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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 31 March 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 765

FOURTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 31 March 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

The Clerk at the Table having informed the House of the unavoidable absence of the Speaker, the Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I inform the House that Mr Speaker is in Ukraine at the invitation of Ruslan Stefanchuk, president of the Ukrainian Parliament, alongside Speakers from across Europe. He will provide an update to the House on Wednesday.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Syrian Asylum Claims

1. **Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): If she will review the pause in decisions on Syrian asylum claims.
[903497]

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): We wish Mr Speaker all the best on his extremely important visit to our parliamentary colleagues in Ukraine. Following the fall of the Assad regime, the Home Office withdrew the country policy and information note and guidance on Syria and temporarily paused interviews and decisions on Syrian asylum claims. This was, and remains, a necessary step that several other European countries have also taken.

The pause is under constant review, and when there is a clear basis on which to make decisions, we will start processing claims again.

Patricia Ferguson: I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that the UK Government, together with the international community, are looking for a peaceful solution in Syria that puts the people of Syria first. Organisations working with the Syrian communities in Scotland, such as the Scottish Refugee Council, have reported a sense of heightened anxiety among Syrians currently in the asylum system, and wonder whether people seeking protection should be kept in limbo any longer than is necessary. There are also concerns that the pause in decision making may increase the backlog of asylum cases, contributing to the legacy backlog left by the Conservative Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Ms Ferguson, is there an actual question?

Patricia Ferguson: There certainly is. Is my hon. Friend able to give a timeline for her decision making?

Dame Angela Eagle: I understand the heightened anxiety among Syrian asylum seekers, but the Home Office relies on the country information in order to make decisions on whether particular people need protection, and that information is currently in the middle of quite profound change. When we are in a position to make decisions against new, more up-to-date information, we will certainly do so. I hope the Syrian community will be patient and not too anxious about the pause currently in place.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): How many hotels in Scotland are used to house asylum seekers?

Dame Angela Eagle: We do not comment on where hotels are, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that there are 216 hotels across the whole country. We will be getting those numbers down as quickly as we can.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Many seeking asylum, including from Syria, enter the UK by illegally crossing the channel, which is, of course, completely unnecessary, as France is a safe country with a well-functioning asylum system. In relation to those channel crossings, will the Minister accept that the Government's plan to smash the gangs lies in tatters? Crossings are up by 31% since the election—they are about to break 300,000¹—and the first three months of this year have been the worst on record. Does the Minister accept it was a catastrophic mistake to cancel the Rwanda deterrent before it even started? I was in Berlin last week, and the new German Government, and other European Governments, are looking to implement removals deterrents very similar to the Rwanda deterrent. Will she now do a U-turn and implement a removals deterrent so that all illegal arrivals are rapidly removed to a safe third country?

Dame Angela Eagle: Some 84,000 people crossed the channel from the day the Rwandan deal was signed to the day it was scrapped. The Conservatives failed to deter a single boat or deport a single person. Instead, they spent £700 million and sent four people—four failed asylum seekers—to start a new life in Kigali with free housing, free private healthcare and free university education, at a cost of £150,000 each. If the right hon. Gentleman really thinks that paying £150,000 per removed asylum seeker was an adequate answer to the challenge of small boat crossings, then I do not know what planet he is living on.

Violence against Women and Girls

2. **Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): What steps her Department is taking with police forces to tackle violence against women and girls. [903498]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): I join the Immigration Minister in wishing Mr Speaker well for his important trip to Ukraine.

The Government have set an unprecedented mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. We have set out new measures, including the first domestic abuse specialists in 999 control rooms, starting the roll-out of domestic abuse protection orders, and a new national policing centre for violence against women and girls and public protection.

Jess Brown-Fuller: The Chichester-based charity My Sisters' House gave vital wraparound trauma-informed support to 28 women in 2015. Last year, it supported more than 1,700 women. The charity has raised the ongoing issue of cross-allegations, whereby abusers are falsely accusing their victims as a means of keeping the control and the emotional abuse going. What steps is the Home Secretary taking with the Justice Secretary to ensure that the system properly recognises this form of continued abuse and protects victims from being retraumatised?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member raises an important issue about how coercive control can manifest and how abusers can continue their abuse in different ways, including using the civil courts. Part of the reason for introducing

the national centre for public protection is to have the best possible national standards and training, properly for the first time across policing and then working across the criminal justice system, in order to keep victims safe.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): At last week's annual police awards held by the Rochdale district of Greater Manchester police, the unsung hero award went to Jayne Ward, who is a sexual assault adviser, for her role in supporting a rape victim throughout every single day in court. That victim was rewarded with justice, and the rapist was sent down for 12 years. Jayne currently supports 150 sexual assault victims. Does the Home Secretary agree that we owe a great debt of thanks to Jayne and to the police officers who help to secure such convictions?

Yvette Cooper: I pay tribute to Jayne Ward for the remarkable work that she is doing to support victims of the most appalling and vile crimes, helping them to get justice and helping them as they go through the criminal justice system. I also pay tribute to the police officers working night and day across the country to tackle sexual assault and abuse.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The ambition to halve the prevalence of violence against women and girls is a laudable one, but could the Home Secretary give the House some more information? What number is she taking as a starting point to be halved? When will she be able to provide more information to the House and to my Select Committee?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee for her questions. We are currently drawing up a strategy on violence against women and girls, which will be published before the summer recess and will set out the approach that we need to take and the need to reduce domestic abuse, sexual assaults and stalking—the crimes that are most prevalent and of which women are most likely to be the victims, but which we also need to reduce more broadly. We will set out details on the measures that we will be looking for as part of that strategy.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The accurate collection of sex-aggregated data by police forces is essential to addressing male violence against women and girls. What plans does my right hon. Friend have in place for her Department to implement the recently published Sullivan review?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell my hon. Friend that we take the Sullivan review extremely seriously. It is important to recognise the difference between biological sex and gender and to make sure that policing and the criminal justice system always have the accurate data that they need.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Women and girls will never truly be safe while terrifying online influencers such as Andrew Tate are allowed platforms that radicalise men and boys into extreme misogyny. What steps is the Secretary of State taking with Cabinet colleagues to support police in tackling violence against women and girls?

1.[Official Report, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 25.](Correction)

Yvette Cooper: Measures in the Online Safety Act 2023 are being implemented over the course of this year. That includes the introduction this summer of measures expected to ensure that stronger action is taken to prevent young boys and children more widely from seeing inappropriate material, which can be very damaging and very extreme. We also need to work in schools to prevent abuse in relationships.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Rape victims were failed under the previous Government, and too few actually got to see the inside of a courtroom. Among those victims were the victims of Andrew Tate here in the UK, who suffered rape and other violence against them. While I know that the Home Secretary cannot comment on the current extradition notice with Romania, what message can she send to those victims, whom I have met and who will be meeting a Minister as well, about their day in court and getting justice?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will know that there is a court case under way in Romania and that issues around prosecution and extradition decisions are matters for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. I know that she has worked with victims, including in her constituency, and it is hugely important that victims of appalling crimes have a route to justice, wherever they are in the world.

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

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): In at least 50 of our towns, gangs of men have groomed and then sexually tortured little girls, with astonishing depravity. Still, not one person has been convicted for covering up these institutionalised rapes. Local inquiries cannot summon witnesses, are being refused by local authorities, and cannot address national policies like deportation. Fundamentally, the Government's plan will not cover even one in 10 of these towns. Will the Home Secretary explain how she will choose which towns get a local inquiry and what she will say to the victims whose towns will not be included?

Yvette Cooper: The shadow Minister will know that we have asked the police to reopen cases and historical investigations, because it is crucial that where there is abuse, including historical exploitation and grooming gangs, prosecutions take place and perpetrators face justice for their vile crimes. We are supporting local inquiries and the review by Louise Casey into the scale and nature of exploitation across the country.

The shadow Minister refers to cover-ups. We are introducing a mandatory duty to report child abuse, and we are criminalising the covering up of abuse and exploitation. That is something I called for more than 10 years ago, and I am really sorry that the previous Government never introduced it.

Defending Democracy Taskforce

3. **Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab):** What recent progress the defending democracy taskforce has made. [903499]

5. **John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab):** What recent progress the defending democracy taskforce has made. [903501]

1.[Official Report, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 25.](Correction)

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The taskforce is driving forward work to ensure that the UK's democracy is strengthened and protected. This includes work to tackle the unacceptable harassment and intimidation of elected representatives. I have recently provided detailed evidence on the taskforce's progress to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, and I will give evidence to Mr Speaker at a Speaker's Conference evidence session on Wednesday.

Steve Race: People in Exeter want to be sure that the elections and referenda we hold are safe and secure from outside state actors who want to manipulate our politics for their own ends. We already know that Russian disinformation on social media in many African nations is already having a huge impact on their domestic politics. Can the Minister confirm that the taskforce will be taking into account our own Russia report and that this Government will do everything they can to defend our politics from the malign activities of external state actors?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. It is and always will be a priority to protect the UK against foreign interference. The Government are absolutely committed to safeguarding the UK's democratic processes and have established measures to protect it. While there is no room for complacency, Kremlin disinformation operations largely fail here in the UK, despite their best efforts. That is in part because of the discernment and judgment of the British public but also because of the actions of our intelligence services.

John Slinger: I declare an interest as a member of the Speaker's Conference. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that aside from the security measures that are sadly increasingly necessary to protect candidates and elected representatives, it is vital that everyone who believes in the importance of defending our democracy plays their part in doing so, and that this must include Parliament, social media companies, the traditional media, the education system, businesses, charities and civil society organisations? That way, we can collectively create a healthier and safer environment within which our democracy can flourish.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to say that the defence of our democracy is something that every sector of our society, business and the media need to play their part in. I assure him that defending our democratic processes is an absolute priority for the Government, and that there is work across Departments to understand the nature and scale of harassment and intimidation of candidates and campaigners. I assure hon. Members across the House that the joint election security and preparedness unit will continue to co-ordinate cross-Government work on all threats, including candidate security.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution recently spoke at an iftar hosted by the European Islamic Centre, which is connected to Jamaat-e-Islami and Abul A'la al-Maududi, the Minister for Social Security and Disability attended the Muslim Council of Britain's annual dinner, and the Prime Minister hosted Adam Kelwick, an imam who celebrated the 7 October attacks and told followers to "pray for victory" for Hamas. Why are the Government

so keen to spend time with and lend legitimacy to organisations and people they say they oppose? What will the Minister say to the Prime Minister?

Dan Jarvis: We are not, and I do not agree with the proposition that the hon. Member has made. All Ministers—of course, including the Prime Minister—take these matters incredibly seriously, and we always engage in the most responsible way.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): When the defending democracy taskforce was established, it was proclaimed that its primary focus was to protect the democratic integrity of the United Kingdom. What work, therefore, has it done on the fact that there is a part of this United Kingdom—namely, Northern Ireland—where the democratic integrity of the United Kingdom has been upended by the fact that, in 300 areas of law, our laws are made not by this Parliament and not by the Stormont Assembly, but by a foreign Parliament: the European Union? What work has been done to restore democratic integrity to the United Kingdom in respect of Northern Ireland?

Dan Jarvis: I give the hon. and learned Member an absolute assurance that we work closely with all the devolved Governments on this matter. In fact, I was in Northern Ireland just recently to discuss this with the Justice Minister. The work that we are conducting as part of the taskforce is cross-party and designed to ensure that we do everything we possibly can to prevent interference in our democratic processes. We take the matter seriously, and we will work with others on it.

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

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I realise that my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) was unable to get a meaningful answer, but with Islamist extremism behind three quarters of MI5's caseload, it is essential to shield our democracy from its pressure. The Minister has repeatedly reiterated the Government's non-engagement policy with the Muslim Council of Britain, despite a Government Minister attending its annual dinner. More recently, there have been concerns about attendees at Government events who have publicly expressed some frightening views. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government remain committed to a non-engagement policy with those who seek to promote extreme views that undermine our democracy? Where Government Ministers go against that, how does the defending democracy taskforce respond?

Dan Jarvis: I assure the shadow Minister that our policy on engagement has not changed. I have responded on this matter on a number of occasions. What I can say to him, addressing the substance of the issue, is that we will tackle extremism wherever we find it. The Government take these matters incredibly seriously. We will never allow them to be used as a political football. We will address these matters and tackle them head-on.

Shoplifting

4. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle shoplifting. [903500]

13. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle shoplifting. [903511]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): In the last year of the previous Government, shop theft reached a record high, with devastating consequences for our high streets and town centres. The Conservative party wrote that off as low-level crime, but the Labour Government are determined to take back our streets from thugs and thieves. That is why we are ending the effective immunity for shop theft of goods under £200, introducing a new offence of assaulting a shop worker and delivering 13,000 new neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers in communities across the country.

Jessica Toale: Many retailers in Bournemouth town centre and across my constituency have told me that the same people over and over again are responsible for shoplifting and putting their staff's safety at risk. Good progress has been made locally with Dorset police's Operation Shopkeeper and the town centre business improvement district's use of the UK partners against crime system, but what more can be done to tackle repeat offenders and to learn the lessons from successful initiatives such as those in my constituency?

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to the House's attention the excellent initiative taking place in Bournemouth. It is a real example of the results that can be achieved when we get local authorities, businesses and law enforcement all coming together. I am keen to look carefully at examples such as that of Bournemouth and what is happening in the town centre to see how we can learn from such best practices and they can be disseminated.

Jim Dickson: May I thank the Minister for her earlier answer? Across my constituency, from the Co-op in Dartford to the Subway on the high street and Pet & Garden Supplies on Colney Road, I hear the same frustrating tales from business owners and shopworkers about how powerless they feel to tackle shoplifting. The measures contained in the Crime and Policing Bill to tackle that problem have just been set out and they cannot come soon enough. Will the Minister bring hope to people across the Dartford constituency that we will turn the tide on shoplifting after it was clearly deprioritised by the Conservative party?

Dame Diana Johnson: Again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. When the Conservative party left office, shop theft was at a record level, up 40% in the space of two years. The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), now says "ZERO TOLERANCE" on shop theft, even in cases where less than £200 worth of goods has been stolen. Yet, in the two years that he was the police and crime Minister he left that £200 limit in place, allowed thieves to escape with impunity and, in the absence of any police, said that people should make their own citizen's arrest. While shop thefts soared, all he had to say to the public was, basically, that they were on their own and should sort it out themselves.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Many of my constituents are exasperated by the fact that the police are unable to turn up when there is shoplifting or a burglary, yet they were able to send six officers to get

themselves involved in a dispute with a local school and to warn off local elected representatives from getting involved. Sadly, that misallocation of resources and unwarranted police overreach is not an isolated example. May I urge the Minister to avoid engaging in political point scoring and instead join me in sending a very clear message from both sides of this House that our expectation is that the police should be focused on solving real crimes and staying out of legitimate free expression and democratic debate?

Dame Diana Johnson: I think it is fair to say that the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have been very clear about the priorities of this Government for tackling crime through our safer streets mission. We want to halve violence against women and girls over the course of the next decade. We want to halve knife crime over the course of the next decade. We will deliver the 13,000 neighbourhood police officers back into our communities that were decimated under the previous Government. The priorities of this Government are very clear in tackling crime and policing.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): My constituent lives just 500 metres from the Tesco Express store in Eastbourne where she works. She does not feel safe leaving as a result of the retail crime there and so gets a taxi back home in the evening. Will the Minister explain not just what the Government can do to help protect shop workers like my constituent, but what can big business such as Tesco do to better protect the employees who do such an important role for them and for their communities?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Clearly, legislation has been brought forward to protect retail workers from assault. However, a good employer will want to ensure their staff are well looked after. If there are issues about leaving work and needing to take a taxi, I am sure that good employers would want to address that and support those retail workers.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers: As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) has outlined, this weekend we heard the shocking reports that the parents of a nine-year-old girl were arrested by six Hertfordshire police officers and placed in a cell for 11 hours because they complained about their daughter's primary school on WhatsApp. At the same time, 270,000 shoplifting cases have been closed without a suspect being identified. Does the Minister agree that the police should be able to get on with the job of tackling crime on our streets? Can she comment on whether they were getting their priorities right in that case?

Dame Diana Johnson: As the shadow Minister will know, this is an operational matter for policing, and it is quite clear that the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner have set out that there will be a review of what happened in that particular case.

Violence against Shop Workers

6. **John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to tackle violence against shop workers. [903502]

1.[Official Report, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 25.](Correction)

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): To repeat what I was saying, under the previous Government violence and abuse towards retail workers increased to unacceptable levels. Everyone has a right to feel safe at their place of work. Alongside the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and the Co-op, who have long campaigned for stronger protections for retail workers, we are bringing in through the Crime and Policing Bill a new offence of assaulting a retail worker, to protect those hard-working and dedicated staff who work in stores, and to send a really strong message that violence against retail workers will not be tolerated.

John Whitby: On Friday I visited the central Co-op in Ashbourne, which recently experienced an armed robbery. Elizabeth and Georgia were working there when the robbery took place and are still deeply affected several months later. What action are the Government taking to stop violence against shop workers, especially in rural areas where the geographical distances involved often mean that the police take longer to respond?

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that shocking case to the attention of the House. All our thoughts will be with Elizabeth and Georgia after what they have been through. I also want to applaud the Co-op for the leading role that it has played in helping us to develop this new offence of assault against shop workers, to ensure that it is not just armed robbery against its staff that will be punished but the acts of violence and intimidation that far too many shop workers find happening on a daily basis. On the issue of serious crime in rural areas, our neighbourhood policing guarantee will deliver thousands of neighbourhood police community support officers across England and Wales, including in rural areas, to speed up response times, build up public confidence and ensure that for those violent criminals who commit acts such as armed robbery, there will be no hiding place from the law.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): In Ashford and Staines in my constituency we have a real plague of shoplifting and antisocial behaviour. Inspector Matthew Walton of the North division is doing a great job with his team to tackle it, in combination with the community and the retailers, but still the problem is getting worse. After the success of the facial recognition software roll-out in Croydon, will Ministers please consider extending it to Spelthorne, because it would be a welcome addition to policing in my area?

Dame Diana Johnson: As an operational matter, live facial recognition is something for the police to use as they deem fit, but from my experience of it being used in Croydon, I can see the benefits to policing. It seems to be a very effective tool that police forces should have in their armoury.

Off-road Bikes

7. **Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to tackle the antisocial use of off-road bikes. [903503]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Many of us will know from our constituencies the havoc that can be caused in communities by the dangerous and deafening antisocial use of off-road bikes. That is why this Government are giving the police

stronger powers to swiftly seize those bikes and other vehicles where they are being driven antisocially through local estates and town centres, as part of our mission to crack down on antisocial behaviour and make our streets safe.

Dave Robertson: People across Lichfield, Burntwood and the surrounding villages in my constituency—and, I am sure, across the country—are sick and tired of off-road bikes being used inappropriately, antisocially and dangerously on our streets. The worst example I have seen was somebody doing a wheelie on a quad bike at 40 mph on Eastern Avenue in Lichfield. I reported that to the police and they are following it up as best they can, but they tell me that they need the new powers in the Bill. Can the Secretary of State reassure me, my constituents and the rest of the country that this Government will continue to crack down on this problem and will not rest until our streets are safe for all road users?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend and I am sorry to hear about the appalling incident he describes. This is a challenge for us in many of our constituencies. My constituents in Airedale and Chequerfield see the total nightmare of off-road bikes being driven deliberately to harass people. If we have to wait for the police to give multiple warnings, they cannot take the swift action needed, which is why we need the change in the Bill.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent Peter from Corfe Mullen has had numerous run-ins with e-scooters and off-road bikes. What consideration is the Home Secretary giving to the redefinition of electric bike so that it is genuinely an electric bike?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right that there are many different forms and changes to the kinds of vehicles, bikes and scooters being used. The legislation applies not just to off-road bikes, but more widely to vehicles being used antisocially. That is important because the police need to be able to act swiftly and not end up having to try to chase and catch the same people again and again to take action.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour is a significant concern to my constituents, especially the nuisance caused by off-road bikes and e-scooters. Last Friday, local officers specifically told me that they do not feel they have the power to pursue the riders of these bikes when they are in their patrol cars, with riders often taunting and even laughing at them because they know they cannot easily be caught. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that my local officers in Mansfield have the specific powers they need to stop those bikes and bring those terrorising our community to justice?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right, and people in Mansfield should not be terrorised by deliberate harassment by people on off-road bikes. That is why we are strengthening the law through the Crime and Policing Bill, but it is also why we support the work that some police forces are doing—for example, the work I have seen in Staffordshire where they were using drones to follow those on off-road bikes and make swift seizures or arrests.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): At the weekend, I was speaking to residents of Braunstone Town, and many, particularly the elderly, were frightened by the use of off-road bikes and similar vehicles given the noises they make and the risk to pedestrians. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the Government are taking the matter seriously and that they will empower local police forces to bring those driving the bikes to justice?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important point. Often, particularly for older people, the way in which the bikes are used is just dangerous. The deliberate ramping up of the noise to intimidate and scare people is disgraceful antisocial behaviour. That is why we are increasing policing powers and why we want to work with policing on things like the drone use and other measures to tackle antisocial behaviour.

Mobile Phone Theft

8. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle mobile phone theft. [903505]

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Street theft increased by more than 40% in the last year of the previous Government, largely due to soaring rates of snatch theft involving mobile phones. There is clear evidence of organised criminality in those crimes—this is not just about petty criminals and opportunists. That is why the Home Secretary recently convened a mobile phone theft summit with tech companies, policing leaders and the National Crime Agency, and why our Crime and Policing Bill includes a new power enabling police to enter premises identified by electronic mapping if stolen items are believed to be there.

Kevin Bonavia: Mobile phone theft is a widespread concern in my constituency. Between 2019 and 2024, the spate of mobile phone thefts has risen by 22.3%. Can my hon. Friend reassure my constituents that this Government will take all steps to ensure their safety?

Dan Jarvis: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. Our recent mobile phone theft summit resulted in clear commitments from attendees to work in collaboration to tackle mobile phone theft and the organised criminality driving it. That is also why our Crime and Policing Bill will give police the power, where it is not practical to wait for a warrant, to enter and search premises where stolen mobile phones are believed to be.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The rising number of mobile phone thefts has caused great concern among many of my constituents. By the way, I am not technically minded—I know very little about how my mobile phone works—but many people have everything on their phones: their bank details are on that phone; their life is on that phone. If their phone is stolen, they are in big trouble. How will we restore confidence in the general public on mobile phones and having all our details on them?

Dan Jarvis: I think it is worth reflecting on the impressive results we have seen in recent months from the Metropolitan police in their work to intensify action on mobile phone theft. The hon. Gentleman is right: this is an important subject and we need to see that kind of activity around the country, including in Northern Ireland.

Rural Crime

9. **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle rural crime. [903506]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Government are committed to tackling rural crime and safeguarding rural areas through tougher measures to clamp down on antisocial behaviour, fly-tipping and the theft of agricultural equipment. Alongside our neighbourhood policing guarantee, we are also providing funding to the national rural and wildlife crime units to ensure their valuable work can continue.

Paul Davies: Crime rates in rural areas have surged by 32% since 2011, compared with 24% for urban areas, with a total rise of almost 130 reported offences. Rural crime in my constituency includes theft of agricultural machinery, livestock and fuel. The area's remote locations make it vulnerable to such crimes, which impact on local farmers and residents. What are the Government doing to ensure that rural crime gets the attention that it deserves?

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that vital issue. Just last month I held a rural crime roundtable in North Yorkshire and met local residents and farmers to discuss this important topic. Last week, in recognition of the success of the national rural and wildlife crime units, I announced additional funding for both in the next financial year, so that they can continue to support the police in rural areas. We are also working with the National Police Chiefs' Council on the next iteration of the rural and wildlife crime strategy. Later this year we will implement the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 and put the necessary secondary legislation in place. Ahead of that, we will publish the Government's response to the call for evidence on the scope of that legislation.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): One of the less widely recognised rural crimes is the use of catapults to maim and kill wildlife. Those weapons are also used in urban settings. I know that the Home Office takes the view that the wildlife protection legislation and the police powers ought to be adequate to deal with that, but at the moment they patently are not. Will the Minister consider reviewing that and possibly amending the Crime and Policing Bill to take account of it?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am always happy to review legislation and ensure that it is fit for purpose. I would be very happy to discuss that further with the right hon. Gentleman.

