fuel payment?

Josh Simons: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me a few more minutes, I will come to the exact question of the threshold at which pension credit is awarded and at which, therefore, someone is eligible for the winter fuel payment.

In order to reach the most vulnerable people, who are often the hardest to reach because they are not on Facebook and are not coming to my coffee mornings, I wrote to more than 5,000 pensioners to ensure that they received the support they deserved.

Let me end by making a broader point. Today's debate has underscored a simple truth about Conservative Members. There is no longer the party with the strength and courage to lead, whether in asserting the sovereignty of this place or in making arguments with principle.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Josh Simons: I will not.

The Conservatives knew that the winter fuel payment needed to change—they said so in their manifesto in 2017—but they did nothing about it. They knew that NHS England was duplicating, wasting taxpayers' money and failing to drive up standards, but they did nothing about it. They knew that flooding was getting worse in places such as Platt Bridge, Ashton and Abram in my constituency, but they did nothing about it.

Let me give an even more egregious example from this week. The shadow Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), has stomped his feet and shaken his head about new guidance issued by the Sentencing Council. The Lord Chancellor has been clear that independent agencies should not make policy; this Chamber should. However, what the shadow Secretary of State for Justice is unwilling to confront is the fact that his party welcomed that guidance. The unequal treatment in the guidance has not changed, and he knows that. The shadow Secretary of State for Justice typifies what the Conservative party has become, and that has been exemplified in this debate. Conservative Members come to this Chamber shaking with outrage and spoiling for a spat, but they forget that they have been in charge.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Josh Simons: I will not give way, as I am coming to the end.

Today's debate is another reminder that Conservative Members are growing comfortable with opposition. They prefer shouting, stomping and shaking with outrage to running the country, and that is the difference between us and them. We believe in calmly but doggedly driving

the change this country voted for. We believe in standing alongside working people, and delivering change that benefits them. Conservative Members can put on their Britney mics and prophesise about abstractions, they can stomp their feet, they can wave bits of paper and they can get buzz cuts in a bid to convince working people that they have changed, but they have not. We are the party of working people and of change, and change is what we will continue to deliver.

5.26 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I have been reflecting that I have been in this Chamber for 10 years, and for most of that time I, like many of my hon. Friends now sitting on the Opposition Benches, were of course seated on the Government Benches. The hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) claimed that we on the Opposition side now resort to stomping and outrage, whereas the Government are acting calmly and doggedly, but I must say to the new hon. Member that if I experienced anything over the last 10 years, it was that the faux outrage from the Labour Opposition on this side over 10 long years was all about the sorts of issues we are raising today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) reminded Labour Members that, in the 14 years that the Conservatives were in government, we did not remove the winter fuel payment. Furthermore, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) added the benefit of his experience, and explained that he had looked at this matter when he was a Minister, but concluded that it would be wrong morally and fiscally to remove the winter fuel payment.

So I say very gently to hon. Member for Makerfield that we on the Opposition side of the House have, for too many years, had to put up with all the false outrage and the anger that hon. Members who are now in government showed us over the years. However, I can tell them that the anger coming to the Labour Government will not be from my hon. Friends but from the pensioners in the hon. Member's constituency, and indeed in every constituency that now has a Labour MP.

Mr Brash: The hon. Member is reflecting on his party's record in office and how pensioners may feel about it. How does he think pensioners feel about the record of 300,000 more pensioners being in poverty thanks to his Administration over the last 14 years?

Alberto Costa: I am afraid that the hon. Member misses the point. The whole point of this debate is to acknowledge that there are poorer and vulnerable people in our society, and that we kept the winter fuel payment precisely to ensure that the most vulnerable pensioners in our society were assisted. What we have heard from Labour party Members—the very Labour party Members who said during the election that they cared for the most vulnerable and the poorest in society—reminds of a comment that they once made about the Conservative party. If there is any nasty party, the removal of the winter fuel payment and the total absence of Labour MPs in the Chamber is proof positive that there is only one nasty party today: the Labour party.

Some of my constituents voted at the last general election for a Labour party that promised to help working people and promised to be the party for the weakest in society.

[*Alberto Costa*]

At no point did any of my constituents who put a cross next to the South Leicestershire Labour party candidate think that a Labour Government would remove the winter fuel payment, yet they did that within weeks of taking office. At the same time, they cruelly increased salaries for those who did not require increases. The train drivers were demanding exorbitant salary increases, which the Conservatives resisted when in government. The new Labour Government capitulated, taking money from those who needed it—the most vulnerable in society—and giving it to those who did not need it. That was a betrayal of the British electorate, when the Labour party said it had the most vulnerable people in mind.

Louise Jones: Will the hon. Member confirm that he opposes pay rises for the armed forces?

Alberto Costa: The hon. Lady has raised that point already and erroneously said that my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) had misspoken. The only person who has misspoken this afternoon, and continues to do so, is the hon. Lady. The Conservatives have been very clear. Last year, when the Labour Government chose to give train drivers an exorbitant pay increase, we highlighted that that was a poor decision precisely because it had a negative impact on the most vulnerable in society, the very people we are speaking about today—pensioners.

Saqib Bhatti: My hon. Friend is making an impassioned speech and excellent points. It is about not just the pay rises for train drivers, but the fact that they were not asked for any savings in return. In fact, the only people who were asked to make a sacrifice were the poor pensioners.

Alberto Costa: Indeed. My hon. Friend continues to make very sensible points. I am sure pensioners watching this debate will, once and for all, see that in 14 years of Conservative government we had protecting the most vulnerable and weakest in society at the forefront of our mind.

Mr Brash: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way, but I want to press him one more time, because I do not feel that he answered the question from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones). He made play of the fact that public sector workers were given a pay rise. I want absolute clarity here: is he saying that he does not support pay rises for soldiers, nurses and teachers? A simple yes or no will do.

Alberto Costa: I will give the hon. Gentleman a very clear and unambiguous response: I support pensioners and the weakest in society. It is disgraceful that it is a Labour Government who have taken away money that is needed by the most vulnerable in society.

I will end where the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent, ended. I ask, as she did, what was all this for? Why deny the weakest and most vulnerable elderly people in our society money they desperately needed to keep their houses warm? I add, as she did, that to govern is to choose—the idiom we have heard time and again. Well, the Labour party in government is showing its true colours to the British electorate. It has never been a party for the working

people, the most vulnerable or the weakest, and today, it clearly demonstrates that it is most certainly not a party for our pensioners.

5.35 pm

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), a Member for whom I have a lot of fondness, but with whom I am afraid I am going to part ways quite considerably this afternoon.

The point has been made by Opposition Members about the difficulties of government, so I will repeat a point I have made in previous Opposition day debates. Members on the Opposition Benches, for the time being, have considerably more experience of government than Members on the Government Benches. I believe that regrettably, many of the actions my own party took during our time in opposition prolonged that, but as a result, I and many Members on these Benches gained a huge amount of experience of what real opposition looks like, as well as what flawed opposition looks like. I gently remind Opposition Members—not for the first time in this place—that if this is what they consider opposition to look like, they are going to spend a lot more time on those Benches than they might wish.

It is often said that any day in government is better than any day in opposition. I am sure Members on the Opposition Benches are very much enjoying the opportunity to repeat arguments we have heard numerous times already. But every single day in government is also a time when we must make decisions, and we on this side of the House—in this Government—have been very clear about the decision we have taken. We have not shirked from it. We have not hidden it. Our decision on the winter fuel allowance was announced in this place. It was not an easy decision—far from it.

Harriet Cross: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Ferguson: I am very, very close to making a point, but why not? There are more people wishing to speak on the Opposition Benches than on the Government Benches, so as someone who has many teachers in the family—we have mentioned teachers in this debate already—I will give way and say, “It’s not my time you’re wasting.”

Harriet Cross: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but I actually do not think it is anyone’s time we are wasting, seeing as we are discussing such an important topic. He talked about a decision that was made. I was just wondering, if Government Members had their time again, would they make the same decision?

Mark Ferguson: I would, and here’s why: when there are difficult decisions to be taken, we cannot shirk from them. When the Government shirk from those decisions, they end up with the grotesque chaos of entering a general election having accrued £22 billion of expenditure that there has not been sufficient allocation for, which is why someone else has to pick up the pieces.

Joe Robertson: The hon. Gentleman looks almost proud of the decision to withdraw winter fuel payments. He talks about taking tough decisions—can I offer him a really easy alternative? Scrap GB Energy, which does

not produce any energy; do not give Mauritius money and sovereign British territory; and restore the winter fuel payment.

Mark Ferguson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his talking points from Conservative campaign headquarters—they have been very much received on this side of the House. I do not relish having to take money away from anyone. It is one of the most difficult decisions that any of us will take. I hope that all of us in all parts of the House—every single person here—believes they are doing what is best for their constituents. I believe that every single Member on the Opposition Benches believes that what they are doing is best for their constituents. I do not believe that what they are doing is best for my constituents, but those are arguments I dare say we will continue to have vigorously over the next four years in this place.

Alison Griffiths: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Ferguson: I am about to get to the thrust of my argument, if the hon. Lady would not mind.

We have been talking about the winter fuel allowance and money being taken from pensioners, which is a serious point. I wish to talk briefly about what happened four years ago, when, in this place, the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Act 2021 was passed. That was a very serious decision that the previous Government had to take. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) for some of the enlightening research that he commissioned from the House of Commons Library. In 2021, the Conservative Government made a decision, following the unusual turbulence in the employment market after covid, that the triple lock would become, for one year only, a double lock. The Conservatives, who are very keen to say that they are the party of the triple lock, turned it into a double lock. I think that it is fair to say—as many Members did at the time—that it was a very unusual time in the market—

Saqib Bhatti: Will the hon. Member give way on that point?

Mark Ferguson: I would be happy to give way, but I am coming to the thrust of my argument.

As a result, the state pension did not increase by 8.3%, as it could have done that year. It instead rose by the absolute minimum of 2.5%, and that has had cumulative effects. In year one, pensioners were £470 worse off. In year two, they were £520 worse off. And in year three, they were £560 worse off. As I want to be reasonable in this debate, I make it clear that the Labour party did not support the 8.3% rise, because we believed, as a reasonable Opposition who went on to win the general election, that it was not within the bounds of what would normally be considered a rise in wages and was because of the impacts of covid. However, Members on the Labour Benches—I was sadly not one of them at the time—supported a Lords amendment that asked for the covid-specific elements to be stripped out to allow the Conservative party to maintain their manifesto commitment to a triple lock. That was voted down by the Conservative party.

Labour Members have been attempting to be reasonable and considered in opposition and in government about the impacts of spending on pensioners. Conservative Members are arguing as if they have never had to take

difficult decisions that would have impacts on pensioners. We have all had to take difficult decisions, and we will all continue to do so.

Saqib Bhatti: I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for getting to the thrust of his argument. He keeps referring to market turbulence, but I think he means the once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. We have repeatedly said how difficult governing is. The fact is that we would have made different choices from the ones that the current Government are making right now.

Mark Ferguson: I thank the hon. Member for his point, but I feel like he has not really listened to what I was saying. The point that I was making was that, at the time, the Government of the day had an opportunity to strip out the covid effects. I have already used the phrase “covid effects” and I have referred to the once-in-a-generation pandemic—my Lord, did we not all live through it? None of us has forgotten about it. But instead of stripping out the covid effects, the Conservative Government argued that that would be too difficult, so, instead, there was a 2.5% rise. That had an effect on pensioners, but I do not feel that the Conservative party has had the same reckoning with that difficult decision that we on Labour Benches have had with the decisions that we have taken.

Alison Griffiths: To be honest, I am absolutely delighted to hear the first Member on the Government Benches acknowledge that there is not a fictitious £22 billion black hole that they are trying to fill, and that they have understood, finally, that the effects of covid and the war in Ukraine are part of the issue they are trying to deal with.

Mark Ferguson: On the contrary. Of course there are difficulties and complexities caused by a war on the continent of Europe and by a once-in-a-generation pandemic, but they did not cause the previous Government to spend £6 billion on asylum hotels that they have not accounted for.

The point is often made about train drivers. As Labour Members have pointed out, it is not just train drivers who receive pay rises. I was not going to get into this, but while I am here I might as well declare that I am very proud to have been a serving trade union official for Unison, representing care workers, hospital cleaners and catering staff, who all received a reasonable pay rise under this Government. Incidentally, it was a pay rise recommended by an independent pay review body that was ignored and left on the shelf by the previous Government.

Alberto Costa *rose*—

Mark Ferguson: I am very respectful of the hon. Member, and I will bring him in in a moment.

Alison Griffiths *rose*—

Alberto Costa *rose*—

Mark Ferguson: I will be reasonable and give way to Members, but first I want to point out that some of the money that has been saved will be spent on the national health service. There is £25.6 billion extra for the NHS

[Mark Ferguson]

this year. Unfortunately, I have had the bad luck of being in accident and emergency with a number of family members in recent months. In this place we often talk about the impact of the national health service struggling, and what I saw there shocked me. I have seen children sleeping on their coats on the waiting room floor for 12 hours. I have seen pensioners on trolleys in corridors for days, crying out for help. It is an appalling legacy—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind Members that we are debating the winter fuel payment. It is perfectly in order to try to put that in context, but perhaps we should steer away from a debate on the NHS.

Mark Ferguson: I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your reminder. I have come to the end of my section on context, so let me bring my speech to a close. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) makes the good point that I should give way.

Alberto Costa: I thank the hon. Member for allowing me to intervene. There is no doubt that we all have sympathy with people who are finding the cost of living a challenge. But as Madam Deputy Speaker has correctly reminded us, today we are addressing the most vulnerable people in society who are no longer able to earn money—pensioners. The Opposition's questioning of why the Government made the choice to increase the salaries of those still working is valid. The point is that pensioners are unable to earn, and are poor at the £13,500 limit.

Mark Ferguson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but those in receipt of pension credit are still receiving winter fuel allowance, and all will benefit from this party's total commitment to the triple lock.

Mr Brash: My hon. Friend mentioned the triple lock and the very tough decision that the Opposition took when in government, but what has been the cumulative effect of that for all pensioners in this country to date?

Mark Ferguson: As I mentioned, my hon. Friend commissioned research from the Library. The cumulative effect overall will be somewhere in the realm of £1,500 per pensioner. As I said, were I a Member in 2021, I believe that I would have agreed that 8.3% was an unlikely increase. However, the Conservative Government were happy to raise it by 10.1% and then 8.5% in subsequent years. There is clearly a bit of dissonance.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mark Ferguson: As I have said, the Opposition's time is being taken up, not mine, so I will draw this entertaining speech to a close.

I am pleased that Opposition Members are proud of their position on the winter fuel payment. I am very happy for them. But under their Government, the winter fuel allowance was never increased. By my own assessment, it went down by around a third in real terms; the Minister said around 50%, and it is a matter of public record that he is far better at numbers than me, so I defer to him. If the Opposition care about the most vulnerable, they also

have to care about our national health service and support the action being taken on the triple lock, and they must consider why in 14 years of government the winter fuel allowance was increased zero times.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Around 15 Members still want to speak. The wind-ups will start at 6.35 pm, so if everyone is to get in, perhaps some thought could be given to the length of contributions.

5.48 pm

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): After such a huge election victory by a supposedly progressive party, it was disappointing to me and many of my constituents that, despite the financial situation that the Government inherited, one of their first acts was to strip vital support from many of the poorest pensioners in our society. I am sure that many of us across the House had hundreds of emails from concerned pensioners, worried about how they would afford their energy bills this winter. Stripping pensioners of this allowance was the wrong thing to do.

The Government said that the removal of winter fuel payments would allow money to be spent in other areas, but as with other attempts to raise money such as increasing employers' national insurance contributions, any savings will be offset, as pointed out by the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), by cold, hungry and unwell pensioners adding to the strain on GPs and social services. It is morally and economically a poor decision.

One of my constituents, Patricia, wrote to me about how furious she was that the winter fuel allowance had been taken away. She is no longer eligible for winter fuel payments, but neither is she eligible for benefits or pension credit. She worked in the NHS for over 40 years, but her NHS pension is not large, and she has been a widow for over 10 years so she is managing on a small, single income. Because her husband died when she was 54, she was not entitled to a widow's pension, either. She wrote to me saying:

"It is always the middle people who are squeezed, whose pips are made to squeak, the easy targets".

I could give numerous other examples of pensioners in a similar position to Patricia who do not know what to do.

In January, I held a cost of living advice surgery in Midsomer Norton where I brought together organisations and charities such as Wessex Water and Mind to provide a one-stop shop for constituents to come to me with their concerns about bills and benefits. The majority of those who attended the surgery were pensioners anxious about the cost of their utility bills or confused about their eligibility for various payments. More than 2 million pensioners currently live in poverty—that is unacceptable. The pressure that they are feeling will only be heightened by yesterday's welfare reform announcements. I have already received a deluge of emails from constituents worried about the likely impacts.

Loss of winter fuel payments, changes to personal independence payments and increases to national insurance for charities and social care providers all pile the pressure on the least well-off in our country while the Government kick tricky decisions like fixing social care into the

long grass. The cost of living crisis is going nowhere, and removing winter fuel payments is just another example of a decision that penalises some of the most vulnerable.

5.51 pm

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to the pensioners in my constituency. They have worked hard all their lives and made immeasurable contributions to our community by volunteering for others and supporting family members and friends through hardship and sickness. My generation owes them a great debt, and they deserve better than what had become the norm under the Tories.

Tory mismanagement saw spiralling inflation and a £22 billion black hole in the nation's finances. Tory mismanagement saw an NHS on its knees, with the longest waiting times on record and a social care system that was not fit for purpose.

Alison Griffiths *rose*—

Matthew Patrick: I am not into the thrust of my argument yet, but I will give way.

Alison Griffiths: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments made by the hon. Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson), who acknowledged that it was indeed the covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine that caused such a problem with the UK finances.

Matthew Patrick: The hon. Lady will know that, when it comes to the NHS, the longest waiting times were impacted by the pandemic, but the longest waiting times on record prior to the pandemic were seen the day before it, because of Conservative mismanagement. The Conservatives do not have a record that they should feel proud of on that matter, or on the economy.

Harriet Cross: Will the hon. Member give way?

Matthew Patrick: I am finishing on the intervention that I just took; I might then come to another.

Many constituents in Wirral West really suffered through Tory mismanagement on the economy and on public services. That mismanagement saw a status quo fail our pensioners and fail all of us. Getting the country back on track required us to support those who need it most. No one in my constituency thinks that the very richest in society like Sir Richard Branson need Government support to get by.

Gregory Stafford: There is probably unanimity across the Chamber that Richard Branson does not need the winter fuel payment, but it is the poorest pensioners—those who are earning just above £13,500—who are losing out. Let us not have the nonsense about Richard Branson or people swigging champagne; let us actually talk about the people who are suffering and will be going into hospital because they are cold and may end up dying. Those are the people we should be talking about.

Matthew Patrick: I will come to that, but I gently make the point, as was just said, that the Conservatives were paying Sir Richard Branson the winter fuel allowance every year. They could have changed that, but they did not.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Matthew Patrick: I will take interventions—I am happy to do so—but I will make some progress first. Hon. Members may have heard earlier that the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale)—I do not believe that he is currently in his seat—said it was nonsense for him to be receiving the winter fuel allowance. I think he revealed—it was news to me—that the Conservative Government had had plans to means-test it. I will be interested if those who wish to intervene would confirm whether he was right.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Members on the Conservative Benches have said that they do not think Richard Branson should have been receiving the winter fuel payment. They talk about those above £13,000. If the Conservative party had been so concerned about the very poorest pensioners, pension credit would not have been the most underclaimed benefit in the welfare system, with 700,000 people not claiming it. If they really cared about the most vulnerable pensioners, would they not have done more about that?

Matthew Patrick: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is incredible uptake under this Government because we want to see the poorest pensioners access the support they are entitled to.

Joe Robertson: Will the hon. Gentleman take my intervention?

Matthew Patrick: I will, but I have a very neat point and so the hon. Gentleman will appreciate why I will not take his intervention right now. The hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) said it is not all about people quaffing champagne, but one Conservative councillor lambasted me for the decision and for taking away his champagne money. I do not think it can be right for public money to be used in that way while the pressures on vulnerable pensioners and working people are so great.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Matthew Patrick: I will take interventions in a moment. Hon. Members have mentioned those who are just above the threshold. They will therefore share my relief that this Government have put hundreds of millions of pounds into the household support fund, which can help those worried about their bills if they are just below the threshold. I will give way to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) first and then to the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen).

Joe Robertson: I thank the hon. Member for finally giving way. He has won his campaign to remove the winter fuel payment from Sir Richard Branson, but if I take him back a little earlier in his speech, he paints a picture of the sorry state that he claims this country was in when he took over. Just let us suppose that and run with his argument, which he must believe: why does he think now is the time to also take away the winter fuel payment?

Matthew Patrick: The hon. Gentleman uses the words “suppose” and “sorry state”. It is no wonder Conservative Members lost; they were in total denial about their failure for this country. Now is the right time to end the

[Matthew Patrick]

status quo, end the incessant decline under the Conservatives and put a huge amount of investment back into our NHS. I, for one, am proud that we have had five months of falling waiting times. I want Conservative Members to welcome such good news for our NHS—news that helps all the people in this country.

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman is very generous in giving way. I have listened carefully to the speeches this afternoon with respect to our tenure in office and regrets that we will have time to reflect on. I accept that. However, having been a Minister and a Parliamentary Private Secretary for 12 years, I want to tell the hon. Gentleman that though making the decision to remove the winter fuel payment for that population may be desirable—I acknowledge and have said that it may be desirable for people in the higher levels—it needs to have a mechanism or a proxy to verify what would be fair and which vulnerable people would be affected. I put it to him that if somebody only has an income of £13,500, they are in a state of vulnerability that means that no Government should take that away. The choice we made was based on the options available. If there had been an easier way of doing that at a higher level, I would have been sympathetic to that. Those are the real choices that one actually has to face in government.

Matthew Patrick: I am grateful to the right hon. Member, including for the way in which he puts his point. He will hopefully share my relief, then, about the household support fund, which I often find my constituents do not know about. The fund is not reported heavily in the media, so it would be wise for us all to take the opportunity in this debate to reiterate that that support is available to people who are just above the threshold and who might just miss out on accessing the winter fuel allowance, so that they know that. I signpost many concerned constituents to Citizens Advice Wirral and support them in accessing the money available through the household support fund, hundreds of millions of pounds of which has come from this Government.

Conservative Members rightly talk about the need to relieve pressures and protect the most vulnerable. However, I question where their outrage was when their Government, back in 2021, broke their manifesto commitment and suspended the triple lock; I wonder where their outrage was when their leader recently suggested that we should look at means-testing access to the state pension; and where was their outrage when only months ago the shadow Chancellor suggested scrapping the triple lock all together?

It is Labour politicians who are committed to protecting pensioners' incomes and delivering support to those in need. I have mentioned the household support fund, and we are ending the Tories' disastrous plans to drag a record number of pensioners into paying income tax by uprating personal tax thresholds from April 2028. Unlike the Tories, we have an iron-clad commitment to the triple lock, which will see the state pension of millions increase by more than £470 this year. I would like to hear them welcome that. We are supporting those caring for their loved ones by increasing the income threshold for carer's allowance so that more than 60,000 carers will benefit by the end of this Parliament.

Times are tough and this Labour Government have made tough decisions to get our country back on track. As I mentioned, NHS waiting times have now fallen for five consecutive months. We have not had that for a long time. We have made a deal with GPs so that healthcare in the community works for everyone, we have targeted income support to those in the most difficulty and we have launched the biggest ever drive to ensure that those who can claim pension credit do so, with almost 50,000 more pensioners now getting the money they are entitled to. The Tory status quo meant only decline for this country. With the Government's plan for change, we will get the country back on its feet.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am introducing an immediate three-minute time limit. I call Bradley Thomas.

6 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Constituents across Bromsgrove and the villages, particularly older constituents who have previously been beneficiaries of winter fuel payments, rightly feel short-changed by this Government. I know that from constituents who have contacted me and those I have spoken to directly on the doorstep. The faith that they placed in the Government has not been rewarded by the Government supporting them at a time of vulnerability.

In the limited time that I have, I would like to point out the effect that this policy has on rural communities in particular. It is important to remember that, while about 83% of homes across the country at large are connected to the gas grid, many pensioners who live in rural areas are not connected to mains energy and have disproportionately higher energy costs. They often live in much more exposed older homes that are less well insulated. This means that their energy demands are much greater than those who live in better insulated or more urban residences.

I also want to touch on political choices. I know that this has been stressed many times already today, but governing is about choices. We hear a lot about £22 billion black holes, but we do not hear too much from the Government and Labour Members about the cumulative costs of other choices that they have made. These include the £18 billion for Chagos and the public sector pay award without any increase in productivity. We could say that pensioners are paying the price for the pressure that unions have placed on the Labour party.

It is crucial to remember that, during the election campaign, Labour pledged to bring down bills by £300 a year. Ever since the Government have been pursuing their GB Energy policy, which is a quango funded to the tune of £8 billion that will not own any energy-generating assets, they seem to have abandoned any claim over when that £300 deduction in bills will be delivered, but we have seen the price cap rise. I find it quite spectacular how, in 2025, Ministers are suddenly talking about how market forces are affecting energy prices, when back in 2022 Labour Members said it was the decisions of the Conservatives that caused energy prices and therefore inflation to spike. It is important for the Government to reflect on the reality of what drives energy prices and to restore the winter fuel payment to pensioners, not just in Bromsgrove and the villages but across the country.

6.3 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): It is an honour to take part in this debate, and this is an extremely pertinent time for it. We all hope we are through the worst of the winter—although in my part of the world nobody puts their snow boots away until we have got through lambing season, because lambing storms usually bring snow—but we need to know, as we get through the winter and into the better weather, what the impact of this policy decision has been on our pensioners, on our health service, on A&E admissions and on other allowances and benefits. We need to know the overall cost of the decision.

The hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons), who is no longer in his place, suggested that he has more pensioners in his constituency than anyone else. Having checked with the House of Commons Library as I sat here, I assure him that Staffordshire Moorlands has more, because we have 22,197 compared with his 20,909. Of those 22,197, over 20,000 of them have been affected by this decision, and Staffordshire Moorlands, as the name suggests, is not exactly warm. Last winter, we saw a low of minus 14°C; this year, we saw only minus 5°C—it has been a relatively mild winter.

It is incredibly important that we find out exactly what impact the decision has had. At the pensioners' fair I held in Cheadle back in November, pensioners were terrified. I am holding another fair next week on 28 March in Leek, and I want to hear from my local pensioners what impact the decision has had on them, how it has made them feel and how often they did not switch the heating on.

I am proud that I was part of a party in government that introduced the triple lock. The suspension of the triple lock has been referred to. Those were exceptional circumstances. That was at a point when we had had furlough and earnings had gone down by 20%—that is how the statistics worked. When people came off furlough and the earnings went up by a much higher number, that was the statistical anomaly that meant giving pensioners the increase in line with earnings would not have reflected reality. Earnings had not gone up by that amount; it was that furlough had ended.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): Can I be clear in my mind that what the right hon. Lady is saying is that at a tough time, the then Government took some tough decisions, and that resulted in the pension level being £560 lower now than if they had not made that decision—a difference far greater than the winter fuel payment amount? That Government made tough decisions at a tough time that are costing pensioners money today.

Dame Karen Bradley: What was happening then was once in a generation, and it was not a real increase in earnings; it was merely that people had gone from 80% of their earnings back to 100%. When earnings had gone down by 20%, we did not cut the state pension but continued to increase it in line with the triple lock.

I want to make a point about universal benefits as opposed to means-tested ones. The Labour party seems to think that a universal benefit is bad because somebody who does not really need it might receive it. I take the other view: it is important that we get to as many people

as possible who need it, and if that means a few people at the top end of the earnings level get a benefit they might not need—

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Given that the right hon. Member's belief is so strong, will she enlighten me on whether she voted to strip child benefit from certain families, as was Conservative policy? That was a universal benefit.

Dame Karen Bradley: The hon. Member makes a good point, and that was a difficult decision because it was the way we could ensure that those at the higher end of the earnings spectrum were taxed on their child benefit. That is a different way of dealing with a benefit that some people may not be in need of but are in receipt of. It would have been perfectly possible for the Government to tax winter fuel payments. That would have meant that those on £13,500 were still getting the money they needed and the Richard Bransons of the world would be paying tax on it. That was a choice available to the Government; they chose not to do that. They chose to just take the benefit away.

The fact that child benefit goes automatically to mothers is an incredibly important point, and winter fuel allowance going automatically to pensioners was valuable to them. I ask the Government and the Minister, who I know well and who is an honourable and decent gentleman, whether they might consider putting in some form of transitional arrangements, rather than having the cliff edge that hurts many pensioners. I also ask whether they will give us the information about whether there is fraud and error in the system now. Will the DWP accounts be affected by the fact that the winter fuel allowance has been taken away in this way and more people may be guilty of fraud and error? Will the Minister give us information on the impact that the measure has had on pensioner health? That matters vitally to us all.

6.9 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I start by acknowledging the clear impact that I have had on the hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward). I am not sure why or how I have had that impact, but it was clear that she was drastically upset at me, despite the fact that I had been sitting quietly throughout the debate until that point.

I will talk about why the Labour Government took this decision—why the Chancellor's first decision was to target pensioners. It was because the Government talked in their manifesto about the fiscal rules that they would put in place, and said that they would not raise taxes on working people, among a number of other policies. However, they then found themselves in a bit of a bind: "What can we do to reduce the cost in-year? What is an easy target?" The Treasury team obviously said, "Well, how about cutting the winter fuel payment? You can do that in-year. You can make the change in this Budget, in the current financial year."

That has left the Scottish Government in a rubbish situation. Because those decisions were taken in-year, it reduced our block grant after we had set our budget in Scotland. We could not magically come up with the £147 million that the UK Government had taken from us with no warning, despite saying that they were going to reset the relationship with the Scottish Parliament. They took that money away in-year.

[Kirsty Blackman]

This is supposed to be a Labour Government. My former Procedure Committee colleague, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), talked about the universality of benefits. I wholeheartedly agree that that is what we should have. I believe that we should have universal social security systems and universal basic income, and that everybody who deserves the social security net should be provided with it. Then we should tax non-doms, tax share buy-backs, rejoin the single market and have a more progressive tax system—like the one in Scotland—in order to pay for those things.

Universal benefits mean that, yes, absolutely, one or two millionaires who buy champagne with their winter fuel payment will get it, but they also mean that every single person who needs it will get it. The choices being made will exclude some of those millionaires, but they will also exclude the people who were freezing in the minus 1°C weather in my constituency overnight. That is a shoddy decision by the Labour Government. I do not understand what the point of Labour is just now.

6.12 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I know that, for the Government Front Benchers, I may well be repeating myself, but I think I need to: £300 may not seem like a lot of money, but believe you me, for the thousands of pensioners in my constituency and up and down the country who have missed out on their winter fuel payment, it is a lot. As we have heard this afternoon, and as Labour Members know, it is the difference between heating and eating.

What does the Minister say to someone who is terminally ill or has a life-threatening illness, is just over the pension credit limit, and misses out because of the Labour Government's callous policy? Does the Minister accept the finding that the chance of an over-65-year-old being admitted to hospital or A&E this winter increased by 9% compared with 2023-24—an increase of 76,190 patients? Has he explained to pensioners that a report commissioned by Labour in 2017 claimed that 3,850 pensioners' lives would be at risk if the winter fuel payment were scrapped, and that scrapping the winter fuel payment would cost the NHS an extra £169 million a year? It is no wonder that the Government did not want to publish an impact assessment.

Andy MacNae: The right hon. Lady is making an eloquent point about how important every pound is for a pensioner, and £300 is a lot of money for a pensioner. But is £560 more or less than £300, because that is what decisions taken by the previous Government in 2021 have cost pensioners this year?

Wendy Morton: I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman, and my right hon. and hon. Friends have made clear the position on that.

Let me return to the point we are debating, which is the winter fuel payment. I would like to think, or even hope, that the Government would have a rethink, although it appears that might not be the case. What is worse is that they seem uninterested in assessing the impact of this decision. They will not do it now, they did not do it before they made the decision, and it seems they will

not even consider delaying the measure. Pensioners have faced a cliff edge and they could not plan for this, which makes it even harder.