Live Facial Recognition

10. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What her policy is on the use of live facial recognition technology by police forces. [903507]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): I thank the right hon. Member for his interest in this subject and for the Westminster Hall debate that he secured last year. I want to support the police to use live facial recognition safely while

balancing public safety and safeguarding individuals' rights. The Home Office invested over £3 million in 2024-25 to develop a small national live facial recognition capability by purchasing and equipping 10 mobile LFR units for deployment later this year. I have been listening to stakeholders and will outline our plans in the coming months.

Sir John Whittingdale: Although I recognise that the use of facial recognition technology can lead to more offenders being caught, does the Minister accept that deployment of a permanent network of fixed cameras across Croydon represents a significant escalation in their use, which makes it all the more important that a clear legislative framework governing their use is debated and approved by Parliament?

Dame Diana Johnson: I fully accept that there is a need to consider live facial recognition. At the moment the law governing the use of that technology comes from various different things—human rights and equalities legislation, and other measures—and we want to see whether that should be brought together. That is why I have been having a series of meetings over the last few months. As I said, we will set out our plans for live facial recognition in the coming months.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Harlow police department's recent successful trial of facial recognition has led to some arrests. Does the Minister agree that technology can play a vital part in tackling crime but cannot be a substitute for neighbourhood policing?

Dame Diana Johnson: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. That is why we have committed to neighbourhood policing and 13,000 additional police officers and PCSOs on all our high streets and in communities up and down the land.

Asylum Policy: Refugee Convention

11. **Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Whether she has received legal advice on the compatibility of recent changes to her Department's guidance entitled "Good character: caseworker guidance", updated on 10 February 2025, with the 1951 refugee convention. [903508]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): The hon. Member will know that we take our international obligations very seriously. We are satisfied that the good character policy is compliant with those obligations. We have strengthened our policy to make it clear that anyone who enters the UK illegally, including small boat arrivals, will normally be refused British citizenship. The good character assessment has been a feature of UK immigration law since 1981 and there has never been any suggestion, either now or in the past, that it is inconsistent with our obligations under the refugee convention or any other treaty.

Pete Wishart: One of the most shocking and egregious things this Government have done is impose a blanket ban on British citizenship for all individuals who have entered the UK irregularly, without any parliamentary scrutiny or public consultation, effectively disenfranchising

all asylum seekers and refugees, including those who have made this country their home for years. The Refugee Council estimates that up to 71,000 refugees who have already been granted asylum could now be blocked from securing naturalisation. The Minister knows that there are no safe routes to get to the UK, so nearly all asylum seekers have to arrive irregularly. Surely the policy clearly breaches article 31 of the 1951 refugee convention, which prohibits penalising those seeking protection for their mode of entry? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. All Members should be respectful and mindful of their language at all times. Now we need to hear the Minister respond.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Member for his question. He will know that we explained when making the changes that each citizenship application will continue to be considered on a case-by-case basis, and that the Secretary of State may choose to apply discretion to grant citizenship on an exceptional basis where there has been particularly exceptional or mitigating circumstances, such as modern slavery.

People Smuggling

14. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps she is taking to help tackle people smuggling. [903512]

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): The Government are today playing host to law enforcement counterparts from across the globe to discuss our joint response to organised immigration crime. The UK is not only hosting that summit but leading the way in its response to this appalling, evil trade, including through new powers introduced in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which I note the Conservative party voted against.

Christine Jardine: I thank the Minister for that response and welcome the increased co-operation with allies on this vital issue. It is critical that we stop the dangerous crossings, but without tackling the problem at its source, with aid to tackle famine and conflict and by providing safe legal routes, do we not risk the crisis continuing? How will the Minister work with colleagues across Government to address those factors to ensure that we tackle the crisis fully?

Dame Angela Eagle: The summit is dealing with source countries. We are looking at how we can co-operate with countries all the way along the routes used by smuggling gangs to ensure that the right messages, rather than very slick organised immigration gang advertising, are conveyed.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): People smugglers do not just put the immigration system in jeopardy; they exploit the vulnerable and they put lives in danger. There is nothing progressive about allowing the vulnerable to be exploited by these smugglers. Does the Minister agree that we should be straining every sinew to crack down on these gangs and can she update us on her meetings today on this topic?

1. *[Official Report, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 25.]* (Correction)

Dame Angela Eagle: I agree strongly with my hon. Friend and that is why today's immigration summit, where 40 countries will be co-operating and attending, is such an important event. Today we also announced that, since we came into government, we have returned more than 24,000 people who have no right to be here. We have also tightened up the illegal working regulations to make certain that they apply across the board to the gig economy and to casual workers, too.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Since the Labour Government came to power, more than 30,000 people have entered our country illegally. The Prime Minister says he is very angry about that, but he is not as angry as the British taxpayer, who has to fork out £1.2 billion a year to keep those illegal invaders in our country. Does the Minister agree that anybody arriving here illegally should be detained and deported?

Dame Angela Eagle: We have a duty to ensure that those arriving on our shores who claim asylum are properly processed. The Conservatives prevented themselves from doing that by becoming obsessed with the Rwanda scheme and they left us with a huge backlog. We will speed up immigration processing so that we can deal with those people, protect those who have a right to be here and send back those who have failed. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the steep increase in returns and removals that I have just announced.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not gimmicks such as Rwanda but international co-operation that will fundamentally deal with the illegal gangs who are facilitating crossings? Is that not why we should welcome today's summit, at which people are coming together to co-operate and to tackle those gangs?

Dame Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is exactly right. These criminals are cross-national, very sophisticated and operate across borders. In order to respond properly, we have to do the same, and that is what today's summit is helping us to co-ordinate.

Police Forces: Gloucestershire

15. **Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support police forces in Gloucestershire. [903514]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): Total funding for Gloucestershire police for 2025-26 will be up to £169.3 million, which is an increase of up to £11.2 million on last year and includes £1.5 million to kick-start the recruitment of additional neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers in Gloucestershire—to get those bobbies back on the beat in our local communities.

Cameron Thomas: I thank the Minister for her response. In 2015, Baroness May of Maidenhead, the then Home Secretary, accused police forces of “crying wolf” over funding cuts. In the decade since, police services across the country, such as mine in Gloucestershire, have never truly recovered from her scandalous cuts to their numbers. Gloucestershire constabulary is one of the worst funded in the country—the victim of an

unfit-for-purpose funding formula. Last week, the chief constable announced 60 staff cuts as she battles with a £12 million deficit. Will the Minister meet me and my chief constable to discuss those challenges?

Dame Diana Johnson: Yes, of course I will.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): As the Minister has said, getting more bobbies on the beat in Gloucestershire and across the country is crucial to delivering the frontline policing that our communities deserve, but recent freedom of information figures show that more than 1,500 police officers are stuck on long-term sick leave, including 148 in my own Greater Manchester police force. On the job, officers witness violent and traumatic events that can damage their mental health, but too many report being left without enough support. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that mental health support is good enough in the police? That is one of the ways to get officers fit for a return to work more quickly, to be part of restoring the proper community policing that our communities deserve.

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Lady raises a very important point about the wellbeing of police officers and police staff. We have the police covenant, which is very important. I have already had the first meeting about the steps we are taking to improve work around the police covenant, but fundamentally occupational health is a matter for chief constables in their own forces. We are very keen that the work that has gone on to improve those occupational health standards continues and that the wellbeing of police officers is at the front and centre of our work, so that we have a healthy workforce to deliver for us on our safer streets mission.

Topical Questions

T1. [903522] **Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Today we are hosting in London the first ever international summit on organised immigration crime and border security, bringing together source, transit and destination countries which all see the havoc and harm that criminal smuggler and trafficking gangs cause, undermining our border security and putting lives at risk. As part of that, the UK is strengthening the law against illegal working in the gig economy, so employer checks will have to be done, alongside increasing illegal working raids and returns.

As a result of our work with France, the French Cabinet has for the first time agreed to change its maritime rules, so that the French authorities can intervene in French waters to prevent boat crossings. We are bringing together Ministers and law enforcement from close neighbours such as France, Belgium and Germany, and from countries further afield such as Vietnam, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, China and the US. They are all discussing today how we strengthen that collaboration to choke off supply chains, pursue illicit finance, take down advertising, disrupt and prosecute the criminals and tackle this vile trade in human beings.

1.[Official Report, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 25.](Correction)

Natasha Irons: A constituent has contacted me about the difficulty he is facing in trying to get what he is entitled to via the Windrush compensation scheme. Given that victims of the Windrush scandal are not entitled to legal aid, a large proportion are assessed as eligible for compensation but cannot meet the high threshold of evidence necessary to prove that they are entitled to it. Will the Home Secretary look again at what legal support can be provided to the victims of this scandal, so that they can finally get the justice that they deserve?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issues around the Windrush generation, who were so badly let down and treated by the Home Office over many years. We have increased support and advocacy for compensation scheme claimants, and the Minister for migration and citizenship, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), would be happy to discuss the matter with my hon. Friend.

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

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Has the Home Secretary seen the police's anti-racism commitment that was published last week, which says that the police do not have to treat everyone the same regardless of race and calls for arrest rates to be artificially engineered to be the same across racial groups? Does she agree that this two-tier approach to policing is totally unacceptable?

Yvette Cooper: The police operate without fear or favour, and they respond to the crimes they face across the country and to the perpetrators of those crimes, whosoever they should be and wheresoever they are. That is the right approach for the police to take, whether they are dealing with the most serious violence—which we have prioritised—or with neighbourhood crimes in communities. As the shadow Home Secretary will know from the approach we are taking to the Sentencing Council and the importance of us bringing forward rapid emergency legislation in that area, we are very clear that there can be no preferential treatment for anyone in the criminal justice system. It is really important that the principle of fair treatment for all is always maintained.

Chris Philp: I completely agree with the Home Secretary that people should stand equally before the law and be treated exactly the same, regardless of their race or identity. I agree with the Home Secretary about all of that, but unfortunately the anti-racism commitment published last week does not say that—in fact, it says the opposite. It expressly says that

“It does not mean treating everyone ‘the same’ or being ‘colour blind’”.

Given that the Home Secretary and I agree that the law should be blind to race and that everyone should be treated the same, will she join me in tabling an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill to override those provisions in the anti-racism commitment?

Yvette Cooper: The police already have to swear an oath on their impartiality and policing without fear or favour. That is the responsibility of every single police officer right across the country. The shadow Home Secretary will know that there are dedicated police officers who

do exactly that and will continue to do exactly that, to ensure that they treat everyone appropriately and make sure that everyone faces justice before the law.

T2. [903523] **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): Residents of Exeter, particularly female residents, have raised with me their alarm at Tory-led Devon county council's decision to dim or completely turn off 80% of Exeter's street lights during the night, including on streets and paths to railway stations and bus stops. Many shift workers come home late at night or start early in the morning, and having well-lit routes offers them a sense of security. Does the Minister agree that Devon county council should think again, and should consult with resident groups and other groups on a way forward that puts the safety of residents at the centre of its decision making?

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. It is absolutely key that people feel safe walking at night, particularly shift workers and residents, and good street lighting is a key part of that.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Ukrainians in the UK deserve stability after fleeing war, yet almost half report severe stress and anxiety caused by prolonged uncertainty about their visa status. Some 44% have lost a job opportunity, 26% have been unable to sign new tenancy agreements and 25% have had a student loan rejected, all because of that uncertainty. Does the Minister agree that this is an unacceptable way of treating those to whom we opened our arms, and will she commit to giving Ukrainian refugees the certainty about their visas that they deserve?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): The hon. Lady will be aware that we continue to stand by Ukraine, and to support those whom we have been able to welcome to our country. We have provided certainty under the Ukraine permission extension scheme, which we opened on 4 February. Under that scheme, people can prove that they have ongoing status through section 3C leave during their application process.

T7. [903528] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): This month, we marked eight years since the Westminster bridge attack, a cowardly assault on our parliamentary democracy that killed five people, including the late PC Keith Palmer, and injured almost 50 others. As the survivors seek to rebuild their lives, what measures is the Department putting in place to support the survivors and honour the victims of terrorist attacks?

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The victims and survivors of terrorism need and deserve the highest levels of support to recover and rebuild their lives. The Government will set up a new, dedicated support hub for victims and survivors, supporting their needs in the immediate and long-term aftermath of a terrorist attack. Proposals for a new national day for victims and survivors of terrorism will also be consulted on, helping the country to remember and honour those who have been tragically killed or impacted by terrorist attacks.

T3. [903524] **Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): Cambridgeshire's rural crime action team is successful, but it does not have the resources to be available 24/7. Indeed, it was not available during the recent hare coursing incursion into my constituency of Ely and East Cambridgeshire. What assessment has the Minister made of ensuring the 24/7 availability of rural crime action teams?

Dame Diana Johnson: I was very concerned to hear about the incident to which the hon. Lady refers. I announced earlier that additional funding is going into the national wildlife crime unit and the national rural crime unit to assist forces in providing the cover necessary in rural areas.

T8. [903529] **Mary Glendon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): During a recent walkabout in Wallsend with Northumbria's police and crime commissioner, Susan Dungworth, and the North Tyneside cabinet member for community safety, Karen Clark, I heard about how the police, retailers and the council work in partnership to tackle retail crime. However, while larger retailers can provide personal safety equipment for staff, that is not affordable for small retailers. Does the Minister have any plans to help small shop owners with such costs?

Dame Diana Johnson: The Government have announced that we will provide £7 million over the next three years to support the police in tackling retail crime, including by continuing to fund a specialist policing team. There is £100,000 available to the National Police Chiefs' Council to assist with measures that retailers can introduce to make their shops and retail outlets more secure. That that may well be of use.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Topical questions should be short.

T4. [903525] **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): The Home Office states that it takes fraud in visa applications seriously, but I know of a case involving a man who came here on a spousal visa, was then arrested four times for domestic abuse, and left the family home in October '23. All this is backed up by police reports and social worker documentation. In his spousal visa application of March last year, he claimed that he was still living with my constituent in the family home. She has reported this twice to the Home Office—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. These are topical questions. I call the Minister.

Seema Malhotra: I am happy to speak to the hon. Member about the case she raises.

T9. [903530] **Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): Socketts newsagents in my constituency is more than 100 years old, but it faces closure because of gangs of masked youths shoplifting. What will the Minister do to help Socketts and ensure that it can stay open?

Dame Diana Johnson: Well, that is totally unacceptable. That is why we need our neighbourhood policing guarantee, and bobbies working on the high streets and in communities that have been devoid of police officers for too long, because of decisions taken by the previous Government. I am happy to discuss that case with my hon. Friend.

T5. [903526] **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Under the Police Regulations 2003, officers in Hertfordshire receive an allowance of up to £3,000, and those in Bedfordshire receive £2,000. Officers in Cambridgeshire are not eligible for the south-east allowance, despite being in the same tri-force area. The Policing Minister has previously informed me that the Government will give careful consideration to representations regarding the south-east allowance. Will she take steps to award the south-east allowance to Cambridgeshire constabulary police officers?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am certainly willing to hear representations on that.

T10. [903531] **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): Following the gripping storyline of “Adolescence” and the rise of incel culture contributing to youth crime, what specific measures is the Home Office implementing to address the root causes and create a safer and more supportive environment for our young people?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to mention the television programme “Adolescence”, which many people will have seen, and the issue of rising violence among teenagers. We see this in a number of areas; the issues range from knife crime to extremism and violence fixation. Importantly, we have the stronger measures in the Online Safety Act 2023 to protect young people from seeing extreme violence and inappropriate material online, but it is also important for us to work with schools to prevent violence among young people, including violence in relationships.

T6. [903527] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday, *Mail Online* reported on the leaking of a report from the National Police Chiefs’ Council on the Leicester riots of 2022. The report blamed Hindu extremism; however, during the riots, 105 Hindu homes were attacked, but no Muslim homes, and two Hindu temples were attacked, but no mosques. Will the Minister ensure that the report is published, so that we can scrutinise it and ensure that the blame is put where it should be?

Dan Jarvis: We take these matters very seriously. I will look carefully at the details of the point that the hon. Gentleman has made, and I am happy to discuss it with him further.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): There has been a recent slew of successful European sting operations that have resulted in the arrest of prominent individuals involved in people-smuggling gangs. Does the Minister agree that this highlights the crucial importance of international co-operation, and signals that Labour’s plan to smash the gangs is working?

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): Hard, tough cross-border policing takes time. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members may laugh, but on a recent joint action day led by German and Belgian authorities, 500 German officers arrested targets and seized dozens of boats and engines, including some in warehouses targeted by the National Crime Agency. On a joint action day led by German police earlier this month, there were seven arrests in eight raided locations,

and 90 dangerous life jackets were seized. That demonstrates a momentum in joint working that will put pressure on the criminal gangs.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): In the south-west last year, 77 police community support officers were taken off our streets; my local Avon and Somerset force accounted for 60 of them. It said that the change was a direct result of lack of funding. Will the Home Secretary agree to raise the matter with the Chancellor as a matter of urgency, so that we can put more money back into frontline policing?

Dame Diana Johnson: An extra £1.2 billion is going into policing for the financial year starting tomorrow. Obviously, past Governments must account for their failure to fund the police adequately.

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): When the Home Secretary visited Nuneaton to speak to local business owners, she heard from them directly about the problem of retail crime. There was a glimmer of hope, because our town centre officer was having a big impact, but that role is now vacant. Shops and other businesses say that retail crime is at an all-time high, with a 58% increase since January. Now that Labour is putting more money into people’s pockets, what more can be done to ensure that it is safe for it to be spent in town centres?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of town centre crime. We are investing additional funds of more than £1 billion in policing next year, and are providing an additional £200 million for neighbourhood policing, which was cut so heavily under the Conservative Government, so that we can bring it back to our town centres. We are strengthening the power of police officers and PCSOs to tackle street and shop theft—crimes that have soared in recent years because the Conservative Government turned their back on it.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): During the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill Committee, we Conservatives proposed a new clause that would provide a mechanism for a binding annual cap on the number of non-visitor visas issued by the UK. That would have introduced accountability and transparency, but it was voted down decisively by Labour Members. The Government talk tough, but does the Home Secretary not believe that the British public deserve a transparent and honest answer to the question of what the level of migration will be under this Government, rather than the Government’s just blaming us, or saying “lower numbers” on every occasion?

Seema Malhotra: I am staggered by that question, because net migration reached record highs under the Conservatives’ watch. We are the ones with a plan to bring it down. Quite frankly, the hon. Lady should support that.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Mohamed waited nearly three years for a decision on his asylum application, a period that was extended by the pause in processing Syrian asylum cases. If the Minister will not end the pause, what interim steps will she take to further support host communities such as Falkirk?

Dame Angela Eagle: As I said earlier, we are keeping under close review the pause in Syrian asylum applications. We cannot decide asylum applications against a country policy that is no longer relevant because of the rapid change in that country. We will resume those decisions as soon as we can.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Reports about the Met police raid and arrests at the Quaker meeting house in Westminster last Thursday have caused great alarm, particularly because Quakers are renowned for their non-violent and pacifist principles. The incident raises serious concerns about the police's approach to freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest. What explanation have the Met police given the Minister for their actions that night?

Dame Diana Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman will realise, this is an operational matter for the Metropolitan police, and I am sure that they will provide further commentary at some point.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Dawn Thurkettle and the Rugby Street Pastors, and particularly the recently commissioned pastors, on all the excellent work that they do to lower the temperature on nights out in our town? They show kindness and listen to people on our streets, and play an important role in our community.

Dame Diana Johnson: I would be delighted to pay tribute to Dawn and the Rugby Street Pastors for their excellent work. Many street pastors around the country do really important work in keeping people safe and secure on nights out.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The final question goes to the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the Home Secretary consider raising an obvious lacuna in the law in the Committee of Ministers at the Council of Europe? Under the refugee convention, we can automatically deport foreign criminals who enter this country illegally, but under the convention on human rights, we cannot. Surely we can address that in partnership with other members of the Council of Europe.

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member will know that we have increased the return and removal of foreign national offenders significantly since the election. Deportations, returns and removals had plummeted under the previous Government. We are increasing them, and I believe it is right to do so. By working internationally, we have secured a new agreement with Germany, which will now go after the trafficking and smuggler gangs and the illegal warehouses in that country, but we need to ensure that we take action against dangerous foreign criminals.

Points of Order

3.41 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to make it clear that in the first question I asked, the number I intended to ask about was the 30,000 people who have illegally crossed the channel since the last election, which is a 31% increase on the previous period; and for the period since 1 January, the number was the highest in history. To be clear, the figure is 30,000 since the election.—[*Official Report*, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 3.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The shadow Minister has got his point on the record.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I asked the Security Minister why the Government were spending so much time with, and lending legitimacy to, organisations and people whom they say they oppose. The Security Minister replied, “We are not.” I gave three examples, and for each of them there is photographic evidence. In one case, a picture shows the Prime Minister in No. 10, laughing with the man I mentioned. I have much admiration for the Security Minister, and I am sure that he did not say what he did deliberately, but can you advise us on how he might correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. As he knows, the Chair is not responsible for the content of questions and answers. Nevertheless, Members should strive to be accurate in the comments they make to the House. If a mistake has been made, there is a procedure for correcting the record.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

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

3.44 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on HM Government’s response to the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I thank the right hon. Lady for her question about an issue that is very important to the Government and to many Members across the whole House.

We strongly condemn the secessionist moves by Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik, which seriously threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such actions are unconstitutional and dangerous, including to those living in Republika Srpska, whom he claims to protect. The UK, as one of the signatories, remains fully committed to the Dayton peace agreement, which protects the authorities of both entities, and supports Bosnia as a sovereign and politically independent state.

On Wednesday 26 February, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina found Republika Srpska President Dodik guilty, in a first-instance ruling, of refusing to implement decisions of the High Representative. The UK is clear that the High Representative’s jurisdiction is indisputable, and that disregarding the independent decisions of the judiciary of Bosnia and Herzegovina undermines the rule of law.

In response to the verdict, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska adopted a number of unconstitutional laws, and proposed a new constitution in clear violation of the Dayton peace agreement. These moves represent a significant escalation in Dodik’s secessionist path, and threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state. As he accelerates those attacks on the state, he increases the threat to international peace and security.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has the institutions and mechanisms to respond to this crisis, and we support all efforts by domestic actors to de-escalate the situation and take appropriate action. Last week, I convened a call with my French counterpart and the other Quint partners—the United States, Germany and Italy—plus European Union institutions, in which we discussed our joint efforts to bolster security and stability. I also spoke to the High Representative last week.

In the last few weeks, I have spoken to the Bosnian Foreign Minister, Elmedin Konaković, reaffirming the UK Government’s full support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The UK special envoy to the western Balkans, Dame Karen Pierce, reiterated that message during her visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina on 27 and 28 March, at our direction.

We welcome the decision by Operation Althea, under the EU peacekeeping mission EUFOR—the European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina—to activate its reserve forces to provide reassurance to the communities most affected by the rising tensions.

1.[*Official Report*, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 25.](Correction)

[Stephen Doughty]

In conclusion, Dodik's actions do not serve the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including those residing in Republika Srpska. The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina need their political leaders to focus on passing reforms and building an inclusive future, rather than exacerbating tensions and amplifying secessionist rhetoric.

Priti Patel: I thank the Minister for his remarks. Attempts to undermine Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and by extension the Dayton peace agreements, are deeply troubling. Over many years, the UK has been a reliable supporter of Bosnia and Herzegovina's democratic and pluralistic journey, and a trusted promoter when it comes to the security of the western Balkans.

We were proud, when in government, to have appointed Lord Peach as the special envoy to the western Balkans—his work was incredibly solid and robust—and we welcome the fact that the Government have maintained that position with the appointment of Dame Karen Pierce. We, too, look forward to engaging with her.

I know that the Minister has spoken with Foreign Minister Konaković, but what is the UK doing in practical terms both to support Bosnia and Herzegovina to stay the course and maintain stability, and to defend and promote freedom and democracy in the region? For the reasons that the Minister outlined, the issue is pivotable to the security and integrity of the region. How does he envisage that the situation could be de-escalated, and can he update the House on the Government's position on strengthening ties between NATO and Bosnia and Herzegovina? What is his position on EUFOR and its response in recent days?

What direct discussions has the Minister or the Foreign Secretary had with leaders from across the western Balkans, including about the very concerning actions by the leadership of Republika Srpska? Specifically on the protests in Serbia, what assessment has the Minister made of the impact on regional stability and security, and what assessment has he made of any Russian involvement in response to the protests there?

Finally, can the Minister share what plans he has to work with Kosovo to shore up and build on its sovereignty and independence? The western Balkans matters to the United Kingdom for so many reasons, and now more than ever given the war in Ukraine, so we must be an active player in promoting and supporting stability in the region.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her points. I am glad she raised Lord Peach because that allows me to put on the record again my tribute to him for all his excellent work as the High Representative; it was a genuine pleasure to work alongside him. I am also delighted that we now have Dame Karen Pierce, one of our most experienced diplomats, in the role. She is already playing a crucial role across the region. As I said, one of her very first visits was to Bosnia, because of the very issues that the shadow Foreign Secretary has outlined.

The right hon. Lady asks what we are doing. I have been very clear about the diplomatic efforts that we are taking across the region, working with partners and allies including the United States, the European Union

and members of the Quint. We continue to work with partners and engage with regional partners, who are absolutely crucial to that stability. The Foreign Secretary met Croatian Foreign Minister Radman on 24 March, and I spoke to Serbian Foreign Minister Marko Djuric on 27 March, as part of a regular series of engagements that we have been having, including through the Berlin process. The right hon. Lady will be pleased to know that we will now be hosting the Berlin process and that preparations for the summit are being led by Dame Karen Pierce. I assure her that the Foreign Secretary and I have had extensive engagements with regional partners. I was out in Serbia and Montenegro just a few weeks ago, and I intend to visit the region again soon.

The right hon. Lady asked about the important role of NATO, alongside EUFOR. I have referred to EUFOR already. We continue to support Bosnia and Herzegovina's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership. Through joint training of UK and Bosnia and Herzegovina armed forces and our support for reforms, we are helping it strengthen capabilities and enable alignment with NATO standards. We are working to invest in and strengthen the capabilities of the Bosnia and Herzegovinian armed forces for peacekeeping operations. Countries that export security are also more secure themselves. We maintain offices at the NATO headquarters in Sarajevo.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): What we have seen from Russia—in Georgia, Moldova, Romania, the Baltic states and now playing out in the western Balkans—is nothing less than hybrid warfare. Democracies are working hard together to stand strong and support Ukraine, but does the Minister agree that we need to put more effort into working with our allies in support of eastern Europe and the western Balkans, which are very much on the frontline?

Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, rightly raises Russia's malign actions not only in relation to its illegal and barbarous war in Ukraine, but across the whole of Europe and globally. We continue to see a pattern of behaviour intended to hamper Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and exploit instability and division.

Recent attempts by Russia to divide the international community at the United Nations Security Council and in the OSCE have only further demonstrated the resoluteness of partners to work together to protect the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. My right hon. Friend's work in the Committee on these issues is crucial. We are also working closely with our allies and the European Union on these matters, in relation to not just the Balkans but locations such as Moldova.

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

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): My former party leader, the late Lord Ashdown, regularly expressed his grave concerns about the fragility of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, drawing on his own experience as the country's former High Representative. Despite repeated warnings, the UK ignored the threat posed to peace in Bosnia by Milorad Dodik, his entourage and

his supporters in the Kremlin. Dodik's latest defiance of international authority, rejecting the legal orders of the international peace envoy, is only the latest act in his concerted work to undermine the Dayton agreement and regional stability in the Balkans.

It is clear that the UK has taken its eye off the ball in Bosnia. The Conservatives' short-sighted decision in 2020 to withdraw our troops from the EUFOR Althea peacekeeping operation sent entirely the wrong signal about our commitment to the region. Does the Minister agree that the UK should recommit to the EUFOR mission, so we can work in lockstep with our international partners to prevent a further deterioration of the situation in the Balkans?

Stephen Doughty: Madam Deputy Speaker, you will understand that I cannot comment on the previous Government, but I know there is strong support across the House for peace and stability across the Balkans, and that we are all engaged in that effort.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that we absolutely have not taken our eye off the ball. This region is one of the most important to the Foreign Secretary and myself, not least because of our long history of engagement in the region. It is why we have now put in place one of our most senior diplomats to act as special envoy, and why we have been engaged in the diplomatic conversations I mentioned.

On the role of the High Representative, we are clear that the political crisis was caused by Republika Srpska, President Dodik and his supporters. We support the High Representative's role and we support the use of his powers, if necessary. His role remains vital for Bosnia and Herzegovina's future prosperity and stability, and we continue to work alongside EUFOR and indeed with the NATO presence we have there, too.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): We all know that Dodik has continually denied that a genocide occurred at Srebrenica. I was absolutely appalled to see that after his conviction, he was invited by the Israeli Minister for antisemitism to go to Jerusalem to address an antisemitism conference. I hope that the Minister can restate the UK's strong belief that a genocide occurred at Srebrenica and that other countries should not be inviting Dodik to address conferences, particularly on the subject of genocide.

Stephen Doughty: I obviously cannot comment on Mr Dodik's travel, but I can say that we are absolutely clear on what happened at Srebrenica. My hon. Friend will know that I have visited Srebrenica and that we have done important work with Remembering Srebrenica. Again, there is a cross-party attitude on this issue across the House. We are in a year of very important and solemn anniversaries and it is crucial that leaders refrain from inflammatory rhetoric and actions, and instead focus on building trust between communities across the western Balkans, and particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): President Dodik's language and actions are both reckless and dangerous. Given that the Minister has just admitted to there being Russian meddling in the region—as we know, it has been going on for many years—can I ask what conversations he has had with the Americans to ensure that they continue to have command of the NATO headquarters in Sarajevo?

To the point made by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), can the Minister say whether the UK could play a bit more of a role in EUFOR, and, from his discussions with the French Minister, whether there is likely to be an extension of that mandate?

Stephen Doughty: As I said, I met one of the American representatives on Friday, with other Quint members, and there is unity across the Quint on these issues. We will continue to work closely with the United States and other partners on this matter. EUFOR is vital for maintaining peace and security in Bosnia and Herzegovina and for upholding the military aspects of the Dayton peace agreement, and we regularly engage with both EUFOR directly and the EU delegation.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we do not currently participate in EU common security and defence policy missions. Of course, we are open to future opportunities for co-operation, and we have identified the western Balkans, and, indeed, hybrid activities, as one of the areas where we need to see closer co-operation. The subject was discussed by the Foreign Secretary and the EU at the Foreign Affairs Council in Luxembourg a few months ago.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that we need leaders in the west Balkans region who are focused on building a stable and inclusive future for all the peoples of the region, instead of escalating tensions with reckless rhetoric?

Stephen Doughty: I could not agree more. I sincerely hope that all, including leaders in Republika Srpska, will focus on delivering the reforms and progress necessary for their citizens, instead of using inflammatory rhetoric and divisive language, which seeks only to break down communities and unity, rather than building up the trust between communities that is so needed.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): In the 1960s, Germany took the very important step of showing programmes about what had happened in the second world war with the Holocaust; the exact opposite has been happening in Republika Srpska and areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where textbooks are being rewritten to actually increase that hatred. Will the Minister say what plans the Government have and what interventions they can make to try to get the truth of what happened during that war out to people, so that those countries do not just generate another generation of hatred?

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree with the broad thrust of the right hon. Gentleman's comments. Ensuring that we understand what happened in the past and do not attempt to deny what happened is, obviously, crucial for all communities; building trust between communities is also crucial. He will understand that we have funded a number of programmes—as did the previous Government—including to support those who suffered sexual violence in the conflicts in the 1990s, as well as providing extensive support to the International Commission on Missing Persons, which has helped to account for more than 70% of the 40,000 people missing from the conflicts of the 1990s. Those sorts of actions are crucial to rebuilding trust and dealing with the legacies of the past.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I volunteered with the OSCE to ensure free and fair elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1996, following the Dayton peace agreement. I therefore have huge concerns about the escalating tensions. I welcome the diplomatic efforts we are undertaking to support stability, on which the Minister has updated us, but can he confirm that he is working closely with European civil society partners such as the OSCE to secure peace and stable democracy in the region?

Stephen Doughty: We continue to work with all organisations that seek to promote peace and stability in the region. My hon. Friend rightly mentions the OSCE, which is crucial. I know that the issue is of keen interest to members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in this place. We will continue to work with them, with the Council of Europe and with others, including our partners in the EU, the US and beyond. Civil society organisations are crucial to that work. Many examples of the work that we have done in the past to build trust between communities and on peacebuilding have been achieved through civil society organisations.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Is the Minister aware of reports that Russia Today and Sputnik are increasing their dissemination of disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the same time as the widely respected Bosnian service of Voice of America faces closure? Will he see what more we can do to counter Russian disinformation in the region, perhaps by increasing broadcasting by the BBC World Service?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the destabilising hybrid activities of Russia, not just in Bosnia but across the region. He knows the steps that have been taken in this country against RT and other Russian outlets; indeed, we have called them out across Europe and have worked with partners on that. He is absolutely right that free, fair, truthful and legitimate media are needed to ensure that citizens have the truth about what is happening, not the kind of lies that are peddled from the Kremlin. I cannot make specific promises, but he knows that we treat the BBC World Service very seriously. The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), is here with me and will have heard his comments closely.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): As has been noted, the actions of Milorad Dodik over the past few weeks and months have seriously undermined the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina and have undermined the Dayton peace agreement, which ended the country's 1992-to-1995 war in the aftermath of the horrific genocide that took place in Srebrenica. What steps are the Government taking to work with partners such as the US, the EU and other western Balkan countries to ensure that the territorial integrity of Bosnia is upheld during this fragile period?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need to work with our partners. My French counterpart Minister Haddad and I convened our Quint partners and the EU institutions on Friday for a joint meeting; Minister Haddad was visiting London and we took the initiative to meet our partners, because we were deeply concerned about the situation in Bosnia. We have also

been engaging with those in the region, including Serbia and Croatia. I, along with the special envoy, the Foreign Secretary and others, will continue to do so.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): One detects the hand of Russia here, much as one does across the entire periphery of Europe, from the High North, Ukraine, the Balkans and the Caucasus, which the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee mentioned, to the Sahel, the Maghreb and Libya, right over to the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. Will the Minister describe the British strategy for rolling back Russian destabilisation across the entire periphery of Europe?

Mark Pritchard: In 30 seconds!

Stephen Doughty: To do so in a few seconds would be a challenge, but I assure the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) that in all those regions we are not only conscious of what Russia is doing, but actively working with partners to push back. That is why it has been identified as an area for close co-operation with the EU; it is why we work closely with the United States and others; and it is why we work closely with individual partners in specific contexts, including in Moldova in response to Russian attempts there. The Balkans, Moldova, the Caucasus and elsewhere are all areas in which we see Russia spreading misinformation, lies and worse.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): Dodik's reckless rhetoric has been noted many times in the House this afternoon. Can the Minister assure me that work is being done with partners in the region to ensure that there is no contagion? I am thinking in particular of Kosovo.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend rightly raises Kosovo, a country that I have visited on several occasions and which we continue to support. We also continue to support the important dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina and to work with EU and other counterparts on this crucial issue. We play a crucial role in KFOR in Kosovo in promoting peace and stability. It is important, as my hon. Friend says, to understand the wider regional implications and to continue to work with all partners to promote peace and stability, whether that is in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Kosovo or in responding to Russian hybrid activity.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the recent love-in between Washington and Moscow, it is hardly surprising that the killer in the Kremlin is encouraging all his sidekicks to stir up trouble in areas such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. Are the Government aware of and keeping under very close scrutiny other potential areas where allies of Mr Putin can be expected to start to stir up trouble and destabilise things as part of his move, now that he is on the front foot in Ukraine?

Stephen Doughty: I would not agree entirely with the right hon. Member's characterisation. One only has to look at what President Trump has said in the last 24 hours on these matters to see that we are united in trying to not only find a sustainable peace in Ukraine but call out Russia on its actions and take the necessary actions. When it comes to Russia's activities elsewhere, as I said there is very strong Quint unity on this issue, and it was a real pleasure to be alongside American and European counterparts with a strong, united approach.

It is crucial that there is strong transatlantic unity on these issues, and we will continue to work for that with European and American partners.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): The Sarajevo security conference is in a couple of months, and there will be a session on defence technology. I have been asked along to speak about it. NATO countries in Europe are rearming and spending increased defence budgets on investing in and developing defence technology. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that our friends in Bosnia and Herzegovina are also updating their capabilities? What message can I take to that conference?

Stephen Doughty: I am glad to hear that my hon. Friend has been invited to that conference. It is important that we have links at a parliamentary level with countries in the western Balkans, particularly on these important matters. I mentioned earlier that we are working, including through our presence at the NATO headquarters in Sarajevo, on investing in and strengthening the capabilities of Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces, and considering how they might be deployed internationally too. That is very important. We will continue to work with European partners, both inside and outside NATO, to ensure that we can all collectively contribute to European defence, particularly in response to the hybrid activities and new advances in warfare we see, whether it be cyber or drone technology.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Last November, I visited the Srebrenica memorial centre, and I am sure the Minister will share my revulsion at the fact that it had to close its doors for a short period just a few weeks ago due to the political situation there. Before he does so, can he elaborate on the position that the United States of America has adopted in respect of Bosnia and Herzegovina and whether he views the US as a stable ally that recognises that the western Balkans are crucial to the security of Europe as a whole?

Stephen Doughty: We and the United States played a crucial role in the western Balkans, particularly in achieving the Dayton peace agreement itself. We continue to be committed to that. As I said, there has been strong unity among the Quint, and it is important that the United States and Europe work together on these issues. There has been a legacy of 30 years of relative stability—I say "relative" because there have been deep threats to it at different points—and we need that to continue for the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am sure we are all committed to that.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), and knowing how much the Minister values soft power, can he reassure the House that there will be no further cuts to the British Council or the World Service in the Balkans on his watch?

Stephen Doughty: I will come back to the hon. Lady on her specific points about British Council and the BBC World Service funding, but I have mentioned our wider development spending in the region. While we are

having to make very difficult decisions at the moment, it is worth reflecting on the fact that through around £50 million this year from the integrated security fund and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office official development assistance, we have continued to empower women and girls, strengthen democracy, build resilience to domestic and state threats, and promote peacebuilding and transitional justice. We have been engaged across a range of different areas in the development and soft power space to contribute to peace and stability in the western Balkans, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina specifically.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I associate myself with the comments made about the British Council and the BBC World Service. A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting 77th Brigade, the anti-Russian-disinformation brigade based at Newbury. Has an assessment been made of the rise of Russian misinformation and disinformation in the Republika Srpska theatre in recent months? We heard during that meeting that Russia is increasingly using misinformation and disinformation across Ukraine, eastern Europe, and indeed the Balkans.

Stephen Doughty: We are clear that Russia continues to spread lies and disinformation and misinformation not only in the western Balkans but in many other locations across Europe. We continue to work with allies and partners—the EU and others—to challenge that. There is a particular challenge in the western Balkans, which is why we also support efforts there to strengthen free media, journalism and civil society organisations.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): In my previous role as trade envoy to the western Balkans, I visited Bosnia and Herzegovina on a number of occasions, and it was evident that though the entrepreneurial spirit was alive and well, business leaders were frustrated by the deadlocked structures that they must work in. Our embassy is doing what it can, but can the Government take any further initiatives that could increase economic activity and trade between our two nations?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member raises an important point, and I pay tribute to him for his work. He and I travelled together on a number of visits to the region—including to Bosnia and Kosovo—so I am well aware of his interest and engagement there. There are many opportunities for increased economic linkage and trade with all the countries in the region, and we continue to promote those. Indeed, I discussed them on my recent visits to Serbia and Montenegro.

The hon. Member is absolutely right that this is fundamentally about leadership in the region. As I said, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina need political leaders to focus on passing reforms and building inclusive futures, rather than exacerbating tensions as we are seeing with President Dodik in Republika Srpska, because that does not serve the people of Republika Srpska.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Minister has acknowledged that the secessionist moves in Republika Srpska could have ramifications for the western Balkans more broadly. One part of that is the north of Kosovo, where there is a Kosovo Serb minority. While the UK does not contribute to EUFOR and

[Richard Foord]

Operation Althea, we do contribute to KFOR in Kosovo. What contingency plans exist for British troops to reinforce KFOR through a strategic reserve, as happened in 2023?

Stephen Doughty: I am sure the hon. Member will understand that I am not going to get into operational details, but he can be sure that we prepare for all scenarios across the region. That is why we have welcomed the steps that EUFOR has taken in relation to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The hon. Member is right to highlight the role that we play in KFOR. Indeed, I also visited KFOR with the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and saw the important work that it does in line with its mandate. It is important that everybody takes steps to de-escalate tensions and deal with issues that have not been dealt with. I have raised the Banjska incident a number of times, including with Serbia, and it is important that those responsible are held accountable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers; he understands the issue incredibly well. He will be aware of the recent judgments made in respect of human rights, in particular those involving discrimination against the Jewish community. Will he outline whether the deputations included discussions of faith and freedom and people's ability to practise their faith, and what the outcomes are envisaged to be to secure the right for people to hold and live their faith, no matter what that faith is, in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Member for that important question. He will be pleased to know that interfaith engagement was part of the special envoy's recent visit. I can write to him with a little more detail about that.

Of course, this is a country that has a strong tradition for a number of different faiths. At the moment, we are celebrating Eid and the end of the holy month of Ramadan, but alongside Muslim communities, Christian and Jewish communities have a long heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina—I have witnessed that with my own eyes. We remain a staunch defender of freedom of religion or belief, and we will continue to work with organisations that promote an inclusive and diverse society where everybody is respected and not discriminated against on the basis of their religion or belief.

Myanmar Earthquake

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The heartbreaking scenes from Myanmar and Thailand over the weekend have shocked the world. I am sure I speak for those across the House in expressing our sincere condolences to all those affected by this terrible tragedy.

The devastating earthquake has only added to the plight of the people in Myanmar, who were already facing extreme vulnerability and hardship. Over 3,000 people have died and that is likely to increase significantly in the days ahead. I thank all the first responders in Myanmar, as well as the humanitarian and civil society partners working tirelessly in extremely difficult conditions to assess the scale of destruction and provide lifesaving support. I put on record the House's thanks to our team in Yangon, and express the UK's continued solidarity with and support for the people of Myanmar as they face yet more hardship.

Within the first half hour of the earthquake on Friday, the UK released in-built contingency funding to our humanitarian partners in Myanmar, and on Saturday, the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), and the International Development Minister, Baroness Chapman, announced a further £10 million of life-saving support. That will be delivered to UK-funded local partners already mobilised to provide a humanitarian response on the ground because of the ongoing conflict. It will bolster their efforts, including in the areas hardest hit by the earthquake, where they will help provide the most vulnerable with food, water supplies, medicine and shelter, regardless of their location.

I assure the House that these funds will not be used to benefit the current Myanmar military regime or individuals and entities sanctioned by the UK. Instead, it will be directed to partners with whom we have a trusted and long-standing working relationship, with a strong record of delivering assistance in an extremely challenging operating environment across Myanmar. Our priority is to help the most vulnerable in all areas affected by this disaster, including those outside the control of the military regime.

The UK is also supporting the emergency response through other global funds, in which we consistently rank as one of the top donors every year; for example, the \$5 million from the United Nations central emergency response fund and \$2 million from the Access to Health fund. Those funds will support emergency health response efforts focused on first aid and trauma care for the affected population.

To conclude, our combined support demonstrates the UK's continuing commitment to supporting the people of Myanmar. Despite the earthquake, we have seen reports of ongoing airstrikes against civilian targets. Such attacks have had devastating consequences on local communities over the last four years, and we condemn all attacks that target civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals. We welcome existing ceasefires and call on all parties to the conflict to give emergency responders and humanitarian partners full, unhindered and safe access to those affected.

We recognise that the earthquake has also had significant impact in Thailand, and have expressed our deepest condolences to the Government of Thailand and to the families who have lost loved ones. We provided consular support to British nationals who were affected and I am relieved to update the House that our high-achieving team in Bangkok continues to function as normal.

We stand with the people of Myanmar and Thailand at this challenging time, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

4.17 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of her statement. As she has rightly said, the thoughts of the whole House are with all those impacted by the terrible earthquake affecting Myanmar, Thailand and the wider region. It is a tragedy that over 3,000 people have already been confirmed dead and many more are injured, and that so many still remain missing, leaving families gripped by anxiety as they await news of their loved ones. They are foremost in our minds, and I join the Minister in expressing condolences to those affected.

The images of rescuers searching through rubble, digging with their bare hands, are deeply moving. We hope and pray that more survivors are found and that effective recovery and stability operations can take place as quickly as possible. We understand, as the Minister has said, that the Government have committed a £10 million humanitarian package for Myanmar in the light of the awful earthquake and that that aid is being delivered through trusted humanitarian partners—she has mentioned some of those already. Will the Minister give any details of the aid partners that the UK is working with? The Minister has explained that the package will provide food, water supplies, medicine and shelter—and quite rightly. Will she give further details of the quantities and the types of foods and medicines being provided and who they are being provided by?

The statement also refers to the release of an in-built contingency fund for partners already in the country. Can the Minister confirm how much this is worth? Is this on top of the £10 million that has been announced? What will it be used for? Can she give details of how multilateral funding is being spent in response to this earthquake? Can she also comment on any contingency planning taking place for responding to any further serious aftershocks? Are there sufficient arrangements to get aid over the border into Myanmar? Given, as she has said, that Myanmar is controlled by a military dictatorship, what safeguards are in place to ensure that British aid reaches those in genuine need?

What is the Minister's assessment on whether deconfliction will be possible to shield humanitarian efforts from military action, given the reports that Myanmar's military have been striking civilian areas despite the obvious need for a focus on humanitarian relief? What is the British Government's assessment of those reports—if, indeed, they are accurate—and how do they intend to respond? Moreover, does the Minister believe that the fallout from the earthquake will affect the humanitarian situation for the Rohingya refugees? What specific assessment has been made of their needs

in the light of this terrible tragedy? Will any of the £10 million that has been announced go towards support for the Rohingya, or will there be an adaptation of existing programmes to support them?

Can the Minister also update the House on whether any of the £10 million is earmarked for Thailand, or whether there is a separate package of support for Thailand? It would be helpful for the House to understand whether formal requests for assistance have been received from any of the countries affected by the earthquake, and what the UK's official response has been, as well as whether Ministers have had any discussions with counterparts affected in those countries. We will, of course, also look to the UK Government to provide all the necessary support for British nationals who are affected in the region; that is crucial. We know that Thailand is a popular holiday destination, and she has mentioned some of the consular assistance that is taking place. We have seen various activity on social media about how the Government are ensuring that messaging is targeted, but can she provide any specifics on the nature of the support that FCDO consular teams are able to provide to British nationals in the region?

Catherine West: I thank the right hon. Lady for her shared concern about this earthquake and for her many points of detail. On the £10 million, that is on top of the current allocation. Myanmar is one of the parts of the region that receives the largest official development assistance funding, due to the conflict there. This is an extra £10 million.

On the aftershocks, we are awaiting more news, it being only three and a half days since the initial earthquake, but given the shallow nature of it, the assessment is that the aftershock in Bangkok is currently the worst. Should I hear more on that, I will update the right hon. Lady.

In relation to safeguarding the aid, the right hon. Lady makes the important point that it would be easy for the military regime to divert the aid away from the frontline. This is where the experience of our excellent staff on the ground plays such an important role, because we have tried and tested methods of working through grassroots organisations to provide aid into the centre of Myanmar and in and around the region of Mandalay. We have trusted ways of providing that aid, without being concerned that some of it might be diverted into the military.

On the Rohingya, that is being seen separately. We will be working a little later in the year on more support for the Rohingya. In the settlement of the Myanmar question, we hope that the Rohingya will be able to return to their part of Myanmar over the long term. Right now, the immediate support that the Government are able to provide is very much assisting with central Myanmar, but I can reassure her that we have a different strategy for the Rohingya, which I can write to her about.

On the separate package for Thailand, the current assessment is that the consular team have no extra concerns regarding people coming across the border. Our consular team is working as usual and our excellent ambassador there has given us reassurances that the team in Bangkok are operating as usual.

On our counterparts, due to the long-standing nature of the development work in Myanmar, we work closely with colleagues across the region who are helpful

[Catherine West]

in Myanmar. It is complex and there are many hard-to-reach areas, so we work closely with some EU partners and some partners in the region, who have come to the aid of those suffering in this earthquake. That includes Singapore, India and other neighbouring countries.