To add insult to injury, more than 30,000 pension credit applications are waiting to be processed. I have been submitting written questions to the Department to try to flush out how many extra staff it has recruited. My figures are different from those given earlier by those on the Front Bench. My numbers are 1,045 full-time equivalent members of staff, and there is still a backlog. Winter is not over and pensioners are still waiting, so why do this Labour Government insist on penalising those who have worked hard all their lives?

Pensioners have worked hard, tried to do the right thing by their families, paid their bills, and perhaps saved a little bit of money, only to be kicked at a time in life when they really need that little bit of help, and when it would make a massive difference in so many ways. Labour Members chose to scrap the winter fuel payment for 10 million pensioners, and the really disappointing thing is that I have sat on these Benches and I have heard not one bit of humility. All I have heard is arrogance—

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Wendy Morton: No, not now. I will continue to fight for the pensioners—for the friends, families, and residents of Aldridge-Brownhills who I know are suffering as a result of this.

6.16 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The flavour and mood of this debate have been somewhat strange. I expected to be in a debate facing Members on the Government Benches who were at least showing humility, and who at least, in the words they chose, showed that they regretted the decision, even though they reluctantly supported it. But that is not the mood we have faced at all. Government Members have been bullish. We have heard the word “proud”. They have been jovial and, at times, even upbeat in describing this very worst decision of this Government of bad decisions, and pensioners will have heard them. Labour Members may have impressed each other, and they may have impressed the trade unions of which they are members, by talking about and defending train drivers' pay, but they will have deeply depressed, and depressed further, those pensioners who live in their constituencies, in my constituency and right across Britain.

My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State took us through the issues caused by withdrawing the winter fuel payment, and she made the central argument that has been repeated from these Benches: they are withdrawing the winter fuel payment not from the wealthy, but from those on as little as £13,500.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): My constituent Jean told me that she is now washing in cold water as a result of this measure. She is one of those people right on the cusp. She might also be concerned by comments from the Leader of the Opposition about the potential means-testing of the triple lock after the next election, if the Conservatives are in government. Will the hon. Gentleman offer Jean reassurance that there will not be an even longer winter if the Government were to change next time?

Joe Robertson: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me the opportunity to talk about means-testing—I did not expect to have that Government argument made by a Liberal Democrat Member, but so be it. There is some sympathy, from across the House, for the argument for means-testing the winter fuel payment, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that nobody on the Conservative Benches thinks that the means-testing cut-off point, if they believe in one, should be £13,500. That means that 10 million pensioners have lost out on the winter fuel payment. Unless the Government can make a fiscal argument for removing winter fuel payments from the very wealthy that actually delivers more funds to the Treasury, this decision should not have been taken at all, and should certainly not have been taken when it harms those on a fixed income of very little.

Luke Murphy: The motion talks about ensuring that “those eligible for Pension Credit receive it”.

To return to the point I made earlier, if Conservative Members were so concerned about vulnerable pensioners, why was there absolutely no movement in the take-up of pension credit under the previous Government? Some 700,000 pensioners are eligible for pension credit, but I do not remember a big campaign on that by the previous Government that made a difference—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman’s intervention is far too long.

Joe Robertson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing attention to his own Government’s promise to increase the take-up of pension credit. After the past winter, there are still 750,000 pensioners who have not taken it up, so he should not speak with any pride or seek to deflect to previous Governments when his own Government have withdrawn the winter fuel payment and there are still 750,000 eligible pensioners who are not receiving pension credit.

Luke Murphy: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Joe Robertson: I am sorry, but in the time remaining I cannot take another intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

Without the winter fuel payment, over the winter we have seen a 5% increase in the number of people aged over 65 attending A&E, and of those who have attended A&E, there has been a 9% increase in hospital admission. The motion seeks a proper impact assessment and analysis by the Government of the effects of winter fuel payments being withdrawn. This was not a one-off winter, and it was a warmer winter than average. The same will happen next winter, the following winter and the winter after that, unless the Government bring back the fuel payment.

Matthew Patrick: The hon. Member stated that he believes in means-testing the winter fuel allowance, so at what level does he believe that eligibility should be set?

Joe Robertson: There are Members across the House who would support the principle of means-testing, and I have invited the Government to come forward with the data that shows us where the bar would be set to bring money into the Treasury. However, I would reject any means-testing that takes money away from those paid £13,500.

6.23 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I do not know whether it is incompetence, pig-headedness or callousness, or indeed all of the above, that has led this Labour Government to take the winter fuel payment away from some of the poorest in society. So often today from the Government Benches we have heard about tough choices, but tough choices do not automatically mean the right choice; in fact, in this case it is entirely the wrong choice.

I expected to see the panoply of the usual greasers and crawlers from the Labour Benches here today, but they are not here. In fact, as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) mentioned, we have seen Labour Members who seem to have donned the hair shirt and decided that this should be their cause célèbre to demonstrate, either to themselves or to their party, that being tough somehow means that they are being a strong Government, which is absolute nonsense. All that the scrapping of the winter fuel payment will lead to is excess deaths. We had warm words from the hon. Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), but warm words will not heat the pensioners who are freezing in their homes this winter.

In my constituency of Farnham and Bordon, more than 18,200 pensioners will have lost the winter fuel payment, and many of them are just above the income threshold for the pension credit benefit. These people are contributing to our society but earning only £13,500 a year. They are not the champagne quaffers that the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) talked about; they are the people who fought for and served this country. They have put money into the system and rightly expect a tiny bit back to heat their homes.

At a pension credit surgery I held in October, pensioners shared their fears and frustrations. One word kept coming up: betrayal. That is betrayal by this Labour Government of their vote. They are not asking for luxuries or for anything like a handout; all they want is to be able to heat their home in winter. They want to live with dignity, and they want to do so without having to choose whether to heat their home or put food on the table.

The idea that this Government would do this without an impact assessment and, subsequently, without doing any monitoring of the impact is shocking. In his winding-up speech, will the Minister commit to doing a full impact assessment to see the rate of NHS admissions and the mortality rates that he talked about, so that we understand whether this policy has killed people? This is not about money; it is about values and decency. Those who built this country should not have to shiver in their homes because of this cruel policy.

6.26 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Once again in this House we find ourselves discussing Labour’s failure to protect our pensioners. Time and again we have exposed its false narratives and asked how it intends to use technology to reduce costs, improve services and drive productivity. This Government capitulated to the archaic working practices of train drivers and their trade union paymasters. There has been no serious attempt to modernise, no recognition of the technological advancements of the past five years, and no meaningful reforms to improve efficiency. Worse still, their Employment Rights Bill drags Britain back

[Alison Griffiths]

to 1970s French-style labour laws, rolling back the vital protections of the Trade Union Act 2016. These outdated policies stifle economic growth, make job creation harder and hand excessive power to unions—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind the hon. Member that this debate is on winter fuel payments.

Alison Griffiths: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I merely wish to set the scene for winter fuel payments.

Luke Myer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison Griffiths: I will make some progress.

Who is paying the price for the Government's economic mismanagement? It is our pensioners. Of the 23,282 pensioners in my constituency of Bognor Regis and Littlehampton—at least 5% more pensioners than in the constituency of Makerfield—nearly 90% will lose their winter fuel payment this year. That is nearly 23,282 elderly individuals being forced into impossible choices because of this Government's incompetence and poor choices. One constituent wrote to me that

“this policy is especially unfair to older pensioners who receive significantly lower pensions than those born later. We have contributed since the age of 16, yet now we feel penalised”

simply for being older.

This is not just bad policy, but a deliberate choice by this Labour Government. Instead of protecting the vulnerable, this Government have prioritised inflation-busting pay rises for their union backers, waged class warfare on independent schools and forced a burden of at least £5 billion on to businesses through their disastrous Employment Rights Bill. Labour's decision to strip away this crucial support will lead to more pensioners in A&E, more vulnerable people suffering in cold homes and more lives being put at risk. It is a betrayal. We will not stand by and let this injustice go unanswered.

6.29 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is painfully clear that if this Government believe you did not vote for them, they will continue to turn their back on you. That is clear from their treatment of independent schools, small business owners, farmers, and now—and most cruelly—pensioners. Within just weeks of taking office, this shameful Government scrapped the winter fuel payment for 10 million pensioners. Those individuals, many of whom are frail and some of the most vulnerable people in society, have given so much to our country. They built our foundations, our communities and the national fabric, yet in return, they receive a cold shoulder from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. She could not wait to get her hands on their £300.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Bedford: No, I am not giving way.

That small sum of money allowed pensioners to keep the heating on, helping them to make it through those cold winter nights, and supported them in not having to choose between heating and eating. Wherever I go in my constituency of Mid Leicestershire, I have conversations

with older people, and the word they use is “betrayal”. It is a betrayal felt deeply in their hearts, particularly by those who helped build this country.

Let us not forget that 348 Labour MPs are complicit in taking the winter fuel payment away from millions of pensioners, and 71% of disabled pensioners have lost that vital support. Labour Members have repeatedly told us that theirs is the party of the NHS, but let us face the facts: they are all complicit in costing the national health service an additional £169 million, which is the cost of looking after the 100,000 pensioners who have been left out in the cold.

Gregory Stafford: We have heard the argument from Labour Members that taking away the winter fuel payment somehow benefits the NHS, because money is going into it. Does my hon. Friend agree that the chief executive of NHS England has said that actually, every single penny that the Government are putting into the NHS this year is being wiped out through national insurance rises, inflation and drug price increases?

Mr Bedford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The numbers simply do not stack up.

In comparison, it was a Conservative Government who introduced the triple lock and increased the state pension by almost £4,000. It was a Conservative Government who reduced the number of pensioners living in absolute poverty by more than 200,000, and it is the Conservatives who have pensioners' interests at heart.

6.31 pm

Lewis Cocking (Bloxbourne) (Con): When I was out on the doorsteps during the general election campaign—as I am sure every Member of this House was—I spoke to my electorate in Bloxbourne. They said, “Look, Lewis, we know what's coming. We know we're going to get a Labour Government. We know they're going to get into power and then they're going to tell us how awful it is, and they are going to come for us. They are going to come after pensioners.” The electorate in Bloxbourne already knew, so the British public are not fools. This argument about a £22 billion black hole and difficult choices that we are told the Government have to make will not wash with the British people outside of this Chamber, because they did not believe it in the first place.

Luke Myer: Will the hon. Member give way?

Lewis Cocking: No, I will not give way.

The Government got elected on a manifesto. Within eight months, they have introduced significant policies that were not in that manifesto, including the family farm tax, the national insurance increase, and of course withdrawal of the winter fuel allowance. That is what my constituents in Bloxbourne are really cross about—it was not in the Labour party manifesto. People went out and voted in good faith in the July election, and lots of the people I speak to in my constituency who voted for the Labour party now heavily regret it because of the choices that Labour and this Government are making. They were not honest about those choices with the British people.

What was in the Labour manifesto, though, was a commitment to cut energy bills by £300. The Government have got in—secured a mandate from the British people—and have then said, “You know what? The manifesto we were elected on doesn't mean anything. We can throw it

in the bin and concentrate on things that we really want to do, rather than concentrate on putting British people first and lowering energy bills by £300.” I hope that when the Minister sums up, he will tell us about the progress that the Government are making towards bringing energy bills down. I suspect that it is very little, because they are too busy concentrating on things that they have not been elected to do.

Bradley Thomas: Further to the point that my hon. Friend has just made, does he agree that the Government made promises to the British public that they not only will not deliver, but cannot deliver, such as lowering energy bills? It is not within the gift of Governments to directly control energy bills—that is why the winter fuel payment is so crucial to so many pensioners across the country.

Lewis Cocking: My hon. Friend makes an important point. What the Government could do to lower energy bills is to secure North sea oil and gas investment in this country, so that we produce here more of the gas that we need to power all the industry in this country, instead of importing it.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that if we were to rejoin a single market in electricity, we would lower our electricity bills by joining the single day-ahead coupling system with Europe?

Lewis Cocking: The hon. Member makes a point that he is passionate about, but I do not agree with him. We need to produce more of our energy here at home, rather than relying on imports. That is why the Government should change their policy and issue new oil and gas licences. I urge hon. Members on the Government Benches—lots of them are honourable—to please support pensioners today and vote to keep the winter fuel allowance.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the wind-ups. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

6.35 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): This afternoon, we have heard some fantastic speeches in which Members have set out heartbreaking real-life stories from their constituents about the situation older people have found themselves in this winter. Pensioners have been forced to choose between eating and heating as a result of the Government’s choice to remove the winter fuel allowance from around 10 million of them. That was compounded by shocking delays in processing pension credit claims. Along with those who have just missed the threshold to receive support, it has meant that many, many people who are desperately in need have missed out on hundreds of pounds that would have made a real difference to them this winter.

As has previously been said:

“Although the poorest do receive some help through cold weather payments, they go only to those on income support, who generally have to wait until after the cold weather for help to be available. The payments are no help at all to most pensioners, including...those on the margins of poverty”.

The individual continues that they were

“simply not prepared to allow another winter to go by when pensioners are fearful of turning up their heating, even on the coldest winter days, because they do not know whether they will have the help they need for their fuel bills.”—[*Official Report*, 25 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 779-80.]

Those were the words of the former Labour Chancellor and Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, who brought in the winter fuel payment. It is a great shame that his successors in a Labour Government today have taken a very different view on support for pensioners.

The choice made by the Labour Government—almost their first choice in office last July—is as cruel as it is unnecessary, and it has real-life consequences for vulnerable people. Like many other Members, I suspect on both sides of the House, I have met my local branch of Age UK and other local charities. They all tell me about how hard their services—services vitally important to pensioners, such as GPs, hospices and pharmacies—will be hit by the Government’s jobs tax, the NICs hike. Alongside that impact on services pensioners rely on, this Government have slashed the winter fuel payment for so many. Understandably, pensioners are asking what the Labour party has against them—or, for that matter, against farmers or businesses.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Will the shadow Minister give way?

Edward Argar: Let me just complete the point. I know that the hon. Gentleman has only come into the debate relatively late, but I will take an intervention from him afterwards.

The message is, under this Government, do not run a hospice, a pharmacy or a care home. Do not be a farmer. Do not run a business and, heaven forbid, do not get old.

Jonathan Davies: We on the Government Benches are disappointed to have had to make this decision, but it is a symptom of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. I just remind the shadow Minister of something. I understand that he stood in the 2017 general election. Some of the policies in the Conservative manifesto at that time were to means-test the winter fuel allowance and to reduce the triple lock to a double lock.

Edward Argar: I will make a number of points to the hon. Gentleman. I was going to come on to his first point, but I will happily do so now. He seems to be alluding to the mythical so-called black hole that is so often bandied around. The OBR pointedly declined to validate that or back it up in its assessment, and it cannot be deemed a rationale for doing this.

Luke Myer: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I want to make a little progress.

We have seen a real black hole emerging following the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s disastrous Budget. It is also not the case that the Government can claim they have saved the pensions triple lock, which was introduced by a Conservative and Liberal Democrat Government back in 2010. The previous Government had already committed themselves to it, in that election’s manifesto and others. Pensioners could rightly bank on the uplift from the triple lock coming through. What they have seen now, however, is a real cut in what they were receiving, and what they had a right to expect, with the slashing of the winter fuel payment.

Luke Myer: The right hon. Gentleman has mentioned the OBR. I wonder whether he has read the report in which it states:

“The Treasury did not share information with the OBR about the large pressures on RDEL”

— resource departmental expenditure limits—

“about the unusual extent of commitments against the reserve, or about any plans to manage these pressures down”.

I wonder whether he will take this opportunity to apologise for that extraordinary fiscal failure.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, as I mentioned earlier, I have read the report, and he will know, having also read it—he is gently waving it at me from the other side of the Chamber—that the OBR pointedly declined to back up the claim about the so-called £22 billion black hole.

As we have heard, the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, initiated the winter fuel allowance, announcing it in 1997 and introducing it in 1998; but it is worth remembering that, even in the challenging circumstances of the time, George Osborne did not cut the allowance, despite the appalling financial and economic inheritance in 2010. Why not? Because it was a cost-effective benefit, and because it genuinely made a difference.

Mark Ferguson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Argar: Let me just make a further point. I am about to deal with some of the hon. Gentleman’s own points, as he will find if he pauses for a minute, but he may want to intervene at that moment.

George Osborne did not cut the winter fuel allowance because it gave pensioners the confidence to turn the heating up those extra few degrees, knowing that the money was coming. I will now give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mark Ferguson: I salute the right hon. Gentleman’s quest for clarity. Will he provide others with that clarity? Would his party reverse this policy?

Edward Argar: I was about to be quite nice to the hon. Gentleman, because I have to say that, during a debate that has, perhaps, produced a lot of heat and not always a huge amount of light, he addressed the issues before us in a measured way. I did not agree with everything he said, but he was reasonable and made some valid points. Let me gently say to him, however, that our record speaks for itself. We did not get rid of the winter fuel allowance. The fact is that Labour Members are in government, and have a large majority, and, as they are discovering, to govern is to choose. They must be accountable for the choice—the choice—that they have made.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Edward Argar: I will make a little bit of progress, and then I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

UK pensioners are not fools, so I am sorry that Labour Members want almost to insult their intelligence by repeating the debunked claim about the so-called black hole, or the debunked claim that the triple lock

was in some way under threat and has been saved by the current Government. Let me also gently remind them that pensioners are unlikely to forget. They feel let down by Labour; they feel that the trust that they placed in Labour Members when they voted for them has been betrayed, and within a month of Labour’s taking office. So I ask again, why did this Government make the political choice to introduce these cruel, unnecessary cuts?

I now give way to my right hon. Friend.

Sir Oliver Dowden: The moment may have passed somewhat, but I think my point is still apposite enough to make. If there are any apologies to go round, they should come from the Labour party. In every single election campaign in which I have been involved for at least the past 25 years, the Labour party has run a scare story about the Conservatives scrapping the winter fuel payment, and the moment they get into office, what is the very first thing they do? They remove the winter fuel payment. That is what has upset so many of my constituents so much.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the former Deputy Prime Minister, who has put the case far more eloquently and succinctly than I could have done. He is, of course, entirely right.

An estimated three quarters of a million people are entitled to pension credit, but do not claim it, even after Labour’s pension credit take-up campaign, so they did not receive the winter fuel payment to which they are entitled. Will the Minister—or the Pensions Minister who opened this debate, whom I see back in his place—commit in the name of transparency to publish an official estimate of the number of eligible pensioners the Government estimate did not receive the winter fuel payment this winter? I am conscious of the time, so I will allow the Minister to respond in his wind-up.

The Government’s own modelling shows that 100,000 pensioners will be pushed into poverty as a result of their choices. Now that the first winter has passed, will the Minister commit to publishing data showing the real impact of changes to the winter fuel payment on levels of pensioner poverty? The number of over-65s attending A&E increased by nearly 100,000 this winter, despite its being a warmer winter than average. We know that multiple factors have an impact on that number, but this is a very large jump. Again, will Ministers publish official data on the number of hospital admissions they believe to be caused by the winter fuel payment cut and what the cost to the NHS has been?

To conclude, because I am conscious of the time and wish to enable the Minister to respond, this money was genuinely needed by vulnerable people—vulnerable pensioners—this winter. In my Melton and Syston constituency, I get heartrending messages about choices between eating and heating, and we should not forget, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) mentioned, the impact on rural communities reliant on heating oil and having to pay for that in one bulk payment.

Labour Members have an opportunity this evening to send a message to pensioners. Will that message once again be one of ignoring their concerns, with the Government showing they are deaf to them and do not care, or will they take the opportunity to do the right

thing this evening, and back our motion to send the message to their older constituents that they do care and are standing up for them against this cruel and unnecessary cut? This choice, and it is a choice, will tell pensioners in their constituencies exactly where they stand. The Conservatives and other Members on this side of the House are standing up for our pensioners on winter fuel payments. The Conservatives are backing the generation that gave so much to our country. Will Members on the Government Benches have the courage to do the same?

6.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I am pleased to respond to this important debate. This topic affects millions of pensioners up and down our country. It is one we have debated many times in recent months, and it is right that we do so. Many right hon. and hon. Members have made important contributions that I want to acknowledge.

My hon. Friends the Members for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones), for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) and for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), among others, talked about the inheritance that we as a Government faced when we came into office and the difficult decisions that have arisen as a result, and they were right to do so. I particularly commend my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons), who talked about the work he is doing in his community to drive pension credit take-up. I know that Members across the House are doing the same, and I thank them for doing so.

As my hon. Friend the Pensions Minister set out earlier, the decisions we have made have not been easy, but we have made sure that we have protected those pensioners who need support the most. Winter fuel payments will continue to be paid to pensioner households in England and Wales with someone receiving pension credit or certain other income-related benefits. They will continue to be worth £200 for eligible households or £300 for eligible households with someone aged 80 or over. The majority of those payments—over 1 million—were paid before Christmas.

Means-testing the winter fuel payment was a choice we had to make to protect the most vulnerable pensioners, while doing what is necessary to repair the public finances after 14 years of the wrecking ball that is the Conservative party. It is the difficult decisions we have taken that mean this Government are able to provide much-needed additional investment in the NHS, which benefits us all, including pensioners who rely on these services. The Government are working hard to reform the NHS in England through the 10-year health plan to build a health service that is fit for the future.

Wendy Morton: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that, while he may well be putting money into the NHS, which is great, his policy towards pensioners, based on the statistics we have seen, means that more pensioners are going into the NHS and putting more pressure on the service? It just does not make sense.

Andrew Western: I dispute the right hon. Lady's statistics. She is right to highlight that there has been an increase in hospital admissions among over-65s, but that is entirely in line with the statistics for people

entering hospital in other age cohorts. That is actually a result of the collapse of the NHS on the Conservatives' watch, which means that A&E is the only option for so many people.

As I was saying, as a first step at the autumn Budget, the Government announced a £22.6 billion increase in day-to-day health spending in England and a £3.1 billion increase in the capital budget over this year and the next. But we know that even with our long-term efforts to rebuild critical public services, pensioner poverty is a very real concern.

Joe Robertson: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Western: I will make some progress first.

There will always be those who, for whatever reason, have been unable to make sufficient provision for their retirement. The benefit system provides a vital safety net for those on low incomes who need support the most. This, of course, includes help through pension credit, worth on average £4,300 a year and which tops up income, as well as unlocking access to additional support and benefits. We know there are still low-income pensioners who are not claiming pension credit but are eligible to do so and we want everyone to get the support to which they are entitled. That is why, since September, we have been running the biggest ever pension take-up campaign. Around 1.4 million pensioner households receive pension credit, but too many have been missing out. Thanks to our campaign, we have seen 235,000 pension credit applications in the 30 weeks since the end of July last year, an 81% increase on the comparable period in 2023-24. That has led to almost 50,000 extra awards over the same period.

Kirsty Blackman: I wonder if the Minister can ask his friend, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons), to get in touch with me about how he managed to find out where the 5,000 pensioners are that he was able to write to. I have tried to get that information so I can write to pensioners and tell them about pension credit, but it has not been available anywhere. If he could ask his friend to write to me, I would really appreciate it.

Andrew Western: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am sure she is capable of contacting my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield herself, but I recall that he did mention that he was working closely with his local authority. I am sure it has been able to assist in that campaign, which he described as a partnership rather than his own work, to drive take-up in his area.

As detailed earlier by the Pensions Minister, we are directly targeting all pensioners who make a new claim for housing benefit, bringing together the administration of pension credit and housing benefit, and we are introducing new research on the triggers and motivations that encourage people to apply for pension credit, to guide future policymaking.

I echo the Pensions Minister's remarks on the triple lock. It is worth repeating that over 12 million pensioners will benefit from our commitment here. Over this Parliament, up to and including 2029-30, the OBR forecasts that Government spending on the state pension will rise by over £31 billion. And there is lots of other support too, including the warm home discount and the household support fund, available to pensioners.

[Andrew Western]

I will turn now to some of the other specific points raised during today's debate. Several Members raised the delays in pension credit processing. It is important for me to recognise here the sheer volume of applications the Department received during this period. We understand that pensioners expect their applications to be processed quickly and accurately, which is why we deployed over 500 extra staff to process the huge increase. The latest statistics also show a positive picture: outstanding claims have reduced from 85,500 in mid-December to just 33,700 by 23 February, which is in line with the Department's usual number of claims awaiting processing.

Some hon. Members raised the issue of an impact assessment at the time of the policy decision. In line with the requirements of the public sector equality duty, an equality analysis was produced as part of the ministerial decision-making process. That was published on 13 September and placed in the House of Commons Library. It assessed the effects on individuals and households according to protected characteristics set out under the Equality Act 2010. They do not include impacts on the NHS.

Other hon. Members have quoted figures on the poverty impact of the changes to winter fuel payments. I simply note that yes, internal Government modelling was produced as part of routine policy advice. Given the interest from the Work and Pensions Committee and the public interest, the Department published this modelling for transparency in a letter to the Select Committee in November. However, it is essential to note that this modelling is subject to a range of uncertainties, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results, and that it does not take into account any impact of the measures we are taking to increase pension credit take-up and ensure pensioners get the benefits to which they are entitled.

Harriet Cross: My understanding is that the impact assessment showed that about 100,000 pensioners would be put into poverty. I was just wondering what range either side of that figure would be acceptable to the Minister.

Andrew Western: What I would say to the hon. Lady is that I would never want to see those numbers increase, but that number is significantly better than the 300,000 pensioners who went into relative poverty under her Government.

To those asking about Government action with respect to energy costs, I say that the Government recognise that affording energy bills is a struggle for many and that energy debt is rising. The Government have continuous engagement with energy suppliers and have discussed the support they have in place to support vulnerable consumers, including pensioner households. We are continuing to deliver the warm home discount for eligible low-income households and have recently published a consultation on its expansion, which would bring around 2.7 million more households into the scheme, pushing the total number of households receiving the discount next winter up to around 6 million.

I will turn briefly to some of the contributions from Members on the Conservative Benches, and in particular from the shadow Secretary of State for Work and

Pensions, who, interestingly—given the description used by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) of this side of the House—I felt expressed faux outrage at this decision. It is rich from a party that, as I said, pushed 300,000 pensioners into relative poverty, made pitiful efforts to address pension credit take-up, made a 2017 manifesto commitment to means-test the winter fuel payment and let the value of the winter fuel payment fall by around 50% during its time in government.

The shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions went on to make repeated reference to Labour Members' consciences, which was relatively offensive, but nothing compared with being called the “nasty party” by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire. I will not accept those sorts of attacks from the Conservatives—the party of Downing Street parties, the party of the inhumane Rwanda scheme, and the party that drove so many to food banks. My conscience is clear, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is appalling to imagine that theirs is the same after what they did to this country over 14 years.

I listened very carefully to—[*Interruption.*] I am being chuntered at from a sedentary position about the household support fund. I remind the shadow Secretary of State that it was not fully funded by the Conservatives on a multi-year basis, and it is this Government who have provided that certainty to local authorities.

I listened very carefully to the speech from the shadow Health Secretary and, indeed, the more than dozen speeches from Opposition Members, and I am still no clearer on what their policy actually is. We had one Member standing up and saying means-test, another standing up and saying tax the winter fuel payment, but neither shadow Secretary of State present bothered to stand up and tell us what the Conservatives' policy is. If they want to stand up now and say that they would reverse this policy decision, I would be happy to give way to either of them. Feel free. Their silence says it all, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We have made the hard choices necessary to bring the public finances back under control after 14 years of Tory misrule.

Ben Obese-Jecty: At what point would the uptake of pension credit eliminate the savings from cancelling the winter fuel payment? At what number would the uptake overtake that payment?

Andrew Western: We have never suggested that they would, and the Minister for Pensions addressed that in his opening statement. The savings put forward do take account of that. I have to say that, in accepting that intervention, I was hopeful that, finally, one Tory would come forward with an actual policy in this area—I would say that I am disappointed, but it is only to be expected. Pensioner households who need support the most will continue to get winter fuel payments. We are getting more and more people on to pension credit, so that they can get winter fuel payments and increase their weekly income.

This motion calls for an apology. The only people who should be giving an apology to pensioners and to this country are those in the Conservative party, for the mess that they left behind.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 177, Noes 293.

Division No. 138]

[7 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eastwood, Colum
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James (*Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
 Medi, Llinos
 Miller, Calum
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David

Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stone, Jamie
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Trott, rh Laura
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wishart, Pete
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

**James Wild and
 Nick Timothy**

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Becca
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith

Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Giindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermey, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise

Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke

Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth

Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Osamor, Kate
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 Rutland, Tom
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Kate Dearden and
Keir Mather

Question accordingly negated.

Council Tax Reform

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

7.15 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Council Tax is, without doubt, the most unfair, regressive and punitive taxation system in this country. It is hammering towns such as Hartlepool. Places with high deprivation and low wages—the very areas that a fair tax system would support—are instead being squeezed to breaking point by a broken system that must be fixed. A Government that stand up for working people, promise change and have a mandate for that change cannot sit back while such fundamental unfairness continues.

The numbers speak for themselves. For a band A property in Westminster, it is £648 a year. In Hartlepool, it is £1,585. A Band H property in Hartlepool pays nearly £3,000 a year more than one in Westminster.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The hon. Member makes a good point in comparing his constituency with the situation here in London. To continue that point, on top of council tax, there is the settlement funding for councils, of which London boroughs have received roughly twice as much as shire counties. Does the hon. Member agree that that is also a problem with the current council tax regime?

Mr Brash: Certainly, the last 14 years—I note that none of the Conservatives are here—shifted the settlement away from areas of deprivation to more affluent areas. That has had an incredibly punitive effect.

Council tax in Hartlepool represents 9% of median gross pay. Here in Westminster, it is just 2%. Someone can live in a multimillion-pound property in London and still pay less council tax than someone in a terraced house in Hartlepool. It is not right. It is not fair. It must change. An outdated system based on 34-year-old property values can never deliver fairness and has widened regional inequalities.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Sixty-six per cent of Somerset council's budget goes to fund social care. That budget is funded through the taxes raised on property based on prices from 1991, as the hon. Member has set out. Does he agree that that is archaic and unfair, and that we should enact real reform to the way we fund local authorities?

Mr Brash: I absolutely agree and I will come to social care later in my speech, so I will pick up that point then.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I commend the hon. Member for bringing forward the debate? He is getting himself a reputation in this House for being an assiduous constituency worker. I wish him well in continuing to do the good work that we all witness.

Does the hon. Member not agree that with the cost of living crisis, working families—that is what we are talking about here—need to know that every penny of tax is wisely spent? Confidence is clearly at an all-time low. Does he further agree that greater openness and transparency as to the use of tax funds can only be a good thing throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Mr Brash: I absolutely agree. I should first say that it would not be an Adjournment debate without an intervention from the hon. Member. He is absolutely right: we need transparency in the system. One of the biggest problems with council tax is that it has broken the bond of trust between those who pay it and the services that they receive. I will come back to that point later in my speech.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): My hon. Friend and neighbour makes some excellent points about the unfairness of the council tax system. My view is that it cannot be tinkered with and it is fundamentally flawed. For my constituents and my hon. Friend's, it is nothing less than a regressive property tax. In Blackhall in my constituency, someone living in a modest band A home worth £35,000 pays almost the same in council tax as a band H property in Belgravia worth many millions of pounds. That is indefensible. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are serious about tackling growth and improving living standards in constituencies such as mine and his, we need radical reform?

Mr Brash: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The tinkering around the edges that has happened in some parts of the United Kingdom will not get the job done.

My hon. Friend mentioned property prices, and they are at the heart of the unfairness. In Hartlepool, 53% of the properties are in band A. Here in Westminster, that figure is 1.2%. In Hartlepool, only 3.7% of the properties are in bands F to H, yet in Westminster it is almost half of all properties. Such a skewed housing base makes it impossible to raise the money to deliver the services that people need. Furthermore, council tax is not a reliable source of income. Nationally, one in 10 people in the UK have been in council tax debt, and nearly 40% of those individuals have reported being threatened with legal action as a result. Outstanding council tax debt already stands at £6 billion.