The right hon. Lady also asked about the British consular assistance. We have an update that there are no concerns regarding missing British travellers either in Myanmar or Thailand, but I will continue to update her should that change.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): The terrible loss of life and destruction caused by the earthquake in Myanmar is heaping further suffering on the people of that country, who are enduring a violent, repressive military regime and a brutal civil war. Does the Minister share my horror that Myanmar's military regime is continuing airstrikes and ground attacks even during this humanitarian disaster? What possibility is there of humanitarian aid reaching non-Government-controlled areas in the periphery of the country?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for his work with the Burma Campaign over the years and for his question. We have heard the reports of airstrikes after the earthquake and are looking into that with our partners. The UK has consistently called on the military to cease its targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, and we fully condemn those attacks. The military must immediately cease attacks on the civilian population, including humanitarian personnel. All parties to the conflict must ensure full unhindered humanitarian access to the most vulnerable and ensure the safety of those facilitating it.

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

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I share the grief expressed by the whole House for the people of Myanmar. It is heartbreaking that a country that has already suffered four years of brutal civil war now faces further devastation. I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's announcement of £10 million to support the emergency response. It is vital that these funds reach those most severely impacted by the disaster as quickly as possible. Can the Minister confirm how much funding has been dispensed so far and outline the steps her Department is taking to translate funds into lifesaving aid as quickly as possible?

As the death toll continues to rise and the ultimate scale of the disaster becomes clearer, will the Minister confirm that the Government will continue to increase our humanitarian support to match the needs on the ground? In the spring statement, we saw that the UK's development spending faces a cliff edge in 2026, with almost £5 billion in cuts anticipated by that time. That will reduce the UK's ability to respond to disasters and provide the long-term consistent support that rebuilding Myanmar and its economy will require. Will the Minister confirm that bilateral aid to Myanmar will remain a priority?

The military junta in Myanmar has long blocked aid access for civilians in opposition-controlled areas. Aid workers have been attacked, and we hear reports that

aid workers responding to the earthquake fear junta arrest and interference. What are the Government doing to ensure that humanitarian aid is getting through and that responders on the ground can work free from repression? Will the Minister outline the Government's diplomatic response to the wider conflict and their response to what the UN are calling reports of human rights violations?

Myanmar needs our support in the aftermath of this tragedy. As the world's spotlight turns to it, I urge the Government to take this opportunity to use every lever they can to push for an end to conflict and for a future democracy.

Catherine West: On the question of how much of the £10 million has been spent, it has only just been allocated within the 48 hours, so it is still building on that firm base we already have. We have been a donor country to Myanmar for many years, and so are building on a solid base. The £10 million will be spent rapidly on the emergency responses.

The hon. Member asked about the impact of UK ODA cuts on the response to the earthquake. We know that the extra £10 million that the Foreign Secretary announced is on top of the original allocations. The hon. Member shared her worries about the future impact given our announcement that gross national income spent on ODA will drop to 0.3%. I can confirm that the International Development Minister set out to the International Development Committee that the initial bilateral ODA allocations for 2025-26 are set at the level of live contractual arrangements with partners. Unlike in the previous reduction of aid where there were in-year reductions and programmes stopped from one day to the next, that is not how this Government will look at the aid budget.

The Minister for Development will lay out to Parliament how she intends to conduct the comprehensive spending review post 2025-26, and how she will bring that the percentage down to 0.3%, but it is immaterial how that relates to the question of funding in response to the earthquake, because of the extra £10 million. We will continue to monitor that funding, and should it need topping-up we could do so, but our assessment at the moment is that it is about right given how many different partners are coming forward.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Our hearts go out to all those affected by the tragic loss of life and devastation in Myanmar and Thailand. The Disasters Emergency Committee says that it is monitoring the situation and is considering launching an appeal, as it has done for previous tragedies of this scale. What discussions has the Minister had with the Disasters Emergency Committee and its 15 leading groups on its ability to operate in Myanmar and on whether it will launch an appeal? If it does so, will the UK Government use UK Aid Match to match the generosity that I am sure the British public will show, in order to ensure that as much money as possible reaches the frontline in Myanmar and Thailand?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his knowledge in these areas of policy. I ask him to allow four or five days so that the various international partners that make up the Disasters

Emergency Committee have time to deliberate. As he is aware, we have a generous civil society in the UK. As soon as there is information to bring forward, we will make a public statement.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for her statement to the House. For those of us who have been closely involved on issues to do with Burma/Myanmar for decades now, the severity of the disaster is shown by the fact that, unusually, the regime has called for international support. However, it is a mark of the barbarity of that illegal and corrupt junta that it conducted 11 airstrikes against its own people after the earthquake took place, which is undoubtedly a war crime. We have a long history of engagement with Burma. Some 6.3 million children are absolutely dependent on assistance. It will be very difficult to sustain the necessary level of support in future following Labour's dreadful cuts to the international development programme. What discussions has the Minister had with her American counterparts to ensure that we drive the UK and US joint spending and get greater value for money?

Catherine West: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution and for his knowledge of Myanmar/Burma and of the situation. I could not agree more with him in his description of the Tatmadaw and its approach over the years—absolutely ruthless and brutal to its own people. He talks about the children who are affected. He will be aware that between 4 million and 5 million children were out of school even before the earthquake, so there is a strong sense that this could not have happened to a more vulnerable country. He asked about the role of the USA. As he is aware, US aid has been paused internationally, but I was delighted to see at the weekend that the US Government have said that they will contribute \$2 million immediately. We will seek to work with US partners, who know the area as well, so that we can join up our efforts.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I associate myself with the Minister's words about what is going on in Myanmar and Thailand. In my former role as the Prime Minister's envoy to Thailand and Myanmar, I had the opportunity to see the extraordinary work that British businesses do in both countries. I fully understand that the British mission in Thailand is supporting all such businesses there, as it has done for many years. In Myanmar the situation is far more complicated, yet there are still a number of British businesses—from big conglomerates down to entrepreneurs trying to cut a furrow in that country—and they employ Burmese nationals, who would otherwise be starving given the complex political situation there. May I urge the Minister to work with the Department for Business and Trade to see how we can support British businesses in and around Yangon that are otherwise not being supported because of the situation with the junta?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his work on behalf of the Government on understanding the trade picture and getting to know the businesses. He is right that there are a number of businesses for which it is safe to undertake business activity, and where there is best practice they have supported the workforce through thick and thin, not just of course in Myanmar but in Bangladesh, which is going through a difficult time,

and in Thailand. I will certainly take his message of support to our missions in Yangon and Bangkok, so that all our partners there can be aware of the support here in the House for that ongoing work.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I thank the Minister for her statement today. This is so much more than a humanitarian crisis. It is a double disaster: a humanitarian crisis on the back of civil war and further military attacks on the domestic population of Myanmar. Given the United States' withdrawal of USAID and the withdrawal of Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, what is being done to support the BBC World Service's Burmese service in an environment where information will be absolutely vital to the maintenance of services and the saving of lives?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that suggestion. He is correct that USAID has been frozen, but it was encouraging to see over the weekend an announcement by the US Government that \$2 million will immediately be put towards dealing with this dreadful earthquake. That is a hopeful sign that we can work together on this emergency. On the BBC World Service, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that often the radio is the only thing that people are able to access and it gives them so much hope. With his permission, I will write to him specifically on the exact position of the BBC World Service in Myanmar.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Many, many compassionate people across West Worcestershire and the whole of the United Kingdom will be wanting to know what they can do to help in this situation, so will the Minister give us some further information on how UK taxpayers may donate and whether there will be an aid match?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Lady for her suggestions. She is right that so many people will be thinking, "How can I do my bit for the people of Myanmar?" As I mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), details will be available as soon as the Disasters Emergency Committee—the joint appeal across all the different bodies—comes forward, which will be within the week, because of course the earthquake happened just on Thursday night and Friday morning. I want to say very clearly from the Dispatch Box that the DEC is a proper brand that can be trusted by our constituents, because it is very important that people do not give money online through Facebook and other platforms if they are not sure of them. As soon as the announcement is ready, we will work very carefully with international partners about where those donations can go.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement and for her compassionate words, which encapsulate, I believe, the opinion of all of us in this Chamber. The major earthquake in Myanmar has caused over 2,000 deaths and the collapse of numerous high-rise buildings, temples and houses, destroying families and livelihoods and dispersing families in all directions. What discussions has the Minister had with counterparts or officials about ensuring that everything is done to get children to a place of safety with the necessary aid, and that efforts will be made to reunite any displaced children with their families as soon as is humanly possible and with all urgency?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Member for his usual compassion for the children caught up in this disaster. I reassure him that children were fortunately not in school, as it was the school holidays; children were not in earthquake-affected schools, which is a huge relief. Obviously, certain places of religious belief were affected by the earthquake. We do not have an exact picture yet, but we know that through the work that the UK has done over the years with the 4 million to 5 million children, whether through vaccinations and health programmes or through our education programmes, we have a very good and trusted way of working at grassroots level to get to the hardest-to-reach families to serve them and ensure that they have lifesaving aid.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The regime's use of its Kremlin-backed military during a humanitarian crisis to attack its own people is a complete obscenity. Has the Minister called in the Myanmar ambassador so that he can offer an explanation?

Catherine West: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that suggestion. Along with him and the whole House I condemn the actions of the Tatmadaw. I am sure he is aware that currently there is no ambassador as such, but there is a chargé d'affaires. We do not have formal relations with the chargé, but I agree with what the right hon. Gentleman has said; the message from this House is very clear.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can the Minister explain a bit more about the mechanism by which any aid donated in this country will reach people on the ground in Myanmar? Particularly given the airstrikes we have heard about, it is hard to imagine how such aid would get to areas that are currently under attack by the regime.

Catherine West: I thank the right hon. Member for raising that. To be 100% clear, the usual procedure is for the Disasters Emergency Committee, which is made up of Governments plus large non-governmental organisations and United Nations agencies, to arrange a mechanism for safely giving donations. We know that if people give donations to different groups, they may not go to the right place. As soon as we have that information, which will be within a week of the event happening, we will provide it, but it requires co-ordination across a number of Governments plus the UN agencies, faith groups and all the other groups. As soon as that is ready, we will let the right hon. Gentleman have the details.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The earthquake in Myanmar could not have come at a worse time, given that millions are already displaced and needing humanitarian assistance as a result of the ongoing civil war since the military coup in 2021. I welcome the Minister's condemnation of the multiple airstrikes that have taken place since the earthquake and the £10 million of assistance that has been announced. However, numerous charities have come forward with emergency appeals to support those affected, and I have heard some warm words about how we can build on that. Will the UK Government support those appeals—as mentioned by others across this House; we are speaking with one voice—through aid match, so that for every pound donated by members of the public, the Government will contribute a further £1 of UK aid?

Catherine West: I can confirm that that suggestion is under active consideration.

Birmingham City Council

4.43 pm

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the statutory intervention at Birmingham city council and on the issues affecting the waste service.

This Government were elected on a manifesto that pledged to fix the foundations of local government. The public rightly expect and deserve well-functioning local councils that provide the essential statutory services that residents rely on. Local councils must be fit, legal and decent. Commissioners have been working with Birmingham city council for the past 18 months to support it in its recovery, and today I am publishing their latest report into the progress on that journey. The report lands at a point of acute difficulty for residents in Birmingham, as the ongoing dispute in the waste service is resulting in rubbish piling up in the streets. I will therefore take this opportunity to update the House on the status of that dispute.

To address the report first, the council has taken important initial steps forward on its improvement journey, and is working constructively with commissioners. It has made significant progress on addressing historical equal pay issues and fixing the foundations of governance. The leader, Councillor Cotton, and his group are taking the difficult decisions to get the council back on track, and the commissioners have recognised his calm leadership through stormy waters. The new managing director, Joanne Roney CBE, has brought a steady hand, and is beginning to make permanent senior appointments that will contribute to much-needed stabilisation. The council has also achieved a breakthrough by reaching an agreement to settle the outstanding claims and end the ongoing equal pay saga. It is also set to re-implement a strategy for the Oracle IT system.

Those improvements are encouraging, but challenges remain. In the short term, commissioner oversight and close supervision will still be required to maintain momentum. There is a difficult road ahead on key aspects of the best value regime—on governance and culture, financial management and service delivery—because substantial risks threaten the journey to reform and recovery. As Members will know, there is a live industrial action in waste services, involving one of the three recognised trade unions in that area. The Government will support the leader and his team in Birmingham, directly and through the commissioners, to move the council on from these historical issues. That support includes an increase in core spending power for 2025-26 of up to 9.8%, or £131 million. That figure includes £39.3 million through the new one-off recovery grant, which illustrates this Government's commitment to correcting the unfairness in the funding system. We have also put in place an in-principle agreement for exceptional financial support totalling £1.24 billion.

Turning to the waste dispute, councils deliver over 800 vital services that make a huge difference to millions of people across the country. However, it is accepted that for many, the most visible and universal service is the collection and disposal of household waste. Members across the House will know that the current industrial action in the city is causing misery and disruption to

local people, and I know that hon. Members whose constituents are affected will be acutely aware of that disruption.

From the outset, I want to be clear that the statutory intervention is led by commissioners, and Ministers cannot legally intervene in this industrial action. However, I have been in regular contact with the leadership of the council throughout this, as they have sought to find a resolution in which the reforms needed to build a sustainable council are still undertaken, and the waste collection service returns to functioning normally, in the way that Members would expect. This situation is causing public health risks to the city's most vulnerable and deprived residents. As a result, Birmingham has today declared a major incident, so that it can use the mechanisms that it needs to better manage the impact on local residents. I support that decision, and I will back local leaders in bringing the situation under control in the weeks to come.

Well-established arrangements are in place to enable local areas to escalate issues when they need support, and the Government are monitoring the situation closely. This is a local issue, and it is right that the key public sector partners in Birmingham lead on it. If leaders in Birmingham feel that tackling these issues would require resources beyond those available to them, and request national support, we of course stand ready to respond to any such request. This Government will always back local leaders and give them the support that they need, not swoop in to criticise or take over from Whitehall. We will not hesitate to give support in any way that Birmingham leaders need. As Parliament would expect, a meeting will take place with the leadership of the council, the commissioners and other key local partners to ensure that we are doing everything we can to support and protect public health.

It is in the interests of all parties and, most importantly, for the benefit of Birmingham's residents that this industrial action is brought to a close in a meaningful and sustainable way as soon as possible. We encourage all parties to redouble their efforts to get around the table and find a resolution. Any deal to end industrial action must maintain value for money and ensure fit-for-purpose waste collection services, without creating or storing up liabilities for the future. All parties recognise that Birmingham's waste service has been in urgent need of modernisation and transformation for many years, so any deal reached must not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Practices in the waste service have been the source of one of the largest equal pay crises in modern UK history, resulting in costs of over £1 billion to the residents of Birmingham. This situation simply cannot continue. I support the council on its journey to creating the sustainable, fair and reliable waste service that residents in Birmingham deserve. We will support the council in resolving its historic issues and establishing the leadership, governance and culture that will drive good-quality public services for the people of that city, so that it can take its rightful place with confidence as one of our great UK cities.

As the council moves to the next stage of intervention, I will continue to work with the council, commissioners and the wider local government sector to understand how we can best ensure that residents get what they need from their local council. I will monitor progress, as I have done since the general election, to ensure that

continuous improvement led by the council can be secured. As I am sure the whole House would expect, the commissioner arrangements will need to remain in place while the situation in Birmingham is so fragile. The commissioners have a vital role to play in supporting Birmingham's transformation, working hand in glove with local leaders.

The Government remain committed to working in genuine partnership with the city and its council, and I continue to encourage the council to strengthen its partnerships with regional stakeholders, including Mayor Parker in the West Midlands combined authority, to support economic growth and financial sustainability. We are keen to promote growth and regeneration opportunities for Birmingham, and we are confident that as the council continues to work to fix the basics, while making progress against the milestones, local stakeholders will be encouraged to work in partnership with the council to deliver a clear vision for the future.

I look forward to continuing dialogue with commissioners, the council and regional partnerships, including Mayor Parker, on opportunities for growth in the region. A partnership approach with a clear vision will increase Birmingham's capacity to achieve sustainable growth. The people of Birmingham deserve a well-run, accountable and financially stable council with good public services, not least waste collection services. I am encouraged by the council's leadership and commitment to the same, and I look forward to the council beginning to demonstrate more ownership of its recovery, and to seeing evidence that it can deliver the lasting improvements that are required. I will deposit in the House Library copies of the commissioners' report, which is being published today on gov.uk.

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

4.51 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. I am sure that the fact that both my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and I tabled an urgent question on this issue played a part in the Minister coming to the House today. He has said nothing on this matter for the 20 days in which it has been a live issue. It is shameful—a national embarrassment—that one of our nation's great cities, our second city, finds itself in such a bleak situation.

As the Minister admits, the problem is of the council's own making. It is a result of the flawed deal with Unite back in 2017, which led to legal action over equal pay, but it is the people who pay the price. We have had mountains of rubbish blighting the streets of Birmingham for more than 20 days, and there is no end in sight to the dispute with Labour's union paymasters, Unite. Almost every area is plagued by overflowing bins, rats the size of cats, and opportunistic fly-tippers exploiting the chaos to turn open spaces into dumping grounds. That is the reality of Labour in local government.

From Edgbaston to Sutton Coldfield, from Yardley to Erdington, and from Balsall Heath to Sparkhill, the piles of waste grow even higher. This is a public health emergency, as the hon. Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) has conceded. Even the Labour Mayor

[Kevin Hollinrake]

of the West Midlands has said that he is “fed up” with waste piling up and the streets being filthy. That is why we call for a Cobra-led response. This issue demands a co-ordinated effort across local and national Government, harnessing the expertise of public health officials, civil contingencies professionals and emergency services.

We call on the Government to cut councillor allowances for the cabinet members who got Birmingham into this mess, and we urge the Government to appoint binmen from the private sector to clear up Labour’s mess. Where are Labour’s MPs today? I can only see one on the Government Benches. [Interruption.] Okay, there are two here, out of 10. While they have been campaigning for an airport in Kashmir, we are proposing workable solutions.

The Minister talks about the calm leadership of Councillor Cotton. What local residents need is action, not buzzwords, both from the local leadership and from central Government. He says that Ministers cannot legally intervene in this industrial action. Is he honestly saying that he has no influence with the union involved, Unite, which is complicitly holding the city hostage, and which contributed £10,000 to the Deputy Prime Minister’s election war chest? Surely she is now duty-bound to pick up the phone and speak truth to the real power behind the Labour throne, the unions.

Incredibly, Unite is calling on central Government not to live within its means, but to make hundreds of millions of pounds available to the council. Is that something that the Minister is considering? He talks about an increase of 9.8%, or £131 million, in the council’s core spending power for the forthcoming year. Will he confirm that a significant part of that is being raised by means of a council tax increase of 7.8%, and that that is a clear breach of the Prime Minister’s pledge to freeze council tax this year?

I pay particular tribute to Councillor Bobby Alden and the Birmingham Conservatives who, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coalfield, have been doggedly holding the council’s incompetent leadership to account. They have clear solutions to this crisis. Now that Birmingham has today declared a major incident, leading to the availability of new mechanisms, can the Minister confirm that he will meet them to ensure that those mechanisms are considered?

I find it extraordinary that the Minister should say that Birmingham city council has not yet requested national support. Will he not insist that it do so immediately? He also said that he would meet local leaders and commissioners. Given that this crisis has been ongoing for 20 days and counting, why has he not already met those local leaders, and when will he do so? Will it be this very week?

Jim McMahon: Well, well. No one listening to that response would think that the Conservative Government had been in government for 14 years, and were in office when Birmingham had to come to them for financial support. But Birmingham was not alone, was it? Councils were falling like dominoes because of the last Government’s chronic underfunding. The Conservatives talk about Kashmir; they left a cash crisis that affected every council. Every single council, whether it was Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat, was let down by the Conservative Government. The Conservatives cannot even look their

own councils in the eye. When it comes to reorganisation, local leaders who are doing what is needed for their area and showing local leadership have been being undermined by the national leadership. They are lions led by donkeys.

Beyond the party political nonsense that has been deployed, surely we can all agree that we care about the people of Birmingham and want this vital public service restored. Surely we all agree that given the last Government’s intervention in Birmingham, the journey of improvement is fragile. Yes, improvements have been made, but we have to maintain our course. The Conservatives must also accept that one of the biggest barriers to settling the council and giving it long-term stability was the storing up of equal pay liabilities. Resolving this issue is critical, not just for the council but for the people of Birmingham.

I can assure the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) that regular conversations have been taking place. That includes a meeting with the council leader a couple of weeks ago, and there will be a further meeting this week. We have said that we will do what is needed to help the council achieve what it needs to achieve, and to get the service back on track. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that that is the right approach, with local leaders showing local leadership and national Government providing the support that is needed.

Bizarrely, the hon. Gentleman referred to council tax increases. The council tax increase in Birmingham last year, under the last Government, was higher than this year’s increase. Why? Because this Government have a clear eye on looking after taxpayers and ensuring that any increases are contained. How did we do that? We did not do what the last Government would have done. We did not say, “Just go to the wall and see what happens.” It was this Government who provided nearly £40 million of new money through the recovery grant for Birmingham, to ensure that it did not have to pass that increase on to local taxpayers. That is genuine partnership, with national Government and local government working hand in hand. Is it not time that the previous Government accepted their failings over 14 years in office and accepted that the foundations of local government were left weaker, not stronger, when they left office? Will they now start putting the interests of the people of this country ahead of political interests?

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): This bin dispute is causing chaos in the city, including in Birmingham Erdington. What discussions have the Government had with Birmingham city council regarding not just the bin collections, but the impact on public health and the environment? It is so important that we look at the health and safety of local residents in Birmingham.

Jim McMahon: That is the crux of where we are: because the bin dispute has been going on for so long, the scale of uncollected rubbish being left in the streets is now posing public health concerns, which is why the council has declared a major incident today. It is showing local leadership, it recognises the public health implications, and it is working with local public sector providers. As I have already said, I will make sure that the Government stand absolutely ready to work with the council and to provide any support that it needs, as part of a genuine partnership.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, I remind Members that if they are seeking to contribute in a statement, they must arrive on time. It is extremely discourteous to the Minister, and indeed to the House, to be late.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker—I ran all the way from the top floor of Derby Gate, but I was not fast enough. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am an elected member of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council.

The people of Birmingham have a right to receive decent services, and it is critical that the ongoing dispute is resolved as quickly as possible. Like the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton), we are concerned about the impact on public health and the environment, and urge the Government to confirm that when waste collection resumes, it will be safely disposed of and recycled where possible, and not just given to the cheapest bidder.

Fundamentally, the Conservative Government slashed funding to local authorities year on year, forcing councils to do more with less and plunging so many, of all political stripes, into financial crisis. However, we are disappointed that the Government have not yet addressed some of the financial crises, particularly around confirmation of the special educational needs override, which I know councils across the nation are really worried about, and which is making it more difficult for them to make decisions about their future plans.

We welcome the multi-year settlements, which I am sure the Minister will refer to, but we remain concerned about how effective they will be. Two recent examples give us cause for concern: the roads funding, which appears to give local authorities more money, actually cuts England's road repair budget by 5%; and the employer's national insurance change, which promised to cover councils' costs for direct staffing in full, did not do so in some cases, including for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council. All that is underpinned by a broken council tax system that is regressive. In some areas, the council tax base is totally inadequate to provide for the growing list of services, and the Lib Dems want to see a radical overhaul.

Birmingham should serve as a lesson for the Government, because this matter is a result of the long-running equal pay crisis. What learning are they taking from the situation in Birmingham, and what extra measures is the Minister introducing to prevent public health and community safety issues?

Jim McMahon: I am pleased to say that we are making sure that we deal with the waste piling up in the streets and that the council gets the support it needs, but the hon. Lady is right to say that there is an interrelationship. This dispute does not sit in isolation; it is part of wider considerations on equal pay, and we have to bear in mind that the cost of meeting the equal pay liability for the people of Birmingham is £1 billion. There can be no steps forward in this dispute that double down on the inherent problems that led to the equal pay crisis that the city has faced. These are sensitive negotiations, but it is important that the council continues to negotiate and that people get around the table to find a way through.