This week I spoke to Caroline, a development officer in Hartlepool who supports many of the most vulnerable in our community. She told me of one working family for whom council tax, even with the reduction, is now the equivalent of more than a third of their mortgage payment. Dad works and mum is a full-time carer for their disabled son. They live in fear of not being able to pay. They do not understand where their money goes and they do not feel any benefit, only financial pain. How can we sustain such a system? How can we stand by while it punishes the very people we are supposed to represent?

At the heart of this broken system is social care, as has been mentioned already. Nearly 70% of Hartlepool's budget is spent protecting the most vulnerable children and adults in our town, and that is mirrored in areas of need across the country. No one in their right mind would design a care system funded by a regressive tax levied on small, struggling communities, yet that is exactly what has happened and it has been getting worse. In Hartlepool, officers have made a rough estimate that if social care were removed, a typical band D property would see its bill drop from £2,400 to less than £1,000.

Elsewhere, the scandal in children's social care is slowly bankrupting local authorities. Private providers, often owned by faceless hedge funds, are profiting on the backs of vulnerable children. The costs are staggering.

[Mr Brash]

In Hartlepool, the top four private providers charge an average of £12,000 per child per week. That is £624,000 a year for just one child. For Hartlepool, that is the equivalent of more than a 1% rise in council tax for one child's care. Local councillors face the impossible choice: protect the most vulnerable or impose even more council tax pain on their residents.

The most pernicious thing about this regressive tax is the impact it has on trust. "No taxation without representation" is the saying, but as council tax bills go up, services are cut. Residents are no longer receiving the representation their money is supposed to deliver. Most people, thankfully, do not need social care, but they do need bin collections, clean streets, well-maintained parks, green spaces, museums, leisure centres and libraries—all things that make somewhere a place—yet these are repeatedly cut because of this failed system.

This is breaking the bond between councils and the public, and when people feel they are paying more but getting less, they stop believing in the system. When voters feel ignored and abandoned, they do not stop voting; they will vote for anyone with easy answers. Populist politicians with no real answers will step into this gap and exploit this frustration. I warn Ministers: fix council tax or face the electoral consequences.

There are alternatives. Andrew Dixon and the Fairer Share campaign have advocated for a proportional property tax that would ensure contributions were based on actual property values. Some 70% of households in the north-east would be better off. Nearly a third would save as much as £1,500 a year—money that could help struggling families put food on the table, heat their homes and buy their children the things that they need. Yes, some would lose out, but it would, and should, be the wealthy in our society shouldering that burden. If we are not prepared to make the wealthy pay so the poor can pay less, what exactly are we for?

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) for securing this incredibly important debate, and I agree with every word he says. Does he agree that a reformed system would reduce the cost of living for ordinary people and, depending on how the Government wanted to reform it, actually increase revenues for the Government to spend on better public services?

Mr Brash: Absolutely. A properly balanced system could provide the services we need and put more money into the pot to ensure those services are delivered. That is partly the problem with this system: it is so broken that it punishes people in deprived areas, and it still does not deliver those services.

I know Ministers have said they are not looking to reform the council tax system in this Parliament, but even if an overhaul of the entire system is not possible, there are still ways to improve things, and I hope the Minister will advocate for them. The Casey review of social care should recommend taking social care out of local authorities. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, by promoting regional co-operation, can create economies of scale to take the burden off council taxpayers. Under the English devolution proposals, financial devolution must be part of the discussion. If we are to

have larger authorities that are more remote from the taxpayer, the residents must see the benefit in their pockets.

This Government promised change and to fix the foundations, but the public's most direct contact with government is through local councils, whose foundations are crumbling. If Ministers ignore council tax reform, they do so at their peril. We can fix a broken system, ease the burden on working families, and restore trust in government at all levels. We have a moral duty to right a 34-year-old wrong, find a sustainable solution to this injustice, cut council tax bills and deliver real change for the people we represent.

7.26 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) on securing the debate. He is absolutely right that the system is outdated, regressive and in desperate need of change, and our region is disproportionately impacted.

My constituency is split between two local authorities: Middlesbrough to the west, and Redcar and Cleveland to the east. They are two distinct areas with their own local challenges, but they face similar issues when it comes to council tax. Loftus in Redcar and Cleveland will have a band D council tax rate of more than £2,500 for the next financial year. That means a multimillion-pound property in East Sussex can attract a lower council tax bill than the average family home in our region. That cannot be fair. In fact, owner-occupiers in our region can expect to pay a percentage of their property value that is 2.5 times higher than the average London resident. That is another example of an unfair system based on three decade-old valuations, hammering local residents in areas of high deprivation.

Over 50% of dwellings in Middlesbrough are designated as band A—a much higher percentage than other local authorities—forcing Middlesbrough council to have the 19th highest council tax rate in the country. One way in which that could be helped is if Valuation Office Agency powers were devolved further to local authorities to allow them to more rigorously assess whether a property is incorrectly banded. That measure would just be tinkering around the edges of a system that needs fundamental reform.

As my hon. Friend said, one solution would be to replace the current system with a proportional property tax, removing the antiquated 1991 bandings and instead asking residents to pay a percentage of their up-to-date property value every year. That would create a more progressive system, preventing those in lower-value homes from paying disproportionately higher rates, while ensuring that wealthier property owners elsewhere in the country contribute a fairer share.

As the Institute for Public Policy Research has set out, another method to address the issue would be further increasing council tax premiums on empty and second homes. As my hon. Friend has noted, reforming the children's social care market, which has been described as "broken" by the Competition and Markets Authority, would go some way to repairing local government finances and delivering value for taxpayers.

The choice is clear: either we keep patching up a system that punishes regions like ours, or we build one that is fair, proportional and fit for the 21st century. Teesside cannot afford to wait another 30 years.

7.29 pm

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) on securing this Adjournment debate on the important issue of council tax. I am grateful for the work and research that he and the all-party group have put into their argument for council tax reform.

The Government take seriously the issue of how councils are funded, and the impact on local taxpayers. Council tax is an important part of the funding that councils require to deliver a range of over 800 vital services. For 2024-25, council tax makes up over half of councils' core spending power. Individual councils are responsible for setting their own level of council tax, taking into account their local circumstances. Indeed, council tax is the balancing item in the local council budget.

As my hon. Friend will know, the ability to raise revenue from council tax is determined by the number of domestic properties within a local authority area, and by the value of those properties in 1991. That means that places with a high number of more valuable properties are often able to raise more than an area with lower-value properties, despite setting the same or commonly a lower level of council tax. However, as he said, the Government have ruled out a revaluation of council tax in this Parliament. That means that we must find other ways to address the discrepancies in tax-raising ability through other means.

The last Conservative Government committed to improving and updating the way in which councils are funded, through the fair funding review, but that work was not delivered. We will make good on that commitment and implement long-awaited funding reforms through a multi-year settlement in 2026-27—the first in over a decade. We have recently consulted on the proposed objectives and principles for local government funding reform. In that consultation, we propose to update the way we account for council tax in determining local authority funding allocations, so that future allocations more effectively account for the differing ability to raise council tax income across the country.

As my hon. Friend has pointed out, that means that somewhere like Hartlepool, where the tax base is weaker because of the high number of homes in bands A to C, will not be treated the same as an authority in the south-east that has a high number of homes in bands E to H and therefore has greater council tax revenue-raising power. That will be part of a wider set of changes to improve the approach to funding allocations within the local government finance settlement by ensuring that they reflect an up-to-date assessment of need and, importantly, local resources. Those funding reforms are part of a comprehensive set of reforms for public services to fix the foundations of local government. That will be done in partnership with the sector and on the principle of giving forward notice and certainty to allow time for councils to plan for the future.

Although the Government recognise the arguments in favour of council tax revaluation and reform, there are currently no plans to reform council tax in this Parliament, as I have said. Significant changes to local government structures, governance, accountability, audit, standards and financing are taking place alongside an

ambitious programme of devolution and, of course, local government reorganisation. I say that because we cannot overstate the amount of change taking place in a very short time within a system that has been left quite fragile, as my hon. Friend will know, after 14 years of mismanagement by the previous Government.

Sarah Dyke: Somerset council is in the position of having to raise council tax this year, but a recent external assurance review reported that a significant proportion of the council's budget shortfall was attributable to decisions taken by the previous Conservative Administration, who recklessly froze council tax for a record six-year period. In the light of the pressures on councils across the country, will the Minister commit to giving us a timetable for reform so that councils can plan well ahead and deliver essential services?

Jim McMahon: That is an important point. In a sense, we can draw up a fairer and more balanced system, and build more security into it. What a system can never do is accommodate every localised decision and how it presents. In the end, there has to be local checks and balances, and that must come through the ballot box. It sounds as if voters in the hon. Member's area have cast that judgment.

We are committed to reform and to moving at pace, but we recognise in doing that that the system is fragile. We are undertaking reform of the business rates system and revaluation, and a lot of devolution deals will come forward where intricately settled settlements are being worked towards, which will be important. All that, of course, rests on local government being strong and stable enough to support it. We completely recognise all the issues around adult social care, children's services and temporary accommodation, which mean that councils are being overwhelmed. There is £69 billion available through the funding allocation this year, £5 billion of which is new money, and for the first time ever there is £600 million through the recovery grant, which is about bridging to the multi-year settlement. We have recognised the urgency and depth of the crisis that many councils find themselves in, but we are also honest in saying that it will take more than seven months to repair 14 years of harm. We are getting on with the job, and we are determined to get it right.

Richard Foord: Shire counties have had their settlement funding cut from more than £300 per person in 2015 to less than £200 per person now. Does the Minister recognise that counties such as Devon have huge road networks to maintain, and that that difference in funding helps to explain why roads in Devon are falling apart?

Jim McMahon: I think that after the last 14 years, roads in quite a lot of England are falling apart. That is why we injected another £500 million into pothole repairs this year, because we know that local people feel that issue acutely. We also recognise, as I said before, that this will take longer than seven months.

On financing, we are clear that the current formula needs to be reviewed. It is not good enough any more to keep on having a formula that is not fit for purpose, and which is supplemented by top-ups that change depending on the whim of the Government of the day. If this is a genuinely fair funding formula, it must be fair when tested.

[Jim McMahon]

That means that wherever someone is in the country, and whatever their local circumstance, they know that those issues have been taken into account. Some of that will involve deprivation or the ability to raise tax at a local level, but some of it will involve demand on services, including rurality. We must ensure that in the review we rebuilt trust and confidence as well as sustainability, and the hon. Gentleman has my commitment that we are determined to ensure that that work is done with integrity.

We recognise the urgency to fix the foundations, and to tackle the underlying issues that we have talked about. For all the criticisms of the current council tax system—many of which are completely legitimate—it has some advantages. First, it is a settled tax that taxpayers understand, and notwithstanding the uncollected element that was mentioned earlier, pound for pound it has a high collection rate. On that basis, revenues are relatively predictable, which means that local authorities have greater certainty for their financial planning. Council tax is genuinely local. The money is collected locally, retained locally, and authorities will make decisions on the band D level based on their local requirements and delivery priorities.

Grahame Morris: Reforming council tax is an enormous problem and I do not underestimate the scale of the task, but does the Minister recognise that council tax is even more regressive than the poll tax it replaced? The system particularly affects my constituency, Hartlepool and the north-east, and other regions as well, where people are paying a premium for living in the poorest communities with the fewest services and facilities. Does he accept that council tax is widening inequalities in our country?

Jim McMahon: I accept that there are inherent issues with council tax, not least the way that the banding system works. Because of the inherent land and property values in less affluent places, people in a lower-band property in a poorer part of the country will pay more for public services than those in more affluent properties elsewhere. Those more affluent places can collect sufficient amounts to fund local public services, where other areas clearly cannot do that. The situation has been made significantly worse by a Government who removed that central support over a decade, so council tax is taking on a significant burden of the weight of local public services. We are keen to address that imbalance through the funding review that we are undertaking.

Members will know that local authorities have control over the discretionary working age council tax support scheme, and the council tax system also includes a range of discounts and exemptions to reflect the personal characteristics of occupiers and to support those less able to pay. These include the single-person discount, exemption for student and disregards for carers, the mentally impaired—a term I would not choose to use, but that is the term used in legislation—and apprentices. The Government will consult on the administration of council tax later this year and consider the case for modernising support in the system for those who need it.

However, I recognise the challenges that council tax creates for some taxpayers and local authorities. I therefore want to reaffirm that this Government are keen to continue working with my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool and his APPG to understand the issues in the council tax system and what options for reform are available to us.

Question put and agreed to.

7.40 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 March 2025

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

Transport Connectivity: North-west England

9.30 am

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered improving transport connectivity in the North West.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I am delighted to see so many Members here today. The issue at hand affects many constituencies in the north-west, including mine. Leigh and Atherton, once a beacon of industrial activity, lies between the great cities of Manchester and Liverpool. With our main source of industry gone, we are now part of a commuter belt, alongside constituencies such as those in St Helens, Warrington, Wigan and Salford. Our road networks, originally designed around mills and factories, now struggle to cope with the ever increasing volume of traffic, and I know the same is true in our neighbouring regions of Merseyside, Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria.

A lack of connectivity in one place affects another. Congestion that starts in Leigh does not just disappear when crossing a border; it blocks the roads of our nearest neighbours. The rush-hour struggle to connect to our motorway or city networks means that the A580 East Lincs Road is a source of constant annoyance for many. When my constituents are asked about public transport, they say that, without a rail or Metrolink connection in the centre of Leigh, buses are stuck in the same traffic—it is all part of the increasing frustration.

The lack of efficient transport links is a key barrier to growth. Leigh ranks in the top 1% of the country for transport-related social exclusion, meaning that people are unable to participate in routine, everyday activities because of a lack of viable travel options. A 2024 Transport for the North report highlighted that people in the north-west with access to a car can reach nearly six times as many jobs as those who rely on public transport. Poor connectivity, limited infrastructure and an overreliance on cars leads to high levels of social isolation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for securing a debate on this important issue, and I welcome her back to the House and wish her well. She is outlining the issues in the north-west. Does she agree that social isolation in rural areas in particular is exacerbated by infrequent, costly public transport, and if we in this United Kingdom are serious about addressing mental health concerns in our rural communities, we need to bring them out of isolation, physically as well as mentally?

Jo Platt: Yes, I do agree, particularly for those who are vulnerable due to age, poverty or disability, as this will have a hugely negative impact on their life chances.

This stark disparity underlines the need for better transport systems and new road networks—ones that boost economic productivity and ensure fairness and opportunity for all. Without the necessary infrastructure, these benefits will remain out of reach for far too many. The narrative often goes that people must leave to succeed, and I am determined to change that story.

We are a proud community, but we are often overlooked when it comes to investment. Growth goes where the growth already is, which stifles the potential for outside business investment and growth for existing businesses. Despite the many positives that Leigh and Atherton has to offer, we still see many young people with great potential leaving to seek opportunities elsewhere.

It can take over an hour and 40 minutes to travel the 18 miles from Leigh to Manchester airport by public transport, while a car journey takes only 30 minutes, if we are lucky—that is not in rush hour. This huge difference cannot be overlooked, especially given the economic and employment opportunities offered by Manchester airport, which provides thousands of jobs to the region. Many of my constituents are missing out on those opportunities due to poor transport links, or have no other option than to use their cars, which obviously does not help with emissions.

It is not just a matter of growth and job opportunities either. After speaking to our borough-wide police force, I discovered that response times in the Wigan borough are slower than in other Greater Manchester areas, and this is due to congestion. Our local health trust, operating sites in Wigan and Leigh, routinely factors in an hour's travel time for consultants and staff moving between sites—it all adds up.

This is an injustice we must rectify. I am grateful to Wigan council for recognising the issue and its commitment to improving the situation. That aligns with the Government's broader ambitions on education, skills, growth and revitalisation. Ideas for strengthening our higher education offer are met with questions about how students from the wider region will get there. And when Manchester United's women's team play at home, the challenge is how to get fans to the game at the wonderful Leigh sports village.

We have an issue, and we need more train and Metrolink routes in our region. Specifically, it is time to make the case for a Metrolink connection to Leigh. For our wider region, we need improved train frequency, better station accessibility, increased capacity at station car parks, and expanded park and ride facilities for key transport routes. I am sure other hon. Members will speak on those matters.

It is not all doom and gloom. The Mayor of Greater Manchester has done much to improve connectivity across the city region, including Leigh's famous guided busway: the V1 in Leigh and the V2 in Atherton. Those services have been incredibly successful, with usage exceeding expectations. With the commitment of a £2 bus fare cap, people are using our Bee network more than ever. The next step is to fully integrate towns like Leigh into Greater Manchester's transport system, making it easier for people to travel seamlessly across the region and unlocking the growth potential of the north-west.

The 2024 boundary changes brought two train stations into my constituency—Atherton and Hag Fold—which is a positive step forward. In addition, the Government's

[Jo Platt]

recent announcement of the reopening of Golborne station brings much-needed investment into the area. I thank Andy Burnham—the Mayor of Greater Manchester—Transport for Greater Manchester, Wigan council and our local councillors for their continued work to make that campaign a reality.

I am also thrilled by the Government's recent announcement that Leigh is one of the 75 places eligible for the plan for neighbourhoods, benefiting from £20 million-worth of funding over the next 10 years. With that funding, we have an opportunity to build on our strengths and unlock the potential of our high street. However, it is important to note that Leigh remains one of the largest towns in the country without a metro or train connection. This clear gap in our infrastructure must be addressed.

We must focus on linking not just Greater Manchester but Merseyside, Lancashire, Cheshire and Cumbria, and all the towns in between, including in my constituency. Those often overlooked towns, rural or coastal, are vital to the region's growth and success. A strategic cross-boundary approach is essential if we are to grow a region that benefits everyone.

Will the Minister support us in that approach? Will he work with me to make the case for Metrolink in Leigh, as part of a connected transport system that benefits not only Leigh but my nearest neighbours? It is vital to focus on a strategic approach to managing connectivity in the north-west, connecting those areas to growth. Only then can we all thrive and fully participate in the region's growth and prosperity.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): A lot of Members want to speak, and I want to accommodate everybody. The Opposition spokespeople have agreed to five minutes each, but the Minister will take the full 10 minutes. That will give everybody else four minutes.

9.39 am

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) on securing a debate on this important topic for our constituents. Transport connectivity is about economic growth and opening up the world so that our constituents can make choices about their lives that allow them to fulfil their potential.

Reliable, affordable and accessible public transport is not just a convenience; it is an essential pillar of our economy, our communities and our future. Yet for too long the north-west has suffered from under-investment, unreliable rail services and disconnected transport networks that leave too many of our constituents struggling to get to work, school or essential services. That is why I am asking the Government for three things today. First, we need more frequent and reliable rail services with simple, affordable fares that encourage people back on to our trains. Secondly, I urge the Government to work with Stockport council and the Greater Manchester combined authority to bring Metrolink or tram-trains to my constituency. Thirdly, the Government need to make public transport the default for my constituents by expanding current bus and rail connections.

Many in my community and in the surrounding areas of Greater Manchester and beyond will remember the absolute chaos towards the end of last year when, almost every day, commuters on Northern-operated trains saw swathes of red cancellation notices. I received dozens of emails from constituents talking about how they could not rely on the trains to get to work or to pick up their children from school. Some even told me that they had to reject job offers because the trains were just too unreliable.

Since the pandemic, constituents commuting on the Rose Hill to Manchester Piccadilly line have faced an irregular timetable, and passenger numbers across the north-west have struggled to recover to pre-pandemic levels. I welcome the plan to integrate our trains, trams and buses, and I look forward to the streamlining of ticketing this will offer. However, it would be remiss of me not to mention that Metrolink does not yet extend into any part of Stockport. Our brilliant new interchange is Metrolink-ready, but we have no indication of when Metrolink will be ready for Stockport. We have even less idea of whether Metrolink or tram-trains will eventually reach into the towns and villages of my constituency.

Many of my residents have to rely on buses to get where they want to go, and some of those buses are not operated by the Bee network because we are right on the edge of Greater Manchester. We need more frequent bus services that link to our rail services, but the ridiculous traffic levels on the roads in my constituency will prevent them from reaching their potential. Whether it is the A6 or Stockport Road, journeys that normally take 20 minutes can take over an hour in the morning and evening rush hours. Public transport is the obvious solution. We should make it easier for those who can take the tram or the train so that the roads are freed up for those who cannot. Trams and trains offer commuters the ability to bypass rush hour congestion in a way that buses cannot.

Transport for Greater Manchester has an ambition to restore regular passenger rail services on the Stockport to Stalybridge line. This provides a unique opportunity to reduce rush hour journey times significantly for commuters heading to Stockport from my constituency. The rail line from Bredbury to Piccadilly crosses over the Stockport to Stalybridge line near Reddish Vale. I encourage the Department for Transport and TfGM to explore the possibility of linking those two lines, whether in the form of a new interchange station or a chord linking the two. The message from my constituents is clear: they need public transport that works for them. That means a railway system that people can rely on, bus routes that connect communities rather than isolate them, and investment in new transport links that drive economic growth.

9.43 am

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey. In the few minutes available to me, I would like to put transport in the north-west into perspective. I would not like anything I say to be taken as a criticism of the mayor or of Transport for Greater Manchester. The Bee network, which is an excellent scheme, has put Greater Manchester to the situation London has had for the last 45 years, which we see as progress.

As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) has just said, investment in transport is vital for economic growth. However, when we look at the national objectives, and as we have seen forever—since the second world war—more money is going into London and the south-east than the north-west. For all of Transport for Greater Manchester's successes, it has had to fight the Department for Transport to get extra investment for Metrolink and fight Labour and Conservative Ministers to get money for investment.

There is great potential in the north-west. In fact, we would get more out of investment in transport links in the north-west than the south-east, because of what we are, in effect, doing when we invest in London and the south-east. All transport investment creates jobs and growth, but in London and the south-east we are then, in effect, subsidising congestion, because we get so much congestion that we need more investment afterwards. That is not the situation in Greater Manchester and the north-west. I am not against the Lower Thames crossing, but three quarters of a billion pounds has already been spent on assessing whether it will be any use whatever, and that money would benefit transport in Greater Manchester, and jobs and investment for the whole country, much more than it will the Lower Thames area.

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

We have suffered, in that we are not getting High Speed 2 at the moment. I think the campaign to get the rail link from Birmingham to Manchester and Manchester airport should continue. It is extraordinary to see the billions of pounds that have been spent on high-speed rail from London to Birmingham, mainly on tunnels.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the benefits of HS2 have been masked by the name High Speed 2 and that one of the main benefits of HS2 is actually capacity, which we desperately need on the railways?

Graham Stringer: My hon. Friend is precisely right: the real case for High Speed 2, as I am afraid it will always be called, was capacity. We are not getting that extra capacity between Birmingham and Manchester without HS2. If that capacity were to happen—it should happen—it would lead to the necessity of extra investment in the rail system east, west and internally within Greater Manchester. It would lead to more investment, so we need to campaign for it. All we have at the moment is an extension to the London underground system, which will benefit London and Birmingham.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove mentioned the Metrolink going to Stockport, and I agree with her. For the first time for nearly a quarter of a century, we do not have viable plans that we know will happen, and we may have to carry on fighting Ministers and the Department for Transport for the next stage. Obviously, I would like trams to go to Middleton, as I represent part of it, but I agree that trams going to Stockport and other parts of the conurbation—perhaps Leigh as well—would mean transport and economic development. So I think we have to keep campaigning and making the case that bucks spent on transport in Greater Manchester will get us more than money spent in London and the south-east.

9.49 am

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing this important debate.

My constituency is semi-urban and semi-rural. Without good public transport, my constituents cannot get around, and the visitors we so enjoy having in our area cannot get in. A lot of people in my community struggle with access to services such as GPs and hospital appointments and with getting to work. That creates more pressure on services such as patient transport services and GP home visits. It also affects the nature of my constituency, in that we have an ageing population, with fewer young families able to move in. My rural businesses and organisations that represent them, such as the Sedbergh Economic Partnership, also tell me that transport connectivity in rural areas is a massive bar to growth, because businesses cannot get the staff they need to expand.

Sedbergh itself is struggling at the minute. There has been a bus service change, so the service is now less accessible and frequent. At my suggestion, Sedbergh set up a bus users' group—I am a big fan of buses and bus users' groups. In Lancashire we have a fantastic bus users' group, the Lancaster Bus Users' Group, of which I am a proud member.

I thank the Government for their investment in bus services—£27 million in Lancashire and £4.2 million in Westmorland and Furness. I hope to see my local authorities take on the new powers that the Government will give them, so that we ensure we have rural bus services that serve my constituents, work together, fit together and fit in with people's lives.

I am also a big fan of trains. My constituency has the highest main line train station in England, in Dent. It is beautiful, although it is not actually in Dent village, which causes some confusion. We have some other fantastic stations, such as Garsdale, which is also beautiful, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) will know, and Arnside. However, we have real problems with accessibility, so older people and people with disabilities cannot get the train—when the train turns up. Because these are not areas with huge populations, they struggle to access grant services, such as the Access for All fund. There is real inequity in how some of the funds for station improvements are allocated.

Finally, I want to talk a little about active travel, which is important. Active travel means moving ourselves around, whether by wheeling in a wheelchair, cycling on a bike or walking. It is good for our health, and spending more time in London, with its fantastic public transport service, I have walked a lot more. I have actually lost weight since the election—I think that is unheard of—because I am walking so much. That shows the health benefits of an integrated public transport system and proper transport connectivity.

I want to highlight a visionary project in my constituency, the Lune Valley Greenway, which is a path that people can walk, wheel or cycle on from the coast at Morecambe right into the Yorkshire Dales national park. It currently goes from Morecambe, via Lancaster, up to Bull Beck near Caton. The ambition is for it not only to go from the coast to the national park, but to link up with public transport systems, so that people visiting our area, as

[Lizzi Collinge]

well as people living and working in my constituency, can access the countryside and good public transport. I would love to invite the Minister to visit.

9.53 am

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing the debate.

I will lay out my case in simple terms: north-west public transport is not up to scratch. Specifically, our railway journeys are nowhere near good enough. They are holding our region's economy back, and we need change. Take my constituency, for instance: there is no direct public transport link from one side of the constituency to the other, despite it being overwhelmingly urban. Try to take public transport from Birkdale to Rufford—a journey of 10 miles—and a single ticket will cost £21, while the journey will take one hour and 11 minutes and involve changing trains three times. It is literally 10 miles away; it would almost be quicker to walk.

Even the rail services that we do have are incredibly unreliable. Just this morning, at 6.47 am, Merseyrail sent out a message on social media saying:

“Due to a train fault, some services on the Southport line face cancellations”.

The first reply said:

“Another day, another train fault”.

The second reply blamed the politicians.

The service to Manchester is even worse: in November, there were no services at all on Sundays for three weeks in a row, and more than a quarter of all journeys were either delayed or cancelled. When the trains do turn up, passengers are greeted with what the chief exec of Northern Rail has called

“some of the worst-performing rolling stock in the country.”

That cannot be allowed to continue.

The constituency's connectivity has also been directly impacted by the well-known 1960s cuts to railway services. The closure of two simple railway curves in Burscough, just outside of constituency, means that the seven-mile journey from Ormskirk to Southport takes 85 minutes by train, and that the notional 20-mile journey to Preston involves passengers changing at Wigan, which is itself 20 miles out of the way. We are lucky, though, because unlike in other parts of the country, the railway curves at Burscough were never built over—they are still there, just overgrown and unloved. It would cost an estimated £30 million to reinstate them, which would once again connect the towns of Merseyside and west Lancashire, and strengthen travel-to-work routes, promoting the economic growth we all want so desperately.

It is not all bad. The Liverpool city region combined authority is maintaining the £2 bus fare cap, including in Southport, and we are moving forward with trials of bus franchising across the region. Despite problems, Merseyrail still received the second highest overall customer satisfaction levels nationally in the latest surveys. And although there is perhaps an element of empire-building, I welcome the fact that our line to Manchester is set to be brought into the Greater Manchester Bee network in 2028, which will finally allow a tap-in, tap-out ticketing system, integrating with Manchester's.

Those positives point the way forward, as more devolution on transport and greater statutory powers for the coming Lancashire combined county authority ensure that the rest of the north-west is linked up, in the way my constituency already is.

9.57 am

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): It is a pleasure, albeit slightly unexpected, to serve under your chairship this morning, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing this important and clearly popular debate.

I will focus my remarks on the rail network. In Pendle and Clitheroe, slow and unreliable rail services, along with disjointed connections, cause daily frustrations for my constituents. Those issues create barriers to work, education and healthcare, and ultimately hold our local economy back.

In my constituency we have two rail routes. The Colne to Preston line operates just one train per hour, taking an hour and 15 minutes to cover only 25 miles. The Clitheroe to Manchester line is no better—again, with just one train per hour, and taking an hour and 20 minutes to travel just 30 miles. If a train is cancelled in the south-east of England, there is often another coming in 10 or 15 minutes, whereas if one train is cancelled in an hourly service, the whole day is ruined.

Those routes are not fit for purpose; we all know that that level of service would not be tolerated on routes going into London. If we want to unlock the potential of our towns, we need investment in order to increase frequency, cut journey times and improve service reliability. Would it be so impossible to have two trains per hour on those routes and speed them up? Would more rolling stock be required? Yes. Would more staff be required? Yes. But can it be done with the right political will? Of course it can. The economic benefits would be profound.

Right now, the connection times do not even make sense. If someone took that slow train from Colne to Preston this morning, hoping to travel south to the capital city, they would wait nearly an hour at Preston for the next train. For public transport to be a viable alternative to car travel, services and timetables must be co-ordinated and designed around the needs of passengers, which currently is simply not the case.

In the longer term, reinstating the Colne to Skipton rail link would be a game changer for east-west travel and our local economy. Reopening the 11-mile stretch, the track bed of which has been protected—that was a theme of my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley)—would open up huge opportunities for jobs and businesses. The project would dramatically improve economic prospects for deprived areas across east Lancashire, well beyond my constituency, and I will continue to campaign for its reinstatement.

Regional inequality in our country is stark, and nowhere is that more obvious than in public transport. Time and again, we have seen rail projects prioritised in the south-east while towns across the north are left waiting for long-overdue upgrades. I know that the Government understand the issue, but I urge them to be bold, act now and commit to delivering a transport system that truly works for the north-west.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): It would be good if other contributions could be similarly brief, to allow as many colleagues as possible to speak.

10 am

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) on securing this debate; it is clearly very popular. I refer to the Register of Members' Financial Interests in relation to my trade union memberships, particularly donations from the RMT to my constituency Labour party.

I will add to the points made by several colleagues on extending the Metrolink tram network. I would like to see it extended into Hazel Grove, as my neighbour the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) said. I would also like to see it extended into Stockport town centre. I understand that the Greater Manchester combined authority and Stockport council are developing a strategic outline business case, which should be completed by autumn this year. I want to see the work start as soon as possible, and I would welcome a meeting with the Minister as soon as possible, perhaps with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, to discuss that.

I have limited time, but I have a couple of points to make. The first is on Stockport railway station, which recorded almost 3.8 million entries and exits in the last reporting period. It is a major hub for Greater Manchester and the north-west region. I am aware that several of my colleagues from Greater Manchester travel to Stockport on a Monday to take the train to London, because it is easier, and several local services often have poor connectivity. However, unfortunately the station is in a dire state. The roof leaks often, the toilets are outdated and the lifts are frequently faulty, which particularly disadvantages passengers with mobility issues or heavy luggage. I want to see real investment in Stockport station. I know that Network Rail and Avanti are doing some work, but we need to be bold about investing. Avanti employs about 48 staff at Stockport station. I know almost all of them, if not all, and many share my concerns about the state of the station. I am grateful to all of them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) made a point about step-free access at railway stations. The Access for All scheme is just far too slow and not ambitious enough. Sadly, three out of five rail stations in my constituency—Brinnington, Heaton Chapel and Reddish South—do not have step-free access. I want to see that addressed as soon as possible. I also want to use this valuable time to pay tribute to Nathaniel Yates from my constituency. He has done a lot of work on step-free access. He is a champion for public transport, and I want to place on the record my thanks to him for his work, not just in Stockport but across Greater Manchester.

Reddish South station in my constituency has a train service once a week. Every Saturday morning, a train arrives and goes into Stockport. A few minutes later, that same train comes from Stockport via Reddish South. In the last reporting period, Reddish South recorded 80 passengers in an entire year. Friends of Reddish South Station is quite active on that issue; I meet its members frequently. I pay tribute to all their work, but we need to address the situation. The increase in housing around Reddish South and the changes in

Reddish over the years mean that we need proper services to that station, to improve connectivity into not only Stockport town centre, but Manchester and other parts of the north-west.

My last point is that before covid, we used to have a direct service from Stockport station into Manchester airport. That service was withdrawn during the pandemic and sadly has not returned. Passengers often have to go into Manchester Piccadilly and then wait to change trains. Many who travel to Manchester airport have heavy luggage, so it is not an ideal situation. We need to see that service reinstated as soon as possible.

I like to end on a positive point: I welcome bus franchising. Mayor Burnham has done a lot of good work. There is obviously a lot more to do on public transport, but I am grateful to colleagues at Transport for Greater Manchester—particularly Ben, whom I am always asking for information—and colleagues at Network Rail.

10.4 am

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing and so ably leading this debate. Mid Cheshire's towns play an important role in our nation's economy as one of only two sources of rock salt, as well as chemical, pharmaceutical and plastics manufacturing. Yet when I speak to businesses—or indeed anyone—they tell me that poor transport infrastructure is one of the biggest issues holding back businesses, jobs and investments in Northwich, Winsford and Middlewich.

That is far from a new phenomenon; the Middlewich eastern bypass project has been the subject of local campaigns for more than 40 years, and was shamefully kicked into the long grass by the previous Government, despite earlier promises to fund it. Campaigns for better sustainable transport, such as more frequent rail services from Northwich and Winsford, a station for Middlewich—I sympathise with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton, as Middlewich is the largest town in Cheshire without a railway station—or a functioning bus service anywhere in the constituency, have hit barriers to progress. While I would love to use my time to ask the Minister to look kindly upon any or all of those projects, the issue is deeper than any one single project—although he is of course welcome to intervene.

We can and must fix the foundations of our economy, but we must also tackle the structures that systemically disadvantage our region—particularly areas outside the big cities—in the allocation of infrastructure investment. On that, I will limit myself to one point, which is fundamental to this debate. The Green Book, developed by the Treasury, is the Government's primary guidance for evaluating and appraising public sector projects on value for money, but it utterly fails to adjust for regional disparities. The reality is that, as of right now, salaries are higher and high-value sectors are more likely to be located in London and the south-east than they are in the north-west.

On a like-for-like basis, it will always be easier to demonstrate a higher return on investment from a project here in London than it will be in my constituency. That is a problem. It is a problem because it undervalues the

[Andrew Cooper]

benefit of economic regeneration or better social cohesion, and it underprices the exacerbating effect that it has on London's housing crisis, the pressure on its public services and the benefit that will be brought by distributing growth across the country. IPPR North estimated in 2020 that, on transport alone, if the north had seen the same per-person investment as London over the last decade, it would have received £66 billion more. The Chancellor has announced a review of the Green Book; I urge the Minister to exercise whatever influence he has to ensure that this moment is seized to finally fix this issue, which has been a barrier to growth for so long.

Our region, from our big cities to our small towns and from our industrial powerhouses to our rural hinterland, is ambitious for our future. We are hungry to play our part in our country's economic recovery. We are impatient for the Government to see our potential after so many years of undelivered promises. This Government finally have us facing in the right direction on valuing and investing in our bus network, and on ensuring that railways deliver for passengers, not shareholders. They are progressing devolution in Cheshire and Lancashire that will finally give us the powers we need to set our own transport investment priorities. I hope that the comprehensive spending review and the Green Book review are opportunities to go further—not just to talk about handing power and money to the regions, but to set the rules to ensure that it happens.

10.8 am

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing this important debate. Good transport links are a vital component of any economy that aspires to achieve economic growth and good opportunities for its citizens. There is simply no point in having a job for every person if those people cannot physically get to where those jobs are.

In the time that I have, I will focus my remarks on rail. If Heathrow is a hub for aviation in the south, from which investment and growth ripple outwards, Crewe station is that hub for rail in the north. Crewe provides 360° connectivity to all major cities across the UK, and that unrivalled connectivity makes it a vital hub for both passenger and freight rail. It is uniquely positioned as a gateway to the midlands engine, the northern powerhouse, Scotland and Wales. However, the west coast main line, a vital artery for our region, has been grappling with significant capacity challenges. Reports have shown that

“There is no available capacity without significantly impacting performance and causing a reduction in timetable resilience”—

something that I believe every Member in this place experiences, perhaps weekly. That leaves little room for additional services, causing frequent delays. The impact of lack of capacity on rail services affects every single one of our constituencies, and the capacity for economic growth that that additional capacity could unlock cannot be understated.

We simply require new infrastructure in our region to tackle that problem. The Conservative Government's approach to infrastructure was nothing short of Jekyll

and Hyde, with communities and industries not knowing whether they were coming or going. We saw a stop-start approach to major projects, with promises made and then broken, dither and delay and a lack of active oversight, which saw costs spiral. The management of and the decision to cancel HS2 phase 2a is a prime example of that. The cancellation has not only undermined the promise of greater connectivity for northern towns and cities, but has left a gaping hole in our region's economic growth prospects.

Ahead of the comprehensive spending review, Ministers are looking carefully at the situation the Government have inherited. It would be remiss of me not to once again ask the Government whether they would consider how new infrastructure connecting the midlands and the north of England, utilising Crewe station, with the right investment, could be a key driver for connectivity and growth in any plans to address the capacity challenges that I have outlined.

It is absolutely clear to me that better connectivity between our towns and villages and major cities in the north can be a major lever in our efforts to create those opportunities that our people need and deserve to fulfil their potential, and that is what people elected a Labour Government to do.

10.12 am

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing this debate on a topic that is popular in our region—as is clear from attendance this morning. For decades we have suffered cuts to bus routes, unreliable train services and fragmented transport planning. Economic growth has not been the only thing impacted. Social isolation has worsened and the changes have impacted vulnerable groups who rely on public transport—especially, in places like St Helens, on buses. I am pleased that the last two issues have already been mentioned, as they are sometimes overlooked.

Eighty-two per cent of all public transport journeys in the Liverpool city region are made by bus, but our region, including St Helens North, has been hit hard by the national decline in bus services. Since 2020, we have lost 15 routes. Much of St Helens North is rural; the cuts have left many areas, such as Rainford, reliant on infrequent, heavily subsidised services. Across the entire Liverpool city region, a staggering 6 million service miles have been withdrawn since 2018, directly impacting our residents. For 40 years, since Thatcher's failed deregulation experiment, we have suffered a system in which private operators dictate routes based on profit rather than public need.

As the leader of St Helens borough council before becoming an MP, I was a member of the Liverpool city region combined authority, and strongly supported the pursuance of bus franchising, bringing our buses back under greater public control. I am delighted to say that, thanks to metro Mayor Steve Rotherham and other local leaders, including St Helens borough council leader Anthony Burns, St Helens will, from September 2026, be the first area in the Liverpool city region to benefit from publicly controlled bus services. That means that routes, fares and timetables will be set by the combined authority, not dictated by private companies: passengers first, not profit.

The story is similar when it comes to our rail network, with delays and cancellations plaguing too many people who are reliant on trains to travel for work or leisure. The state of some of our stations is not good enough either, particularly when it comes to accessibility. In 2025, it is surely not too much to expect that every station should be fully accessible to all passengers. It is a scandal that stations including Garswood and Earlestown in St Helens North do not have step-free access. This is something that local Labour councillors, campaigners and our metro Mayor are all keen to fix, and they have my full and ongoing support. I should be grateful if the Minister would share his view on that, either when summing up or outside of the debate.

St Helens North and our wider borough is in a great location, in one strong city region and bordering another, with the M6, the M62 and major rail routes running through it. With affordable and reliable public transport, there is no limit to the growth that we could unlock. As in so many things, all we are looking for is fair funding and the opportunity to fulfil our potential.

10.15 am

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing this crucial and popular debate. Improving transport connectivity in Bolton is a priority that matters deeply to me, and I am proud to join fellow north-west MPs in fighting for a better, fairer transport system for my constituents.

A good transport network does more than move people; it moves society forward. It connects us to education, jobs and businesses that drive our economy and to the family, friends and communities that shape us. It is the foundation stone of a thriving society, because if we get our transport infrastructure right, everything else follows. For too many people in Bolton, however, transport is not a bridge to opportunity, but a barrier with real consequences. No child in Brightmet should have to miss an after-school club because they cannot find a bus. No college student in Little Lever should have to turn down an apprenticeship because fares are too high. No adult in Bromley Cross should have to miss a job interview because their trains are cancelled again.

For too long, under-investment in transport has held back Bolton's communities. Loneliness and isolation among young and elderly people are at an all-time high, and we know that good transport can mean the difference between precious time spent with loved ones or another day spent alone. Complicated routes and unreliable services are leaving pensioners and teenagers stranded—isolating not just individuals, but entire communities.

When transport in Bolton fails, everything else suffers. That is why, since my first speech in Parliament, I have called for Metrolink to be extended to Bolton and that call remains urgent. Metrolink is expanding, yet Bolton—one of Greater Manchester's largest towns—remains forgotten. For those who say that our rail services are already good enough, I invite them to catch a train from Bolton late at night or at the weekend, or indeed on their first day of work and be met with a cancelled train, as I experienced on my first day travelling down to this place.

One third of all trains into Bolton arrive late, and almost half of TransPennine Express trains. Bolton residents deserve better, and I look forward to working alongside Mayor Andy Burnham and the Greater Manchester combined authority as we build the business case for a long overdue extension.

My hon. Friends the Members for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and for St Helens North (David Baines) mentioned accessibility. We also desperately need to think about parents with prams who get left out. When we fix the rail system, we empower towns such as Bolton to thrive. Of course, it is not only about rail: in just 18 months, the Bee network has been a huge step forward for Bolton, proving what is possible when people, not profit, come first.

Finally, we must fight for regional fairness. In London, over-60s travel for free. In Greater Manchester, they do not. Why should older people in the north-west settle for less? I will push to introduce free travel for over-60s in Greater Manchester, because affordable transport helps older people to stay active, connected and independent.

As north-west MPs, we are united in our fight for a better, fairer transport system. Better transport means stronger businesses, connected communities and a fairer, thriving north-west region. When transport works, everything else follows. I sincerely hope that the Minister agrees and that he will commit to making collaboration on improving Bolton and north-west transport a priority.

10.18 am

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) on securing this important debate. I had originally prepared a lengthy speech that laid out in great and eloquent detail the huge number of issues that we have in Rossendale and Darwen around transport.

Those issues include the challenge of simply walking or cycling to school or work; our patchy bus services and isolated villages; the congested, unsafe and potholed roads; and of course our railway connections—or lack of them. Darwen's transport could generously be described as wildly unreliable, while Rossendale is the only local authority area in the north with no commuter links at all. I therefore look with envy at my hon. Friends with merely unreliable services.

Time does not allow for a full explanation of all those issues, and it would clearly be unnecessary, as this debate shows that the picture is shared and understood by hon. Members. I am sure that the Minister recognises it too. We are all too familiar with cut-off small towns and villages with so much unmet potential, yet the investment never seems to come our way.

We know the problems and the legacy that we have been left with, and we know the massive benefits that true transport connectivity can deliver, but we also know the solutions. The Government have made a start by investing in rural bus services and pothole repair, while committing to act on some long-standing regional rail priorities. However, the question remains as to how we make sure that left-behind towns get the connectivity they need to unleash their full potential. The previous Government and the systems that they put in place

[*Andy MacNae*]

manifestly failed to do that, but I believe we have two big opportunities under the new Government to do things differently and to deliver the change that the north-west needs.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) eloquently—indeed, brilliantly—put it, the Green Book is a massive issue that has resulted in a sustained long-term bias towards wealthier areas. We have to change that. The Treasury review is a huge opportunity for us, and we must ensure that it is carried out with true ambition, rather than just tweaking the rules. The existing bias must be removed and the long-term strategic impacts of investment fully recognised, as opposed to overvaluing short-term returns. We also need to ensure that the social wellbeing and enabling aspects of projects are properly valued. Indeed, why not bias projects towards deprived areas?

We also need to recognise that guidelines are just guidelines, and that there are entrenched cultures within appraisal mechanisms that, regardless of what the guidelines say, will tend to default to outdated benefit-cost ratio metrics. That review is a huge opportunity that we must grasp and I am really glad that the north-west is speaking with one voice on the issue.

Of course, our other great opportunity is devolution. The north-west could be the first region in England to have a full set of elected mayors with devolved budgets. That would give us the chance to join up our transport investment across the north. We have seen what innovative transport thinking can do in Manchester, so let us imagine what could be achieved across the north with a fully devolved regional transport budget and mayors working together to unlock our potential.

I find that possibility hugely exciting, but I also worry that opportunistic and self-interested local politicians may try to derail the process. For instance, the Reform candidates in the Lancashire county council elections are standing on a platform opposing devolution. They are defending a status quo that may be in their own interests, but it manifestly does not meet the interests of residents of Lancashire—what madness! We need to reject such pessimism and put the north-west back in the fast lane.

It is in small towns such as Rossendale and Darwen that the next election will be won and lost. We cannot be left behind as our cities forge ahead. Truly integrated transport could connect our futures, and I believe that the Government and our empowered communities can grasp that opportunity.

10.22 am

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison.

In my constituency, we have had a large amount of housing growth in the last few years, and we expect to have much more. My constituents are not nimbys; they absolutely recognise that it is a huge problem that young people cannot afford to leave home in our area. It is also a huge problem that there is an absolute shortage of care workers in my area alongside an older population, and that we do not have sufficient nurses and teachers. We need key worker housing, but we also need the infrastructure to go with it.

Transport is primarily about roads in my local area, which consists of a series of small towns and villages that people drive between as much as they can. I live in my constituency, so I despair of the potholes in exactly the same way that my constituents do. Our roads are dark and dangerous, and far too many of our young people are dying on them completely needlessly. The A500 is a complete mess. The A34 is the major road to Manchester and lots of people commute on it, but it is single-lane, unlit and frequently flooded. It is completely dangerous; indeed, it is a disaster. I could carry on ad infinitum—I could list so many roads—but the only other one that I will mention specifically is the Middlewich bypass, which would unlock major employment opportunities. We need the Government to fund work on it.

When I talk to young people in my area or to older people who cannot drive, the major mode of transport they talk about is buses. For example, I had the pleasure of talking to Shipton explorer scouts about their experience of trying to use buses in our local area. They told me about buses being so full that the drivers simply drive past them on the way to school and will not pick them up. There are not enough services and, as I say, they simply do not stop.

If someone tries to take a bus from Alsager to Royal Stoke university hospital or Leighton hospital, for example, it will take them nearly an hour, despite the distance being only 9 miles. If someone tries to take what might be one of the most important journeys they are ever going to make, for example from Holmes Chapel to one of our local hospices, it will also take them a really long time. Similarly, there is no direct bus from Congleton, a town of 30,000 people, to Macclesfield district general hospital, which is our nearest major general hospital. Bus services are fundamental services. We want to invest in the NHS, and it is vital that we do so, but there is no point in us creating additional appointments if people simply cannot get to them.

And don't get me started on trains in my constituency. They are unbelievably unreliable. There have been no Sunday services for literally years: Congleton's last train from Manchester is at about 9 o'clock on a Saturday night. I reiterate: this is a town with 30,000 people. Sandbach, a town of 20,000 people, has no accessible route across the platform, so people with disabilities, with buggies or with luggage—it is a route to Manchester airport—simply cannot get there and have to go backwards to Crewe to make the journey to Manchester. It is absolutely crackers.

I could talk about that in more detail, but I really want to talk about the fact that the decisions about transport investment have historically been incredibly short-sighted. I reiterate the comment of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper): we would have had £66 billion more in the last decade alone if we had had the same per person investment as London. I do not want to take money away from London. I want us to have a thriving capital, but I want my constituents to be able to get there. I also want them not to have to get there—to have opportunities in my constituency and in the wider north-west in the first place, and to be able to access them.

10.26 am

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my neighbour, my hon. Friend Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt), for securing this debate about connectivity; we are well connected, as I am sure she appreciates.

Efficient, affordable and accessible transport options are crucial to north-west workers, its economy and the ability to unlock growth. A well-connected transport system broadens access to opportunities and enhances our region's competitiveness. Transport infrastructure and the affordability of transport options directly impacts the jobs that people are able to take, where they are able to live, and their access to essential services, as so many hon. Members have said. That is particularly true for those living in commuter belt towns and suburban areas in my constituency of Worsley and Eccles. We must do more to ensure that the different modes of transport on offer are interconnected, ensuring smooth and efficient journeys, and making it as easy as possible for everyone to move around our region.

Driving remains the most popular mode of transport in Worsley and Eccles, but high levels of congestion are a real issue for all of us, including rush hour commuters of all forms. An improved public transport system can reduce the strain on our roads, benefiting all commuters, including those for whom driving will remain the most appropriate form of transport.

I am a north-west MP and, like all Members here who regularly come to London, I can see with my own eyes what can be achieved with proper investment, funding and Government focus on our transport system. To give one small comparison, from Eccles in my constituency to Manchester Piccadilly, we have one or maybe two trains an hour on the main commuter line. From Surbiton in south London to Waterloo, there are 10 an hour. That is a world of difference and makes trains a viable option for many people as an integral part of our network.

As I am sure the Government recognise, delivering greater transport connectivity is one of the most effective tools available to increase vital access to opportunities and deliver the growth we all need, which will underpin all our services and fundamentally improve the living standards of everyone we are here to represent. In Greater Manchester, we are making great progress via the expansion of the Bee network, including the roll-out of tap and go contactless ticketing, and daily and weekly fare caps, which are coming this weekend, but we must go further to bring trains into that network and to deliver the comprehensive, interconnected transport system that will deliver the benefits that we have all been talking about.

It is absolutely vital that we continue the mission to expand and improve our transport networks, so that everyone across our whole region can benefit from them in getting around more easily and getting to those jobs. That will make everywhere a viable place to live, to attract investment and to deliver on the potential that we all know that our region has.

10.29 am

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) on securing this crucial debate.

Constituencies such as mine have long faced challenges of poor connectivity. Warrington South is located at the crossroads of the north-west. It is strategically placed between Manchester, to the east, and Liverpool, to the west. Our town is successful: it is a desirable place to live and has grown considerably in size over recent years but, sadly, investment in transport has just not kept up. We have congestion on the roads, limited, poor-quality crossing points over the Manchester ship canal, ageing infrastructure and unelectrified rail lines. Towns such as mine deserve better.

It is critical to understand how poor connectivity is constraining growth, limiting our potential and leaving us behind. Uncertainty about infrastructure projects such as Northern Powerhouse Rail, slimmed-down projects such as HS2 and delayed projects such as the Western Link congestion relief road are part of the problem. According to data published at the end of last year, every region of the country falls behind London in public spending on transport per head. The capital receives about £1,313 per person, but the north-west receives only £729. That shocking £584 difference shows the north-south divide in practice once again.

A report by Transport for the North revealed that one fifth of people living in northern England are prevented from taking up opportunities and participating in communities around them due to poor connectivity and mobility. The focus must be not only on the big cities: it must also include towns such as Warrington and Leigh.

Investment in transport infrastructure can be transformational. It can act as a catalyst for growth, unlock potential and drive forward the Government's plan for change. We need a co-ordinated effort that better links our communities and recognises the contribution that our towns and villages make to the wider economy and the potential they have to offer. We cannot allow the transport challenges of the past to restrict our potential in the future. With the right investment in the right places, we have the opportunity to grow the national economy and our local economy.

10.32 am

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) on securing this crucial debate on transport connectivity in the north-west—an issue that impacts the day-to-day lives of many of my constituents and people across the whole region.

Our region has historically been neglected when it comes to transport, but I want to begin with a positive: I reiterate my wholehearted support for the electrification of the Bolton to Wigan train line, properly funded under this Labour Government. I also welcome the extension of the excellent Greater Manchester Bee network out towards my constituency.

Given that other Members have spoken so eloquently about planes, trains and automobiles, I will focus on a particular issue in my Bolton West constituency: the Hulton Park housing development. Hulton Park is a significant development, but it suffers from a critical oversight: a complete lack of sustainable transport options.

[Phil Brickell]

Local public transport links are virtually non-existent. That will force future residents to rely almost entirely on cars and will snarl up the already overly congested roads for my constituents.

I am sure colleagues agree that we should not rubber-stamp major housing projects without properly considering how people will get to work and school and access sustainable essential services locally in a convenient manner. In Bolton West, we already have severe congestion at Four Lane Ends in Hulton, where traffic bottlenecks daily and pedestrian facilities are extremely limited. The recent proposal for two additional housing developments in Leigh, one of which is particularly large, will only compound the issue.

To be clear, I wholeheartedly support the Government's housing plans, which are necessary given that the previous Tory Government sat on their hands for 14 years. We have built 4.3 million fewer homes than comparable countries since the second world war, and house prices are now 8.3 times the average income, pricing many of my constituents out of home ownership, but we must strive to deliver those new homes in a way that does not force residents into car dependency and exacerbate existing congestion issues. For me, the Hulton Park development is emblematic of a broader failure to link transport planning, house building and, crucially, economic growth.

We must ensure that new developments are served by cycle, pedestrian, bus, rail and tram networks from the outset, rather than as an afterthought. We should be planning how to mitigate existing congestion before spades are in the ground. This is about more than convenience; it is about the future of our towns and our cities. It is about delivering economic growth by ensuring connectivity between new developments and workplaces. It is about reducing emissions, improving air quality and ensuring that everyone has fair access to transport. I urge the Minister: let us not only build the homes that we need but build them with the infrastructure they deserve.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Well done, everybody; all Members have got in. I call the Lib Dem spokesman, Tim Farron.

10.35 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance this morning, Dr Murrison. It is also an honour to follow the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt), who admirably led this debate, as well as many other colleagues from across the north-west who have made excellent contributions on behalf of both their constituencies and the north-west as a whole, which is of course the greatest region on planet Earth. It is home to the greatest towns and cities, and indeed the greatest and most beautiful landscape that we have to offer.

The north-west is the birthplace of the industrial revolution, yet it is appalling that our region performs 6.8% below the national average on productivity. Indeed, the only regions with productivity above the national average are London and the south-east. Over the last 60 or 70 years, we have become a steadily unipolar country, and the north-west, like lots of other parts of the UK, has become undermined. We saw levelling up

from the last Government, which had some admirable aspects, but essentially—dare I say—it felt like a whole load of pork barrel with no strategy. Let us hope that we can have some strategy.

The cancellation of HS2 summed up that lack of strategy. I completely agree with the hon. Members for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), who is my neighbour; they talked about HS2 being about capacity and not speed. If we had a proper HS2 line to the north-west that mirrored and upgraded the west coast main line, which is the most congested rail line in western Europe, that would give us the opportunity to reopen many stations along the existing main line—I will throw out Tebay, Shap and Milnthorpe, just to name three. We must also think about how important it is for the north-west to relate to not just London but other parts of the north of England. East-west connectivity is crucial. What we used to call High Speed 3, or Northern Powerhouse Rail, is hugely significant, and we want to see and hear more about it.

As an MP in Cumbria, I am bound to say that often, when we talk about the north-west, we seem to stop thinking about anything that exists north of junction 32—I can confirm that it does exist. In particular, I would love the Minister to focus on the A66, which is a hugely important road for connectivity that links the A1(M) and the M6, so it connects the ports in the east and the west of this country. In a parallel universe, it would have been a motorway. However, for 12 miles it is a single carriageway, where there are hideous numbers of deaths that are always concentrated in that small section.

I urge the Minister and his colleagues to say yes to the A66 upgrade as soon as possible. Everybody in my neck of the woods is on tenterhooks waiting to hear. Likewise, there is work that has to be done on the M6 near junction 38. While it is massively important to the whole motorway network in the north, the people of Tebay must not be isolated during that work, and I ask the Minister to pay special attention to the so far inadequate levels of mitigation from National Highways, as those eight bridges have to be replaced in the coming years.

It is also important to talk about trains, and to think about what train services are like across the whole of the north-west. I want to highlight the situation with Avanti, and its failure to serve the northern half of the north-west adequately. It is worth bearing in mind that rail services on the west coast managed to meet their timetable obligations only 43.5% of the time, and last year, more than one in 20 services were cancelled. Any of us who live north of Preston know that any problem in the borders of Scotland or Glasgow means a train cancelled at Preston. Lancaster, Oxenholme, Penrith, Carlisle and Lockerbie are often completely overlooked, and that must stop.

I also want the Minister to think very carefully about what can be done to expand existing railway lines to make better use of them. The most visited destination in the United Kingdom outside London is the Lake district, yet we have a single railway line that goes from the main line to Windermere. It is possible, quite cheaply, to double capacity by having a passing loop at Burneside, and I would love the Minister to look at that possibility and see whether he agrees to it.

Graham Stringer: In the context of the north-west, we are all friends on this matter. The hon. Member probably does not know, but a few years ago the Transport Committee did a study into north-west trains and found that train schedules in the north-west—not when the trains actually run—were slower when there was a Liberal Prime Minister. Even more surprisingly, it was not Campbell-Bannerman; it was Gladstone.

Tim Farron: May I point out that there were many more railway lines then, and therefore more trains to be slow? It was also mostly pre-electricity—so there we go. I am grateful for the hon. Member's point.

The industrial capability of the west coast of Cumbria—not in my constituency—is significant to the economy of the whole country, and includes BAE at Barrow and Sellafield on the west coast. The railway line that serves them—the Furness line—saw a derailment a year ago and a flooding-related near disaster just a few weeks ago. We need to pay special attention to keeping the Furness line open, upgrading it and electrifying it if possible. I also want to make a case, on behalf of all my Cumbrian colleagues, for the Cumbria coastal line, which needs significant investment.

It is great to hear colleagues from metropolitan parts of the north-west talk about keeping the £2 bus fare cap, but for many of us in areas that are far less well funded, and where devolution has not really happened, such as Cumbria, we are stuck with the £3 cap, and we are worried about that being got rid of altogether. Before the cap came in, the most expensive bus journey in the United Kingdom was Kendal to Ambleside, which cost more than an hour's wage for somebody working in the hospitality sector. Will the Minister confirm that the £3 cap will not be raised or got rid of any time soon?

It is my great privilege to represent a very rural area, but that means that even when the £3 cap exists, it is of no good whatsoever. It does a fat lot of good if we do not have any buses. Giving our local authority, Westmorland and Furness council, the ability to run its own buses is key to meeting the needs of many rural communities. I am honoured to chair an outfit called Cumbria Better Connected, to which all these issues are regularly fed in. One of the most important issues is connectivity and integration between bus and rail, but it is no—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. I call the shadow Minister, Jerome Mayhew.

10.42 am

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing the debate, and congratulate all hon. Members, who have put very forceful cases for transport in the north-west. Their combined contributions have demonstrated that there are many shared problems in the region.

I do not have time to mention every hon. Member who has contributed, so I will limit myself to commenting on the contribution of the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton, who highlighted that her constituency, like I suspect many others in the area, is a post-industrial commuter belt that is struggling to cope with the

consequential increase in traffic. Because of the over-reliance on cars, the society suffers from high transport-related social exclusion. There are a number of issues, but I will try to mash them together into three headlines.

Let us start with the positive news, which is the welcome devolution of transport policy. It was implemented by Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, but it was of course a Conservative policy that was brought in in 2017, so while we welcome it, we should share the plaudits. I welcome the success of the Bee network, but we have to recognise that it was expensive—there was £1 billion of Government support.

That raises a big issue, because as well as that £1 billion, Bee is supported by considerably north of £130 million a year from central funds, by my calculations. Its parent, as it were—Transport for London—receives in excess of £1 billion a year. There is therefore a fundamental question here for the Minister. The Bus Services (No. 2) Bill is going through the House of Lords, and I have with me the consultation on Great British Railways and “A railway fit for Britain's future”. If this is the model for the future, can the Minister shed some light on where the increased funding will come from? It is a good development—it was Conservative policy—but where it is expanded beyond the large mayoral combined authorities to other combined authorities, there will inevitably be an associated cost.

The second related issue is the potential conflict when regional policy butts up against national policy, when a strong regional mayor rightly wants control over a combined transport policy, whether that is buses, rail or road. We potentially have a directing mind under Great British Railways—intended to be one of its key benefits—coming up against Andy Burnham, for example. The consultation paper refers to that, but has no detail on how those potential conflicts will be resolved and who will be the final arbiter. Perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity to respond on that.

Many hon. Members called for the reintroduction of the northern HS2 extension, focusing not on speed, but on capacity. We have to recognise that, again, it comes back to money. The cancellation of the northern part of HS2 redirected £19.8 billion to other transport projects for the region. This is not a comprehensive list, but it gives a flavour: £2 billion for the new station at Bradford and a new connection to Manchester; £3 billion for upgraded and electrified lines from Manchester to Sheffield, Sheffield to Leeds, Sheffield to Hull and Hull to Leeds; about £4 billion of additional transport funding for the six city regions; £2.5 billion of additional funding for outside the city regions; and £3.3 billion for road improvements, albeit largely filling potholes.

Mrs Russell: I understand that in that announcement there was £180 million for Cheshire East council, but council leaders were told it would be weighted towards the back end of the seven years. They feel strongly that it was made-up money that was always predicated on borrowing, and that there was never any real intention to give that money to the north-west.

Jerome Mayhew: Their concerns were wrong. I had a minor position in the Treasury at the time, and I can assure the hon. Lady that that was genuine redirection of funds, albeit over a period, as one would expect, with the release of funds associated with the development of HS2 in the northern sector.

[*Jerome Mayhew*]

To conclude the list, we had £3.3 billion for road improvements and an additional £11.5 billion for Northern Powerhouse Rail from Manchester to Liverpool. The question that is easy to miss in opposition but impossible to avoid in government is this: where do the Government want money to be spent? That money could be used for those widespread improvements or be redirected to a northern branch of a version of HS2, but it is impossible to spend the same money twice. If the Minister wants to do both, where is the money going to come from?

Finally, many hon. Members referred to the seeming disconnect between investment decisions in London and the south-east and elsewhere in the country, the north-west in particular. The hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton used a good phrase:

“Growth goes where the growth already is.”

The previous Government at least took the first step in tackling an injustice in the Green Book analysis. That was undertaken to unlock some of the levelling-up investment that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) referred to. I am concerned that the new Government—certainly the new Treasury—are reverting to type. When the Chancellor of the Exchequer had her growth panic a few weeks ago—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. I call the Minister.

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) on raising the important topic of connectivity in the north-west—an area that was a cradle to so many transport innovations and is home to beautiful countryside and some of our greatest cities and towns. It is not quite Yorkshire, but it is still a pretty special place.

Kick-starting economic growth is the Government’s No. 1 mission, and the economic performance of the north-west is vital to successful delivery. It is essential that we deliver our plan for change to create more jobs, put more money in people’s pockets and help to rebuild Britain—but, as I am sure my hon. Friend recognises, we cannot have good growth without the transport connectivity to support it.

A truly connected transport network must be designed and built in collaboration with local leaders. That is why the English devolution White Paper published last year is so important. It is an opportunity to reset our relationship with local and sub-national government and to empower local leaders and mayors to make the right decisions for their communities. We are already seeing the benefits across mayoral areas with the introduction of the Bee network in Greater Manchester, alongside mayors in the Liverpool city region and West Yorkshire who are working towards taking back control of their buses. I will just put on the record how pleased I was to hear yesterday that South Yorkshire will also be taking back control of its buses.

The Government will be still more ambitious, however. First, we will make the process for taking buses back into public control faster and simpler through the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill. Secondly, we will give mayors a statutory role in governing, managing and planning the

rail network, working alongside Great British Railways. Thirdly, through the English devolution Bill, we will put the roles of mayors on a primary footing, setting out a clear and broad set of powers that will be available to mayors and local leaders.

Our transport network has seen decades of decay. Communities have been cut off and short-changed. Fragmented networks have hindered meaningful change, and the state of our local roads is a result of past under-investment. We are determined to reverse that. An uplift of £200 million was secured at the autumn spending review for city region sustainable transport settlement areas for 2025-26, which was welcomed by the mayoral combined authorities, including Greater Manchester and the Liverpool city region, which are receiving over £1.7 billion from the current CRSTS programme.