The hon. Lady talks about the multi-year settlement that is being prepared for and the simplification of the funding mechanism, but she also mentions redistribution. Birmingham and councils like it have not found themselves in this situation in a vacuum; it has been partly driven by central Government not distributing money in a fair way to deal with service need and deprivation, and it is very important that we get the money to where that deprivation exists. Even under the current one-year settlement, Birmingham has had a 9.8% increase—in cash, that is £131 million.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement. The Birmingham bin strike means that many of my constituents have not had their bins collected in weeks, and this week a constituent wrote to me to say that they had been bitten by a rat. I have been raising the public health situation and calling for the council to take emergency measures, so I do welcome the fact that it has declared a critical incident today.

Does the Minister agree with me that it is unacceptable that Unite pickets have been frustrating the council's contingency plans by blocking depots, and that it is time for Unite to accept the fair deal on the table? Seventeen people cannot hold 1.2 million Birmingham residents to ransom.

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend is right to say that the vast majority of the workforce of the service have agreed a way forward, by one route or another—whether by taking voluntary redundancy or accepting a new way of working—and that this comes down now to a small number of people who have not accepted that. In the end, that is where the dispute lies. I do agree that a city cannot almost grind to a halt because of such a circumstance in its waste collection service.

I encourage all parties—the local authority as the employer and the trade unions—to get around the table, and focus on the bigger prize here. After almost a decade of uncertainty on equal pay, the council and the trade unions have agreed a position from which they can move forward together. That is a significant moment in which I think all parties should take some pride. Let us not spoil it by the action today that could undermine the equal pay negotiations that have been so successful.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The Minister really cannot get away with blaming the last Conservative Government for this situation. Labour's own campaign improvement board said:

“Budget cuts and the size of the City are used as reasons to explain the situation however, this does not hold up to scrutiny”.

My constituents in the Royal town of Sutton Coldfield, which is part of Birmingham if only for local government purposes, are absolutely furious at this latest evidence of paralysis and incompetence under Labour. It follows Labour bankrupting the city, rocketing our council tax, seeking to close our libraries and trying to charge us for parking in our own park. Does the Minister not think that we now need a judge-led inquiry into the cause of the equal pay crisis, Birmingham's bankruptcy and this dreadful bin strike? Surely the people of Birmingham, Britain's second city, deserve better from the Labour party.

Jim McMahon: I am afraid that the picture that the right hon. Member paints of increased charges at a local level—whether for car parking or other types of charges, or the council tax going up in a way that some households will find difficult—is the story of English local government for the last decade, and Birmingham does not sit in isolation. In many ways, the size of the local authority—the fact that it is the largest local authority in Europe, not just in this country—goes some way to explaining how a ripple in one council of a much smaller size in Birmingham has a much bigger implication.

The right hon. Member talked about a judge-led process. This situation does not need a judge; it needs judgment. The judgment is that, after so much progress has been made on equal pay, now is the time to resolve the dispute, settle it and allow the workforce to move on with fair pay for men and women in equivalent roles across the local authority. I am sure he agrees with me that that is the way forward.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): My residents and constituents deserve better than the current scenes in Birmingham. Bins are not being collected, and the council is losing future revenue because commercial contracts are being cancelled. The reality is that bin services were not good enough even before the strike. When the strike ends—and it will end—what assurance can the Minister give my residents that refuse and health services in Birmingham will be decent and fit for purpose?

May I respond to the comments of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), whom I respect? He sought to deny a share of the blame for his party, but will the Minister confirm that last year's 10% council tax increase was signed off in No. 10 and the Treasury at the time and that, under the previous Government, Birmingham lost 40p in the pound, with the sharpest cuts of any unitary authority?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend rightly sets out how difficult the operating environment has been for local government and in particular for Birmingham. It was the previous Government who introduced the commissioner process, the previous Government who started the exceptional financial support process, and the previous Government who introduced the 10% council tax increase in Birmingham. When we came into office, we were determined not to let Birmingham stand by itself and that we had a role to play. The recovery grant was our contribution to that. The benefit for local people is that we are now able to manage the impact on council tax payers at a local level in a way that, frankly, the previous Government did not seem to care too much for.

How we move on from this point is what I think people in Birmingham want to know. How can we clear up the mess that has been left on the streets? How can we restore a waste collection service that delivers for the people of that great city? How can we have an equal pay agreement that really holds, and is not unpicked by a short-term agreement just on the current crisis? As I said, I think the council has done a good job in navigating very choppy waters, but it is not at the other end of them yet. The improvement journey for Birmingham will take some time. It requires a clear eye on the end that everyone is trying to work towards.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): When the Minister describes this as a local matter, it is clear to me that his Government are washing their hands of the problem. That is not good enough. The residents of Aldridge-Brownhills, which is on the edge of Birmingham, see and hear what is going on and we do not want the problem coming over to us—we do not want the squeaky blinders in Aldridge-Brownhills. What we do want is the Minister to get this problem sorted out and get those bins emptied for residents. It is quite simple.

Jim McMahon: I said that this is a partnership. Of course, Birmingham city council, as the employer in this trade union dispute, has to negotiate with the trade unions and the workforce to get those services back. That is a statement of fact, not an opinion. The question is then: what can we do, as a national Government, to support local government to achieve that? We have maintained support. The commissioners, appointed by the previous Government, are in place. We have provided additional financial support—not just to Birmingham—with £5 billion of new investment in local government, bringing the total settlement to £69 billion.

As I said before, £40 million alone was for the recovery grant for Birmingham, so I feel the Government are doing as much as we can, but we always stand ready to do more if needed.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): Over 14 years, Birmingham city council lost £736 million of funding under the previous Conservative Government. Does the Minister agree that that is a big recipe for the situation we are in now? Does he agree that both sides, the council leadership and the trade unions, need to put public rhetoric to one side, get around the table and sort this dispute out?

Jim McMahon: If we look at the progress made on equal pay, the trade unions and the local authority worked in partnership to agree a way forward. In the end, they recognised that they all care about the same things: they care about the people of Birmingham, about the workforce and about the long-term viability of the local authority. When common interest is applied, people can find a way through. I hope, going forward, that all interested parties can get around the table, find a way through and get the bins emptied.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Residents of Birmingham will have heard the Minister talk about monitoring, overseeing and reviewing what is happening. What they want to hear is what the Minister is going to do. Can he make it clear that if the talks are not agreed, there is no return back to work and the bins are not emptied, he will intervene and throw all the resources that are required to break the strike and ensure the bins are again emptied in Birmingham?

Jim McMahon: There is a difference in tone between resolving the strike and breaking the strike. We absolutely stand ready to support the council and the workforce more generally, who do want the situation resolved as many who work for the council also work in the city. They take pride in being local public servants and they want the city to be proud of the council in return; for many, that is being tested. We absolutely stand ready to

work with the council and find a way through this issue. The council is working hard to resolve it; it understands that people are angry and frustrated, and that, from a public health point of view, it just cannot continue.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Chelworth Road in my constituency is a road of two halves: on one half of the road, which is in the Wythall division of Worcestershire, the rubbish is collected; on the other side, which falls under Labour-led Birmingham city council, the rubbish is piling high, council tax is going up by 21% and a major incident is being declared. Labour is delivering rubbish, while the Liberal Democrats are prancing around on their hobby horses on social media. The Minister talks about priorities, including putting residents first and delivering value for money, but surely this is further proof that only Conservative councils will deliver on those priorities. Will the Minister tell us at what point he will step in to get those bins collected?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Gentleman is trying to set up the good council and the bad council by party politics, but I am afraid that has been exhausted. The previous Government did this all the time: they would parade councils of a different colour around for shaming, whatever the issue, while for one of their own they would just hope that everything would move on and that nobody would notice. We are not interested in doing that.

This is about a new partnership, where national Government and local government work together to resolve these issues. If a Conservative council finds itself in trouble—there have been some, I should say, and there may be more in the future—I am not going to name and shame it and parade it around in the way the hon. Gentleman is trying to do today. We stand ready to

work with councils of all political parties in the interests of the people at a local level, because that is what matters.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I give the Minister some friendly advice and suggest that he does not try to write this off as a little local difficulty? I am half expecting to hear him use the phrase, “Crisis, what crisis?” He cannot be blamed for not remembering the winter of discontent—using the wonders of Wikipedia, I see that it happened a year before he was born—but I can assure him that the Callaghan Government and the Labour party never shook off the pungent smell of the rubbish piling in the streets on their watch. He really does not want to have the same thing happen to him.

Jim McMahon: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what stinks: hearing Conservative MPs line up as if they were not in government for 14 years and creating the conditions for this to happen, while the foundations of local government were eroded. With that record, I would honestly keep the advice to myself if I were him.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): We have Birmingham Labour MPs campaigning for a new airport in Pakistan; meanwhile, we have rats the size of cats feasting on a month of rubbish in Birmingham, courtesy of Labour’s trade union friends. My simple question to the Minister is this: when will this rubbish be cleared?

Jim McMahon: We both share the intention and ambition that it will be cleared as soon as possible. There should not be any further delay in reaching an agreement when it is quite clear that the volume of waste to be collected is proving to be a waste hazard. With his background as a councillor, the hon. Gentleman will know that it is for the council, as a local employer, to resolve this matter with the trade unions by agreement. That is what we want.

Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 1B, 2B, 7B and 8B, and by Lords amendments 15B, 15C, 15D and 15E to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords non-insistence on their amendment 15. If any of those Lords amendments is agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*.

Clause 1

DETERMINATION OF ADDITIONAL MULTIPLIERS

5.18 pm

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1B.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Lords amendment 2B, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 7B, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 8B, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 13B, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 15B to 15E, and Government motion to disagree to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords non-insistence on their amendment 15.

Jim McMahon: I am grateful for the opportunity to consider the Lords amendments tabled in lieu of those to which this House disagreed. I reiterate my thanks to Members of both Houses for their continued diligence in the scrutiny of these measures.

The Bill makes provision to enable the introduction of permanent lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses from April 2026, ending the uncertainty of the temporary RHL relief. The RHL relief stopgap measure creates uncertainty for businesses, as well as a significant fiscal pressure on the Government. This Government are committed to addressing that in the Bill.

The Government face the significant challenge that we must balance the books, so we cannot and should not make tax cuts without ensuring that those tax cuts are funded. The Bill therefore makes provision to enable the introduction of a higher multiplier for all properties with a rateable value at or above £500,000, ensuring that the permanent tax cut from RHL properties is sustainably funded from within the business rates system.

The Bill will also help to deliver another of the missions set out in the Government's manifesto: breaking down barriers to opportunity. It will remove eligibility for charitable rate relief from private schools that are charities in England. As I have said before in this House, the Government believe in parental choice but are also determined to fulfil the aspiration of every parent to get

the best education for their child. To eliminate the barriers to opportunity, we need to concentrate on the broader picture towards the state sector, where—let us remember—over 90% of children are educated. The revenue raised through the removal of charitable relief will help to deliver our commitments to education and young people and will help us to meet our overarching mission of breaking down barriers to opportunity for all.

Lords amendments 1B and 7B seek to allow the Treasury to exclude healthcare hereditaments from the higher multiplier through regulations. Lords amendments 2B and 8B seek to allow the Treasury to exclude anchor stores from the higher multiplier through regulations. The amendments are unnecessary, because the powers that they seek already exist in the Bill. Let me be clear: the powers in the Bill will already allow the Government, should they so choose, to exclude certain properties from the higher multiplier. This is not the intention that I have set out; the Government's intention is that the higher multiplier will apply to all properties at or above the £500,000 threshold to ensure that local multipliers can be adequately funded. I urge the House to reject the amendments, because they are not required and they duplicate powers that already exist in the Bill.

Lords amendment 13B, tabled by Lord Thurlow, would require the Government to

“undertake a review of how the provisions in this Act may affect businesses whose rateable value is close to £500,000.”

The amendment would require the review to be laid before Parliament within six months of the day on which the Bill is passed. It also specifies that the review

“must consider the merits of a separate Use Class and associated multiplier for retail services provided by fulfilment warehouses that do not have a material presence on local high streets, to apply in England.”

We have previously considered two similar Lords amendments, and our position has not changed. The amendment is unnecessary. The “Transforming Business Rates” work that is under way recognises the cliff edge in the business rates system and recognises that it may act as a disincentive to expanding. I reiterate the assurance that I have previously provided to the House: the Government are already looking at this precise issue.

The second part of Lords amendment 13B would require the Government to undertake a review examining the merits of a separate use class in business rates and an associated multiplier for warehouses that cater for retailers without a material presence on the high street. As has been set out, the Government are already exploring that objective through the projects that have been mentioned. The “Digitalising Business Rates” project will allow us to match property-level data with the business-level data held by HM Revenue and Customs. This will improve the way in which we target business rates. The Government therefore remain of the view that the amendment is not required. I urge hon. Members to disagree to it.

The Government are fully committed to transforming the business rates system. This is simply the first step in a wider programme of change in a system that is long overdue for reform. As the Chancellor set out in the spring statement last week, the Government will publish an interim report setting a clear direction of travel for reform, with further policy details to follow at the autumn Budget. Reforms to the business rates system will be phased in over the Parliament.

Finally, amendments 15B to 15E seek to move the measure to remove the charitable rate relief from private schools from one that is being made by Parliament through this Bill to one that the Secretary of State would make through regulations, subject to the affirmative resolution procedure for that statutory instrument. The Government are committed to delivering on our manifesto commitments, and part of that is removing the charitable rate relief from private schools to raise revenue to help deliver on our commitments to young people and education, including the in state sector where, as I said, most children are educated. The Government's view is that this is a matter for Parliament to decide, which is why we have invited Parliament to do so through this Bill. Therefore, the amendments are unnecessary, the Government cannot accept them, and we ask the House to disagree to them.

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

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank their noble lordships for their diligent further consideration of the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill and for the new amendments they have passed to address their concerns with the legislation. These changes shine a spotlight on Labour's muddled priorities, exposing an approach that punishes aspiration, squeezes business, and increases the cost of living for consumers and the cost of doing business.

This very week, we will see the new jobs tax introduced and business rate hikes. The Employment Rights Bill is coming down the line, which is of great concern to many private sector businesses, and consumers will consequently see higher prices and lower wages. Tomorrow, we will also see a hike in council tax, energy prices, water bills, broadband and the BBC licence fee.

I will address the four primary groups of amendments in turn. First, Lords amendments 1B and 7B tackle the proposal to levy a higher multiplier on medical, dental and other healthcare settings. The amendments would prudently protect all healthcare premises—occupied or vacant—from the higher multiplier, addressing a glaring flaw in Labour's Bill. For too long, we have cautioned against their detachment from practical governance, but now it is undeniable: rather than targeting the untaxed profits of internet giants as pledged, they are heaping costs on to hospitals and GP surgeries. It is baffling that Labour's so-called reform of the rating system would burden healthcare at all, let alone doing so while they plan to hike national insurance on jobs tomorrow to fund the NHS—only to claw it back today by taxing those same health services.

Just yesterday, the Government pledged to funnel more cash into the NHS by taxing jobs through national insurance hikes, yet today they turn around and tax the NHS itself via business rates. It is a fiscal farce—a two-faced assault on healthcare that undermines their own rhetoric. As Conservative Members have mentioned in recent debates, Labour's obsession with revenue grabs over sensible relief is choking the sectors we need most.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that there seems to be a disjointed approach, where the Health Secretary is asking for more healthcare in the community, whereas we will be asking anybody who moves from a central location into the community to pay these additional taxes and rates?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Member is right; there is no logic to the Government's approach. They are giving with one hand and taking with the other, and they are making the kinds of decisions he talks about ever more difficult.

Lords amendments 2B and 8B address the ratings regime for anchor stores on our beleaguered high streets. We echo the words of the John Lewis chief executive Nish Kankiwala, who warned that Labour's Budget is a "two-handed grab" at retailers that piles on national insurance increases while refusing to reform business rates as it promised to do. Retailers face a £7 billion hit from these policies, with consumers braced for higher prices as a result.

These amendments exempt anchor stores—the vital engines of our town centres—from the higher multiplier. It is a lifeline that Labour seems determined to withhold. Unoccupied anchor stores would also escape this punishing rate, preventing empty shopfronts from becoming permanent scars on our highstreets. Setting the threshold for the higher multiplier at £500,000 is a blunt instrument, as the Minister concedes. I can assure the Government that this will have consequences for businesses that are not big tech giants. It will hit large supermarkets, supermarket delivery and large department stores, showing that the Labour Government have not thought it through.

Conservative Members have rightly decried Labour's neglect of retail, and they are right. The Leader of the Opposition has rightly highlighted that Labour's rates multiplier fiasco is killing off the high street while real reform is dodged. Businesses face a double whammy of higher taxes and no certainty thanks to a Government who are more interested in punishing aspiration than powering growth.

5.30 pm

Labour's failure to shield those businesses betrays the shopkeepers, the workers and the families who depend on thriving high streets, not ghost towns. Labour are putting both those costs on retailers on the high street. Exempting anchor stores from the higher multiplier would help support our high streets. Were unoccupied anchor stores not subject to the higher multiplier, those businesses would have less of a strain on them when it comes to making decisions on what they are to do with their premises.

Supporting businesses' ability to plan for the longer term is something that we must consider in all legislation and policy. Our concern about the Bill is shared by KPMG, which described the Government's plan to change the business rates system, as set out in the Bill, as creating uncertainty for businesses when considering the liability that they will need to factor in to forward planning.

Turning to Lords amendment 13B, we confront yet another symptom of Labour's ill-conceived assault on business. Picture this: a thriving firm with premises valued at £495,000 dares to invest in its future with, perhaps, a modest expansion, new equipment or a refit to stay competitive, and that ambition tips its rateable value just over the £500,000 threshold. What is the reward under the Bill? A staggering jump in business rates from roughly £175,000 to £325,000—a near doubling of its tax burden overnight. That is not fairness; it is a trap and a punitive cliff edge that snares the aspirational and mocks the very notion of fairness.

There must be greater accountability for these new multipliers and tiers, which threaten to crush businesses under arbitrary thresholds. The Lords are absolutely right to demand a review by the Secretary of State to probe the real-world impact of the changes, especially on firms teetering near that £500,000 mark: businesses that employ our constituents, anchor our communities and drive our economy. By mandating consultation with sector experts, the Lords amendment would ensure that future decisions on business rates were rooted in evidence, not ideology, offering Parliament and Government a chance to course-correct before more livelihoods are sacrificed to Labour's reckless tax experiment.

The final group, Lords amendments 15B to 15E, relates to perhaps the most objectionable part of the Bill: the levying of business rates on independent schools. Let me reiterate the Opposition's view that education should never be taxed. Over the weekend, *The Times* published a number of alarming stories outlining the impact that VAT on school fees has had on families. It tells the story of Leanne, a self-employed accountant who works between 5 am and midnight seven days a week to pay for the increase in costs to her disabled son's education that have come as a result of levelling VAT on school fees, which is exacerbated by business rates on independent schools.

The same article highlights a study that has shown that one in five families with a child with special educational needs and disabilities who attends a private school have already remortgaged their home; one in eight have sold their home altogether. That is before business rates have been levied. As I have already highlighted, the Bill will also levy business rates on nursery schools and sports facilities on the site of a private school that are used by the general public.

This measure is simply wrong, and I agree with the other place that the statutory instrument required to bring in the regulations should be voted on by both houses before such measures can be introduced.

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

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Here we go again. This is very similar to what we spoke about last week, so I will again put on record my thanks to the noble Lords for their work in pushing forward the amendments from the other place.

We welcome the business rates reform and look forward to a far more substantial overhaul of the system. However, we are deeply concerned about the proposals for hospitals. Lords amendment 1 sought to exclude hospitals and it is so disappointing that that was not accepted. In my area, in Dorset, both Poole and Royal Bournemouth hospitals would be caught by the £500,000 rateable value rule. Poole hospital has a rateable value of £2.1 million and Bournemouth's is £3.3 million. World-famous hospitals, including Great Ormond Street, The Royal Marsden and England's oldest hospital Barts, would all be caught up.

The Government have rightly been proud of the early delivery of extra NHS appointments, but keeping hospitals in the Bill risks real problems for local councils which might find themselves having to take difficult decisions to take the hit and not charge their hospitals the higher amount. To take away the discretion altogether, I ask Ministers please to remove the provisions from the Bill so that hospitals do not pay twice.

I share the concerns of the shadow Minister regarding the businesses that are on the cusp of the £500,000 threshold. The impact of flipping just over from the lower to the higher multiplier could be profound. So many businesses are already on the cusp, given the national insurance increases, the living wage and the impact of the Employment Rights Bill. The additional worry about tipping over into the higher threshold could see many fail to invest in their businesses for the future.

I will keep this brief, because we know where we are. We too do not agree with the taxation of education and we continue to support the Lords amendments to remove private schools from the legislation. The main reason that we feel that way is that we know that many parents of children who have additional needs choose the private sector because it is so difficult to get what they need in overcrowded schools that are falling apart at the seams. We therefore fundamentally disagree with the principle of taxing education.

The Government have made a good start on the Bill. We want to see a much more fundamental review of business rates. There is a long way to go, but we think that the amendments, if accepted, would demonstrate a Government who are listening. At a time when trust in the Government needs to be built, a Government who listen to sensible amendments would be most welcome.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Government for bringing the Bill forward, but I have to put on record some of my concerns—the Minister will not be surprised. He knows that it is never meant in an aggressive way; I put things forward in this way because it is important that my constituents have a chance to express themselves through me in this Chamber.

First, I echo the concerns of the shadow Minister and the Liberal Democrats spokesperson in relation to hospitals and medical and dental schools. I have some concern over how that will trickle down, as it will inevitably, and put pressure on sectors where it does not need to be. The job of those three areas is to ensure that our hospitals can deliver the care and our medical and dental schools can produce the students with the expertise and knowledge to be the next generation of those who look after us.

My major concern, however, is about private schools. I know the point has been echoed many times, but I cannot let this occasion go without making my remarks, on which I have sought the direction of Madam Deputy Speaker and other parties. Members will be aware of the issue with private schools, and I have spoken about it on numerous times to put forward the argument for the faith schools in my constituency. Parents scrimp and save to ensure that their children can go to those schools and have the standard of education that they wish for them, and they have asked me to put that on record. The reason I persist in raising the issue is that I truly believe that some people of faith will be further disadvantaged when the Bill goes through. I know that that is not the Government's intention, but it will be the reality, and for that reason I must put it on record.

Although the rating provisions will not apply in Northern Ireland per se, the disadvantage to our sector remains in the removal of the tax considerations, which will affect schools in Northern Ireland. That is where the issue is. For the mainland, the effect is quite clear, but schools in Northern Ireland will be affected as well.

I wish to be clear that I oppose these provisions on behalf of faith-based schools on the mainland as well, because parents of children at those schools want the same as those who spoke to me.

I am a very proud member of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and I believe that that extends to parents' freedom to educate their child with a view to how their faith is worked into that education. Lords amendment 15 has been referred to by the shadow Minister and by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade). For many parents, confidence that their faith will not be dismantled in the classroom is worth the financial burden of paying into their child's education, but that is being denied by this legislation. I believe that they all deserve the opportunity to educate their child in a way that they wish, for which they will probably pay handsomely, but these proposals will adversely affect parents' freedom to educate their child in their religious belief.

The option to home-school is one that parents may not have considered previously, yet may now feel is the only financial option available for them. Those parents may not feel qualified or equipped to deal with the skills that are vital to home-schooling, yet believe there to be no option as they simply cannot afford to pay the uplifted fees. That is the unfair burden that falls on the shoulders of those parents.

I firmly believe that the Government disagree with almost every Lords amendment because the Lords amendments interfere with the public revenue and affect the levy and the application of local revenues. The Commons does not offer any further reason, trusting that this reason may be deemed sufficient. Basically that means, "We need the money." I have been a Member of this House for almost 15 years and an elected representative for some 40 years as a councillor and a member of the Assembly, and never, ever have I believed that money is the bottom line, and I do not believe that many right hon. and hon. Members believe that. We cannot take faith-based education out of the hands of a certain class of people to punish those high-class schools with swimming pools. Let me assure the House that Bangor Independent Christian school, with its Sunbeams nursery schools, has no pool. Regent House prep in my constituency has no swimming pool either. There are small primary schools that will have difficulty operating when these regulations come into force, and that is simply not right.