The autumn Budget announcement also included a commitment of over £650 million in local transport funding in 2025-26 to ensure that transport connections improve in towns, villages and rural areas, and a funding uplift of £500 million for 2025-26 for highways maintenance. Of that £500 million, the north-west region is receiving over £64.8 million in additional funding. In the Budget the Government confirmed investment of over £1 billion to support and improve bus services and keep fares affordable. Local transport authorities across the north-west have been allocated nearly £150 million for the 2025-26 financial year.

The Government are committed to improving transport across the north, including boosting rail connectivity from east to west. We are already taking forward the trans-Pennine route upgrade—TRU—which will improve rail performance and support growth and housing by reducing journey times and providing more passenger services on the line between Manchester and York. We are delivering the Manchester taskforce programme, which is central to the Government’s ambitious multibillion-pound rail investment across the north. As announced in the autumn Budget, we are maintaining momentum on Northern Powerhouse Rail by progressing planning and design works to support its future delivery.

On our strategic road network we are developing a five-year third road investment strategy that will cover 2026 to 2031. The RIS will be published before the end of 2025. Our vision is for a network that connects more people to more places, making our day-to-day journeys easier and simpler, and building a network that can attract investment, whether that is through boosting efficiency or unlocking land for development.

The integrated national transport strategy will be published this year and will set a long-term vision for transport in England, focusing on how transport should be designed, built and operated to better serve all the people who use it and enable them to live fulfilling lives. We will develop the strategy through collaborative and open engagement with our stakeholders and people who use transport.

It is impossible for me to cover every point raised today, but I will touch on a few. On Northern Rail, it has been made really clear to Northern’s management that the current performance is not acceptable. That is why Rail North Partnership, through which the Department for Transport and Transport for the North jointly manage Northern’s contract, issued it with a notice of breach of contract, which has required Northern to produce a detailed plan to improve its services.

On HS2, transport is an essential part of our mission to rebuild Britain, and I am committed to delivering infrastructure that works for the whole country and of course to improving rail connectivity across the midlands and the north. My ministerial colleagues and I are carefully reviewing the position we have inherited on HS2 and wider rail infrastructure.

On the previous Government's commitments on investment, I will just remind the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) about the £22 billion black hole. They left this Government to pick up the pieces.

Jerome Mayhew: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I will not give way.

We acknowledge that rates of step-free access remain low across Great Britain, which is why the Access for All programme is working to address that. In the Greater Manchester area—

Tim Farron: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I will not give way, because I have a lot of points to make, but I am happy to have a conversation with Members afterwards. In the Greater Manchester area, about 50% of stations already have step-free access, approximately double the national average. We remain committed to improving the accessibility of the railways and recognise the valuable social and economic benefits that that brings to communities. However, the programme continues to be heavily oversubscribed, so we welcome opportunities for external funding to improve the accessibility of the network.

The objective of the Treasury's review of the Green Book is to understand whether it is being used in a way that ensures fair, objective and transparent appraisals of proposals outside London and the south-east of England. DFT officials are working closely with the Treasury on that review and will take forward any relevant actions following its conclusion.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton very much for raising this important issue. I hope that I have been able to reassure her that the Government recognise the importance of transport connectivity across the north-west. That is why we are investing and that is why we are devolving to local leaders. I look forward to continuing to work with her and other hon. Members on this key issue.

10.57 am

Jo Platt: Thank you for chairing the debate, Dr Murrison. There is not much time left, so I will not go through everyone's contribution, but I express thanks to everybody who attended and everybody who made such valid points about how we improve our transport infrastructure for the north-west. I just hope that as we go forward, we can all work together and speak as one voice, working across the parties and with our Minister and this Government, to get the improvements that we desperately need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered improving transport connectivity in the North West.

Defence Industries: West Midlands

11 am

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered defence industries in the West Midlands.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. Global threats are evolving, making defence investment more critical than ever. A strong defence underpins our security and sovereignty, but we must scale up to meet the modern challenges. The warning flags were raised in 2014, yet the UK lacked a long-term strategy. The defence industry drives innovation and economic growth, but skill shortages and supply chain volatility risk holding it back. Our armed forces are only as strong as our defence sector.

Across the west midlands and the UK, the defence industry provides security, supports thousands of jobs, and fuels innovation in areas such as AI, cyber and advanced manufacturing. The region is home to major players, including Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems and Babcock, with BAE Systems alone working with 11 small and medium-sized enterprises, including one in my constituency of Tamworth.

The Government's renewed focus on defence as part of their industrial strategy is welcome. I also support the recent commitment to the largest defence spending increase since the cold war, meaning that we will spend 2.5% of GDP on defence. With post-war alliances shifting, we must continue investing in our defence capabilities.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I recently visited Somers Forge in my constituency—it is the 10th oldest SME in the United Kingdom, and has been supplying defence equipment since the Battle of Blenheim in 1704. It was great to meet with its team, and see the important work that it does. Does my hon. Friend agree that our defence industrial strategy will help SMEs access defence investment and boost businesses such as Somers Forge in the west midlands?

Sarah Edwards: I absolutely agree. This industrial strategy is essential in making sure we have the focus to support our businesses right across the region, and in making sure that they are successful.

The upcoming defence industrial strategy must prioritise British businesses, including SMEs, ensuring that investment creates jobs and strengthens our national security. Currently, nearly 18,000 people work in defence SMEs in the west midlands, and the Ministry of Defence spends £1.6 billion annually in the region, making it the UK's third largest defence hub. By backing UK industry, and fostering co-operation between Government, business and workers, we can build a defence sector fit for the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this issue forward, and she is certainly making a reputation for herself as an assiduous MP on these issues. I welcome what she said in relation to the Government's commitment to 2.5% increasing to 3%—there is nobody in the United Kingdom who does not welcome that. I know that we in Northern Ireland have very strong sectors in the work we do with the Royal Navy and Thales, but does the hon. Lady agree that we must ensure that all parts of the United Kingdom can get the advantages that she has referred to, in terms of not just security, but the economy, jobs and

[*Jim Shannon*]

opportunities? If we can all be part of this process going forward, that could support the Minister and the Labour Government.

Sarah Edwards: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. In fact I will go on to talk about just how important it is that all our regions and nations are embedded in this process, and that they all contribute different skills that are of value. There are so many different aspects to defence, and our defence industries that contribute and go well past into other areas of manufacturing. I thank him for raising that point.

Last week, the Business and Trade Committee heard from Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems, Leonardo and MBDA on the global combat air programme, which is an alliance between the UK, Italy and Japan, who are designing Tempest fighter jets. That alliance integrates advanced air combat technology, ensuring that our defence capabilities match evolving threats. Defence alliances are a cornerstone of trade diplomacy, driving both national security and industrial growth. They have been cited as having the potential to drive our export growth, while cementing important alliances for our defence.

One issue raised with the Business and Trade Committee was the short-term nature of defence funding cycles; even major companies operate on a one-year funding cycle, making it difficult to sustain long-term projects such as Tempest. National security priorities do not fit neatly into parliamentary terms, and our defence sector needs stability. It was suggested that moving to a three or five-year funding model would provide certainty, drive innovation and ensure that the UK remains a global leader in defence. What conversations is the Minister having on the contractual arrangements currently in play for companies and the assessment that he has made of their ability to help the Government to reach their goals for the sector and national security?

Export-led growth will be essential to the defence industries that need a wider base than just their own sovereign purchasing power. By exporting technology and products, companies will be able to keep the continuity of build programmes going away from that boom-and-bust cycle. We could use industry to foster diplomatic relations of bilateral importance. The future of the defence industry relies on a workforce equipped with the right skills and adaptable to the evolving demands of our armed forces and the Ministry of Defence.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for securing this important debate. Every year, Bedworth residents show their pride in our armed forces with their Armistice Day parade, which I was privileged to take part in this year. Many of my constituents already work in the defence and security sector in small and medium-sized enterprises around the west midlands. I am glad that this number will only go up with the Government's increased investment in our defence and security. Does my hon. Friend agree that the west midlands should be proud of the contribution we make towards the defence and security of our nation, and should look forward to seeing more people benefiting from the skills and training that come from joining this industry?

Sarah Edwards: That contribution is paramount to the debate; the west midlands is very proud not only of being the third largest region in terms of our contribution to the defence sector, but that our constituents work very hard to contribute to that. It is incredibly important that people see that they are a part of this endeavour, and it is not something that is happening far away from them. They are an essential part, so I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point.

To achieve this, we must create clear, skills-based career pathways that allow individuals to upskill or transition into the sector at different stages of their career. One effective way to address that challenge is through closer collaboration between further education centres and the defence industry. These partnerships are critical in identifying skills gaps and shaping education programmes that directly address industry needs. By doing this, we can provide young people with a clear vision for how they can step into the defence industry. Young people too often underestimate the transferability of their skills across industries. Many assume that the expertise they gain in education or early career roles is limited to a single sector, but abilities such as problem solving, teamwork, communication and technical proficiency are in high demand across multiple fields. An engineering student may not realise that their expertise is equally valuable in defence.

At the same time, we must ensure that those already in the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence have the opportunity to reskill and upskill—a zig-zag career approach, where individuals move between roles and gain new skills. That would allow personnel to adapt to the changes, ensuring that the MOD retains experienced talent, while keeping pace with technological advancements. In my constituency, we are fortunate to house Defence Medical Services Whittington, which hosts the defence medical academy. That institution is dedicated to advancing the training and research that can provide our military personnel with the best medical care and knowledge required to tackle complex injuries on the battlefield.

Linking our industries with our military centres provides opportunities for skills development and transfer. The social value created by defence industries is strategic value. Larger companies in the west midlands are capitalising on key skills. Some companies, such as Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems, are currently creating their own apprenticeship training programmes. How is the Minister working with the Minister for Skills on developing pathways and opportunities that directly respond to the needs of the sector?

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I attended a roundtable in my constituency held by the Manufacturing Technology Centre and chaired by the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry, my right hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Garston (Maria Eagle), and the Minister for Nature, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), who is one of my neighbouring MPs, to discuss with local businesses their involvement in the defence supply chain. I am very interested in what my hon. Friend is saying about large companies investing in skills development.

GE Vernova is a 130-year-old company based in Rugby that specialises in electric propulsion systems for naval vessels. It has supplied propulsion systems for the

Royal Navy's Type 23 frigates, and it developed and delivered the world's first fully electric warships. Indeed, 92% of the Royal Navy's fleet is powered by its electric propulsion systems. This is vital, because it is creating new jobs in Rugby and across the country. Does my hon. Friend welcome the Government's commitment to spreading the economic benefits of the defence sector across the entire country?

Sarah Edwards: I absolutely agree. It is almost as though my hon. Friend predicted what I will speak about next, because I will soon tell a story about a visit that I made. The fact that the company has been in his constituency for 130 years shows that Britain has this prowess, and we do not want to lose it. Through this strategy, we have to ensure that such businesses are still going and that that innovation is being incorporated into technology.

The Business and Trade Committee went to Scotland on Monday. Although ships are manufactured in Scotland, it takes a whole country to build them. The Committee witnessed the incredible shipbuilding work taking place at the BAE Systems site in Govan. The commitment to skills development in Scotland is impressive, with competitive apprenticeship programmes open to all ages, allowing career changes and retraining. The programmes are more competitive than gaining a place at Oxford University, highlighting the value of practical skills and apprenticeships. The narrative that university is the only option to success has, in part, fuelled a shortage in skills.

During our visit, I stood onboard HMS Cardiff in its fit-out stage and saw where HMS Birmingham will soon start the next phase of its construction, in a giant hangar that is large enough for two ships to be built side by side. The Type 26 frigates being built in Scotland are world-class and, when used properly, will be crucial for our trade diplomacy strategy, with many countries eager to buy British.

A key theme raised as being important to the success of the defence industrial strategy was the continuity of work to preserve an essential skills base. For example, steel may come from Port Talbot in Wales, making up 4% of the cost of a ship, but 25% of the cost is in the combat systems, requiring digital engineering and design expertise found in places such as Hertfordshire. Fostering innovation across the defence and civil sectors such as aerospace is crucial, as demonstrated by the evidence given to the Business and Trade Committee yesterday by Airbus, which said that more than 50% of the supply chain is both defence and civil.

Our visit reinforced the importance of a collaborative, nationwide approach to defence. From steel manufacturing to advanced digital systems, every region and nation of the UK contributes to defence and innovation, playing a part in our national security. Will the Minister meet me and defence companies in my constituency to talk about how they can continue to play a part—and, indeed, play a greater part—in the endeavour that the Government have set out? To ensure the long-term security and strength of our defence and industrial sectors, we must build that greater resilience in our supply chains.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for the way she is leading it. In my constituency, we have JCB, which is a major employer and manufacturer, but we

also have Crestchic Loadbanks, which is an SME that often finds it difficult to get access to Government contracts. Does she agree that, as we look at the defence industrial strategy, we have to ensure that we are backing British business and that all those companies can make a contribution to our shared national defence?

Sarah Edwards: I absolutely agree. We have to back British, we have to buy British, and we have to keep the west midlands in pole position, innovating and ensuring that companies working across civil and defence can get the maximum benefit from the new procurement contracts coming from the MOD.

A comprehensive review of the UK supply chain is essential to ensure that SMEs have visibility and fair access to Government contracts. Smaller businesses often struggle to break into large procurement processes dominated by major players, and access to funding is difficult. Again, the annual funding cycles were cited by Flare Bright and Gibson Robotics as problematic for growing SMEs in the evidence we heard yesterday.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her generosity in giving way and for giving us the opportunity to discuss this important issue. She is clearly setting out the value of the defence sector in Tamworth, the villages and our region more widely. In Cannock, engineers at Briggs Equipment have extended the operational life of the RAF's fleet of bespoke air-transportable forklift trucks by at least 10 years. This might not be the most high-profile equipment, but those specialist forklifts are being used for everyday logistics and for military and humanitarian missions as far afield as Cyprus, Ascension Island and the Falklands. Does my hon. Friend agree that such local businesses are essential to the wider defence supply chain, providing high-quality jobs, boosting skills and contributing to Staffordshire's success?

Sarah Edwards: I absolutely agree, particularly with my hon. Friend's shout out to his constituency and, of course, Staffordshire, which plays an important role. As hon. Members have said, we have a concentration of hard-working companies, and there is a benefit to their dual-use aspects. That is something we should push as a nation to ensure we get the most for all our regions.

RAND Europe, commissioned by the MOD in 2021, found that

"SMEs and mid-tier suppliers report difficulties accessing and engaging with both top tier suppliers and the MOD".

Barriers included a lack of corporate functions and challenges in marketing their businesses to prime contractors. UK defence supply chains also struggled to attract non-traditional suppliers due to slow, inflexible and bureaucratic processes. It concluded that the MOD's approach to contracting is seen as "inflexible" and disadvantageous to lower-tier suppliers, which "discourages innovation."

Examples of how the MOD could support smaller suppliers and foster innovation were cited as being, in part, possible due to the defence and security accelerator programme, or DASA, because it creates a contract for revenue, which is vital so that firms can demonstrate to other investors that they are viable—grants cannot be treated in the same way. Can the Minister reflect on how

[Sarah Edwards]

the DASA programme could be expanded to align more closely with the challenges that SMEs face in developing products and solving problems?

The DASA programme has an element of mentoring, which those who have used it have cited as very valuable. The US also uses a model in which technical liaison officers scout for companies and then support them through the complex military procurement and due diligence processes. Has the Minister considered a similar scheme in defence industrial policy, and has he spoken with his colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade on how to align those goals for maximum impact?

Yesterday, the Business and Trade Committee heard that procurement towards capability might better suit the fast-paced environment that military technology now inhabits. Ukraine has shown that innovation is happening in weeks, not years, so the procurement need—rather than defined items—may in some circumstances foster better results. The strategic defence review will also be an important part of informing those decisions. It is a vital first step, taken by this Government, to ensure that we have the right force capability fit for the future and that, when we spend money, we spend it well.

It has been suggested that one large innovation hub could be created, establishing facilities for testing programmes that could then enable smaller companies to continue developing, leading to small-scale buying programmes that could later be scaled into larger ones. That sets a clear pathway that could be stewarded by an individual liaison. Those are some of the things the Committee has heard that we think could support the Government's ideals.

The west midlands is showcasing the incredible potential of the UK's defence industry as a driver of security, economic growth, innovation and skills development. Investing in reskilling and upskilling is crucial for those currently serving in the armed forces and the MOD, as well as for future-proofing our defence workforce. Building resilience in our supply chains by prioritising UK businesses, especially SMEs, in procurement decisions is essential. I thank the Members present for showcasing the work of their constituents, and of the companies in their constituencies, to support the defence industries. By making funding more accessible and breaking down barriers to entry, we can harness British innovation and ensure that our defence industry remains competitive globally.

The Government have taken decisive action by focusing on an industrial strategy that prioritises defence. Amid global uncertainty, we must provide calm and focus on developing security systems that prepare our nation for any eventuality. Including our regions in the strategy unlocks opportunities and high-skilled jobs that benefit local communities everywhere, including those in my Tamworth constituency. We have talent, expertise and ambition, and now we must make the right choices to unlock that potential.

11.20 am

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): It is good to see you, Dr Murrison. As a former Defence Minister, you will know these subjects well. I might be a

proud Janner—someone from Plymouth—but my great-grandfather, Alfred Carey, worked in the automotive industry making Hillman Minxes in the west midlands, so I feel that the debate has a connection with my past.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) for securing this debate and for speaking so passionately about not only why we need to defend our national security and learn lessons from Ukraine, but how we can spend the increased defence budget announced by the Prime Minister to create more British jobs and more opportunities for our young people to develop skills that will last them a lifetime and support the growth mission, which is this Government's No. 1 mission.

As a native of the area, my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth knows better than most the importance of defence to the west midlands. Although it is clear that defence makes a considerable contribution to the west midlands in jobs, investment and prosperity, today's debate also reminds us of the huge contribution that the west midlands makes to UK defence, and the possibility of doing even more. Billions of pounds are injected annually into west midlands defence enterprises by industry and Government, but we know that our military is only as strong as the supply chain that supports it. What we have heard today is not only a clarion call of support for the big defence companies in the west midlands—the Rolls-Royces, the BAE Systems, the Babcocks—but a call for further investment in SMEs, which I will come back to.

As a Government, we are determined to nurture and develop the region's defence cluster and defence businesses. As part of that, we need to invest more in skills, and I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth spoke about that. We know the world is becoming more dangerous and Britain is facing rising threats. The Government also face the challenges of rebuilding and reinvigorating our armed forces after a decade and a half of underfunding and hollowing out. That is why we launched the strategic defence review: to assess the dangers we face and determine the capabilities we need to meet them. It is why we brought forward our promise to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence to April 2027, and 3% in the next Parliament when economic conditions allow. It is why we are working hard on defence reform and the new defence industrial strategy: to unlock the potential of suppliers across the country.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth alluded to, there is a well-known phrase in military circles that soldiers win battles, but supply chains win wars. She was right to make the case that we need to invest more in our defence industry, because there are companies out there that will not regard themselves as defence companies.

People who work in data, digital or advanced manufacturing, or who support the wider supply chain, are defence companies in waiting. They are the innovative people who could support the next generation of military equipment and military operations. In making the case for investment in defence businesses, the Government need to be aware that if we get defence procurement right, we can expand the number of companies involved. That increases the economic benefits of spending, but also enables us to access skills, ingenuity and innovation, especially among SMEs.

Sarah Edwards: The Minister has mentioned the examples of the automotive sector and cyber-security, and how many people do not realise that they are working in comparable industries. As parliamentarians, how can we work to showcase the different ways that people are contributing to the defence industry, or could be working in it? How can we promote that? What does the Minister think we can do to make sure people realise that this is a wider, shared endeavour and that their skills are very transferable?

Luke Pollard: That is an excellent question. It comes down to how we implement the defence industrial strategy that my colleague, the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry, is leading within the Department. That needs to tie in with the whole-of-Government and whole-of-society effort for our national defence, which is something Parliament will need to speak more of in future. To defend our nation and support our allies, we will need this mission to be held passionately not just by people in uniform and the Ministry of Defence. We will need every Department to understand its contribution to that mission. When we invest in skills, we will have the opportunity to do that.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend mentioned the Type 26 builds in Scotland. As the MP for Devonport in Plymouth, where the Type 26s will be based, I know how incredible these frigates will be, how they will deter Russian submarine activity in the north Atlantic, and how they will contribute directly to the security of our nation and our allies.

To build those frigates, we will need to invest in skills on a long-term basis. We are looking at how we can have multi-year budgets, to invest more in skills and supply chains, rather than having the annual cycle. Frankly, and as the Defence Secretary has made very clear, defence needs to spend money better than it has in the past. That is why he started a programme of defence reform to make sure we reform not only how we fight and how we are configured, but also how we procure. The recruitment for a new national armaments director is a significant part of driving the defence reform needed to support SMEs as well as primes.

Alex Ballinger: We are talking about procurement. Just this week I met Members of the European Parliament in Brussels to talk about our collective response to Ukraine. One of the challenges that Somers Forge in my Halesowen constituency faces is the struggle with European supply chains and the trade barriers between the UK and Europe. As we go through a new reset with Europe, will the Minister commit to push for greater access for defence industries to the European market?

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for talking about Somers Forge and those opportunities. It is certainly something that my Cabinet Office colleagues, who are leading that reset work with Europe, are very conscious of. It is also something that the Defence Secretary picked up with High Representative Kallas from the European Commission yesterday. They looked at the opportunities for UK industry, which is already integrated across our European partners, to work without some of the obstacles in the way of delivering the defence capabilities we need to deter Russian aggression. There is an opportunity here.

A number of Members have spoken about the importance of SMEs in their constituencies and the jobs that they provide. Five years ago, the Ministry of Defence spent 5% of its direct spend with SMEs. In July 2024, we inherited a situation where that had fallen to 4%. The Department has now set an ambition to spend more direct spend with SMEs across the country. We are consulting on what the level should be, so that it is achievable but stretching.

We are working with organisations such as Make UK to understand what barriers need to be overcome and removed to support SMEs to access that direct spend—rather than just supporting the brilliant work of our primes as subcontractors—because we know that if they have a direct spending relationship with the MOD, they are more likely to be able to access overseas export markets. It is precisely for that reason that we are adjusting how we deliver defence procurement within the Ministry of Defence. It could not only spend the money better in the UK and create more jobs, it could also increase the size of our economy by receiving export orders from abroad.

In their interventions on my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth, Members talked about how we can invest more. I am keen to invest more in SMEs, and I am keen that we speak about the opportunity for young people to find a brilliant career in defence. The zig-zag career proposal is absolutely vital. We need to make sure that we do not create cliff edges and that transferring from regular service to the reserves is easier, so that people can serve in our military, move into industry and then return to service without there being cliff edges that get in the way. There are huge opportunities.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth secured this debate and that we have had this conversation about how we can invest in our defence, grow our economy and provide jobs that will benefit our young people for their entire careers.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Miscarriage of Justice Compensation

[KARL TURNER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered miscarriage of justice compensation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I wager that the majority of citizens are unfamiliar with the workings of the criminal justice system, and still less familiar with miscarriages of justice. Perhaps, if they are aware of miscarriages of justice, they are aware of certain high-profile exonerees or miscarriages of justice, such as the Cardiff Three, the Guildford Four or the Birmingham Six. Most people will understandably and reasonably assume that victims of miscarriages of justice are compensated, particularly if they spent time in custody before being pardoned or having their convictions quashed. However, this is not the case. In England and Wales, compensation for the wrongly convicted is the exception rather than the rule. The current compensation scheme enables only some people in England and Wales who have had their convictions overturned, or been found not guilty at retrial, to receive compensation.

I make it very clear that my concern is not that miscarriages of justice happen. Sadly, no system in the world is perfect. Miscarriages of justice happen—we cannot get it correct 100% of the time—but when they occur, citizens expect the state to right that wrong. In a survey by Opinium in December 2024, 71% of those asked believed the Government should ensure fair and swift compensation for those who are wrongly convicted. Many will therefore be appalled to learn that this is not the case, that victims of miscarriages of justice seldom receive compensation for the wrong that has befallen them, that the wrongly convicted often have to fight for years, at great cost, to clear their name, and that the justice system unnecessarily forces the innocent to suffer continued injustice.

The issue in this debate is the failure of the state to right these wrongs. We should be clear that a miscarriage of justice inflicts considerable harm on the wrongly convicted. A 2018 report by the campaign group Justice, “Supporting Exonerees: Ensuring Accessible, Consistent and Continuing Support,” underscores the grave hardship and difficulty that the wrongly convicted have in adjusting to life after conviction, and the trauma that they have gone through, which they must deal with for years after the event. The report highlights how victims of miscarriages of justice struggle to adjust. Having spent time in prison, becoming institutionalised and grappling with the fact that they should not be there, they struggle to trust authorities.

The unfairness of the current system was brought into sharp relief for me when I met my constituent Mr Brian Buckle and his family and learned of their experiences. I am pleased that they have made the journey from Fishguard to join us in the Public Gallery.

In May 2017, Mr Buckle was convicted on 16 counts of historical sexual offences and sentenced to a total of 15 years’ imprisonment. He had always maintained his innocence, and in September 2022 the Court of Appeal overturned his conviction and ordered a retrial. He was immediately released on bail, having served five years

and four months of his sentence. The retrial took place in May 2023. Mr Buckle and his defence team, led by Mr Stephen Vullo KC, who is also in the Public Gallery, prepared a detailed defence and presented new witnesses and forensic evidence. After three long weeks in court, the jury returned unanimous not guilty verdicts in just over an hour.

I cannot fathom the strain that Mr Buckle has endured as a result of years of legal proceedings and the travesty of being imprisoned for a crime that he did not commit. Let us remember what the wrongly convicted must go through and its impact. He missed important family milestones, such as his daughter’s 18th and 21st birthdays. His imprisonment cost him over £500,000 in lost income and devastated his plan to retire at 55 with a private pension, because he had been unable to make any contributions following his imprisonment. Furthermore, his state pension is now in jeopardy, given that he was unable to make any national insurance contributions for more than five years.

The impact on Mr Buckle is not limited to the period in which he was deprived of his liberty. Indeed, I am afraid to say that he has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder because of the impact of his wrongful conviction and imprisonment. His mental health is such that he has been unable to work since his release.

Prior to this awful state of affairs, Mr Buckle travelled every week from west Wales to London because he was in charge of an engineering firm. He performed this very important role, which had a lot of responsibility, for more than 15 years. He made the weekly journey on the great western main line or the M4 that the Minister and I also make.

This travesty of justice could befall any of us, through no fault of our own. Although it is difficult to comprehend the nightmare that has befallen Mr Buckle and his family, one can estimate the financial impact of his ordeal in terms of the income and pension that have been lost. Perhaps we can also put a figure on the costs incurred for appeals and legal defences, but how can we begin to calculate the impact on his health or the loss of precious time with his family?

I am sure we would all agree that that is a difficult dilemma, but it was not difficult, it would seem, for the Ministry of Justice, which issued a cruelly simple response to Mr Buckle after he applied for compensation under the statutory scheme. In the decision letter, which was issued almost a year after the application was submitted, the MOJ rejected his claim out of hand:

“Having carefully considered the particular circumstances of the reversing of your conviction, I do not consider your case demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt that you did not commit the offences for which you were convicted.”

Mr Buckle spent five years and four months in prison, and he had his conviction overturned by the Court of Appeal. He produced a detailed defence, including new witnesses and fresh forensic evidence, at retrial, at which the jury unanimously returned not guilty verdicts to all 16 counts in just over an hour. Having been subjected to that ordeal and having jumped through all the hoops that one could expect him to jump through, the Ministry of Justice’s response was not only to deny him compensation but, worse, to state that it does not consider that his case “demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt that you did not commit the offences for which you were convicted”—the same offences of which he was acquitted.

There was no reference to the harm he has suffered, to the impact on his family or to the Court of Appeal being concerned that the original trial was so flawed that the jury had failed to approach their task correctly that it ruled the conviction unsafe, such that the new witnesses and fresh forensic evidence were ultimately unnecessary. All that Mr Buckle received was a pretty meaningless reassurance that the matter had been “carefully considered.” If this is what comes from careful consideration, I dread to think what would result from reckless handling, but it surely could not be much worse for Mr Buckle. After years of legal battles following his wrongful conviction, he has been told that, although he is not guilty, the state will not compensate him for the years spent in prison because it does not believe that he has proven his innocence.

One does not need to be a King’s Counsel to see the unfairness of this situation. There can be no doubt that such a decision prolongs the miscarriage of justice in Mr Buckle’s case. That is a wrong that this new UK Government can and, indeed, must put right.

Before I discuss how the Government can do that, it is worth our reflecting briefly on how we have arrived at the current situation. Before 2006, the Government operated two compensation schemes for victims of miscarriages of justice in England and Wales: a discretionary scheme and a statutory scheme. The discretionary scheme was abolished in 2006, but the statutory scheme afforded the Justice Secretary the discretion to pay compensation to a wrongly convicted person when:

“his conviction has been reversed or he has been pardoned on the ground that a new or newly discovered fact shows beyond reasonable doubt that there has been a miscarriage of justice”.

In 2011, the Supreme Court ruled that the meaning of “miscarriage of justice” for the purposes of the statutory scheme should not be restricted to applicants who are able to conclusively demonstrate their innocence, and should be extended to cases where a new or newly discovered fact

“so undermines the evidence against the defendant that no conviction could possibly be based upon it”.

However, in 2014, the then UK Government legislated to reverse the effect of this decision. The test for eligibility for compensation under the statutory scheme, as set out in section 133 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988, was amended by section 175 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 in such a way as to restrict compensation to those who can prove innocence “beyond reasonable doubt”. Therefore, for applications made to the statutory scheme on or after 13 March 2014, there will have been a miscarriage of justice

“if and only if the new or newly discovered fact shows beyond reasonable doubt that the person did not commit the offence”.

That modest rewording of a single section of an Act of Parliament has proved devastating. Indeed, it is legally illiterate to effectively reverse the burden of proof in this way, for it places a burden on the victim of a miscarriage of justice to prove their innocence. This is such a high bar that, in the words of the joint dissenting opinion of judges in the European Court of Human Rights case of *Nealon and Hallam v. the United Kingdom*, it:

“represents a hurdle which is virtually insurmountable”.

Such a claim is not solely a matter of opinion, but an observable fact. The data on applications to the miscarriage of justice application service shows that less than 7% of applications submitted between April 2016 and March 2024 were successful.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have always believed—and the hon. Gentleman is probably the same—that someone is always innocent until proven guilty. It seems that the Ministry of Justice is saying: “You are actually guilty. Now prove yourself innocent.”

Ben Lake: The hon. Gentleman has got to the nub of the matter. That is precisely the effect of the change implemented in 2014. It has devastated the number of successful applications for compensation, because if we consider the data for the period between 1999 and 2024, we can see that, prior to the introduction of the new section 133 test, 45.6% of applicants received compensation for their wrongful convictions, but, following its introduction, just 6.6% of cases were successful—a drop of 39 percentage points. This new test has virtually put a stop to compensation payouts for these kinds of miscarriages of justice—an insurmountable hurdle indeed.

Members may wonder about the purpose of restricting eligibility in this way, and I am sure we will hear arguments that it was done to prevent those exonerated on a technicality from receiving compensation, but the cynic in me fears that the restriction was introduced to cut costs. Prior to 2014, the Ministry of Justice made average annual payouts of £5.9 million. Following the change, we have seen the average annual payouts under the scheme drop by 95%, to an average of £297,000. Even successful applicants have seen their individual compensation payments fall, with the average pre-2014 payment totalling just over £267,000, falling to an average of £61,000 after the change.

I am reminded of Cicero’s teachings, over two millennia ago:

“Justice looks for no prize and no price; it is sought for itself”.

He also said, of course:

“The worst kind of injustice is to look for profit from injustice.”