I know that the strength of the Labour Government means that this Bill will pass, but I am urging individual MPs across the House to consider who will be punished and to urge the Government to review this tax raid on education, even at this late hour. We believe in the right to live one's faith, and we cannot tax that right out of reach. That is where this Bill has gone wrong, and has divorced itself from the reality of the people that I represent.

Jim McMahon: I think I addressed the majority of the points in my opening speech that have been raised subsequently, but I thank Members for their contributions. We have heard the Opposition's concern that the multipliers do not deliver on the stated intention of the policy as announced in the Budget. We clearly do not agree with that position. At the Budget, the Government announced their intention to introduce two lower multipliers for qualifying retail, hospitality and leisure properties, to end the uncertainty of the annual retail, hospitality and

leisure relief. Also, as I set out in my opening speech, the relief was a temporary stopgap measure. Of course, it has been extended year on year, but it does not provide the certainty that businesses require. It has created a cliff edge.

During our last session—I cannot remember when it was; it feels like it was yesterday—the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) seemed to acknowledge that the cliff edge that was built in the previous system was providing uncertainty to businesses and their ability to plan ahead. He must surely welcome the fact that this new lower multiplier—this permanent relief—gives all businesses, whether they are retail, hospitality or leisure, the long-term security that they have been asking for and, importantly, in a way that is sustainable and self-financing through the business rates system.

Through the Bill, the Government are taking steps to address all the issues that have been outlined. The chosen approach is both appropriate and prudent, and the challenging fiscal environment that the Government face requires it. Any tax cut must be appropriately funded, under our commitment to sound financial management, so the Government intend to introduce a higher multiplier for all properties with a rateable value of £500,000 and above. It is important to say this to settle some of the arguments: that will affect less than 1% of properties in England. Less than 1% will pay more, but that will fund the lower multiplier, as we all recognise. That will help our town centres and our high streets, and it is what we need to do. This approach delivers on the policy set out in the Budget, and on our manifesto commitment to transform the business rates system to make it fairer and fit for the 21st century, and to protect the high street.

5.45 pm

On the comments about the multipliers for the healthcare sector, of course health providers are subject to the same business rates regime. That has been the case for 25 years, since the Crown Estate ended its exemption; Members will know that. They will also know that the financial support given to the national health service this year was a record £22 billion, so that it could deal with the legacy that this Government were left, which was, importantly, holding the country back. That £22 billion is going where it is needed, and of course any decisions about future financing are a matter for the Treasury at the appropriate point.

On the review of the £500,000 threshold, we have already said that there are provisions in the Bill to address that.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister says that the solution that he has alighted on meets his manifesto commitment, but his manifesto says,

"This new system will level the playing field between the high street and online giants".

That is not what the provision does—not exclusively. He knows that it levies extra taxes, extra business rates, on high street stores, large department stores, supermarkets, football stadiums and many others. They are not online giants.

Jim McMahon: The rating system adequately reflects the scale of properties. Less than 1% of properties in the business rates system will use the higher multiplier.

[Jim McMahon]

That will fund the tax break for those on the high street that will use the lower multipliers. In the evidence session—the hon. Gentleman was there—we heard retailers say, “Of course, that will have an impact on our distribution centres, but we have so many stores that are below the threshold.” That allows national retailers with multiple locations to benefit; in the round, they find themselves better off as a result of this policy. As for rebalancing the situation for online retailers and those on our high streets, that is exactly what this measure does. Big distribution centres will pay for that relief.

I once again thank hon. Members for their contributions, but for the reasons set out, I respectfully ask this House to disagree with the amendments before us.

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

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. As the escalators in Portcullis House are still not working, I shall allow an additional two minutes for the Division.

The House having divided: Ayes 296, Noes 170.

Division No. 157]

[5.47 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Ady*)
Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen

Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese

Dollimore, Helena
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foy, Mary Kelly
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Kendall, rh Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, rh Lucy

Prinsley, Peter
Race, Steve
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogam, Michelle
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren

Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
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
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Gen Kitchen

NOES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)

Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Chowns, Ellie
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Denyer, Carla
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
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
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Jeremy
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
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James (*Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
McVey, rh Esther
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward

Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Raja, Shivani
Rankin, Jack
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Jerome Mayhew and
Rebecca Paul

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 1B disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2B.—(Jim McMahon.)

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 104.

Division No. 158]

[6.4 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen

Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hincliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam

Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan

Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Race, Steve
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggum, Michelle
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam

Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
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
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Vicky Foxcroft and
Gen Kitchen**

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy
vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Gareth
Davis, rh David
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Grant, Helen
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Jopp, Lincoln

Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast
by Joy Morrissey*)
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
McMurdock, James (*Proxy
vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
McVey, rh Esther
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Philp, rh Chris
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani
Rankin, Jack
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James

Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
**Jerome Mayhew and
Rebecca Paul**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 2B disagreed to.

Lords amendments 7B and 8B disagreed to.

After Clause 4**REVIEW: THRESHOLD EFFECT**

*Motion made, and Question put, That this House
disagrees with Lords amendment 13B.—(Jim McMahon.)*

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 167.

Division No. 159]**[6.17 pm****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chownes, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma

Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda

Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Race, Steve
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny

Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogam, Michelle
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 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

Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Gen Kitchen

NOES

Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Gareth
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 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
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)

Goldman, Marie	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Gordon, Tom	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Grant, Helen	O'Brien, Neil
Griffith, Andrew	Olney, Sarah
Griffiths, Alison	Patel, rh Priti
Harding, Monica	Perteghella, Manuela
Harris, Rebecca	Philp, rh Chris
Hayes, rh Sir John	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Heylings, Pippa	Pritchard, rh Mark
Hinds, rh Damian	Raja, Shivani
Hoare, Simon	Rankin, Jack
Hobhouse, Wera	Robertson, Joe
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Robinson, rh Gavin
Hollinrake, Kevin	Roome, Ian
Huddleston, Nigel	Rosindell, Andrew
Hudson, Dr Neil	Sabine, Anna
Hunt, rh Jeremy	Savage, Dr Roz
Jardine, Christine	Shannon, Jim
Jarvis, Liz	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Jenrick, rh Robert	Simmonds, David
Jones, Clive	Slade, Vikki
Jopp, Lincoln	Smart, Lisa
Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Smith, Greg
Kohler, Mr Paul	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Kruger, Danny	Smith, Rebecca
Lam, Katie	Sollom, Ian
Lamont, John	Spencer, Dr Ben
Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Stafford, Gregory
Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Stephenson, Blake
Lopez, Julia	Stone, Jamie
Lowe, Rupert	Stuart, rh Graham
MacCleary, James	Swann, Robin
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Maguire, Ben	Taylor, Luke
Maguire, Helen	Thomas, Bradley
Mak, Alan	Thomas, Cameron
Malthouse, rh Kit	Timothy, Nick
Martin, Mike	Trott, rh Laura
Mathew, Brian	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Maynard, Charlie	Vickers, Martin
McMurdock, James (<i>Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson</i>)	Vickers, Matt
Miller, Calum	Whately, Helen
Milne, John	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Wild, James
Moore, Robbie	Wilkinson, Max
Moran, Layla	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Morello, Edward	Wilson, Munira
Morgan, Helen	Wilson, rh Sammy
Morrison, Mr Tom (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster</i>)	Wood, Mike
Morrissey, Joy	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Morton, rh Wendy	Wrigley, Martin
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Young, Claire
Munt, Tessa	
Murray, Susan	

Tellers for the Noes:

**Jerome Mayhew and
Rebecca Paul**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 13B disagreed to.

Clause 5

REMOVAL OF RELIEF

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 15B to 15E to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords non-insistence on their amendment 15.—(Jim McMahon.)

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 167.

Division No. 160]**[6.29 pm****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Crichton, Torcuil
Abbott, Jack	Daby, Janet
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Akehurst, Luke	Dalton, Ashley
Aldridge, Dan	Darlington, Emily
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Davies, Paul
Ali, Rushanara	Davies-Jones, Alex
Anderson, Callum	Dean, Josh
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Dearden, Kate
Arthur, Dr Scott	Denyer, Carla
Athwal, Jas	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Atkinson, Catherine	Dickson, Jim
Atkinson, Lewis	Dixon, Anna
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Bailey, Olivia	Dollimore, Helena
Baker, Alex	Dowd, Peter
Baker, Richard	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Ballinger, Alex	Efford, Clive
Bance, Antonia	Ellis, Maya
Barker, Paula	Elmore, Chris
Barron, Lee	Entwistle, Kirith
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Evans, Chris
Beales, Danny	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Beavers, Lorraine	Falconer, Mr Hamish
Bell, Torsten	Farnsworth, Linsey
Benn, rh Hilary	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Berry, Siân	Ferguson, Mark
Betts, Mr Clive	Ferguson, Patricia
Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Fleet, Natalie
Blake, Rachel	Footy, Emma
Bloore, Chris	Fookes, Catherine
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Foster, Mr Paul
Bonavia, Kevin	Foy, Mary Kelly
Botterill, Jade	Frith, Mr James
Brickell, Phil	Furniss, Gill
Burgon, Richard	Gardner, Dr Allison
Burke, Maureen	Gelder, Anna
Burton-Sampson, David	Gemmell, Alan
Butler, Dawn	Gilbert, Tracy
Byrne, Ian	Gill, Preet Kaur
Cadbury, Ruth	Glindon, Mary
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Goldsborough, Ben
Campbell, Irene	Gosling, Jodie
Campbell, Juliet	Gould, Georgia
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Grady, John
Carden, Dan	Griffith, Dame Nia
Carling, Sam	Hamilton, Fabian
Carns, Al	Hamilton, Paulette
Champion, Sarah	Hardy, Emma
Charalambous, Bambos	Harris, Carolyn
Charters, Mr Luke	Hatton, Lloyd
Chowns, Ellie	Hayes, Tom
Clark, Feryal	Hazelgrove, Claire
Coleman, Ben	Healey, rh John
Collins, Tom	Hillier, Dame Meg
Conlon, Liam	Hinchliff, Chris
Coombes, Sarah	Hinder, Jonathan
Cooper, Andrew	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Costigan, Deirdre	Hopkins, Rachel
Cox, Pam	Hughes, Claire
Coyle, Neil	Hume, Alison
Craft, Jen	Hurley, Patrick
Creagh, Mary	Ingham, Leigh
Creasy, Ms Stella	Irons, Natasha
	Jameson, Sally
	Jermy, Terry
	Jogee, Adam

Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha

Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Race, Steve
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reid, Joani
 Reynold, Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred

Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 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
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Gareth
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim

Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Gen Kitchen

NOES

Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 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
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit

Martin, Mike	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Mathew, Brian	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Maynard, Charlie	Simmonds, David
McMurdock, James (<i>Proxy</i>)	Slade, Vikki
<i>vote cast by Lee Anderson)</i>	Smart, Lisa
Miller, Calum	Smith, Greg
Milne, John	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Smith, Rebecca
Moore, Robbie	Sollom, Ian
Moran, Layla	Spencer, Dr Ben
Morello, Edward	Stafford, Gregory
Morgan, Helen	Stephenson, Blake
Morrison, Mr Tom (<i>Proxy vote</i>)	Stone, Jamie
<i>cast by Mr Forster)</i>	Stuart, rh Graham
Morrissey, Joy	Swann, Robin
Morton, rh Wendy	Taylor, Luke
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Thomas, Bradley
Munt, Tessa	Thomas, Cameron
Murray, Susan	Timothy, Nick
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Trott, rh Laura
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Tugendhat, rh Tom
O'Brien, Neil	Vickers, Martin
Olney, Sarah	Vickers, Matt
Patel, rh Priti	Whately, Helen
Perteghella, Manuela	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Philp, rh Chris	Wild, James
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Wilkinson, Max
Pritchard, rh Mark	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Raja, Shivani	Wilson, Munira
Rankin, Jack	Wilson, rh Sammy
Robertson, Joe	Wood, Mike
Robinson, rh Gavin	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Roome, Ian	Wrigley, Martin
Rosindell, Andrew	Young, Claire
Sabine, Anna	Tellers for the Noes:
Savage, Dr Roz	Jerome Mayhew and
Shannon, Jim	Rebecca Paul

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendments 15B to 15E to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords non-insistence on their amendment 15 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 1B, 2B, 7B, 8B, 13B, and 15B to 15E to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords' non-insistence on their amendment 15.

That Jim McMahon, Gen Kitchen, Mark Ferguson, Harpreet Uppal, Emily Darlington, Kevin Hollinrake and Tessa Munt be members of the Committee.

That Jim McMahon be the Chair of the Committee.

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

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

Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

DRAFT PROPOSALS FOR ESTABLISHING NEW EXECUTIVE AGENCY

“(1) Within six months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must produce a report containing draft proposals for the establishment of a new executive agency, to be known as “Skills England”, responsible for the powers transferred under this Act.

(2) A copy of this Report must be laid before both Houses of Parliament.

(3) Within forty days of a Report under subsection (1) being laid, the Secretary of State must ensure resolutions are tabled, and moved, in both Houses of Parliament to approve the Government’s draft proposals.

(4) If the draft proposals are rejected by either House of Parliament, the Secretary of State must, within a period of six months, lay a report containing revised proposals before Parliament, and, within a period of forty days after laying the revised proposals, table a motion before each House of Parliament to approve the revised proposals.

(5) The Secretary of State may not establish an executive agency to carry out the functions transferred under this Act until it has secured, through a motion under subsection (3) or (4), the consent of both Houses of Parliament.

(6) If a motion under subsection (3) or (4) is approved by both Houses of Parliament, the Secretary of State must make an annual statement in each House of Parliament on the work of the agency.

(7) Within twelve months of a motion under subsection (3) or (4) being passed, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report evaluating the effectiveness of the “Skills England” governance structure in delivering on the organisation’s aims and objectives.”—(*Ian Sollom.*)

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to bring forward proposals for the executive agency, to be known as Skills England, subject to the approval of both Houses of Parliament.

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.41 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Report on the impact on Higher Education—

“(1) Within one year of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish a report on the impact of this Act on the provision of degree apprenticeships in England.

(2) The Report must include an impact assessment of the removal of apprenticeship levy funding for degree apprenticeships.

(3) The report under subsection (1) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament.”

New clause 3—Report on the impact on T levels—

“(1) Within one year of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish a report on the impact of this Act on T-Levels.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must include—

- (a) the involvement of Skills England in the administration of T Levels, including the curriculum and assessment methods;

- (b) an assessment of the independence of the accreditation of T-Levels, specifically whether there has been any involvement of the Secretary of State in this process; and
- (c) an assessment of the extent to which T-Levels are meeting local demand for skills.

(3) The report under subsection (1) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament.”

New clause 4—Creation of Skills England—

“(1) A body corporate known as Skills England is established to carry out the functions transferred to the Secretary of State under this Act.

(2) At the end of a year after the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must make regulations transferring to Skills England all the functions transferred from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education under this Act.

(3) Nothing in this section prevents the Secretary of State from transferring more functions to Skills England under other enactments.”

This new clause would put Skills England on an independent statutory footing rather than as part of the DfE. The role of IfATE would be included in that planned for Skills England.

Amendment 4, in clause 4, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“(3B) A group of persons under subsection (3) must include a representative from an organisation that is the representative body for a sector.”

Amendment 5, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“(3B) When approving a standard under subsection (3), the Secretary of State must have regard to the reasonable requirements of—

- (a) industry, commerce, finance, professions and other employers regarding education and training, and
- (b) persons who may wish to undertake education and training.”

Amendment 3, in clause 5, page 2, line 32, at end insert—

“(6B) When approving a standard under subsection (6), the Secretary of State must have regard to the reasonable requirements of—

- (a) industry, commerce, finance, professions and other employers regarding education and training, and
- (b) persons who may wish to undertake education and training.”

Amendment 1, in clause 9, page 4, line 13, after “England” insert

“, including the impact of removing apprenticeship level funding for degree apprenticeships”.

Amendment 2, page 4, line 13, at end insert—

“(c) the impact of the exercise of the relevant functions on the provision of level 7 apprenticeships in England”

Amendment 6, in clause 12, page 5, line 6, leave out subsections (1) and (2) and insert—

“(1) This Act comes into force at the end of the period of one year beginning on the day on which Skills England is created.”

Ian Sollom: In considering the transfer of functions from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, we face fundamental questions about the Government’s accountability and the future structure of our skills system. While modest in size, the Bill has far-reaching implications for that system, and for millions of learners and apprentices. It represents a significant centralising of power in the hands of the Secretary of State, without providing proper mechanisms for parliamentary oversight or accountability.

I have sat through many hours of debate on the Bill, during which Labour Members have extolled the virtues of Skills England, but let me emphasise again that the Bill does not actually establish that body, as many assumed that it would. It simply abolishes IfATE and transfers its functions to the Secretary of State, an approach that risks creating a governance vacuum in which there is no proper scrutiny or independent oversight. It is clear from the evidence received by the Bill Committee that I am not alone in having those concerns. The Association of Colleges, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the University of Winchester and the Institute of the Motor Industry all raised similar issues relating to governance and accountability in their written evidence submissions to the Committee.

As was noted by many on Second Reading, skills policy in this country has suffered from constant reorganisation and restructuring. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) has reminded us several times that Skills England will be the 13th skills body to be established in 50 years. Given that history, employers, providers and learners desperately need stability and clarity. In its evidence, the University of Winchester warned:

“The transfer of power from IfATE to the Secretary of State for Education raises questions about the independence of the proposed Skills England regulatory body.”

It also observed that in IfATE, at present,

“employers and academics come together to ensure that the standard is industry relevant, current, and academically rigorous.”

The Skills Federation raised similar concerns:

“The clauses in the bill which transfer powers from IFATE to the Secretary of State risk shifting the development of standards further away from employer demand.”

It also said:

“Too much centralisation leads to a lack of focus on sector needs”.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the new clause would help colleges such as Bridgwater and Taunton college, the biggest provider of apprenticeships in England? Will he join me, and other Members, in encouraging those colleges on their path towards awarding their own degrees?

6.45 pm

Ian Sollom: I entirely endorse what my hon. Friend has said, and I certainly encourage those colleges on their path. As I will explain, my new clause will enable Skills England to support them more fully.

Equally concerning is the need for effective cross-departmental co-ordination. Skills policy does not exist in isolation. Skills England needs to work with, among others, the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council on future workforce needs, the Migration Advisory Committee on reducing reliance on overseas workers, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on green skills, the Department for Work and Pensions on employment programmes, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology on priority sectors, the Department of Health and Social Care on workforce planning, and, following the Chancellor’s spring statement last week, the new defence growth board on critical skills for our defence industry.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the past, the hon. Gentleman has mentioned the construction sector. We welcome the news that the Government will build 1.3 million houses, but that requires builders, plumbers, carpenters, electricians and plasterers, and they must be trained, so that they can do that job well. Does he feel that his new clause will enable the building of those 1.3 million houses?

Ian Sollom: I would hope that better scrutiny and accountability in Parliament would help with delivering what is required, and holding the Government to account when it comes to keeping their promises.

On the cross-departmental work that I mentioned, the lack of a published framework for Skills England as we consider the Bill is deeply concerning, and what we have seen so far suggests a structure that is heavily Department for Education-centric. Without statutory independence and appropriate seniority, Skills England will struggle to drive the cross-departmental co-ordination that Members on both sides of the House agree our skills system needs.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman says. He is, of course, right that the measures would represent considerable centralisation, if it was not for the creation of Skills England. He has mentioned a number of Government Departments. Does he think that IfATE, a non-governmental body, has been successful in bringing all their work together, and that a Government body will not be, or is he arguing for something different?

Ian Sollom: I will come to my preference for an executive agency that fits what the Government want to do. That is the reason for my new clause, and I do not think that it need delay efforts. Ultimately, a statutory, departmental body would have more clout. On the basis of what we understand, at least, I think that the remit for Skills England is very different from the remit for IfATE when it comes to that cross-departmental working.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): This Government have just taken bold action by abolishing NHS England, the largest quango in the world. Part of the motivation for doing so was the need to ensure that when something is not going right in the NHS, the buck does not stop with a quango that we Back-Bench MPs cannot question directly, but with Ministers. That is better for governance and for scrutiny; it means that when the Health Secretary says that something is not going well enough, we can question him robustly and challenge him to improve. Surely the hon. Gentleman sees that the way to push Skills England to be as robust as possible is by having strong governance.

Ian Sollom: There are different options, and I will come to this issue later. Given the scale of cross-departmental working required, having Skills England sit outside a single Government Department is probably more effective. Moreover, such bodies can be held accountable effectively by Parliament, as we have seen with some other quangos. Indeed, I believe the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council will be set up as a statutory independent body when time allows, and I suggest that Skills England is of the same order of magnitude.

Beyond the concerns about accountability and cross-Government authority, there are practical, operational risks to the approach laid out in the Bill. The Skills Federation warned in its evidence that

“there is a key risk that transfer of functions from IfATE will become the key focus for the set-up of Skills England and less attention (and potentially resources) placed on achieving the overarching aims.”

There is significant concern that the broader strategic purpose of Skills England could be lost in the rush to transfer operational functions. That concern was echoed by Lord Blunkett, who suggested that

“there is a real danger that IfATE will swamp Skills England at birth.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 November 2024; Vol. 841, c. GC98.]

The Government’s impact assessment also acknowledges risks, noting that the transfer of functions could

“potentially cause a temporary slowdown in the growth rate of new apprenticeships and technical education courses due to potential delays in the approvals process”,

which

“may disproportionately impact disadvantaged learners.”

In Committee, the Minister emphasised the urgent need to address skills shortages and said that delay “is not an option.” Although we share the Government’s commitment to addressing skills shortages urgently, I respectfully suggest that there is wisdom in heeding the warning that the University of Warwick gave in its evidence. Getting the foundations right is more important than hasty construction.

In light of those concerns, I tabled new clause 1, which I proposed in Committee. It provides a constructive solution to many of the issues that I have outlined, and proposes a clear pathway for establishing Skills England as a dedicated executive agency within the Department for Education. As I said, my party ultimately believes that a fully independent statutory body with cross-departmental authority is the optimal approach, but we recognise the Government’s preference for the executive agency model, so new clause 1 works within that structure but provides essential safeguards. Under the new clause, the Secretary of State would produce draft proposals for establishing Skills England within six months, lay the proposals before both Houses, secure parliamentary approval before establishing the agency, provide annual statements on the agency’s work, and evaluate its effectiveness 12 months after establishment. This approach strikes the right balance between allowing the Government to implement policy at their desired speed and ensuring proper parliamentary scrutiny and meaningful stakeholder engagement.

As I said, I tabled new clause 1 in Committee because I believe that parliamentary scrutiny is essential for an organisation with such far-reaching responsibilities. The Minister argued that the standard accountability mechanisms for executive agencies are sufficient. However, I contend that Skills England is not just another executive agency; it is central to the Government’s economic growth mission and to creating opportunities for millions of people.

Standard executive agency protocols are built for “business as usual” functions, not for what should be transformative bodies at the heart of the Government’s economic strategy. Having a properly accountable Skills England, even as an executive agency, would ensure that

[Ian Sollom]

employer voices remain central to standards development rather than being merely consultative; that technical expertise is maintained and developed across economic cycles; that Parliament maintains appropriate oversight for this critical area of policy; and, crucially, that political short-termism does not override long-term skills planning.

In Committee, the Minister argued against new clause 1 on several grounds. First, she suggested that it would cause unnecessary delay in addressing urgent skills challenges. Secondly, she pointed to the existing accountability mechanisms for executive agencies, including framework documents and reporting requirements. Thirdly, she emphasised that Skills England is already operating in shadow form and is poised to take these functions when the Bill passes. Let me address those concerns. On the issue of delay, new clause 1 would require reporting and parliamentary approval within six months—a reasonable timeframe that would not significantly impede progress. As the Skills Federation noted, proper planning for the transfer of functions is essential for success, and parliamentary scrutiny would reinforce, rather than impede, the effective delivery of Skills England.

The existing accountability mechanisms are indeed important, but they are surely insufficient for an organisation of Skills England's significance. As the University of Winchester argued in its evidence to the Public Bill Committee, Skills England should be structured "to ensure and protect its regulatory independence from Government and other agencies."

The framework document and annual reports are important tools, but they are prepared by the Executive without any meaningful parliamentary input.

Skills England's current shadow operations are welcome preparation, but operating in shadow form, without parliamentary scrutiny or approval, only underscores the need for new clause 1. Important decisions about structure, governance and priorities are being made right now, without any oversight in this place.