It is for others to consider whether anyone profits from this injustice, but the savings that the 2014 test realises for the Ministry of Justice perhaps offer an answer to that age-old question of, “What price do we put on justice?” Well, I can tell you, Mr Turner: it is around £5.6 million a year on average, compared with the pre-2014 payments.

The current system therefore places an almost impossible burden on the applicant—one whereby they are required to find a new fact that shows beyond reasonable doubt that they did not commit the offence for which they have been acquitted. The perverse situation into

The perverse situation into which the 2014 change forces the wrongly convicted can be summarised as follows: they are required to prove that they are innocent of a crime for which they have already been exonerated. I appreciate that this is an academic point, but it is worth considering whether some high-profile exonerates—the Cardiff Three, the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six—would receive compensation if they applied under the scheme today.

To the layman, it is difficult to understand how such a situation is compatible with the principles underpinning our justice system, because it undermines the well-understood principle that we are all innocent until proven guilty. I know there might be a challenge to that assertion, but the fact remains that the current rules place the obligation on the defendant to prove that they did not commit a crime to the criminal standard of proof, which is beyond reasonable doubt.

[*Ben Lake*]

In Mr Buckle's rejection letter, the Ministry of Justice, as well as reassuring him that his case had been carefully considered, asserted that, despite rejection of his claim for compensation, he is still presumed to be, and remains, innocent of the charges brought against him. If you were ever looking for a definition of Orwellian doublespeak, Mr Turner, that response is a perfect example. It illustrates how the 2014 change, by reversing the burden of proof, undermines the presumption of innocence and forces the Ministry to perform quite impressive but legally illogical linguistic gymnastics.

For if Mr Buckle is in law presumed to be innocent, surely he must be treated as such by the state. A man presumed to be innocent who has spent more than five years in jail should be compensated. If the state wants to treat him as though he were a guilty man and deny him compensation, why should the burden not fall on to the state to prove his guilt? Claims by the Ministry of Justice—

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for approximately 65 minutes for multiple Divisions in the House. If we get back earlier than that and all Members are in their place, I will recommence the debate.

2.47 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4 pm

On resuming—

Karl Turner (in the Chair): We will start where we left off. Injury time will be added to the debate, so I expect it to finish at 5.13 pm. I call Mr Ben Lake.

Ben Lake: I am grateful for the additional time to conclude the debate.

Prior to the Divisions, I was reiterating the perversity of the situation that the 2014 change has forced the wrongly convicted into. It can be summarised as follows: they are required to prove that they are innocent of a crime of which they have already been exonerated. To the layman, it is difficult to understand how such a situation is compatible with the principles that underpin our criminal justice system, for it undermines the well-understood principle that we are all innocent until proven guilty. I know that this can be challenged in practice, but the fact remains that the current compensation rules place the obligation on the defendant to prove that they did not commit a crime—a crime, of course, of which they have already been acquitted to the criminal standard of proof, which is beyond all reasonable doubt.

Let me return to the case of my constituent Mr Buckle. In its rejection letter, the Ministry of Justice, as well as reassuring him that his case had been carefully considered, asserted that, despite rejecting his claim for compensation, he is still presumed to be and remains innocent of the charges brought against him. If we were ever looking for a definition of Orwellian doublespeak, this response is a perfect example. It illustrates the way in which, by reversing the burden of proof, the 2014 change undermines the presumption of innocence and forces the Ministry to perform quite impressive, but illogical, linguistic gymnastics. For if Mr Buckle is presumed to be innocent in law, he must be treated as such by the state. A man presumed to be innocent, who has spent more than five

years in jail, should be compensated; if the state wants to treat him as though he were a guilty man, and deny him that compensation, why should the burden of proving his guilt not fall on the state?

The Ministry's claims that Mr Buckle is still presumed to be, and remains, innocent of the charges brought against him ring rather hollow when he is also denied a single penny in redress. It is clearly an affront to justice that the eligibility test prevents those who have been wrongly convicted from enjoying the full and unconditional benefits of being presumed innocent.

There is a growing acceptance of the need for action on this matter. Sadly, the list of miscarriages of justice that have perhaps not received as much media attention, but which are just as deserving of compensation, grows ever longer. I could mention cases such as that of Sam Hallam, who was imprisoned for seven years; Victor Nealon, who was imprisoned for 17 years; or Oliver Campbell, who spent 11 years in prison and a total of 34 years fighting to clear his name.

All have suffered unimaginable harm as a consequence of their wrongful convictions and, just like my constituent Mr Buckle, deserve justice. The new UK Government have an opportunity to provide it, and I urge them to address this injustice without delay. I know that the Minister will agree with the principle that the state should compensate those who have wrongly been deprived of their liberty by the state, and I would welcome confirmation from her that this is the Government's position.

The Law Commission is consulting on reform to the law governing criminal appeals, because it, too, acknowledges that the current state of affairs is completely unfair. The Law Commission's intervention is to be welcomed, in so far as it acknowledges the unfairness of the current position of the wrongly convicted. In its consultation, the commission suggests that, if the burden is to fall on an accused to prove innocence to obtain compensation, it should be to the civil standard, rather than the criminal standard, as is the position in every other situation in a criminal case where the evidential burden shifts to the defence. That would bring things into line with the normal state of affairs. Will the Minister offer the Government's position on the Law Commission's proposal? Would the Government accept such a recommendation? If they are minded to accept, will they ensure that the recommendation is applied retrospectively to those wrongfully convicted since 13 March 2014?

Although I cautiously welcome to the intervention of the Law Commission, and agree that it would make the current situation fairer, it still does not explain why someone presumed innocent has a further obligation or burden to prove it, nor would it address the failings made by the scheme in determining Mr Buckle's application for compensation, or prevent other claims from being rejected after similar careful consideration.

If the Government maintain that it is necessary for a person presumed innocent to prove it to receive compensation, I do not believe the appropriate authority to make that decision is an official at the Ministry of Justice, someone who, through no fault of their own, will be unfamiliar with the facts of the case and will not have witnessed the evidence given under oath, but who instead must work solely from the papers. Such an individual is not best placed to decide on such applications.

Surely it is the trial jury that is best placed to decide whether the evidence proved Mr Buckle—in this case—to be both not guilty and innocent. I request that the Minister meets us to discuss the handling of Mr Buckle's specific application and also the merits of amending the law to allow a judge to ask the trial jury, in circumstances where they have acquitted the defendant on all charges, to consider also whether they are satisfied on the balance of probabilities that the defendant is innocent of those same charges.

If it is the Government's intention to ensure that true victims of miscarriages of justice are fairly compensated, asking the trial jury to make the decision must be the fairest way. It is difficult to see any rational argument against it. I ask the Minister to be kind enough to agree to a meeting to discuss how we can ensure that Mr Buckle is granted that opportunity, so that this miscarriage of justice and the ordeal that he and his family have endured is finally brought to an end. Urgency is key, because justice delayed is justice denied.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Karl Turner (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob if they wish to catch my eye to be called. I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

4.8 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve for the first time in a Westminster Hall debate that you are chairing, Mr Turner. It has also been a pleasure to hear the speech of the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake). I thank him for selecting this topic for debate and for the outstanding representation he has given to his constituent, Mr Buckle.

There are concerns about miscarriages of justice that go beyond compensation. This debate is specifically about compensation, which I will come to, but it would be remiss of me not to note at the beginning of the process that there are various concerns, particularly around the role of the Criminal Cases Review Commission and more generally—I will come to the Law Commission report later. I will say no more than that there has been recent turbulence at the top of the CCRC and that the Justice Committee is holding a public session on that body on 1 April, when we might also touch on the subject of compensation.

I will briefly take this opportunity to say to the Minister that we are awaiting the appointment of an interim chair, following the resignation of the previous chair. We need an interim chair, and we need a strong interim chair. We also need a good process for selecting a permanent chair of that body. She will know that the Justice Committee has asked to be involved in that process as part of a pre-appointment approval hearing, and I hope that can happen. If she has anything to say on either of those matters today, that would be most welcome.

It is right that there are concerns about the process for identifying miscarriages of justice. I am pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson), who very ably chairs the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice, is here, and no doubt she will say something about this issue. Unless we clearly identify cases, and do so in a

timely manner, the issue of compensation will come even further down the line or will perhaps not even come to the fore.

We have heard that the Law Commission is producing a substantial report—it is a very substantial consultation exercise, at some 700 pages so far—looking at the way that the CCRC operates. The Law Commission correctly says that the test that exists for referring cases is a faulty one. “Faulty” is my word; what the Law Commission says is that there is a real possibility that referred decisions would not be upheld due to a new argument or evidence not raised in the original or appeal proceedings, which effectively means that the CCRC is having to second-guess the view of the Court of Appeal. The Law Commission is consulting on that, and it says that it is provisionally persuaded that the current test should be replaced with a non-predictive one.

The second important change that the Law Commission is putting forward for consultation is that the CCRC should return to what I think it was originally intended and have an investigatory function. In so many cases, evidence presented to the CCRC is not looked at in good time, and when it is looked at, it is looked at purely on the merits of what is submitted, rather than the CCRC going behind the case to see whether there has been a substantial miscarriage of justice.

Let me turn specifically to the issue of compensation. This issue has been added to the Law Commission review, and it has said, in very strong terms, that it believes that the law as it stands is incoherent on that point. The concluding paragraph in that section of the report, paragraph 16.75, says:

“The current compensation scheme seemingly prioritises minimising the risk of the guilty receiving compensation at the expense of the innocent receiving compensation. Some people who are provably innocent – on the balance of probabilities, which would ordinarily apply in civil compensation proceedings – are denied compensation. The stringent requirements of the current compensation scheme seem to be in tension with the overall objective of the criminal justice system. As noted by Lord Phillips, requiring a wrongfully convicted person to prove their innocence beyond reasonable doubt is a ‘heavy price to pay’ to ensure that no guilty person receives compensation. We consider that imposing the criminal standard of proof on an applicant is indefensible and inconsistent with the fundamental principles that underlie our criminal justice system.” That is incredibly strong language from a body that is as thoughtful and reserved as the Law Commission.

It has also been said that some of the recent, and of course welcome, compensation schemes that have been devised to deal with the injustices in the Post Office Horizon scandal—there are four separate schemes for that—have had to be devised to deal with something that was a national outrage, affecting many thousands of people, because the current system simply does not work on its own merits.

I say gently to the Minister that all those factors are reasons why we have to look at both the issue of wrongful conviction and the issue of compensation for wrongful conviction. I do not want to go over the same ground that has been very assiduously described already by the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli, who secured this debate, but it has been said that, with each passing decade, there have been more and more restrictions.

There have been some positive steps. The previous Lord Chancellor, Alex Chalk, was right to end the disgrace of those who had been exonerated having to pay for their bed and board while in custody out of

[*Andy Slaughter*]

their compensation. That compensation is already heavily limited. The circumstances under which that compensation becomes available have, as we have heard, become extraordinarily limited. I can give one statistic in relation to that.

In 2005-06 the compensation actually awarded to victims of miscarriages of justice was £14.6 million. Ten years later—this is the total sum—it was £12,493. To all intents and purposes, compensation has ended as far as victims of miscarriage of justice are concerned. Of course, that is not everything. The important thing is to get people out of prison and clear their names once they have been exonerated. But the financial, material and other damages, including emotional damages, that in any field of civil law would be compensated, simply have not been addressed. People are still being punished.

As in the case of Mr Buckle, people are still being punished despite being exonerated. The state should not just be apologising, redressing wrong and vindicating people who have been shown to be in that situation. The idea that the “beyond reasonable doubt” test is a reasonable test, if there was ever an argument for it when it was introduced in 2014, has been disproved. The rationale was that if somebody was cleared on a technicality, it would be wrong for the state to compensate them for that. Well, the system is able to deal with cases like that. What it has done is caught everybody in its net, including the most deserving cases.

The only thing we have to think about when it comes to whether we have a just or unjust system at the moment is which historical cases would now be caught. At the invitation of the chair of the APPG, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside, I attended a 50th anniversary event of the Birmingham Six a week or two ago at which there were representatives of many other miscarriages of justice. The fact remains that were the Birmingham Six now being exonerated, or the Guildford Four, the Cardiff Three or many other cases, they would not receive compensation. The line has moved so far to one side that in almost every case there is an injustice.

Yes, it is vital that we get right the way we deal with miscarriages of justice, whether that is in the Court of Appeal, the CCRC or through legislation. Clearing someone’s name and getting them out of prison when they have been undeservedly sent there is one thing. Ensuring that they, their families and their lives are put back on track requires substantial sums of money—not thousands of pounds, but often hundreds of thousands of pounds, or in some cases millions of pounds.

There are arbitrary limits and insuperable barriers, which is itself a grave injustice. The sooner that we can change that system, the better. I do not know what my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to say today, but within the next weeks and months we have to see not just a review of the rules on compensation, but a review of the whole way that the miscarriages system functions—in particular a review of the role of the CCRC, which appears to have severely lost its way.

4.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. I wish you well in your new role. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) for raising this issue. I watched him

on TV this morning being interviewed with his constituent. He should be commended and applauded for his efforts on behalf of his constituent to find justice. In my intervention earlier I said to him that everyone is innocent until proven guilty, not the other way round, and that is the thrust of what the hon. Gentleman has put forward. Like him, I cannot comprehend it.

Someone found not guilty is not guilty. If the court cannot prove it and feels that he or she should be freed, then for me the matter is clear. As has been alluded to, Northern Ireland does not operate under the same scheme as England and Wales, but we do have a scheme that has been accessed. Cases can be referred to the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal by the Criminal Cases Review Commission. The CCRC investigates wrongful convictions in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It was set up by the Government in response to a number of high-profile miscarriages of justice, including the case of the Birmingham Six. It receives some 1,400 applications a year from across the United Kingdom, including some 40 from Northern Ireland. Anyone in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can apply to the CCRC about a miscarriage of justice.

I recently read a BBC article on compensation for miscarriages of justice in Northern Ireland. It highlighted that more than £9 million

“has been paid in compensation since 2010 to 16 people who have had their criminal convictions overturned in Northern Ireland.”

So there is a compensation system under the CCRC, which has compensated at least those people in Northern Ireland. That is why the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli is right to pursue similar compensation for his constituent. The article noted that

“New figures show that 84 people were wrongly convicted of crimes between 2007 and 2017. Charges ranged from murder to rape and included people serving life sentences. At least half of those who had their convictions overturned spent time in prison, amounting collectively to more than 100 years in custody.”

Of those 84 convictions, 30% were for sexual crimes, 90% of those wrongfully convicted were men and 31 cases led to a retrial.

I am always mindful of the victims of crime—this week I have been highlighting the issues of victims in other circumstances. Even in cases where convictions are quashed, we should consider the words of Dr Hannah Quirk—a former CCRC caseworker and criminal law lecturer:

“it’s important to also understand what is meant by wrongful conviction. It would be very unusual for the Court of Appeal to say someone is innocent, instead it decides whether any new evidence has come to light that makes a conviction unsafe. So not all these cases will necessarily be about innocence and more about if the criminal justice system applied the rules fairly at the time and whether or not if the trial happened today that the person would be convicted based on the latest available evidence.”

That last phrase, about whether the person would be convicted based on the latest available evidence, shows why the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli is correct to pursue compensation for his constituent. We need to ensure for victims of crime that justice is carried out. Unsafe convictions are not justice and for those who are innocent, there should be compensation.

The old saying “There’s no smoke without fire” is often used when considering someone’s guilt, but a wrongful conviction leads to people having to restart their lives. What does that mean? I was thinking about it

before this debate. It sometimes means that families have to move home, move their children to a new school, seek new jobs, and work out how they are going to take care of their mortgage. The issue of compensation is focal to what has to happen for those people who have to make a fresh start because of failings in the system and not because of their own deeds—the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli referred to that. It is right and proper that there should be help to start a new life for those who are genuinely innocent. However, the criteria for that compensation must be strict—we are not saying that it should not be. However, whenever there is a clear case of innocence, there should be no reasonable doubt from impartial eyes.

In Northern Ireland, compensation for victims of the troubles has been skewed, in that perpetrators of crimes can receive compensation for those crimes. Gerry Adams could receive compensation, or Gerry Kelly, who shot a prison officer in the head during a prison escape. Those people should never receive a single penny adorned with our King's head, and that is why we must retain a very close scheme for these matters.

When there is a clear case—as the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli clearly illustrated in the TV and radio coverage, as well as today in this Chamber, where he has put forward an admirable case on behalf of his constituent—I support access to redress, but not for any purpose. I believe the judiciary must continue to have courage in its convictions and be supported to deliver real justice in every way possible.

4.25 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mr Turner. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) for securing this important and timely debate, and for the vital work that he is doing in support of his constituent Brian Buckle and, by extension, all victims of miscarriages of justice, including those convicted under joint enterprise. I also declare my interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice.

As mentioned, earlier this month I held an event in Parliament to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the conviction of the Birmingham Six, and to remember the Maguire Seven and the Guildford Four, all of whom were wrongfully persecuted and convicted and all of whom fought tooth and nail for exoneration and justice. We heard some harrowing testimonies from Paddy Maguire, who was just 13 at the time of his arrest and suffered immense police brutality, and served time for his alleged handling of explosives. He and his family were eventually cleared of all wrongdoing, but the scars still run deep.

We hoped to hear from Paddy Hill, a titan of the justice world who dedicated his life not only to clearing his own name but to fixing the systemic issues that facilitated his wrongful persecution and prosecution in the first place. Unfortunately, he passed away in December last year, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to his life and work. Paddy was wrongly imprisoned for 16 years following the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings in one of the most profound examples of injustice in the UK legal system. Following his release, he campaigned tirelessly for justice on behalf of other wrongfully convicted prisoners.

Paddy's dedication and the widespread outcry after the wrongful convictions of the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four and Maguire Seven led to the establishment of the Criminal Cases Review Commission to prevent similar injustices. It was the first state body in the world established to help those convicted who claimed to be innocent. However, as we have heard, years of cuts and overlap in personnel with the police and courts undermined the CCRC's effectiveness and independence.

There have been many recent scandals, including the outrageous case of Andy Malkinson, who served 17 years in prison for a rape he did not commit in what has been called one of the worst miscarriages of justice in UK legal history. In the months after leaving prison, Malkinson was reliant on food banks and universal credit, suffering from mental ill health due to his wrongful conviction. Last month, he was finally awarded a six-figure sum as compensation, but he is one of only a handful of people wrongly convicted of a crime to be compensated in recent years.

Since the 2014 overhaul of the compensation policy by the coalition Government, the bar has been raised insurmountably high for most victims of wrongful convictions. The result has been a virtual halt in all compensation payouts for these devastating miscarriages of justice. In reality, only those who can demonstrate that new DNA or alibi evidence proved that they did not commit the crime will receive compensation—an absurdly high threshold that reverses the burden of proof and does not reflect the principles of just law. In practice, it is impossible to achieve that for the vast majority of cases.

Between 2020 and 2023, the MOJ paid out less than £1.3 million in compensation to victims of miscarriages of justice, following a two-year period when not a single penny of compensation was paid out. To put that in context, between 2007 and 2009, a total of £20.8 million was paid out.

Following the Post Office Horizon scandal and the infected blood scandal, we know that public sympathy and support for victims of miscarriages of justice are strong. The principle of fair justice is universally held, but it should be the true rule, not the exception. We should not need significant political campaigns and interventions from the top for justice to be accessed. Our justice systems should work according to the law and the principles on which they were founded. Where wrongdoings are done, there should be checks and balances to ensure that justice is achieved.

Instead, we see significant backlogs in the CCRC, with only a trickle of cases making it through to the Court of Appeal. While the recent resignation of the chair is welcome, we know the systemic failings and the lack of funding reveal the need for a complete overhaul, not just a change of leadership. Cases like the Birmingham Four are still awaiting a decision on their application to appeal. People who believe they can prove their innocence and who have a right to appeal their convictions are rotting in jail, while the system creaks.

If the public are to have confidence in the underfunded and struggling criminal justice system, they need to have confidence that the processes are both fair and appear to be fair. Checks and balances are needed throughout the system, and they need adequate resourcing and support. Miscarriages of justice ruin lives, not just for the victims but for their families and loved ones. Compensation

[Kim Johnson]

must be paid where it is due, and victims should not have to wait and fight for years to secure it when they have already been put through so much.

The British legal system is supposedly predicated on the principle of innocent until proven guilty. I hope today's debate will help us get back to that principle and make sure that those who have been wronged have access to justice.

4.31 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) for securing this important debate. I also declare my interest as a member of the Justice Committee.

I read about Brian Buckle's case this morning, and I want to express how sorry I am for what he went through and the injustice he and his family have suffered. Compensation payments awarded to victims of miscarriages of justice can be life-changing for the individuals involved. As a solicitor before becoming an MP, dealing with negligence cases where I pursued compensation claims for clients who had suffered injustice, I appreciate how important compensation can be for victims of miscarriages of justice. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) mentioned that such cases are not just about compensation, and he mentioned the Law Commission's consultation, which I will not repeat here.

Just as important as obtaining financial compensation is the need for access to justice, so that those victims of miscarriages of justice can have their names cleared, their experiences acknowledged, and the harm inflicted upon them and their families recognised, together with a commitment to prevent future injustices. Very often in my career as a solicitor, I came across clients who had been very badly injured, but what they ultimately wanted was a proper apology and an acknowledgment that they had been wronged, rather than seeking maximum levels of compensation.

Access to justice is something that we, as parliamentarians, should be advocating for. The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act means that those wrongfully convicted must not only overturn their conviction but prove they are innocent beyond all reasonable doubt to be eligible for financial compensation. That unfairly reverses the burden of proof, where a person is presumed innocent until their guilt is proven beyond all reasonable doubt. This reversal of the burden of proof makes no sense at all and is contrary to the basic principles and rules of criminal justice in this country.

Mr Buckle's KC, Mr Stephen Vullo, said he believes that the law was changed in 2014 to ensure that money is not paid out to victims of miscarriages of justice, and that it was a policy decision deliberately made to avoid the payment of compensation. It is therefore no surprise that, following the 2014 Act, there has been a huge decrease in the number and value of compensation payments that have been awarded.

Between 2016 and 2024, of 591 applications, the Ministry of Justice compensated only 39 claimants, representing a rejection rate of more than 93%. The law needs to be changed because justice and the opportunity for redress must be available for all in our society.

A former criminal defence solicitor and specialist in miscarriages of justice at the University of Manchester, Suzanne Gower, says the current system is "inhuman" and "cruel" and sends a message that the state does not accept responsibility when it causes harm—that is clearly wrong.

It is essential that proper compensation payments are made so that victims of miscarriages of justice can recover the costs they have incurred in proving their innocence and be compensated for all they have suffered. However, alongside the correction of historical injustices, more needs to be done to ensure that we prevent these incidents from occurring in the first place. We need to learn lessons about why things have gone wrong by investing in investigative processes, ensuring accountability within institutions and promoting a culture of transparency. Those measures would not only save the Government and the taxpayer from a financial burden in the long run but, crucially, they would prevent more people from being harmed and prevent further miscarriages of justice.

4.37 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your inaugural chairmanship, Mr Turner. I look forward to speaking in the debates that you chair in the weeks, months and years to come.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) on securing this debate, the focus of which strikes at the heart of our justice system: principles of fairness, accountability and, ultimately, the duty of the state to right its wrongs. There are no two ways about it: those who have been wrongfully convicted are not merely victims of an unfortunate mistake; they are victims of a gross failure of the state. These individuals have lost not only their liberty, but their livelihoods, their families, their reputations, their dignity and much more. For all the talk of compensation today, no amount of money is able to restore a loss of such profound dimensions.

On the subject of compensation, the miscarriages of justice compensation scheme was set up with the best of intentions to ensure that those who have suffered the gravest injustices are properly compensated. However, as we have heard both in the Chamber today and beyond, that system has perpetuated the injustices it was meant to put right. How? We have heard that in cases where a person's convictions are quashed, our system forces them to jump acrobatically through legal hoops to access even the most basic financial redress.

We have heard about the case of Andrew Malkinson, who spent 17 years in prison following a conviction that transpired to be unsafe. He had to wait years beyond that for his first tranche of compensation, and he is still waiting for the rest. Such waits and injustices are a national disgrace, not least because they are experienced by so many across our country.

The hon. Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) mentioned the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses who also suffered such gross injustices after being wrongly convicted in the Horizon Post Office scandal. People like Kathleen Crane, the former sub-postmistress at Old Town post office in Eastbourne who was wrongly convicted of fraud and made to "pay back" £18,000 that she never owed before her conviction was overturned last year. Despite the injustices that those caught up in this scandal faced, the Horizon convictions redress scheme and the

Horizon shortfall scheme—the two special compensation schemes—have been paying out compensation at much too slow a pace, which is a great dishonour to those who were unfairly convicted. I thought the Business and Trade Committee put it aptly when it said of the process that it was,

“akin to a second trial for victims”.

Many folks in this Chamber and beyond, across party political divides, have long campaigned for a fairer approach to addressing miscarriages of justice. The Liberal Democrats are proud to have been part of that tradition, and we continue to be. We believe that when the state wrongfully convicts an individual, it has a moral and legal duty to provide full and proper compensation without unnecessary bureaucratic barriers, or barriers that undermine fundamental maxims of our legal system. That is why urgent reform is necessary. We must ensure that compensation is granted promptly without retraumatising legal battles, and must ensure that it reflects not just the financial cost, but the emotional and psychological toll of wrongful imprisonment. When the state gets it wrong in such a profound way, it must have the courage to put things right.

I conclude my remarks by touching on an insightful comment made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about victims and survivors. What we are talking about today, being passionate about correcting these injustices, is not incompatible with supporting those victims and survivors who are brave enough to come forward, who report what has happened to them to the police, who take what has happened to them to the court, but who ultimately do not get the conviction they hoped to secure. To have a criminal justice system that works for those victims and survivors, it is critical that everybody can have confidence in how it functions on both sides of the dock and both sides of the courtroom.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s take. Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli for securing this debate.

4.43 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I join everyone else in congratulating the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) on securing this debate and putting it front and centre of the Minister’s timetable, which is always an important achievement. The hon. Gentleman has done an ample job of representing his constituent, whose experiences we have heard about today.

Overall, the UK’s justice system is one of the most respected in the world, and it is built on a long-standing foundation of trust in, and respect for, the rule of law. At the heart of that trust and respect is the belief in the ability of the law to right injustices, including those caused by the justice system itself. Ensuring that miscarriages of justice are rectified is vital to preserving that belief, and providing compensation to victims where appropriate is an important part of the process.

Work began under the last Government to reform compensation for victims. In 2023 the then Lord Chancellor, Alex Chalk, removed the guidance on miscarriage of justice compensation, first introduced in 2006, that allowed deductions for living expenses saved while in prison. That common-sense change applied to all future

payments with immediate effect, and it was vital in restoring fairness to this aspect of the compensation schemes.

The last Government’s legal aid reforms have also been important in improving fairness and reducing delays to compensation applications. As a result of these new reforms, payments made through the miscarriage of justice compensation scheme no longer make people automatically ineligible for legal aid, helping to improve access to justice for those wrongly convicted.

In the light of the concerns about miscarriages of justice, comprehensive data on compensation applications was made available by the last Government. That data has proved vital in informing the ongoing debate on compensation for wrongful convictions. I urge the Government to show similar transparency in that area.

It remains clear that a comprehensive assessment of miscarriages of justice was needed, which is why the Government asked the Law Commission to review the law relating to criminal appeals in criminal cases. That review expanded to include compensation for wrongful convictions, and it raised a number of important points. I understand that it focused particularly on whether the UK is meeting its obligations under the international covenant on civil and political rights.

The Law Commission has now recommended a number of reforms to compensation and support for the wrongly convicted, including replacing the requirement for people to prove their innocence beyond reasonable doubt—an issue on which we have focused considerably today—with only needing proof of innocence on the balance of probabilities to receive compensation. It is important that those proposals are thoroughly considered before any final decision is made, and I welcome the ongoing consultation by the Law Commission to that end.

It is important that the additional costs that any changes to miscarriage of justice compensation would entail are thoroughly assessed and understood. I urge the Government to conduct a thorough cost assessment of any proposed changes and to make that data publicly available for scrutiny before any final decision on reforms to compensation are taken. I am sure that all Members here would agree on the importance of providing appropriate compensation for the victims of miscarriages of justice. I urge the Government to consider the responses to the Law Commission’s consultation carefully, and to consider how we might better support the wrongfully convicted.

4.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): It is a privilege to serve under your inaugural chairship today, Mr Turner, and what an important debate for that chairship. I also place on record my sincere diolch yn fawr iawn to the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) for bringing this important debate to this place, and for highlighting the case of his constituent, Mr Buckle, and his family.

Fairness is a core pillar of our justice system. Miscarriages of justice are thankfully very rare, but they have a devastating impact on those who suffer them. They are victims of the state, so it is right that the state should help and support those people in rebuilding their lives. It is also right that we should seek to redress the occurrence of miscarriages of justice and to reduce

[*Alex Davies-Jones*]

them by learning lessons when things go wrong. Ensuring people are better protected from miscarriages of justice is one part of the Government's "Plan for Change."

Any miscarriage of justice is a tragedy, both for the person who is wrongfully convicted and—as was eloquently expressed by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson—for the victim of the original crime and their family, who have not seen justice done. As the Minister with responsibility for victims and violence against women and girls, I know how important it is that victims have confidence in the criminal justice system and that we have safeguards in place such as the Court of Appeal and the Criminal Cases Review Commission. We work hard to ensure that, when errors occur, changes are put in place to prevent similar cases from ever happening again.

As we have heard, the last year has seen some miscarriages of justice that have shocked all of us as a society, including the Post Office Horizon scandal and the appalling case of Andrew Malkinson, who was convicted of a crime he did not commit. While those cases are the exception, they require serious and swift action, which we are taking.

The Lord Chancellor has met Mr Malkinson to hear how his case has affected him. Following her meeting with him, she acted swiftly to ensure that those receiving a compensation payout for a miscarriage of justice will not have their financial eligibility for legal aid affected. The Lord Chancellor has stated her conviction that justice must be a reality, not an ideal, and I wholeheartedly agree. Following the agreement of Parliament to overturn the postmasters' convictions, this Government acted swiftly to stand up a compensation scheme specifically for those affected. As of February this year, 273 final claims have been paid along with 407 interim payments, with the Government issuing £190 million in compensation.

As I turn to the issue of compensation, which is what this debate is about, I feel it is important at the outset to clarify what we mean when we talk about a miscarriage of justice. The Court of Appeal is a vital safeguard in the criminal justice system. If someone appeals their sentence within the time limit, which is normally 28 days, and the Court of Appeal overturns their conviction, that is the system working as it should to correct any errors. That is not a miscarriage of justice. The interest here today is in those who have exhausted the usual appeal processes, and have often referred themselves to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. If the CCRC finds that there is a real possibility that the Court of Appeal will not uphold the conviction, it will refer the case. If the conviction is then overturned, the person may have a qualifying miscarriage of justice for the purposes of compensation. It is important to outline that here.

The miscarriage of justice application service, known as MOJAS, pays compensation to those who have suffered a qualifying miscarriage of justice. References today to a 93% refusal rate do not necessarily provide the full picture, because the Department routinely receives applications from people who do not pass the initial triage stage. Reasons for that may include that they had their conviction overturned simply following an in-time appeal, or that they had not had their conviction overturned at all; in some cases, there is no criminal conviction in

the first place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) highlighted, in the six years to April 2024, there were 591 applications received, but only 133 passed the triage and were eligible for full consideration. Of the 133 applications that passed the triage, 39 have been awarded compensation, with the Government paying out £2.4 million.

Understandably, there is some debate about where the line should be drawn for the purposes of compensation, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for outlining that. However, I highlight that there are a number of reasons why someone might have their conviction quashed on appeal, and we believe it is right that there should be a process by which eligibility for compensation from the Government should be assessed. That will ensure that taxpayers' money is used appropriately and effectively. The test is designed so that only those who can demonstrate that their conviction has been reversed on the basis of a new or newly discovered fact that shows beyond reasonable doubt that they did not commit the offence can receive compensation from the state.

The 2023 European Court of Human Rights judgment, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli, considered the test by which eligibility for compensation was assessed in the case of Nealon and Hallam. In its judgment, issued in 2024, the Court found that the test did not breach applicants' rights under article 6, specifically the presumption of innocence.