The Secretary of State indicated on Second Reading that the Government may review Skills England's status in 18 to 24 months to consider whether it needs to be an independent statutory body, and the Minister confirmed that timetable in Committee. But why wait? Why create uncertainty about the future status of an organisation that needs to establish credibility with employers now? It is worth noting—as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), did in Committee—that the Government plan to put the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council on a statutory footing "when parliamentary time allows", according to their own documentation. This suggests that they recognise the value of key strategic bodies' statutory independence, so why should Skills England be treated differently?

New clause 1 offers a constructive path forward, building on the debates we have already had. Personally, I was disappointed that the Government opposed it in Committee, but I believe that the case for proper parliamentary scrutiny remains compelling. Although my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I ultimately believe that a fully independent statutory body would be the ideal model for Skills England, new clause 1 would work within the Government's executive agency framework to add essential parliamentary scrutiny and accountability.

The Minister assured us in Committee that Skills England will have robust governance arrangements and clear lines of accountability. If the Government truly believe in those principles, they should welcome rather than resist proper parliamentary oversight. If Skills England is to be the cornerstone of our skills system for years to come, even as an Executive agency with the Department for Education, we must ensure that it has the transparency, accountability and parliamentary oversight to withstand changes in political priorities and economic circumstances.

I urge Members across the House to support new clause 1, which would strengthen the Bill and help ensure that the transfer of functions leads to better outcomes for apprentices, students, employers and the economy as a whole.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Pam Cox. Happy birthday! [Interruption.] Do you wish to contribute, or are you going to celebrate your birthday on the Back Benches?

7 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was rather blown away by that. My birthday was actually on Saturday, but thank you so much.

It is a pleasure to speak in favour of this Bill, as a member of the Public Bill Committee and of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships. The Bill is vital because it paves the way for the creation of Skills England, a new and ambitious body that will bring a fresh urgency to the task of upskilling our young people—and there is an urgency about this.

As the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) said, Skills England will build on the extremely valuable work of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, and I would like to pay tribute—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Could you be seated for a moment? We are talking about the amendments to the Bill, not the overall Bill. The idea is to discuss the amendments and whether you disagree with them, but you need to bring your contribution in line with the debate this evening.

Pam Cox: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The issue is whether we should delay the introduction of this measure to allow more time to set up Skills England. A lot of preparatory work has already been done to set up Skills England, as we discussed quite fully in Committee, and we should get going on training up the carpenters, plumbers, electricians and other apprentices that we all know we need.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Derby is seeing a fresh boost to its city centre with a new performance venue, a restored marketplace and the Friar Gate goods yard, which had stood derelict for 50 years, but is now being transformed into 276 new homes. What we do not want is for our ambition for our city to be held back by skills shortages. Does my hon. Friend agree that, rather than the dither and delay proposed by Conservative Members, we need to get on with this legislation so that we can train the next generation of bricklayers, roofers, plasterers, scaffolders and electricians that our country so desperately needs?

Pam Cox: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I agree. This morning, before I travelled to Westminster from Colchester, I visited JTL, a national organisation with a base in our city that trains thousands of apprentice electricians and plumbers, and I had similar exchanges with them. So I very much agree, because the urgency I have mentioned is about their futures—securing their futures.

We debated this in some detail in Committee, and the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire has outlined the Minister's responses. To my mind, those responses stand. I am satisfied that we should not delay in setting up Skills England, because the young people of Colchester—and, indeed, of Derby and elsewhere—simply do not have the time to wait.

On that note, last week the Government announced plans to train 60,000 new construction workers to help build the 1.5 million homes we will see going up in the course of this Parliament. Moves such as that and many others show that we are working at pace to reverse the many years of stagnation—

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Pam Cox: I will not give way, if the hon. Member does not mind.

I hope we can work at pace today to pass this Bill.

Edward Morello *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Is the hon. Lady taking an intervention?

Pam Cox: I am sitting down.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Has the hon. Lady concluded her speech or is she taking an intervention?

Pam Cox: I have concluded.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I want to make a short contribution to this Report stage debate, particularly in favour of new clause 4 and amendment 6. On the train coming up to Westminster, I typed into my tablet “Short IfATE speech”, and every time I did so, it kept changing it to “Short irate speech”. Unfortunately, I am not very good at irate speeches—it is not really my thing—so I will make a slightly disappointed speech, but with a hint of optimism, because I hope this Minister may take this opportunity to do something of significant benefit for the technical and vocational education and training system in this country.

I know why the Government came forward with the idea of a new quango—it is not even a quango, but a sort of semi-quango—called Skills England. They did that because they were going to have to talk to British industry about a lot of other things. They knew deep down that they would be doing things that were really very unpopular, such as the Employment Rights Bill and the massive hike in national insurance contributions and business rates, and that aspects of those things are bad for employment and unpopular with employers. With Skills England, Ministers—then campaigners, but now Ministers—had come up with something they thought business would really like and want.

In truth, however, if the Government are going to fix the two big underlying issues in our system—the productivity gap we have in this country compared with France, the United States and Germany, and the parity of esteem we all say we want, and that the Conservatives do want, between academic learning and vocational learning—we need to make technical and vocational education better. We also need to make it simpler and more appealing, but above all it needs to be made better. That is entirely what the Sainsbury review—spearheaded by the noble Lord Sainsbury, a Labour Lord—was all about. It was about giving us a simpler, more appealing system, led by business, which would deliver the highest quality of technical education.

Edward Morello: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point about creating parity between academic and technical education. Would a useful step in the direction of attracting people into the apprenticeship scheme be to ensure that they are paid the national minimum wage in line with their age group?

Damian Hinds: The truth is that there is always a balance about apprenticeships. Of course, there can be abuses: in the past there were abuses of the apprenticeship system with the lower rate that could be paid, although many employers pay the full rate to people of whatever age who are doing apprenticeships. However, it is also true that providers are getting four days a week—not five—of work from somebody, and a form of learning is involved. It is the same, with the opposite proportions, when someone is doing a T-level, which is partly done at college and partly on an employer's premises. There is always a risk that if we make that gap too narrow, fewer people may be afforded that opportunity in the first place. That balance has to be got right, but I take my hat off to all the many employers who have invested very strongly in their young people, particularly in the way the hon. Member outlines.

Clearly, quality cannot be guaranteed just by the structure of the Government Department or Executive agency that oversees it, but quality is less likely if we get that structure wrong. The two key things with IfATE—key to this debate and for the amendments we are considering—are, first, its independence from the Government, and secondly, that there was the guaranteed business voice. I am talking in the past tense already, but I mean that it is independent and there is a guaranteed business voice.

Which Minister is not going to say, “We'll listen to business”? Of course, Ministers will say, “We'll listen to business. We want business to be at the heart of our plans and designing them.” They will say that, but it is not guaranteed in what the Government plan to set up, and just saying they will listen is not enough. Such independence gives people, meaning the employers, the young learners and everybody else, the confidence of knowing that the Government—and it might not be this Government—could not erode the standards because they wanted to artificially increase the volumes of people on those courses.

It has been a feature of the broader debate to have Labour colleagues saying, “We're going to get the numbers of people getting apprenticeships up.” Well, wahey, of course they are going to get the numbers up. That much is blindingly obvious. I am reminded of a time in the past when many apprentices did not know they were on

[Damian Hinds]

an apprenticeship, so loose were the requirements. The Conservative Government raised the minimum length of time for an apprenticeship and raised the minimum amount of time in off-the-job training. In college-based education, the Sainsbury review reported that in many cases qualifications had become divorced from the occupations and sectors they were there to serve.

We are already seeing, with the change in the minimum length of apprenticeships from 12 months to eight months, the rowing back or erosion of that standard. There is plenty of training in industry that does not require a 12-month minimum and there always has been, but if somewhere is going to have a short course, just do not call it an apprenticeship. That training is very worth while, but that does not mean it is the same thing.

In Germany, which is the country people usually look to as the international standard on these matters, an apprenticeship typically lasts for two or three years, with two days a week—not one day a week—in college. In those two days a week, young people typically do a full timetable of what we in this country call general education or academic subjects, as well as vocational education. In Germany, people can do an apprenticeship to become a food and beverage manager, but if they want to be a bartender there is not an apprenticeship for that role, because it does not take that long to train to be a bartender—they do another kind of training.

In this country, we have come to a strange position with the apprenticeship levy. There is lots of lobbying to count more and more things as an apprenticeship, so they can be paid for out of the apprenticeship levy. That is not the right way around. Already, we ask the word “apprenticeship” to do a lot. In most countries, it means young people aged 16, 18 or 21.

Mr Perkins: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Damian Hinds: I could not resist the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Perkins: Thank you very much—that is a niche view. The right hon. Gentleman is talking about how the apprenticeship levy creates a straitjacket whereby there is a real value to what is being offered, but it perhaps should not fit into an apprenticeship. Is that not precisely the aim of the Government’s approach? Is he not advocating for precisely what the Government are suggesting, which is, “Let’s make it more flexible. Let’s say it doesn’t have to be a year. There is value to investment of a different kind to an apprenticeship.”? Is he not arguing in favour of what the Government are proposing?

Damian Hinds: He is not, no; he is saying something different. Of course there is value in all sorts of training. In my working career, I did various stints of training but they were not called an apprenticeship. We do not have to call something an apprenticeship for it to be a worthwhile piece of training.

Already, we ask the word “apprenticeship” to cover a lot of things. As I was saying, in most countries it typically means younger people starting their career. Here, it covers career starters, career developers and career changers. If anything, we ought to be thinking about how we can refocus and differentiate between the requirements that people have at different times of their career, and the requirements their employers have as well.

The Bill is not about to fix that or address that, but I am hopeful—this is where I started—that the Government have indicated that they have heard the message on the two key elements needed when certifying and specifying qualifications: independence and a guaranteed business voice. New clause 4 would create precisely that independence. New clause 1, which was moved by the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), has a lot of merit. He put a great deal of thought into it in Committee, but the additional point about statutory independence is fundamental. If the Minister is minded to accept just one amendment—I hope she will accept two; what do we think?—it should be new clause 4.

7.15 pm

I think everybody in this House wants Skills England to succeed. As with so many matters we debate, we all broadly want the same end goal. Amendment 6 is what I would call a breathing space amendment to make that success more likely. It would reinstate the one year that their noble lordships put into the Bill as it went through the other place, meaning that Skills England would be operational for a year before it had to absorb IfATE’s functions. The hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire went through some of the reasons why. Absorbing IfATE’s functions is an enormous undertaking. I think the noble Lord Blunkett estimated that close to 200 people would come into the organisation. In his words from that debate, which we have already heard, IfATE could

“swamp Skills England at birth.” —[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 November 2024; Vol. 841, c. GC98.]

Skills England has a much broader function than IfATE. Its broader strategic function is incredibly important and it is not small. They are different shapes and sizes, if you like. Skills England will initially prioritise 10 sectors: the eight growth-driving sectors in the industrial strategy, as well as construction and health and social care, which are also listed as essential to the Government’s missions. So there are 10 sectors to feed into the industrial strategy planning process. The noble Baroness Smith of Malvern has said that work is under way on eight of those, which begs the question, “What about the other two?” On a bigger level, what about two of the three big volume employment sectors, hospitality and retail, which, for a broad labour market strategy that includes the skills we want in them, are essential?

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the exclusion of a number of sectors. There is a danger that Skills England will be very much tilted towards London and the south-east, ignoring large areas such as the midlands and the north of England, which will suffer as a result of its very prescribed focus.

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point, which stands on its own merits.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): To refer back to the previous intervention, as the MP for Bournemouth East in the south-west, I can assure the House that we are very excited about the prospect of extra construction coming to our area. In fact, Bournemouth and Poole

college tells me that it has 600 construction apprentices on its books, but that it is having to turn away hundreds more. Those are opportunities being lost. The college welcomes the abolition of IfATE and the speedy transfer of responsibilities to Skills England. Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that we should listen to colleges such as Bournemouth and Poole college?

Damian Hinds: Of course we should be listening to colleges such as Bournemouth and Poole college. We heard the Government announce earlier that thousands of people were going to go into construction, but then say that they could not do anything until they created this body and subsumed the functions of IfATE into it. I do not see how all those things fit together. Yes, we want more people going into construction, and a long list of other sectors too, but that does not necessarily mean an apprenticeship in every case. There is a whole suite of existing technical and vocational courses, and T-levels are still ramping up as well.

On breadth versus depth, IfATE has a huge range, with more than 600 occupational standards for apprenticeships, T-levels and higher technical qualifications. Skills England is initially looking at a narrower set of sectors, but has a much broader remit for them, so it does more than IfATE. There are three big things on its list. The first is to identify where skills gaps exist, which is itself a very significant task. It may at first glance sound obvious, but it really is not. First, there is a question of what time horizon we are talking about. Are we talking about today, or planning five, 10 or more years into the future? More significantly, I am sure people would generally say that we could train more people to go into the social care sector. The issue is not so much whether we have the training courses available, but whether people are willing and happy to go into the sector. That is a broader question.

Secondly, Skills England has to work across Government with the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council and the Migration Advisory Committee, as well, of course, as with the Labour Market Advisory Board, under the DWP. The MAC is a well-established body, having been around for a number of years, that has a remit on immigration; it will not necessarily have the same perspective as Skills England. As the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire rightly said, the ISAC is going to be given its own statutory footing, which begs the question of where in the hierarchy Skills England will be. We want this to be a body that is able to speak authoritatively right across Government.

Thirdly, Skills England is going to identify the training that should be accessible via the growth and skills levy. That, again, is a huge task. What can be funded from the levy is a huge strategic question. What specific skills should we rightly expect a firm to provide, and what should be generalisable skills for the economy?

Even after all that, there is still the big question about supply and demand at college level—this may come back to the point the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) made about listening to colleges, on which he was absolutely right. We do not currently stop people doing courses because there is a surplus of people in such and such a sector and a shortage somewhere else, but some hard questions are going to come up around the funding formulae for these things to ensure that we do have enough people going into construction, social care and so on.

My contention is that each of those functions is enormous. Amendment 6 would, therefore, perform a useful role. It is not about dither and delay, but about allowing Skills England to establish itself and to carry out those key strategic functions that it is there to do, and then to be able to subsume the functions from IfATE.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the contributions of the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), who spoke powerfully to their amendments. It may disappoint them to know that I will be speaking against both new clauses, as they risk undermining the speed with which we need to effect change in the sector.

It is a privilege to speak in this debate on a subject about which I am very passionate, and as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships. The transfer of functions to the Secretary of State and the creation of Skills England is one of the most critical reforms this Government are due to bring about. It addresses one of the most damaging legacies of the previous Government: the fall in apprenticeships. This matters when we look at the structure of the Bill, which is why I am concerned about new clauses 1 and 4 in particular. It also matters in constituencies like mine in Peterborough, and in neighbouring St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire, where we have seen falling apprenticeship starts, falling training and rising unemployment. Peterborough is a city with one of the highest levels of young people not in education, employment or training. This is not just the folly of opportunities lost and young people let down, but the story of a failed economy.

I take the opposite view to that expressed by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire, who seemed to elevate the independence of Skills England as a virtue in respect of what it could deliver; I see the independence of IfATE as one of the tools that led to its failure. The fact of its independence removed it from economic need, made it bureaucratic and meant it failed to address the needs of businesses and other providers to get the flexibility and delivery of skills that we need. Independence does not always guarantee success or the things that we need.

Damian Hinds: Would the hon. Gentleman extend that principle to the academic route? I have asked the Minister this question a number of times now. I do not think we would stand for anyone saying that the standard and specification for A-levels should be set in Sanctuary Buildings by the Department for Education. If we would not do it for A-levels, why would we think it is right for T-levels? What is the answer to that?

Andrew Pakes: I think we need a mixed economy in this area. The principles I elevate in this debate are speed, substance and bringing businesses around the table, alongside providers and colleges—such as my excellent provider in Peterborough, ARU Peterborough, with its new university campus—to deliver the goods and get the job done. My concern with new clauses 1 and 4 and amendment 6 is that they elevate a level of independence that does not address the overall issue.

In fact, many of the issues the right hon. Member for East Hampshire described in his speech were actually around delivery and political choices. Having the Secretary

[*Andrew Pakes*]

of State and the Department establishing Skills England will make it much more likely, in my view, that we deliver at speed on those challenges. However, I am sure scrutiny will come from all parties of this House if that is not the case.

Our No. 1 mission is economic growth, spread across all parts of the UK and built on a diverse base of industries and services. The Government have already made a powerful start, which could be undermined by these amendments if they cause further delay, with early work on the growth and skills levy to drive up standards and places, the move to functional English and maths, foundation apprenticeships providing flexibility and a route in, and a £600 million investment in construction skills. I particularly welcome the replies from my right hon. Friend the Minister for Skills, who has acknowledged in written answers the need for social mobility to be a factor that Skills England will consider, so that we can actually change people's life opportunities. This is something I am passionate about, and which the Co-operative Group and other employers I have talked to consider to be very important. This mission will fail without the urgency needed to get the Bill passed and to get Skills England up and running.

Skills England has already been set up in shadow form. Given the urgency of the task, it provides the best of external industry leadership in its Skills England shadow board, which will move to a full board. It provides independence for the voices around the table, and therefore already meets the needs that new clauses 1 and 4 seek to address. It also focuses on delivery and the speed with which we can get going to bring jobs and opportunities to all parts of the country.

The Government had already been clear, before these new clauses and amendments were tabled, that the transfer of the institute's statutory functions to the Secretary of State will introduce more flexibility to the skills system, which I wholeheartedly endorse. It will allow us to be more responsive to the needs of employers, learners and the economy, which I also endorse. The Secretary of State will delegate these powers to Skills England. I think new clauses 1 and 4 risk delaying and creating confusion, rather than aiding purpose and delivery of what we need. I therefore oppose the moves to create a separate Executive agency or to bind Skills England before it is even created.

We need to get going. This is not just a political slogan or the subject of debates in this House, but the message I hear from businesses, providers and schools in Peterborough. We need a genuine partnership in places such as my community between colleges and employers to ensure that we are providing leadership at all levels; we need practical action and leadership, working together to improve lives and our economy. The independence of IfATE, as I said earlier, elevates it to a level that risks undermining the ability to get going quickly.

Let me provide an example. A few weeks ago, I met MDS, a not-for-profit membership organisation in my constituency that is a pioneer in flexi-job apprenticeships and training in the food supply chain, working with some of the biggest names in the food sector to create a workforce for tomorrow. It is looking to Skills England and this Bill to create the flexibility and opportunities

that businesses and learners need. It would be sorry to see any delays or confusion over structure when it knows what needs to be done to get the jobs. It wants this Bill.

Can the Minister say what additional funding and resources are available to help businesses to provide pre-apprenticeship training for individuals who have been unemployed long term? Businesses want the Government and Skills England to do that quickly. They want to understand how, with SMEs and others, the Government are supporting the growth of flexi-job apprenticeships to help industries to attract new talent into the food and fresh produce industry. That is a direct criticism of IfATE and the structures we already have, and there is concern that delay through new clauses 1 and 4 will make it more difficult. As we have heard, Skills England will identify the skills gaps in our economy and work with the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council and the Migration Advisory Committee to plug them. The direct link between the industry, the MAC and the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council will address our industrial need and purpose at the necessary speed.

The new clauses are not necessary. This is a Bill about skills and about addressing our skills shortages, and it needs to get going. I support the Bill and oppose new clauses 1 and 4 and amendment 6.

7.30 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): During their time in government, the Conservatives broke our apprenticeship system and betrayed young people. The Liberal Democrats are thus calling on the Government, if they are serious about growth, to fix the apprenticeship sector by investing in education and training, including by increasing the availability of apprenticeships and career advice for young people.

I wish to speak in support of new clause 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), which would require the Secretary of State to bring forward proposals for the Executive agency to be known as Skills England. There should be greater emphasis on developing sector-specific skills that support the natural abilities and interests of each student. I believe that we should focus on strengthening careers advice and links with employers in schools and colleges to allow students clear alternative steps into a career that does not require them to go to university if that is not the best option.

Any business will tell us that the apprenticeship levy does not work. Businesses cannot get the funding that they need to train staff, so hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of funding is returned unspent, only to disappear into the Treasury. If that money were ringfenced to boost the further education budget, it would at least benefit the employers that contribute, but it does not.

I am glad that the Government are reforming the current system, but I urge them to accept my hon. Friend's amendment, which would require a clear plan for their new proposals. We must improve not only the quality of vocational education, including skills for entrepreneurship and self-employment, but pupils' awareness of such skills as they make initial decisions about their further education and career.

I have spoken to young people in my constituency who are undertaking apprenticeships in the hospitality industry. They have spoken positively about the opportunities to

develop their skills while earning a wage. However, I have also heard that many apprenticeship jobs do not pay enough for people to meet their living expenses. It is extremely important that young people are provided with a footing solid enough not to discourage them from pursuing apprenticeships in their field of interest. I believe that the lower minimum wage for apprentices should be scrapped. We should ensure that apprentices are paid at least the same minimum wage as other employees their age.

I constantly hear from small and medium-sized businesses across my constituency who are struggling with workforce shortages. We need to build capacity in the workforce and within the economy to drive growth and ensure that British businesses can hire people with the correct skills to allow industries to thrive. Apprenticeships have a huge role to play in upskilling. Although I am glad that the Government are taking action to reform the current system, I urge them to accept new clause 1, which would give us proper detail on what the new system will look like.

Apprenticeships could play a crucial part in addressing many of the staff shortages that businesses face, by equipping people across the country with the skills that they need to thrive. The Liberal Democrats have called on the Government to truly invest in skills. I urge the Minister to accept the new clause.

Mr Perkins: It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. On new clause 1, there is merit in the points that the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) raised. There is a legitimate question about the basis on which Skills England operates. Many people want to see it being taken seriously, but whether it will be taken more seriously as an independent body or as part of the Government is a big question on which there are different opinions.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) said that the Government need to get serious, but adopting new clause 1 or not adopting it will not in any serious sense make the difference to whether the Bill is a transformational one. The new clause would make a very small amendment to a Bill that is fairly limited in scope, so we should be realistic about how much of a difference we are debating. There is some merit in the Government's argument that the drafting of the amendment would cause additional delay and would prevent Skills England, which already exists, from getting on with taking the necessary powers.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) made some interesting points. It is always important to take seriously what he says; he is a former Education Secretary and a serious man. Having listened carefully, I have to say that many of the complaints that he rightly made about our fragmented and complicated skills system and the extent to which many employers have felt distanced from it are entirely legitimate criticisms, but are largely a commentary on the system bequeathed to us by 14 years of the previous Government.

The right hon. Gentleman considers it a criticism of this Government that they have a policy that they think will be popular with business, but I see it as a virtue. As co-chair alongside my excellent hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) of the all-party group on apprenticeships, I have heard from businesses how much they welcome the greater flexibility that the Government propose.

It will be important to understand how Skills England will seek to ensure that greater flexibility. There is real merit in degree apprenticeships, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) raised, but I also hope that Skills England will ensure far greater provision at the bottom end of the scale—not just at levels 2 and 3, where take-up has fallen dramatically since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, but at level 1. I would like to see the apprenticeship levy being used to support people who have come out of our school system with very few qualifications, possibly having had an education, health and care plan. They are able to access work, but will need longer to get up to speed in jobs. There are tremendous opportunities for level 1 apprenticeships to support people with special needs from traineeships into the world of work, so I hope that the Government will consider them.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire described the merit of the German skills system, which is admired across the world, but it is important to say that it involves a far greater cultural understanding. One of the ways in which the Germans understand themselves is about their skills system and the value that they put into a craft or trade. Achieving that is not just about the structure of our skills system; it would require a complete reversal of our understanding in this country over the past 30 or 40 years. There is huge merit in much of the German system, but we cannot simply adopt it and imagine that we will somehow achieve a cultural change. It needs to be wrapped up in the industrial strategy that the Government must continue to develop.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the Government envisage Skills England having a far wider scope than IfATE. I welcome that, because one of the great failures of the system under the previous Government was that there was an array of unconnected bodies and initiatives floating around. He referred to the skills system, but right now I do not believe that this country has a skills system. What we have is an array of initiatives without any coherence.

I very much hope that in Skills England we have a body that will start the task of bringing our very complicated and fragmented system together. I have no idea whether Skills England will be a success, but I am confident that it could be. The direction in which the Government are attempting to go, if they have the courage to follow it all the way, has the potential to bring about the change that we desperately need.