MOJAS is just one route by which someone whose conviction is quashed can receive compensation or support. For example, it may also be open to someone to bring a civil claim in cases where a particular agency is at fault. Support is also available through the miscarriage of justice support service, which is part of Citizens Advice, based at the Royal Courts of Justice. The support service provides advice and support to those who have their convictions quashed to help them to rebuild their lives. That could involve helping someone find accommodation, assisting with benefit claims or signposting to psychological support services. Anyone who has had their case referred to the Court of Appeal by the Criminal Cases Review Commission is eligible for that support.

I also highlight the work that we are doing in this area both to reduce occurrences of miscarriages of justice and to improve the Government's response to them. The Post Office scandal highlighted the lack of oversight of prosecutions brought by private prosecutors. On 6 March, the Government launched a consultation on the oversight and regulation of private prosecutions, with the aim of ensuring that any organisation bringing a private prosecution does so according to rigorous standards and is subject to appropriate scrutiny. In addition, we have launched a call for evidence on the use of evidence generated by software in criminal proceedings. That will inform potential reforms to the law, to ensure that evidence produced by software can be properly assured.

As the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli mentioned, the Law Commission is currently consulting on a wide range of changes to the laws relating to criminal appeals. The consultation is rigorous, with more than 100 questions, including questions on compensation for miscarriages of justice. We look forward to the final report in 2026, and we will consider all its recommendations in the round before deciding on any necessary reforms.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the process is fair for all involved in the criminal justice system, and a key part of that commitment is the effectiveness of the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which carries out the vital work of investigating potential miscarriages of justice. As highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), the Chair of the Justice Committee, the Secretary of State is in the process of recruiting an interim chair as a matter of priority. The interim chair will be tasked with conducting a full and thorough review of how the organisation operates. The findings of that review, together with the final report of the Law Commission, will provide us with the evidence we need to ensure that any change we make to the system will promote fairness and justice for all involved in criminal justice proceedings.

I will ensure that the request for a meeting is passed to the Minister of State, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), who is responsible for this brief. Unfortunately, she cannot be here today as she is in the assisted dying Bill Committee, but I will ensure it is passed on. I will also take a keen interest in the case, which I am sure the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli will mention to me at every opportunity.

It is an important principle of the justice system that people who are convicted should have the right to seek leave to apply to a higher court to review their conviction. It is also vital in the rare cases when things do go wrong that the system works effectively to correct errors and ensure that those who have suffered can rebuild their lives. I emphasise again that when the wrong person is convicted, it fails those who are wrongly convicted and also the victim of the original crime. The Government have acted and will continue to act to ensure that lessons are learned and justice is done.

4.55 pm

Ben Lake: I begin by apologising, Mr Turner, for failing to acknowledge that this is your inaugural session in the Chamber. May I say how admirably and professionally you have chaired the debate, especially given that we had the unexpected interruption of Divisions? Thank you very much for doing so. I also thank my fellow Members from every part of the United Kingdom for their contributions. It is heartening to hear a great degree of consensus that there is a wrong to be righted and that the new Government have the opportunity to do that.

In summing up, I will make a few quick points. We have this opportunity to right a very clear wrong. There are far too many people who have had their convictions overturned, and who have been found not guilty at retrial after spending years in prison, but who are still awaiting compensation. We need to appreciate that any delay to this justice is effectively justice denied. While appreciating the need to proceed with caution and reasonably, we need to make sure that we do not waste any time, because too many individuals have already suffered ordeals for far too long.

We have an opportunity here, as Members of Parliament and with a new Government, to do something that I think is very honourable. It is something that a far more honourable Member than I, who sat just over here, once told me: we are sent to this place to right wrongs. I think today there is a great consensus in that endeavour.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered miscarriage of justice compensation.

4.57 pm

Sitting suspended.

Supported Internship Provision

5.6 pm

Karl Turner (in the Chair): I will call the Member in charge to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for a 30-minute debate.

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered supported internship provision.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner.

Yesterday, we heard some dreadful statistics about the stifling of the ambition of people with additional needs who would choose to work but face too many barriers and limited opportunities. The most striking statistic that I heard yesterday was that only 1% of people with health issues who have claimed limited capability to work benefits actually return to work.

I know people with significant disabilities who have thrived in truly exceptional and inclusive businesses, such as the King's Award-winning Nuneaton Signs, which is not only one of the biggest manufacturers of road signs in the country but boasts a workforce of whom an incredible 70% are disabled, including those with learning difficulties.

We know that as many as 86% of those with learning difficulties who are not in work would like to be, but workplaces need to make the adjustments that our young people need, and they need to be ready for work. We must break down the barriers, and supported internships are a way to do that, both for those wishing to enter the workforce and for businesses wishing to provide a more inclusive employment offer.

Previously, the Department for Education has recognised the value of supported internships. It provided grants for local authorities and partner organisations to double the number of internships between 2020 and 2025 under the Internships Work consortium.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. She clearly has a heart for her people, including her young people, and I commend her for that. I thank her for getting here on time, too; I am not sure how fast she ran, but well done to her. Does she agree that supported internships provide not simply confidence for our young people, but valuable assistance for businesses, and that more businesses perhaps need to be aware of the potential to recruit skilled permanent staff through a different avenue, offering those staff a different opportunity?

Jodie Gosling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and note that only 23% of businesses have applied for adjustments to accommodate disabled people to enter the workforce. These internships are crucial, and they are a really good, supported way into work.

There are four key principles to the supported internship programme. First, the majority of the intern's time is spent at the employer's premises in a work placement, allowing a structured introduction to the work environment. Secondly, alongside their time at the employer, the intern follows a personalised study curriculum, including in key skills such as maths and English, which creates a bespoke package to support young people and enable them to progress into paid employment. Thirdly, a job

coach is central to the study programme. They support the young person to access training in line with the national occupational standard for supported employment, and provide crucial support for the employer to make necessary adjustments and reflect on their inclusivity practices.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for securing this debate. Several of my constituents with special educational needs are taking part in the supported internship programme at George Eliot hospital in her constituency. I am delighted that they have been able to take up that opportunity to learn important skills and to engage in independent work. I was glad to hear that between 50% and 75% of people who undertake the internships get full employment afterwards. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should continue to support these internships to deliver opportunities for students with special educational needs and disabilities across the west midlands, and will the Minister highlight these excellent programmes, particularly to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions?

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. Before Jodie Gosling continues, I remind Members that interventions are meant to be very short; they are not meant to be speeches.

Jodie Gosling: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and absolutely—the crucial aspect is enabling people into good, well-paid jobs.

The final principle of supported internships is for young people to gain paid employment that fits not only their passions but their long-term career goals, while providing the flexibility to overcome barriers. Supported internships have demonstrated evidence that, with a compassionate scaffolding, the proportion of young people with an education, health and care plan who enter the workforce, which is currently a woeful 5%, can be vastly improved to 60%, through the delivery of the four key principles that I have just stated.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I recently visited Asda in Spondon in my constituency, where there is a supported internship under way called Project SEARCH. It is delivered with the YMCA and the Direct Education Business Partnership. It is a fantastic scheme, and when I met those young people, it was clear that the initiative had transformed their lives. In some cases, they had struggled to get employment elsewhere. May I encourage my hon. Friend to welcome that initiative?

Jodie Gosling: Absolutely. I will come to this later, but we were inspired by a visit to Asda and its supported interns.

The supported internship scheme builds on the applicant's interests and passions, and it provides them with flexibility to try different types of employment opportunities and build skills in a range of sectors with organisations such as the NHS, Asda, Amazon and Goldman Sachs.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): There is a lot of talk about Asda, and I pay tribute to the Asda in Tunstall in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kids Grove, which has an excellent supported internship

programme that helps young people to step up into employment. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as outlined in the Green Paper published yesterday, we must ensure that Access to Work is strengthened for adults by raising awareness of the scheme and clearing the backlog?

Jodie Gosling: I absolutely agree that we need to remove the backlog and get more people into good, paid employment with the skills that they need to become independent.

Paragraph 59 of the “Pathways to Work” Green Paper clearly demonstrates an ambition to change working practices to support employers to make workplaces accessible and inclusive. The Green Paper discusses the “scarring effects’ from youth employment and inactivity.”

Not only is delayed entry into the workforce costly, but it has a negative impact on the individual, damaging their long-term mental and physical health.

The youth guarantee scheme—a commitment to offer every young person a guaranteed place of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a training scheme within four months of leaving formal education—is also set to bring about monumental change. If we are to achieve such clear ambitions, then work, and support for young people, especially those with SEND, needs to adapt rapidly.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I have seen how supported internship programmes at City of Wolverhampton college and Adult Education Wolverhampton have made a real difference for 16 to 24-year-olds with EHCPs. However, with one in eight young people not in education, employment or training, does my hon. Friend agree that widening participation for NEETs would be one further way to support more young people into work?

Jodie Gosling: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that, with success rates moving from 5% to a dramatic 60%, the model could be applied more widely to the 1 million NEETs, or to people re-entering the workforce or retraining.

In January, I had the pleasure of meeting five supported interns at Nuneaton’s branch of Asda, and their job coaches from the brilliant North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire college. The exciting thing about supported internships is that the interns learn by doing: they have a chance to develop new professional and personal skills while working alongside employees in a real employment setting. The combination of meaningful experiences of the world of work and a study programme creates great opportunities for interns to develop marketable skills in preparation for paid work, by providing access to in-work qualifications such as health and hygiene certificates.

We know that paid employment brings young people financial independence, builds their confidence and self-esteem, and provides them with opportunities to gain new friendships and to improve and maintain their health and wellbeing. There are also wider benefits to our community, including broader economic growth and the promotion of diversity and inclusion in all workplaces. The benefits to interns of taking part in these schemes are numerous.

Ethan, one of the students I met at Asda, told me that the internship had helped with his anxiety and with talking to new people, both staff and customers. Adrian, who is also on the scheme, said that he finds it much easier to talk to people and, importantly, feels able to approach people for help, not only when he is on the placement but as part of his everyday life. The structured environment, alongside ongoing support, allows interns to acquire and practise essential organisational skills that they will need to join the workforce.

Leo told me that his timekeeping and attendance had improved since he started at Asda, and that he was happier—an outcome commonly reported by the thousands of students on the scheme, and one shared by their parents, who we know have worked incredibly hard to fight for their children’s EHCPs through a tricky system, just to ensure that their children had access to a suitable education and that their needs were met. Supported internships give parents a vital break from caring to take time for themselves and do the millions of other things that they have to do, while still playing a supportive role and having a say in their children’s future.

In 2013, Social Value Lab found that parents of interns reported increased peace of mind that their child was better prepared for the future, and that their child found it easier to handle change and was more resilient in the workforce. Supported internships were also found to improve family relationships as a whole—happier children and happier parents. The same Social Value Lab report demonstrated that DFN Project SEARCH, a supported internship provider, creates considerable social value of £3.80 for every £1 spent on the scheme.

For me, the most meaningful outcome was that the interns reported having a sense of purpose. That speaks to the broken system that we heard about yesterday, wherein disabled people are written off and those who want to seek employment are locked out of contributing to the world of work. Importantly, Asda as a provider also saw huge benefits in hosting the interns. The staff culture on the shop floor embraced and welcomed the interns, and the scheme made the management re-evaluate the accessibility of its hiring process, which is an insurmountable barrier to most people with disabilities trying to enter employment. How on earth can we get people working if the first step to employment is an insurmountable barrier?

With yesterday’s announcement on pathways to work, and the Government’s aim to get people working, the timing of this debate could not be more pertinent. We all know that young people want to work and want independence, but some require specialist support to transition into employment. Supported interns are the key to achieving this. They have been proven to succeed in getting young people back into employment. Will the Department for Education commit to continuing to invest in supported internship programmes and getting people back to work? Will the Minister give an update on the decision to extend the Internships Work consortium?

The profound success of supported internships is reason enough to extend the criteria to young people without an EHCP, those with mental health conditions and those struggling with persistent absenteeism from school. Will the Minister commit to boosting supported internships further and widening the criteria for interns?

[Jodie Gosling]

We talk regularly and passionately about the damage done and the inherited SEND crisis, but a key issue is the lack of focus on outcomes and transitions to adulthood. As an early years SEND specialist, I have first-hand experience of the importance of early intervention, but I recognise that we cannot write off those the system has already failed. We need to support young disabled people as they leave school. For too many people with SEND, the support runs out after they graduate the classroom.

We cannot prioritise educational provision without considering the educational and employment outcomes. Is the Department for Education working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that those outcomes are considered when addressing the SEND crisis? After seeing the success of the supported internships during my Asda visit, I will meet more supported interns at our local NHS hospital, to hear their experiences. I invite the Minister to join us—I believe the email is in her inbox.

Finally, it is my honour to host the first parliament of young people with SEND on Monday, as part of National Supported Internship Day, when 70 young people who have taken part in the supported internship project will come to Westminster to discuss what matters to them. I hope it will mark a historic step towards greater inclusion, representation and advocacy for some of the most marginalised voices in our society. All interested colleagues are welcome to attend the parliament to promote inclusive policymaking. I thank the Minister for her time and all those who came to listen and contribute.

5.22 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):

It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Turner. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) on securing this debate on an incredibly important topic. It is clear from her speech and the work she does that she has a keen interest in supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, and supported internships in particular, and it is clear from the other contributions that her passions are very much shared.

Supported internships are excellent study programmes that provide 16 to 24-year-olds with EHCPs with the skills they need to transition to paid employment. Over the last couple of months, events have been held in each region to celebrate the progress made on supported internships in local communities, after three years of Government investment. A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of speaking to interns, parents and carers when I attended an event celebrating success in London. At that event I met Rayhan, who had a work placement with Transport for London, and whose confidence had grown hugely thanks to the supported internship programme. I met and spoke to many of the young people at that powerful event; they were very proud, but the parents who were with them were even prouder. It was wonderful to see good practice being shared around the country.

Looking ahead to one week tomorrow, the third National Supported Internship Day will take place on 27 March, with more events scheduled throughout the

country, including a youth parliament and webinars to raise awareness of supported internships among young people, their families and employers. Many interns, education providers and employers will also be planning local events to show the incredible achievements and capabilities of young people on the programmes.

To shine a light—literally—even further, Harry Georgiou, who works at DFN Project SEARCH and is CEO of the charity 6 Percent & Rising, has led the drive to have national monuments such as the University of Derby and the Northern Spire bridge, which is not far from my constituency, lit up in orange to celebrate supported internships on National Supported Internships Day. What a fantastic way to mark the day!

I know how important it is to ensure that young people with special educational needs and disabilities are prepared for adulthood and employment. In my own city, Newcastle City Learning has a partnership with Northumbria University and Sodexo, whereby young people complete work placements in various roles, including in ground maintenance and sports centres. There are also placements in hospitals in Newcastle, run by Project Choice; my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton mentioned that there are in her area too. These opportunities provide young people with practical experience and valuable skills that help them to secure paid employment. It is so good to witness all the innovative approaches that have been taken, including in my own area, to champion the inclusive practice we need to see everywhere.

Since 2022 the Department for Education has invested up to £18 million to build capacity in supported internships, to support more young people with education, health and care plans to gain the skills to needed transition into employment. The Internships Work consortium—made up of the National Development Team for Inclusion, the British Association for Supported Employment and DFN Project SEARCH, which I mentioned earlier—has been delivering the investment programme. It has worked closely with local authorities to establish SEND employment forums, focused on improving local supported internship provision; rolled out a quality framework and facilitated peer reviews; trained more than 760 job coaches to provide high-quality support to interns while they are on work placements; and recruited almost 800 employer ambassadors, who advocate for establishing supported internships in businesses.

The data from local authorities shows that we are on track to reach our aim of doubling the number of supported internships to 4,500 when the funding ends at the end of this month. That is a great achievement and will provide real employment opportunities for many people. We know that high-quality programmes achieve employment outcomes, because 60% to 70% of their cohorts go on to employment. That is why the investment has also been focused on improving the quality and consistency of the offers across the country.

The indicative data we have from local authorities shows that last year more than 1,500 young people secured paid employment following their internship. The interim report from the evaluation of the programme also shows progress. It shows that the majority of supported internship providers reported offering more supported internships and an improvement in the quality of intern placements with employers. Although it was from quite a small sample, nearly half the interns surveyed

had jobs six months after finishing their internship, with three quarters of them working more than 16 hours a week, which is fantastic news for them.

We know that the right preparation and support are essential, and that with that the overwhelming majority of young people with SEND are capable of sustained, paid employment. But not enough people are getting the support they need. To build on the investment, the Department has been running a pilot in 12 local authority areas to test the supported internships model with young people with learning difficulties and disabilities who are furthest from the labour market but do not have education, health and care plans, to see whether that can be an effective way to support them into employment. Indicative data from the Internships Work consortium shows that, across this year and last, about 240 young people have enrolled on non-EHCP pilot programmes, with at least 60 people gaining employment last year. This shows there is demand for this kind of pathway and that it can lead to good outcomes.

I know my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton is keen to know about funding. The funding for Internships Work and the pilot for interns without education, health and care plans is committed up to the end of March 2025. It was designed as a three-year investment to build capacity in the system to deliver more high-quality supported internships throughout the country. We have seen huge progress towards achieving those aims, thanks to the hard work of Internships Work and the commitment we have seen from local authorities, education providers, job coaches, employers and, of course, the interns themselves.

The Department received a settlement for the 2025-26 financial year in the autumn Budget, and we are still working through, with the Secretary of State, how we will allocate the budgets for specific programmes. We hope the process will be completed soon, but unfortunately I do not currently have any further information on budgets for next year. It is fantastic to hear that, despite the financial pressures that many local areas face, some plan to continue their SEND employment forums and value the important work that is taking place on supported interns.

A challenge raised by many stakeholders involved in delivering supported internships is the delays that interns can face when they claim DWP Access to Work funding, which can fund interns' in-work support needs during their work placements. Demand for Access to Work has been growing, and the personalised nature of the scheme means that it can take longer to identify a customer's specific needs. Several measures have been put in place, including on streamlining delivery processes and recruiting additional staff, and the DWP has been taking steps to modernise the Access to Work customer journey, with all core parts of the scheme having been fully digital since April 2024.

Access to Work has a dedicated supported internship team in the DWP, which manages all the intern applications. That provides a central point of contact and a direct route for applications. To enable supported interns to have confidence that support will be in place before they start their internship, they can submit Access to Work applications up to six months before they start their work placements.

Despite the DWP having a dedicated team within Access to Work to process supported intern applications, delays are still occurring due to the high demand for Access to Work funding. To make it easier for supported interns to apply, the DWP is working to reduce the administrative burden and paperwork for learning providers. Work is under way to develop a claims process whereby learning providers can claim Access to Work funding for multiple interns using one claim form. The DWP is also working to improve the supported intern application process and the support plan, to reduce the need for additional contacts. My Department is working closely with the DWP on these issues.

Every child and young person, regardless of their individual needs, deserves the opportunity to thrive, succeed and achieve. However, we are aware that there are challenges in the SEND system, and the Government have made a clear commitment to addressing them. We are prioritising early intervention and inclusive provision in mainstream settings, as we know that early intervention prevents unmet needs from escalating and supports children and young people to achieve their goals while still being alongside their peers. We are committed to working with the sector to ensure that that approach is fully planned and delivered in partnership.

We have already begun the work by appointing a strategic adviser on SEND to engage with sector leaders, practitioners, children and families; we have established an expert advisory group on inclusion, to improve the mainstream-education outcomes and experience for children with SEND; and we are setting up a neurodivergence task and finish group to provide a shared understanding of what provision and support in mainstream educational settings should look like for neurodivergent children and young people, within an inclusive system. We recognise that these are complex issues, and we need a considered approach to deliver the change we want to see in a sustainable way that will deliver the outcomes we want for young people.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton for bringing this matter forward, and all who have contributed to the debate. I know we all care passionately about ensuring that there are high-quality pathways to employment for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. I have seen at first hand the great work done by employers, local authorities and education providers to break down the barriers for young people with additional needs.

Supported internships are a key part of the Government's mission to ensure that all young people are supported to achieve the skills they need to be successful in the workplace, regardless of their background. We have made a clear commitment to address the challenges raised today, to support all children and young people to achieve and thrive, and to improve the wider SEND system. I am determined that progress will be made.

I conclude by thanking all those who work in education and employment in the interests of children and young people with SEND throughout the country. I know that they share the desire—and we are determined to work with them—to deliver the very best for all our children and young people, including those with SEND.

Question put and agreed to.

Down's Syndrome

5.36 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Down's syndrome.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I assume that the Minister responsible for this area of policy is still the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock)—the Minister for Secondary Care is nodding. I understand that he has to be somewhere else, but it is great to see the Minister in her place.

I organised the debate to call on the Government to implement the Down Syndrome Act 2022, which received Royal Assent three years ago, as Members will be interested to note. Here in the mother of Parliaments, an Act was passed with the democratic engagement of Members from both sides of the House, but three years later it has still not been implemented. It is therefore about time that it was; we need it.

The first requirement—the first command—of the Act is that the Government should issue guidance because of the specific needs of people with Down syndrome. They were supposed to issue such guidance for local authorities, health authorities, education authorities and everyone else engaged in the support of people with Down syndrome.

Various versions of draft guidance have been produced, but none of them even completely covered what was required, let alone adequately. In 2022, the then Minister for Care and Mental Health, my former right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester, assured us that the guidance would be “fit for purpose” so we can ensure that people with Down syndrome can access “the support they need”, and that the final guidance would be published in the next year. The previous Government did not fulfil that pledge, and as we sit here today, people with Down syndrome still have not seen that historic Act fully in force.

As I said, the draft versions of the guidance so far, according to my understanding—although I do not claim any great expertise—are flawed in a number of ways. Instead of recognising the unique needs of people with Down syndrome, they simply reduce Down syndrome to a subset of a type of learning disability. That limited perspective does a disservice to those with Down syndrome.

For instance, individuals with Down syndrome often require tailored speech and language therapy, yet the most recent version of the guidance, published in December, makes only vague references to specialist therapy. My friend, my former right hon. Friend Sir Liam Fox, who was the driving force behind the Act, put it perfectly. He said:

“This legislation was specifically for those with Down Syndrome as a definable collection of predictable medical conditions and specific life challenges.”

The Act says that it is

“to make provision about meeting the needs of persons with Down syndrome; and for connected purposes.”

In trying to cater for all individuals with learning disabilities, the guidance misses the mark, failing to provide for the very people it was meant to support when the Act received Royal Assent three years ago.

There are reasons to be optimistic. The Prime Minister has rightly pledged to lead a Government of builders, not blockers. Members on both sides of the Chamber, from all political backgrounds, can all stand united in a shared consensus that the guidance needs to be built and issued, and that we need to get the blockers out of the way. We can agree that people with Down syndrome must be recognised as having specific needs, not just generic ones, and that support must be in place to ensure that they have equal access to opportunities to thrive in all aspects of life.

What is truly disappointing is that the blockers of progress are not really elected representatives or indeed Ministers, but, I fear, civil servants—those entrusted with carrying out the will of Parliament. Too many of them have obstructed the efforts of Ministers in two different Governments to implement the Act. Despite repeated promises, we still have not seen the creation of an effective cross-ministerial taskforce. I hope that the Minister will comment on that, because if there is blockage and resistance within the Government machine, Ministers need to come together. There would not have to be a permanent taskforce, but there should be one, two or perhaps three meetings at maximum where Ministers get together and ensure that the will of Parliament is brought to fruition.

Engagement with key stakeholders has been less than adequate. When the stakeholder group was formed to lead on this work, there was no consultation with Sir Liam Fox, the promoter of the Bill that became the Act, or with Rachael and Ken Ross, the founding officers of the National Down Syndrome Policy Group, who also should have been included, and who were a driving force behind the thinking around the Act. That is not good enough—it is not a party political point. The Prime Minister has my full support to ensure that the Minister here today and her colleague the Minister for Care are empowered to do what they were partly appointed to do, which is to fully implement the Act.

I will say a little more on Down syndrome, which is a genetic condition caused by a chromosomal anomaly. While most people have 46 chromosomes, individuals with Down syndrome have three copies of chromosome 21 in each cell, rather than two. There are an estimated 47,000 people living with Down syndrome in the UK, making it the most common chromosomal condition. The good news is that people with Down syndrome are achieving more than ever before: attending mainstream schools, gaining meaningful employment and making invaluable contributions to our communities, as well as living longer.

There is a risk, however, that we see that progress as a reason to rest on our laurels. Instead, it shows the huge potential of people with Down syndrome, if only we can unlock it, and the urgent need to do more. There should be no limit to our ambitions for people with Down syndrome, which is why we should not wait one day more than we need to in order to deliver the guidance promised in the Down Syndrome Act.

The first step towards meaningful change is the improvement of healthcare. People with learning disabilities die, on average, 24 years younger than those without, and are twice as likely to die from treatable conditions. Whether due to significant delays in diagnoses, unsafe hospital discharges or poor co-ordination between the NHS and other services, one thing is clear: many of

those deaths are preventable. Doctors certainly do not mean to harm people with Down syndrome. Instead, it is likely that poor healthcare results from a lack of specific knowledge and training needed to give people with Down syndrome the tailored support that the condition requires.

Following the passage of the Act, NHS England issued statutory guidance in 2023, mandating that every integrated care board appoint a named executive lead at board level to drive better outcomes for people with Down syndrome. That was to provide accountability within the system, so we could say that the Ministers are responsible, not civil servants. However, in the implementation—in the delivery on the ground across the country—of course civil servants are responsible. That is why it was an explicit part of the campaign around the Act, and an explicit promise from a Minister at the Dispatch Box, that we would see people appointed—not so that they could be hidden, but so they could be publicly available, contacted and asked what they are doing within their area.

That was so that we could challenge not only the health system, but schools on what they are doing and why, in so many parts of the country, a Down syndrome child is automatically assumed to need to go to a specialist school when a lot of the evidence is they do better in mainstream—but only, of course, if the people in the schools have been given the support and skills to deliver that improvement. A few days ago, however, when I sought to find out who those named accountable individuals are to allow the Down syndrome community to hold the Government and the system to account, I was able to find a publicly nominated lead in only three of the 42 ICBs in England, and two of those leads are called David Jarrett.

I ask the Minister, what is going on? Can we make sure that those leads are publicly named and prominent on the websites of ICBs; that lists are issued and kept up to date; and that everyone in the Down syndrome community can easily find out who is responsible for the delivery of those services? That would ensure that not only health, but the wider community of public services is a servant of people with Down syndrome, rather than turning a person with Down syndrome into a supplicant.

After healthcare, I turn next to education, which is crucial to the life chances of people with Down syndrome. As I have said, research suggests that people with Down syndrome often achieve better outcomes in mainstream education than in specialist schools, provided that it is appropriate for their specific needs. Officials in the Department for Education are best placed to offer guidance on that, which highlights the importance of an effective cross-ministerial taskforce.

The Minister will have already discovered in her relatively short time as a Minister—we all know what it is like—that Departments other than where such Acts are made tend to be quite resistant to them. Sometimes the only way to cut through and make sure that sufficiently senior civil servants take on board these Acts of Parliament and do what they are obliged to do on a statutory basis is for Ministers to be called together to issue such an instruction and push the system to do what it is supposed to do. Otherwise those Departments will sit in their own lane, following the particular priorities of their Secretary of State, and utterly ignoring their statutory obligation to deliver on an Act of Parliament.

Some progress has been made, but there is more to do. Statistics from NHS Digital reveal that only 6% of working-age adults with learning disabilities who receive long-term social care are employed. In other words, 94% are not. When we meet the people who are and see what they can do, we ask, how many more are there? If only we put in place the right co-ordinated system, how many more could have much more fulfilling lives?

We should get the incentives aligned. If there are fears now about a person with Down syndrome losing benefits, it might not be them deciding—they may not even be spoken to—but members of their family or their social worker might decide, “Oh, it is best to take no risks and just keep them on benefits,” rather than supporting them into a job where they can be full members of society, contribute and benefit from that activity.

Even more troubling, 68% of those who are employed work less than 16 hours a week. Those figures are not just numbers; they reflect the deep systemic barriers that still limit opportunities for people with Down syndrome in the workforce. Despite a range of initiatives, it is clear that we need stronger, sustained efforts to ensure that people with Down syndrome can access fulfilling long-term employment. Only then will we truly break down the barriers to their independence and potential. I hope that it is by now clear to the Minister why we must break down those barriers, and why it is critical that the will of Parliament, in the form of an Act of Parliament that is now three years old, is upheld and implemented, and that change is delivered without further delay.

The time for action is now, so I would be grateful if the Minister could answer the following questions. When will the promised cross-ministerial taskforce be created? At the very least, could she speak to her colleague the Minister for Care and push for one? I know that it is hard to get Ministers to turn up for some other Department's cross-ministerial taskforce, so it often takes personal contact, an agreement that it is not going to run on forever, and someone saying, “Look, this is important. Let's get this over the line. Please come along.” We need to get the right Minister at the right time, with sufficient seniority around the table and a real will to enact change and make a difference. If that could come out of this debate, it would be fantastic.

Will the Minister ensure that the consultation group contains only Down syndrome-specific organisations, so that the legislation supports people with the condition, as is set out in the Act? There has been a tendency to open up consultations to everybody engaged with learning disability, so people with little or no understanding of the specifics of Down syndrome have been engaged in the consultations run by civil servants. The whole thing has run into the ground and lost the specific focus of the Act.

The National Down Syndrome Policy Group informed me that the draft guidance issued to sector groups contained significant omissions. I always find it much easier to commit to meetings on behalf of colleagues than to commit myself, so I hope I can tempt the Minister to do so. Will the Minister commit the Minister for Care to meeting Rachael and Ken Ross—I would also love to attend—as soon as possible? They are the founding officers of the National Down Syndrome Policy Group, and they do exceptional work for people with Down syndrome. They are in the Public Gallery alongside

[Graham Stuart]

Millie, who recently gave evidence to the all-party parliamentary group. Millie is always available to correct any of us when we get our policies wrong, as she will attest. Given that it has been three years, will the Minister provide a clear date—an aspiration from the Government—for when we will get comprehensive guidance? When can we get it ready, in a final version, to go through all the sign-off processes of Government? When can we expect it to be officially issued? Those are not just procedural questions; they are vital to ensuring that the promises made to people with Down syndrome are delivered, and that we move forward with the urgency and specificity that this issue demands.

Hon. Members in this Chamber will speak for themselves, but I am sure they all stand with the Minister in this effort. On behalf of the 47,000 people with Down syndrome across the country, we urge the Minister to ensure that a suitable and proper version of the guidance is produced quickly, and that is truly reflects the experiences and needs of people with Down syndrome, specifically. If alongside that exercise someone wants to produce separate, more generic guidance, that is fine; but can we ensure that the guidance described in the Act is delivered for people with Down syndrome, and that it is published and fully implemented without delay?

A great opportunity lies ahead for all of us. We can be part of delivering meaningful, lasting change for thousands of people, now and for generations to come. I am sure support will come from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, and I hope we will send the Minister out from this debate determined to ensure that her colleague, the Minister for Care, does the right thing.

5.52 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Turner. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this important debate.

Down's syndrome regression disorder is an aspect of Down's syndrome that has been, until now, largely overlooked. It affects roughly 1% to 2% of people with Down's syndrome and usually presents between the ages of 10 and 30. It is a truly horrific condition. People with Down's syndrome regression disorder change, almost overnight. I met a mum whose son developed Down's syndrome regression disorder. Overnight, he became non-responsive, uncommunicative and catatonic. She said it was like everything that was him had left.

Young people who previously held down jobs or voluntary positions, and had many interests, hobbies and a love of life, lose the ability to speak, lose continence and retreat into themselves. The change is not gradual; it is stark, unexpected and profound. There is a fundamental lack of awareness of the condition. It is often wrongly diagnosed as early-onset dementia or late-diagnosed autism, even though it does not fit the profile of either of those conditions. There is currently no pathway for diagnosis, and progress is often fraught. Finding a clinician who recognises the symptoms and will treat is, by and large, impossible. However, there is hope: 80% of people who receive the right treatment in a timely manner achieve some prospect of recovery.

I want to be clear: if a typical child who does not have Down's syndrome stopped eating and taking any interest in jobs overnight, and if they suddenly became catatonic and completely unresponsive, it would be treated as a medical emergency. People whose children have Down's syndrome, and who have finally managed to speak to the right clinician, have been told, "You need to take your child to A&E." If it was a typical child, that would be happening, but because that child has Down's syndrome, it is overlooked. Will the Minister meet with me and individuals affected by this disorder to discuss how we can best create awareness, and what their thoughts are on how we can create a pathway to diagnose and treat it?

I would also like to touch briefly on my reflections as a parent of a child with Down's syndrome, and what I think would be generally helpful in the space. Many of us feel that some kind of pathway for parents whose child is born with Down's syndrome would be extraordinarily useful. When their child is born, or when they receive an antenatal diagnosis, they very often think, "What lies ahead? What can I expect? What does my future look like?" Down's syndrome is the most common chromosomal condition, and we know that 50% of children born with Down's syndrome will have a heart condition, and there is a higher prevalence of conditions such as leukaemia. By and large, those with Down's syndrome do not have a very strong immune system—as I know every flippin' winter, when my child gets cold after cold.

I have had lovely responses and gained a level of knowledge about what to expect from various parts of my child's condition. We have cobbled that together from speaking to other parents, through WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups, and sometimes from speaking to professionals and support groups. It would be helpful to have that set out officially, so that parents know what lies ahead, what to expect and what to look for.

This is a very small thing, but when people with Down's syndrome have a fever, their temperature sometimes goes down rather than up. It is really unusual, but it is normal for the condition, and it is quite useful to know as a parent. It is also useful to know how to diagnose things, because people with Down's syndrome do not present conditions typically, including conditions that can be really awful. Parents have lost children to sepsis because it does not present as it would with a typical child, so knowing how to diagnose it is really useful.

As people transition into adulthood and make those steps into the adult world, it is important to have an idea of how people with learning disabilities and Down's syndrome can expect to be treated. What kind of things help them to live full and happy lives? As their parents and caregivers, what kind of things should we be encouraging them to take part in? That is extraordinarily helpful to know.

I will keep my speech brief, as I know other Members want to speak, but I will just end by reflecting that Friday is World Down Syndrome Day. In our community, we typically see it is a day of celebration, as well as an opportunity to present a challenge to policy makers. This year, we are asking them to ensure that we have the right support.

People will see this debate who have just received a diagnosis of Down's syndrome. They might be receiving it today; they might be receiving it antenatally or postnatally. When I received that diagnosis seven years ago, it was

a shock. I felt like the carpet had been pulled from under my feet, and I was devastated. I look back at that moment with shame at the thought that I was so devastated at the news of this person who became the beating heart of our family. She is joyous, although she is not always happy. That is a misconception—she is not—and if people say that, I will say, “Oh, did I get a wrong one?” Of course, I did not. She is stubborn—I like calling girls stubborn—she is determined, and she is feisty.

She is also a fantastic dancer. At a community event we went to, I was there as an MP, but she had me up dancing in the middle of the floor. I was not in the background; I was right there, and she dragged me into the heart of it. She is really funny, and she is so kind, especially with her sister. There is a really brilliant statistic that 95% of people who have a sibling with Down's syndrome think that they have enhanced their life. She has made me a better person, and she has made my husband a better person. When she loves, she loves deeply, and she loves hard. People who meet her share that and feel that love with her.

The brilliant thing is that, if a parent has a child with Down's syndrome, they join this wonderful community. I have met some of my best friends through that community and we are there to support each other. There are some brilliant groups; I will give a shoutout to Faye and Claire from our local Down's syndrome group, who welcomed us with open arms and showed us what our life is. We are taking what we call the scenic route, not the quick path. It is a lot better than the casual straight line. Who wants normal? It is boring, and they showed us that joy.

Upwards with Downs in Harlow is a fantastic group that organises so many wonderful events, including a holiday we have been on with people who get it. There is also Downright Excellent in Hackney, and I say to my wonderful friends Charlotte and Kirsty: what a brilliant and fantastic community we have. Happy World Down Syndrome Day—I love all of you. If anyone is ever worried about what the future looks like, come and talk to me, or to any of us, because we can tell you that it is not just going to be okay; it is going to be brilliant.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. I am imposing a time limit of four minutes. To show us how to do it very well, I call former Education Secretary Damian Hinds.

6 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It truly is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Turner, and it truly is a pleasure and a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft)—I do not know if I can. There are times in this place when it is a real privilege to have heard from a colleague, particularly when they share something very personal that helps to inform our democracy, and she has just done that many times over, and I thank her. Indeed, I am sure we all thank her very much for it.

I also thank and commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for securing this important debate. As the hon. Lady said, we are coming up to World Down Syndrome Day. It is already Down's Syndrome Awareness Week, so it is particularly apt that we should be having this debate.

It is my honour to co-chair, with the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), the all-party parliamentary group on down syndrome. Down syndrome was not something I knew a lot about beforehand; it just so happens that the co-founders of the National Down Syndrome Policy Group, Ken and Rachael Ross, happened to be constituents of mine. But my God, through that link I have come into contact with the community that the hon. Member for Thurrock was just talking about, which is the most enormously wonderful thing. We had an event a couple of weeks ago over in Portcullis House. There was a flash mob in Portcullis House, there was dancing and there was singing, but there were also challenging speeches from members of the Down syndrome community, who it is always important to hear from directly.

In the APPG, we have heard a number of testimonies about people's frustration with the education system. I am pleased that Down syndrome is now included as a category in the school census, which means that it is possible to take a more targeted approach, but those issues carry on into employment, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness said.

There is so much work to be done, but the Down Syndrome Act 2022, which was carried through by Sir Liam Fox, was a really important milestone and a really important achievement to build on. I do not really have time to say it all, so I will just very quickly commend Sir Liam again for the work he did then and for his continued advocacy today.

I also want to recognise the work of Ken and Rachael and everything they did to support the Act through Parliament, and everything they have done since. That includes their work locally with Portsmouth hospitals on a Down-specific maternity pathway, which I know as a constituency MP; in a completely different way, their work with the British Academy of Film and Television Arts to make sure that the voices of people with Down syndrome are heard in mainstream films; and also their work on special schools and making sure that more children with Down syndrome can be in a mainstream setting when that is right for them. I also want to recognise the work of all the MPs involved, including the Minister, who was on the Bill Committee with Sir Liam Fox to consider his private Member's Bill.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness said, it is now several years since that Bill was enacted. It is really important that we press on with the guidance and that it is specifically about Down syndrome. That is not in any way to reduce the issues faced by people with a broader set of learning difficulties or disabilities, but this is specifically the Down Syndrome Act 2022, to look at those particular issues and challenges. We need that ministerial cross-departmental taskforce, to make sure that the guidance is as sound as it can be and is produced as quickly as it can be.

I also thank the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), for his continued engagement. We continue to extend an invitation to him, and to the Minister, to join us in the APPG when they can, to hear further from members of the community about how important all this work is to them.

6.4 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Down syndrome. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on his comprehensive speech and on securing this debate, which holds immense significance for individuals with Down syndrome and their families, especially as we approach World Down Syndrome Day on Friday. That day was chosen because the 21st day of the third month represents the triplication of the 21st chromosome, which is the cause of Down syndrome. I will focus my comments today on the Down Syndrome Act, a landmark piece of legislation that recognises the unique needs of people with Down syndrome, and the ongoing work to update and implement the guidance that will help bring it to life.

As we have already heard, there are an estimated 47,000 people with Down syndrome people in the UK, yet, despite its being the most common chromosomal condition, people with Down syndrome continue to face barriers to achieving their full potential. That is where the Down Syndrome Act comes in. For the first time ever, we have legislation focused specifically on this community, taking into account the distinct health, developmental and educational needs unique to people with Down syndrome. With the right interventions, many people with Down syndrome can lead full, independent lives, attending mainstream schools, gaining employment and participating fully in society. To achieve that and to improve life outcomes for people with Down syndrome, we need more than just general disability support: we need Down syndrome-specific strategies.

This is where the long-overdue guidance will play its part. The guidance will determine the success of the Act and be a practical road map that provides clarity on how the principles of the Act should be implemented. Without it, the Act will just remain words on the page. The preparation and implementation of the guidance, however, has faced challenges. We know that there have been significant delays in updating the guidance. More importantly, there are concerns that the current draft of the guidance does not reflect the original intent of the Act and lacks the Down syndrome-specific focus in line with the Government's statutory duty.

I thank the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), for writing to me yesterday to assure me that he has listened to those concerns, and that he is engaging with stakeholders and working with all relevant Departments to produce a second draft of the guidance, with a view to putting it out for consultation by the summer. My ask of the Minister is to ensure that the second draft of the guidance reflects the feedback raised by the National Down Syndrome Policy Group, the Down's Syndrome Association and others. I am sure he will agree that we need guidance that is robust, inclusive, and reflective of the needs of the community it is intended to support.

Importantly, an accountability mechanism must be included to ensure that individuals and organisations responsible for the implementation are held to their obligations. Additional direction and training should be considered for external bodies to help them to understand fully their roles in effectively implementing the guidance

in the first place. I hope the Minister will give due consideration to these points as the second draft is prepared.

The Down Syndrome Act and its guidance offer an incredible opportunity to improve outcomes for people with Down syndrome, but we must ensure that the guidance reflects the specific needs of the community it aims to serve. To ensure that that is the case, I hope the Minister will agree, on behalf of the Minister for Care, to meet with representatives of the APPG on Down syndrome and the National Down Syndrome Policy Group to discuss and address our key concerns. By working together, we can create a future where people with Down syndrome are not only included, but truly empowered to reach their full potential.

6.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second time today, Mr Turner. I wish you well in this new role, and I hope we will have many engagements in this Chamber. I thank the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for raising this issue and introducing the debate. He has taken the mantle on well and I congratulate him. In the short time I have, I will give three inspirational examples of those with Down's syndrome from Northern Ireland. I know the parents of one of them personally.

First, many people will have seen James Martin from Belfast; the Minister, who always has a close eye on what is happening in Northern Ireland, will know him. Last year at the Academy Awards he was an inspiration to so many, showing that the opportunities are limitless for that young man. There is a place in our society for so many different skills and abilities. I am truly thankful for those who are at pains to portray acceptance in the mainstream. James did us all proud at the Oscars, and set the scene for more to be done.

Secondly, young Kate Grant was Northern Ireland's first Down's syndrome model to walk at London fashion week. What an inspiration that young lady was. Our society has made limits, but they are being changed, which can only be a good thing. In setting the scene, the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness talked about how we must change the limits and ensure that young people have opportunities.

Thirdly, my parliamentary aide volunteers in a local Campaigners clan in Newtownards. In her clan is a young boy called Harry; he and his younger sister are integral members of the group. Harry played the role of a wise man in the nativity play this Christmas, delivering his iconic line, "Look at the star!", with great confidence and gusto. He attends a special school but is well integrated in this wee group, and the inspirational aspect is that he is not treated as different by the children around him. They just see him as Harry; they attach no Down's syndrome label to him, but accept him as he is.

I love to see and hear those stories of integration and I think the right hon. Gentleman hopes to see that sort of integration across society. We all know the days of stigmatising Down's syndrome children are well in the past, and rightly so. Now is the time to step up and help these children and adults to find their place in our society. I believe that that is happening more, and that is very positive.

I have one concern, which is that children with Down's syndrome can be aborted up to birth in Northern Ireland, under the horrific imposed abortion regime. It is an absolute stain on this House that it made the decision to impose that regime in Northern Ireland. I cannot highlight the wonderful steps forward that society is taking without begging once again that allowing abortion until birth simply because a child has Down's syndrome is removed from our legislation. We voted against that measure at the time, but this House passed it for Northern Ireland.

I will never forget the words of young Heidi Crowther, who has Down's syndrome, urging people not to allow abortion until birth, saying:

"My life has as much value as anybody else's."

That is so true, and the worth of people like her to communities around the world is beginning to be understood. We must encourage and support children and adults—and parents, too. I look to the Minister, as I always do, to ensure that families have access to help and support throughout this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which is only made richer and stronger by our differences.

6.12 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair, Mr Turner. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this debate. The Down Syndrome Act is simple, but brilliant—but it is powerless without the guidance to accompany it. That is why this debate is timely.

I also call it timely because the elements of the Act determine the very structure that can support a child through to adulthood, from birth through to work. The Act depends on three main pillars, the first of which is healthcare. At this time, we are putting in place a 10-year NHS plan, putting together the NHS of the future, and looking at how we can keep ourselves well; we are putting in early intervention measures and ensuring that we have the workforce needed in the future. If this guidance is to have effect, we need the workforce and the structures to support individuals and their families. Now is the time to look at that and to put in the additional screening and support that a person with Down syndrome needs to optimise their health and keep well throughout their life.

The second pillar is that we are having a massive review of the education system at the moment. We are looking at curriculum change, recognising that the broadening of the curriculum will be much more inclusive. As we review SEND and the whole education system, it is timely to bring in this guidance. It cannot just be guidance around Down syndrome looking in; it must be looking out at other Departments. Again, the time is now. Look at the data: the figure of 80% of children with Down syndrome attending primary school drops to between 25% and 37% in secondary school. That deficit in itself indicates that we need significant change in our education system. We need a schools system that is nurturing, therapeutic and integrated, so that no child feels on the outside of the education they are rightly entitled to.

The third pillar is the place of work. We need to ensure that there are more opportunities for people with Down syndrome to engage in the labour market. Just yesterday, the Government published their plan "Pathways to

Work", which I see as a plan in two halves. The first half will enable more people to access the labour market, to follow the career of their dreams, and to have their skills and talents recognised. We need to ensure that everybody with Down syndrome has that opportunity where it can be afforded—if not in a formal workplace, by volunteering in the community or being able to have the most life-enhancing opportunities available to them. When I talk about the second half of the plan, I have deep concern for people with Down syndrome, looking at the proposed thresholds for personal independence payment in which people will have to score at least four points to meet the threshold to access vital funding to keep them independent—the key word in personal independence payments. We need to ensure that we feed into that debate.

When we get this right, it will be for the benefit of the whole of society. In York, I think of those people who work in West Offices, where the café is run by United Response and provides real work opportunities, and of the Once Seen theatre company, where I see such talent on display. We must get this guidance—

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. I call Bobby Dean.

6.16 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I thank the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for securing the debate today and for articulating the key points of the Act so well. I cannot move on without also thanking the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for her inspiring contribution. She really did her community proud today.

This issue came to my attention because I have a constituent called Lucienne who sits on the National Down Syndrome Policy Group and runs a local group called Get On Downs. I was at its annual celebration this morning—we had tea and cake, we threw balls around a ball pit, and I wore funky socks as demanded by the event—unfortunately, you cannot see them, Mr Turner, but I am still wearing them. I got to meet Noah, Lily, Stephen and Charlotte, all people living with Down syndrome and thriving in that loving space. I asked Charlotte what she would like me to say to the Minister, and she said she would like me to tell the Minister that she is fantastic—so I have done that.

I also spoke to parents there, who told me about the relief of having that space, including for themselves, so they could talk to other parents and share experiences. They also had some serious points to make about the Act, which they were all aware of. A common theme was the education system and that the specific needs of Down syndrome children are not being met, even though the smallest of adaptations and interventions can make such a massive difference. Schools are not aware of that and we need to get the guidance sorted for them.

I also heard a story about someone moving on to post-16 education and the demands on them to take maths and English to a particular level, when what they actually need is the vocational skills. They want to become an animal carer and wish they could just have access to a vocational course without the hard maths and English requirements. I also heard about the need for more support to stay in work. Charlotte did Christmas cover in retail, but companies were not looking to keep her on.

[Bobby Dean]

There were warm words for Lucienne—or Lu, as she is known—and she was described as a “life saver” for setting up that local group. She has also set up an amazing initiative with the local hospital trust. The healthcare information provided at birth can be daunting, warning about some of the things that parents of children with Down syndrome will have to face. Lu wanted to flip that on its head and provide care packages to new parents of children with Down syndrome that congratulated them and talked about all the joys ahead of them. I want to recognise that brilliant initiative.

It is fitting to give the last word to Lu, and these are the questions that she wants to ask the Minister. What is happening with the guidance, and why the delay? Will the Minister agree to meet the National Down Syndrome Policy Group? Can the Minister reassure us that the draft guidance will be Down syndrome-specific? Lu wanted to labour the point about the specific learning profile that requires specific interventions. She asks, “What is the point in a Down Syndrome Act if it is not specific to people with Down syndrome?”

6.19 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this important and timely debate ahead of World Down Syndrome Day this Friday.

What a pleasure it was to take the opportunity before the debate, as we were slightly delayed, to chat to marvellous Millie, who is an incredible advocate for those who have been touched by Down syndrome.

In my constituency of Chichester we are fortunate to have an incredible charity, the Chichester and Arun Down Syndrome Support Group, which works tirelessly to fill the gaps left by failings in public service provision. Ahead of this debate, the charity highlighted to me many of the challenges that people with Down syndrome face, particularly in accessing the support they need throughout their education. One of its core initiatives as a charity is the bespoke schools outreach programme, which ensures that children with Down syndrome receive the tailored education they require. They require additional support throughout their education, yet many families struggle to obtain EHCPs from local authorities.

In West Sussex, the picture is stark: only 3.6% of EHCPs were issued within the statutory timeframe of 20 weeks in 2023, and the situation has not got much better. Those delays force children with Down syndrome to remain in unsuitable educational environments where their needs are not met, which hinders their opportunities. Most importantly, when an EHCP is issued, we need the accountability to see that that EHCP is delivered.

The charity also highlighted to me the cliff edge of support that people living with Down syndrome face at the age of 18, when they are no longer in an education provision. I was pleased to visit Together Our Community at its exciting new venue in Chichester, which is due to open next month. That will provide a space for TOC members and a public-facing café where adults with additional needs between the ages of 18 and 35 will have the chance to learn and develop essential skills. For people with Down syndrome, charitable organisations

such as those provide vital support and services and give these incredible people the opportunity to thrive, not just survive.

The Down Syndrome Act recognised the needs of those living with Down syndrome and rightly acknowledged that public services must take those needs into account across health, social care, education and other local authority provisions. However, the Act must be properly resourced. The NHS website lists a range of specialists that a person with Down syndrome may need to see, including speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, opticians and occupational therapists. Yet local organisations consistently report a lack of those essential services, which undermines the opportunities for people with Down syndrome to live comfortably or independently. Three years on from Royal Assent, the Act is not supporting those who it was designed to support.

The Liberal Democrats have long called for all individuals with long-term conditions or disabilities to have access to a named doctor, which would shift care from the corridors of hospitals to local communities. That is especially crucial for people with Down syndrome, who not only have learning disabilities but are at a significantly higher risk of conditions such as dementia, seizures and leukaemia, as the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) mentioned.

The impact of social care on people with Down syndrome cannot be overstated, which is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for a comprehensive overhaul of social care policy. While we welcome the cross-party commission to establish a long-term agreement on social care, we strongly believe that it can be concluded within one year, not three.

While the Down Syndrome Act was a step in the right direction, real change requires more than warm words; it demands proper funding and meaningful action. From healthcare and social care to employment and independent living, people with Down syndrome deserve better. As the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness stated, the guidance is where we are severely lacking at this moment in time. The Government must prioritise this issue, and we will continue to push for the improvements necessary to enhance quality of life for all.

6.23 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner, and to respond in this debate. I credit the now Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who said, when speaking about this issue in January 2022:

“Our constituents expect us to see guidance and perhaps be part of scrutinising it, raising objections and problems and improving it—that is the role of a Member of Parliament”.—[*Official Report, Down Syndrome Public Bill Committee*, 26 January 2022; c. 7.]

We have seen that exemplified here today. I give credit to my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for all he has done to raise this issue, but he was actually trumped by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), to whom I pay tribute for her ability to speak so openly, so personally and in such an informed way about the issues at hand.

In January 2022, the then shadow Minister closed by saying,

“this is an example of how Parliament and the proper role of Members of Parliament can be made real. That is only for the good of our constituents.”—[*Official Report, Down Syndrome Public Bill Committee*, 26 January 2022; c. 7.]

I agree with her entirely.

Turning to the debate itself, it is unusual to have unanimous feelings from across the House, but that is what we have heard in this debate. It is an accolade to everyone that we have got this far, but some things are still outstanding, particularly two issues—the progress of seeing the guidance and ensuring that it is accurate and effective. It is important to ensure that the guidance is robust and reflects the needs of the community. We do not want to rush publishing the guidance, which could mean that key issues are not addressed, because it would undermine the efforts of the last three years and fail the very people the Act is aimed to support.

My former colleague, Sir Liam Fox, who has been mentioned here and introduced the private Member's Bill, has written to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee about these reforms; with your permission, Mr Turner, I would like to quote some extracts. He said:

“When the House of Commons unanimously passed the Down Syndrome Act, it felt like a real dawn had arrived for those with Down Syndrome and their families. We were promised new government guidelines covering health, education and social care that would phenomenally improve service provision and provide accountability to service users”.

He said later:

“Despite repeated promises we have not yet seen the formation of an effective cross Ministerial task force. There has been little Ministerial engagement with stakeholders, with many identical letters being sent out in response to demonstrably different queries. Now, three years after the legislation reached the statute book, this is completely unacceptable.”

He finished by saying:

“I believe that it is now time for both Ministers and officials to be held to account for the lack of progress in producing coherent guidelines, something that is regarded as a betrayal by many of those who were so encouraged and inspired by the passage of the Down Syndrome Act itself”.

Therefore, to echo many of the sentiments expressed in this Chamber today, I have some gentle questions about the guidance.

First, though, it was interesting to hear from the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) that a letter has been sent out, which I welcome. I wonder whether the Minister might take back to the Department the suggestion that a copy of the letter might be placed in the Library, for the public and all of us to see.

For my first question: can the Minister clarify whether the updated guidance will be published, and if so, when? Secondly, will she commit to holding a debate or a statement on the guidance, on having it laid before Parliament? Thirdly, how will the Government monitor compliance with the guidance?

To help with the above, the National Down Syndrome Policy Group, which drafted the original Down Syndrome Bill and worked with Sir Liam Fox and previous Ministers to support its journey through Parliament, has been trying to engage further with Ministers. It has highlighted to me multiple requests for Ministers to meet the APPG on Down syndrome, the policy group and MPs, which have yet to be successful. I echo that call: will the Minister commit today to her fellow Minister meeting with the policy group and the APPG to follow this up?

The theme of World Down Syndrome Day, which is indeed this Friday, is “improve our support systems”. We know that, with the growth in life expectancy for people with Down syndrome, access to social care will be critical. Therefore, can the Minister confirm whether

the needs of people with Down syndrome will be considered in the first stage of Baroness Casey's commission into adult social care? With the Government's 10-year plan in production, could the Minister outline how Down syndrome will be addressed in the context of that plan?

I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how this Government will build on the foundations of the Down Syndrome Act, and about the strengthening and enabling of support. If we see it through that prism, the world shines brighter when we see people for their abilities rather than their disabilities.

6.28 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I congratulate and thank the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for securing this debate, and for giving us all the chance to mark World Down Syndrome Day on Friday. No one has done that better than my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) this afternoon. Her child is the beating heart of her family, and that joy is absolutely with all of us. She has spread that joy today and we are grateful to her.

I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness for his support for the Down Syndrome Act. As he highlighted, I was pleased to support the Act with his right hon. Friend and my constituency neighbour at the time, the former Member for North Somerset, Sir Liam Fox. It was a marvellous thing to be part of. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, it was a simple but quite brilliant piece of legislation. I am always grateful to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Luke Evans) for quoting my comments from different times at the Dispatch Box; hopefully they were all carefully chosen.

This Government want to see a fair Britain where everyone lives well for longer. I absolutely recognise the importance of the Down Syndrome Act in helping to achieve that. The Act gives people with Down syndrome the building blocks they need for a healthy life, and we have heard about some of those today: access to the health and care services they need, receiving the right education, securing living arrangements that work for them and being supported into employment were mentioned by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Central, as well as the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller).

By raising awareness and understanding of the needs of people with Down syndrome, we can help ensure that every person with Down syndrome has the opportunity to live a full and fulfilling life. Today's debate is an excellent opportunity to come together to mark World Down Syndrome Day. I commend those in the Public Gallery, and the many people who have been in contact with or are known to Members. This year's theme is “improve our support systems”, which is incredibly important. It is something that we are striving to achieve through developing the statutory guidance under the Down Syndrome Act.

We are committed to ensuring that people with Down syndrome receive the care and support they need to lead the lives they want to in their community. However, as we have heard this afternoon, there is significant work

[Karin Smyth]

to be done to make that a reality. The Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), is working hard to implement the Act. Under the Act, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is required to give guidance to relevant authorities in health, social care, education and housing services on what they should be doing to meet the needs of people with Down's syndrome.

As Members have highlighted, the Act was formally commenced on 18 March 2024 by way of regulations. That brought into force all the provisions of the Act, and it was a necessary step towards the publication of the guidance. I do not think it has been mentioned today, but shortly after that point we had the general election, and I appreciate that the delays are frustrating for campaigners and people involved. The Minister for Care has written to sector partners and the all-party parliamentary group on Down syndrome with an update on the guidance and next steps. That includes our intention to put the guidance out for consultation by the summer.

Engagement with people with Down syndrome, their families and supporters, sector colleagues and experts has been invaluable throughout the development of the guidance. Over 1,500 responses were received to a national call for evidence, which is being used to inform the guidance, in addition to sector engagement and a review of the evidence to gain a better understanding of the specific needs of people with Down syndrome and how those can be best met by relevant authorities.

On 26 November 2024, the Minister for Care convened a roundtable of partners to discuss how we can improve life outcomes for people with Down syndrome, and the opportunities that the guidance presents in support of that. We are grateful for the collective efforts and insights of individuals and organisations across the country, which have enabled us to make great strides in our development of this important piece of guidance. We recognise that some time has passed since the Act became law in April 2022.

Graham Stuart: Several colleagues have mentioned the need for specificity—if the Minister is coming on to that, then great. Would it be fair to say that it is the intent of the Government—I am not looking for cast-iron promises, because we know how challenging these things are—that we should see the guidance issued before the end of this year, all things being well?

Karin Smyth: We want to ensure that the guidance is published as soon as possible, and we appreciate patience while we make that happen. It is important that we continue to work with people and organisations with lived experience to develop the guidance. We hope that the update we provide will assure everyone of the priority attached to that important piece of work.

As for the scope of the guidance—with regard to other genetic conditions or learning disability—a commitment was made during the Bill's passage through Parliament to consider the links and overlaps with other genetic conditions and/or a learning disability. Therefore, the guidance will be Down syndrome-specific, in line with the Government's statutory duty—which we are clear about—under the Act. It will also include

references to where it could have wider benefit. We want to take the opportunity of the guidance to help as many people as possible and to provide examples of good practice to support relevant authorities to implement improvements in practice.

On employment, we heard through engagement with our partners that employment is crucial to improving life outcomes. People with Down syndrome can bring many skills and strengths to the workplace. We want every person with Down syndrome who can and wants to work to have the right support and opportunity to do so. That is why a dedicated chapter on employment will be included in the guidance.

On implementing the guidance, we know that ultimately much depends on how the guidance is put into practice across our communities. To support implementation, NHS England published statutory guidance on 9 May 2023 to require that every ICB had a named lead for Down syndrome. I think that the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness said that there was only one, and I recognise the name, because it is my own area—well done, them. That might not have happened, but it was said in 2023.

The executive lead on Down syndrome will lead on supporting the chief executive and the board to ensure that the ICB performs its functions effectively in the interests of people with Down syndrome. We recognise the importance of ensuring that people with Down syndrome are able to make complaints, if they have concerns about the quality of and access to care. We expect the named lead to ensure that concerns are acted on at the local level.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Karin Smyth: I am sorry, but I think I have only a minute to go.

This week has been a powerful reminder of how far we have come regarding awareness of Down syndrome. It has also made us reflect that much more remains to be done. When the guidance is launched for public consultation, we will welcome Members' support to ensure that the communities they represent are aware of it and can share their views.

I will just highlight the issue of regression, which my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock mentioned. The guidance will deal with specific health needs, and regression will be part of that.

I thank the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness again for securing the debate and other hon. Members for joining the discussion. In particular, I thank the co-chairs of the APPG, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), for their work, and everyone who works tirelessly to improve our support systems and services. It is incumbent on us all, working with people with Down syndrome, their families and carers, to get this done.

I appreciate that a number of requests have been made for different individuals and groups to meet my hon. Friend the Minister for Care. He is keen to do that. I will not make specific commitments, although the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness tempts me to do so, but I will make the commitment that my hon. Friend will be in touch via his office with colleagues

who made such requests, to ensure that we make best use of the time and bring people with us on the implementation of this guidance, which is so crucial—I remember my time on that Bill well. I am thankful for the opportunity to be part of the debate this afternoon.

6.37 pm

Graham Stuart: We have had 10 speeches in this debate, which is fantastic. I think we all agree that the stand-out speech was that of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft). It is great to have the whole House coming together in this way—a number of colleagues focused on that—and to have the pledges from the Minister. I think we can move forward with enthusiasm and engage

with the Minister for Care. Led by the co-chairs of the APPG, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), we can ensure that we have a streamlined meeting or meetings to ensure that the Minister's time is best used, the voices of the community are heard and the guidance is swiftly produced.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Down's syndrome.

6.37 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Wednesday 19 March 2025

HOME DEPARTMENT

Support for Victims and Survivors of Terrorism

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The impact of terrorism on individuals and their families is long lasting and evolving. In a single moment, their worlds are turned upside down and lives are changed forever. We hold in our thoughts everyone tragically lost, bereaved, and injured, physically and mentally, by terrorist attacks, both at home and abroad.

It is essential that each and every one of these individuals receives timely and compassionate support to help them recover from the impacts of an attack.

The Home Office has carried out a comprehensive review of the support needs of victims and survivors of terrorism, to identify ways to better address the needs of victims and survivors. The Government pay tribute and give thanks to each and every victim and survivor who contributed to the review and to those who continue to raise awareness of the lived experiences of victims and survivors, and to campaign for better support.

Today we have published the review's findings, which fundamentally signal that more needs to be done to better support victims and survivors of terrorism.

The review identified that victims and survivors need consistent and co-ordinated support, with streamlined communications to enable clarity on what support they are eligible for, how to apply, and where to receive help in applying. The review also found that acknowledgement of victims' and survivors' lived experiences is crucial to their individual recoveries.

Today the Government have affirmed this commitment by announcing plans to implement a dedicated support hub to deliver timely and compassionate support to victims and survivors nationally. The Government have also launched a consultation on a national day for victims and survivors of terrorism to better recognise those impacted by terrorist attacks.

Next Steps

Today we have announced that we will deliver a dedicated support hub for victims and survivors of terrorism. The support hub will better support victims by streamlining communications through a single point of contact and will provide specialist support addressing their diverse needs in the immediate and long-term aftermath of an attack. We are aiming for the support hub to be available to victims and survivors from next year.

There is currently no single focal point to allow the nation to come together in reflection and remembrance of those sadly lost and impacted by terrorism. It is only right that we consider the ways the Government could appropriately acknowledge their experiences.

In recognition of this, today the Government have also launched a public consultation on a national day for victims and survivors of terrorism. The consultation seeks specific feedback on the proposal for a national day, together with exploring other forms of recognition for victims and survivors. It also seeks respondents' input on key aspects of a national day, including their views on a potential name, date, the ways it could be commemorated, and any consequences that may arise. We welcome responses from those impacted by terrorism including, victims, survivors, their loved ones and those that support them.

The consultation has launched today for a period of 12 weeks. It is available on www.gov.uk and is open to members of the public.

We understand the outcomes of the review have been long-awaited. It is important to this Government that we are transparent about the unique challenges victims and survivors experience. Today we have also published a summary of the review and its key recommendations. The review summary is available on the www.gov.uk website and accessible to all members of the public.

These reforms are an important first step towards better support and recognition for victims and survivors of terrorism. I personally pay tribute to their courage and resilience, and I pledge my commitment to ensuring they receive the support they deserve.

A copy of the consultation—and related privacy information notice—and the review summary will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS533]

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