We have a basic understanding of level 2 and 3 apprenticeships in this country, but we need much more coherent pathways through levels 4 and 5. The previous Government did a tremendous amount to promote level 6 apprenticeships, which are popular in some trades, but they mean getting a degree six or seven years down the line, which is a hell of a long time. Many things could go wrong in someone's employment in that time—they might lose their job, or the company might cease to exist—and in any case they might not want to commit to six or seven years. Having stop-off points at levels 4 and 5, so businesses understand that there is something beyond level 3 that does not necessarily look like a degree, would be tremendously valuable. I hope that the Government will look to do that.

Of course it is fundamental that we listen to employers, whether they be businesses or public sector employers, and that all of them feel that they have a stake in

[Mr Perkins]

the skills system. I do not for a minute believe that the Government or Skills England will not want to listen to employers, who are entirely the arbiters of whether we have a successful skills system, but I do not think that a body has to be independent to listen to employers. There is a potential argument that a body within government would be better placed to take a much more strategic approach than the independent IfATE ever could. It will be useful to hear how the Minister anticipates Skills England reaching out and listening to employers and businesses, particularly about which courses will be appropriate for the growth and skills levy. They might not look like apprenticeships, but they will be crucial qualifications that people will be able to work towards.

I welcome the Government's decision to take forward many of the construction skills bootcamps. The Government quite understandably have question about the value of bootcamps; a huge amount of the previous Government's adult education budget went in that direction. Within the construction sector, there was real value to them, and I am pleased to hear from training providers in my constituency that they have been told that the construction bootcamps will carry on.

We often speak about the skills environment as though it were purely outside of here, but we Members of Parliament are all employers, and we are all involved in skilling up our staff. I am very pleased to say that my apprentice Ellie Chapman recently successfully completed her level 3 apprenticeship. She is not an apprentice MP but an apprentice office support worker, and she has done a tremendous amount in my office over the last 16 months. She was also top in her class at Chesterfield college. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] Thank you very much—and well done, Ellie. It is important that we walk the walk as well as talk the talk. I encourage other Members of Parliament to consider whether they have a role for an apprentice in their office.

On that happy note, I encourage the Government to keep going, and to listen to employers. It is really important that we get this right, because there is nothing more important for the success of our economy than having a more coherent skills system that enables us to make the very best of all our people.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend. I welcome this Bill and the establishment of Skills England. I oppose new clauses 1 and 4 and amendment 6.

I do not agree with the amendments to delay, because we need action now. The Bill is a crucial step forward in addressing challenges felt across the country, particularly in south-east Cornwall. We need access to well-paid, stable employment close to home, so that people do not have to leave their community or take on debt just to access higher skills and wages. In my area, transport connectivity is a barrier to employment. Cornwall and the south-west have been overlooked and underfunded. The Bill represents Labour's focus on cracking on and delivering real change for people who really need it. I want to ensure that the Bill delivers for south-east Cornwall, and across the duchy and the south-west.

There are already great apprenticeship schemes established, but we must make sure that more of them are viable and accessible. That is what the Bill delivers.

In the most recent full academic year of 2023-24, there were 760 apprenticeships started in south-east Cornwall, but only 530 people successfully achieved their apprenticeship standards. Of those 760 who started, the majority were aged 25 or older, and the most common level of study was intermediate. I am very proud of those who achieved their apprenticeship standards, and I know there will be many more to come. However, I am concerned that our younger people have not been able to access these opportunities as readily as should have been possible, and that those who took up apprenticeships under the previous Government did not always progress to a higher level.

The 760 apprenticeships started represents a significant drop from 2018-19, when 1,070 apprenticeship schemes were started south-east Cornwall. The numbers continued to decline over the five years before the Labour Government took office, representing a 28.4% decrease in apprenticeships started over five years. The Bill is a vital opportunity to reverse this decline, which is felt really strongly in south-east Cornwall, and to bring much-needed improvements to our workplaces, our economy and local skills. We need to remove unnecessary barriers and blockages in the skills system, so that we can respond more quickly to the needs of apprentices, their employers and the economy. Skills England already existed in a shadow form, and it is time to bring it directly out into the light and make it work for those who need it most.

7.45 pm

I know that local residents and businesses in south-east Cornwall are concerned about stability and future opportunities. The Bill, with its establishment of Skills England, is an opportunity to deliver the stability that businesses need to plan their workforce, invest in skills development, and create quality jobs for local people close to home. By making the apprenticeship levy more flexible, we can ensure that funds are used effectively, support lifelong learning and provide structured training opportunities. Through the alignment of Skills England with our national industrial strategy, we can promote co-ordinated skills planning across the country, while the focus on devolution means that local solutions can be tailored to local needs. This is vital for Cornwall. Decision-making powers must be held locally, not kept in Westminster. Cornish people know what works best for us, and it is only right that we shape our own future.

The Bill offers a chance to bring real, tangible benefits to south-east Cornwall, so that we have the skills and opportunities to thrive. I look forward to working with the Government to ensure that the Bill delivers on its promise.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I will aim to keep my remarks brief, having spoken on Second Reading and served on the Bill Committee. Before I speak about why we should not amend the Bill to include new clauses 1 and 4 and amendment 6, I will set the scene. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be unsurprised to hear that I warmly welcome the role that the Bill will play in paving the way for Skills England. It is right that we crack on and allow the Secretary of State to transfer to Skills England the tools to find and fill the skills gaps across the country, so that the workforce is equipped with the skills to power economic growth.

My constituency sits just next to Stansted airport, and we have many young people undergoing courses at the Stansted airport college, which I was privileged to visit last Friday. I did not take a whirl on the simulator to learn how to fly a plane; I saved that for a future visit. I was delighted to find out how the college uses our local talent in Hertford and Stortford to fill the critical, growing skills gaps in the aviation and aerospace sector, and to see the careers-focused courses that are giving young people skills for work and life.

Just this morning, I was proud to welcome the Minister for School Standards to Manor Fields primary school in Bishop's Stortford, where we heard about the impact of the teaching assistant apprenticeship for local support staff, and met the fantastic providers of those courses. It was really moving to hear the apprentices talk about how their confidence had been built by taking those courses.

For a young person, the opportunity to find and develop a skill or something they are passionate about does not just get them into the workforce; it builds their confidence and helps them to find the path that is right for them. That is why it is so important that we get Skills England set up and do not delay getting the Bill through. I know about this from personal experience, having left school at 16. I did not follow the path of an apprenticeship. I did not know what the direction was for me. Apprenticeships are so important for young people who need to find a path and need the certainty of a career at the end of it, but perhaps do not want to stay in traditional education. It builds their confidence, and helps them find their place in the world. This is work that we simply cannot delay.

Young people are being let down by a skills system that is not working for them. One in eight young people is not in education, employment or training, which is holding them back, and the economy back, too. In 2022, more than a third of UK vacancies were due to skills shortages. We need urgent reform—we cannot afford to delay. I urge hon. Members to pass the Bill unamended this evening so that the Government can get on with reforming the skills system and delivering Skills England, to create the opportunities for young people in Hertford and Stortford and across the country that will build their confidence, help them find a path that is right for them, and make a difference to their lives.

Peter Swallow: I was proud to serve on the Bill Committee for this vital legislation. It is a small Bill, but, by goodness, it is mighty. I rise to speak against amendment 6. In doing so, I will highlight a local success story in recognition of the third National Supported Internship Day. It took place on 27 March, which also happens to be my birthday.

For 15 years, Bracknell and Wokingham college—my local college—and Activate Learning have been working together with over 100 employers to offer supported internship placements for learners with special educational needs. The scheme offers invaluable opportunities, and provides the skills, confidence and qualifications necessary to thrive in the workplace. Their partners include the National Grid, the Royal Berkshire hospital, Johnson & Johnson, and Sodexo. It is an excellent example of a local college working with big players in the energy, medical and food industries to provide high-quality schemes for stable, well-paid employment. It is proof that young

people with special educational needs can thrive with the right support. We face one in eight young people being not in education, employment or training—the number is at an 11-year high, after 14 years of the Tories—and we need more supported internships to address the challenge.

Skills England will deliver opportunities across the country in key industries including green energy, construction and healthcare. That is vital for the Government's five missions, and for communities like Bracknell. It is a step towards ending fragmentation. A less complex, more flexible skills system will deliver for young people, especially those with special educational needs. By bringing together the constituent parts of the skills architecture, Skills England will create a system that is fit for purpose, responsive to the needs of employers and businesses, and capable of driving economic growth in the years to come. It will lay the ground for a better system.

There is a need to move fast. As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) pointed out, the UK's productivity is almost 40% below that of the US, and 20% below that of other major economies, such as France and Germany. A major reason for that is a lack of appropriate skills, so the Conservatives' amendment 6, which would delay the creation of Skills England by a year, is nothing short of irresponsible. We need to work faster, not more slowly. The amendment is indicative of their approach to government: where there was a challenge, they ducked it; where a decision was needed, they put it off; and when a broken system needed fixing, they left it for the next lot. Well, the next lot are now in government and will not put off for tomorrow what needs to be done today.

We know that skills are a crucial driver of economic growth and the key to tackling productivity gaps, but our economy is changing rapidly in ways we cannot fully anticipate, so it is crucial that our education system equips young people with a broad range of the skills necessary for success in the jobs market of tomorrow. That is exactly what the Bill and Skills England will deliver.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): On the face of it, this is a technical Bill, but the benefits and opportunities that the transition to Skills England can create across the country, including in communities such as Birmingham Northfield, are real and tangible. The amendments would have similar effects. In terms of timing, while new clause 1 would delay the establishment of Skills England by six months, new clause 4 and amendment 6 would delay it by a year. There is a risk that by accepting such amendments we would recreate IfATE under the name of Skills England. As my hon. Friends have said, we cannot wait that long. A new approach is needed.

As the first Skills England report, which was published last September, identified, there has been a steady decline in employers' investment in training during the past decade. Investment in real terms has fallen by about 20%, even though 90% of the roles in critical demand across the economy require training or education.

In my constituency, apprenticeship starts fell by 35% during the last Parliament, more than double the national rate. This is a social issue as well, because more than half the young people not in education, employment or training

[*Laurence Turner*]

in Northfield are classed as vulnerable, and adult skills funded education is accessed particularly in the areas of my constituency with some of the highest levels of social need, including Longbridge and West Heath, Weoley and the three estates in Kings Norton. I am sure the situation is similar for other hon. Members.

According to a response to a freedom of information request in 2022, some £1 billion a year nationally in apprenticeship levy funding was unspent. At the same time, major local employers have expressed their frustration to me about skills shortages in areas from construction and home upgrades to computer science.

I have seen some of the good work already done locally to provide apprenticeships and other forms of technical education. Next month, we will witness the 20th anniversary of the closure of MG Rover in my constituency. Today, South and City College Birmingham, which is partly built on the old Austin site, is one of the largest training providers in the west midlands. A number of hon. Members have paid tribute to their local colleges, and I would like to do the same. That college offers impressive programmes, developing the technical and soft skills of students in a multitude of industries including catering, automotive and advanced manufacturing.

As manufacturing jobs start to return to Longbridge, these facilities and the experienced staff who work there will be vital to delivering economic growth and opportunities for young people, but they are attempting to fit into a system that is not fit for purpose and is not working. In other words, skills policy is essential for the Government's plans for economic recovery and industrial strategy, and it is appropriate to place accountability for the new development directly with Ministers for this period.

We heard a lot on the Bill Committee as well as elsewhere about whether Skills England should be created as a stand-alone agency at arm's length from the core Department. As we heard on Second Reading, the Government may review Skills England's status after 18 months to two years, which seems like a sensible way forward. That is a legitimate debate, but we should not agree tonight to delay Skills England's creation.

It is important to say that IfATE has not lived up to expectations and that the status quo is a barrier to the Government's objectives. Nine years ago, the then Minister for skills, Nick Boles, told the House's Education, Skills and the Economy sub-Committee that IfATE would "be much more akin to the Bank of England"

in terms of its independence compared with a traditional arm's length organisation. I think most hon. Members would agree that that has not been borne out.

During the last Parliament, I attended meetings of the UK shipbuilding skills taskforce, where there was common agreement between employers and employee representative organisations that the GCSE entry-level requirement was a barrier for employers taking on the young people who were best equipped for those apprenticeships. However, that recommendation was blocked—by DFE Ministers, we were given to understand—from the final report. Similarly, employers and people with direct knowledge of the skills system I have talked to over the last few weeks have stressed some of the frustrations that existed in the trailblazer employer organisations: within the bureaucracy of IfATE, some recommendations

and expertise would be either delayed or disregarded by the route panels, some of which were made up of employers who did not necessarily have expertise in a particular industry.

It is important to reduce some of that bureaucracy so the Bill's effect of removing a requirement for a regular review of an apprenticeship's standard—in practice, every few years—is a sensible change. There are, at the last count, 658 live apprenticeships listed on the IfATE website. That implies 219 reviews every year or four a week; I think we are entitled to question how effective those reviews can be given IfATE's current resources.

If I may, I will list one more example of where the current system is going wrong. The special educational needs and disabilities teaching assistant apprenticeship standard, which was discussed during the last Parliament and then formally created during this one, lists a very large number of organisations that contributed to its design. The overwhelming majority are employers, who, of course, need to be represented. Only one trade union was represented and I question why that was the case. However, not a single SEND parents' organisation or other group that represents the needs of those young people was drawn into the creation of that standard. I think we are entitled to ask whether that is the right approach. The discussions that led up to the creation of the standard, in practice, were heavily DfE-guided, so I think we are entitled to question the independence of the current system as it exists.

8 pm

We spoke at length in Committee or, at least, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) did—I think we all enjoyed it—about the history of skills education in this country. There have been a number of attempts to create skills bodies to serve Government policy. In preparation for this debate, I was interested to note that when the Conservative Secretary of State for Employment, Maurice Macmillan, announced in 1972 the creation of one of the forerunners of the body, the Manpower Services Commission, he said that a skills training body ought to have direct responsibility to the Minister and the Department of the day. Another point is relevant to policy development in this area: in establishing that body, he sought the input and representation of employees, as well as employers, through the process.

At this point, for the avoidance of doubt, I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my membership of the GMB and Unite Construction trade unions, because I want to return to a clarification and reassurance that the Minister made in a letter to the Public Bill Committee's members in respect of the implications of clause 10. She clarified that nothing in those powers could override the constitutions of the Construction Industry Training Board and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board.

The industry training boards have a long history in skills training, which I hope will be revisited by this Government as they address some of the very challenging skills programmes that will be needed to deliver the energy transition. Arguably the most successful skills mass training programme in this country was the one that underpinned the transition from town gas to natural gas in the 1960s and 1970s, overseen by the Gas Industry Training Board—perhaps we could do with that body being recreated.

One of the very important points about that programme, which survived multiple changes of Government and delivered that transition before time and under budget, was that the trade unions had very heavy involvement. They included the General and Municipal Workers' Union, the forerunner of today's GMB, which had a formal consultative role on the curriculum that was overseen by that body. Over time, the trade unions have been squeezed off the boards of both the CITB and the ECITB, the remaining industrial training boards, which is contrary to the original intentions of Parliament in the legislation that underpins those bodies. I therefore hope that, in the course of continued policy development in this area, this Government will look at that issue because, as Ministers have rightly assured us, employee voices will be represented through Skills England. I hope that that can be the case for the remaining training boards as well.

It is vital that the next generation of workers have the necessary skills to meet the industrial challenges we face, whether it is constructing new homes, developing our infrastructure or meeting our environmental targets. Most importantly, however, we must ensure that the next generation of young people is provided with the skills and opportunities to develop their potential and pursue their ambitions. I will be glad to join my colleagues in voting against the amendments in front of us tonight.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): If I may, I will start by joining my colleagues on the Government Benches in my opposition to new clause 1, new clause 4 and amendment 6. Well-meaning they may be, but I am impatient for change.

Stoke-on-Trent has one of the highest rates of youth disengagement in education, employment or training in the country. As always, when we look at those heat maps, we see the big yellow splodge in the middle of the midlands, which is Stoke-on-Trent, showing that we have one of the highest numbers of workers in the country with no form of formal qualification whatever. Our young people tend to find themselves unable to access any form of training or support that they need to make a future career for themselves.

I declare my interest as a governor of the City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College, as we offer T-levels. Even though I do not have an apprentice in my office like my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), as of next week a T-level student will be in a placement there for the next 18 months, to help their advancement.

My impatience stems from the necessity of identifying the skills that we need in the city I represent and of making sure that the next generation of young people coming through education have them. That is the only way I can see for us to fulfil our desire and ambition to rebuild our economy and attract those higher quality, well-paid and long-term jobs into the city that will mean higher wages and the ability to dig ourselves out of our city's economic troubles. I do not expect or hope any Government to come over the hill like a cavalry, with a big sack of cash, saying, "Here you go—here is what you need." It is partly on us to do that, by matching up the skills that we have and the skills that we need in the city to do the jobs of today and the future jobs of tomorrow. That is really important. The local skills improvement plan put together by our chambers of commerce and colleges has gone

some way to achieving that. However, as always, it is a bit like wading through treacle, because we get to where we think we are going to be and all of a sudden something appears that makes it more difficult. Then, the people who struggle with that are the young people.

I am afraid that anything that seeks to delay the advancement of this Bill, such as new clause 1, new clause 4 and amendment 6, will not get my support this evening. I do, however, wish to spend a few minutes on my own new clause 2, which is a probing amendment. It is not intended to cause any frustration or Divisions; I say to the Whip that I am not seeking to test the House's opinion on it. However, when we consider what apprenticeships will look like in the future and what they mean for cities such as Stoke-on-Trent, it is important to understand that level 7 apprenticeships, funded by the apprenticeship levy, are a genuinely important part of the educational offer available to young people in my constituency.

The week before last, I visited DJH accountants in Stoke-on-Trent, which is a significant regional player that is training its own generation of chartered accountants at level 7 using the apprenticeship levy that would otherwise just disappear into the Treasury. People there explained to me quite succinctly, and I agreed, that through their own means they simply would not have the available capital or cash to fund the quantity of training courses that they run. The apprenticeship levy allows them to grow a group of young people into chartered accountants. The people I met were all young. They were not at the mid or tail-end of their careers looking for a final bump before they got to their pension; they were young people who had come in after GCSEs, done their basic accountancy skills and had their eyes firmly set on a chartered accountancy qualification. The levy was allowing them to do that.

I asked the young people where they were all from, expecting them to be from the city, which they were. I then asked them where they wanted to work once they had their chartered accountancy status and, wonderfully, they all wanted to stay in Stoke-on-Trent and practise the craft that they had been learning. The economic benefit of that to my city is that if it were not for the ability of that company to train to level 7 using the apprenticeship levy, it would have to import that labour from neighbouring areas. So somebody who already had the level 7 qualification, or had been trained somewhere else through a company that could afford it, would come into Stoke, do the level 7 job, attract that level 7-equivalent salary and take it back to where they actually lived. That would mean that the level 7 salaries those young people were going to earn and spend in Stoke-on-Trent would end up migrating to other, slightly more affluent places in the midlands—and, candidly, there are many more affluent places in the midlands than Stoke-on-Trent.

The economic damage done by turning off the apprenticeship levy, or even the skills and growth levy, from level 7 apprenticeships could mean that the places such as Stoke-on-Trent that already suffer from ingrained regional inequality see it further ingrained into their local economies, because the people who have those skills travel in to do the work, or work from home, and the money flows out of the city and is spent in those other local communities.

[Gareth Snell]

There is also the message that we are sending to young people in the city. If level 7 qualifications are not available to them, they will be unlikely to have the means to pay for a level 7 qualification themselves. Having a level 7 qualification in Stoke-on-Trent is quite a rarity. You are more likely to find somebody with no qualification than with a master's level qualification. New clause 2 is a hook to allow the Minister to go away and consider this. I do not believe for one second that it is the determination of the Government to artificially stymie or cap the aspirations of young people in Stoke-on-Trent by suggesting to them that those level 7 qualifications are not available to them.

I appreciate that there are concerns in the system about the levy not being used for its intended purpose, but to take people through higher level qualifications who already have a career behind them. There are obviously organisations and companies that have done that because, rather than send that money to the Treasury, they have sought to upskill their own workers. I understand why the Government want to get tough on that, because it is not what the levy was intended for, but the level 7 learners that I have met are all young. They are people who have a clear idea of the path and trajectory of the career they want to take, and the levy simply makes that more viable and likely to be achieved in an economically depressed and deprived place such as Stoke-on-Trent.

The other side of the issue is that 95% of the apprenticeships at the University of Staffordshire are at level 6, and 5% are at level 7. It provides level 7 training for the Ministry of Defence and a number of public services. Some of that is funded by the apprenticeship levy. That is an invaluable income stream for the university to deliver that training for people who then go back into the public sector to make it more efficient, to crack down on waste and to deliver those skills that we as a nation determine that we need.

That will undoubtedly need to be looked at as we have more defence spending, because we will need people with those level 7 qualifications in the defence sector, in the manufacturing companies, and in the electrical and chemical engineering companies. Ordinarily, companies in places such as Stoke-on-Trent will simply not have the capital or the cash to provide that. Only by drawing down from the apprenticeship levy will they be able to train people locally to do those jobs. If we are not training people to do those jobs, the opportunity that comes from that Government investment simply will not be felt in places such as Stoke-on-Trent, and the regional inequality that is already quite clear in my city will become more entrenched.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) talked about finding people finding career, and that is what all of us want for the young people in our communities. It is certainly what I want for the learners in my city, but that career should take them as far as they want to go. That career should take them, if they want, up to a level 7 qualification that allows them to build a life and a career that they enjoy and are happy doing. My concern is that the unintended consequence of the Government's decision that level 7 qualifications will no longer be available from the apprenticeship levy will be that in cities such as mine, aspiration and ambition will be capped because the cash and the capital are simply not there to meet those young people's demands.

I have no truck with or support for the delaying amendments of the Opposition, and I have no intention of doing anything with my new clause other than sitting down in a moment. I hope that the Minister will take back the concerns that I have raised this evening and see whether there is a way, maybe through devolution deals, through reorganisation or through the mayoral strategic authorities, in which certain areas could be able to continue with the levy funding for level 7 qualifications that we so desperately need.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I rise to speak against new clauses 1 and 4 and amendment 6. The simple truth is that we cannot have any more dither and delay. Our starting point in this debate must be the fact that we are in a skills crisis, and one that lies at the feet of the Conservatives. Twenty-six years ago, I worked on the new deal taskforce for the Labour Government of the time, clearing up the mess that the Major Government had left in the skills system. Fast-forward over a quarter of a century, and once again we find the Labour Government having to clear up the mess in skills left by Conservatives.

8.15 pm

The facts are stark. Today, only 10% of all adults hold a level 4 or 5 qualification, versus 20% in Germany and 34% in Canada. Some 26% of our workforce are underqualified for their jobs, versus the OECD average of 18%. What is more, the UK has higher skills inequalities than other equivalent countries. Adults in the west midlands are three times more likely to lack basic qualifications at GCSE level than those in London. If we reached German levels, an extra 290,000 people in the west midlands would have higher level qualifications. While 71% of Londoners look set to have higher education by 2035, the figure for Hull is only 29%.

The system is not just struggling to provide our people with the skills they need; it is failing to provide employers with the skills they need to drive growth. One third of UK vacancies in 2022 were down to skills shortages. For instance, 92% of employers cite digital skills as key for their business, yet 7.5 million working-age adults lack them. The skills system that the Conservatives left behind is letting down our people and holding back our economy.

Conservative Members have talked about what is needed. Let me tell them what is needed. We need a more strategic approach, one that identifies skills gaps and flexibly co-ordinates the Government response to address them. It needs to be integrated and it needs to take a more strategic view. That is exactly what Skills England does. Skills England has already started its work and published its first report, and it will issue analysis later this year on sectors to support the industrial strategy. It will act as a key ingredient in delivering that strategy, and it will unlock the skills that employers need. It already exists in shadow form.

Skills England is ready to go and business is crying out for it, yet what we have heard today are two suggestions. The first is that, despite that, we should delay further: for six months in the case of new clause 1, and for a year, if not longer, in the case of new clause 4 and amendment 6. To those who propose this, I say simply this: enough debate. We need to get on with the job. What they are proposing is not constructive, and would simply slow down the process of turning this country's skills gaps around.

The second thing we have heard is that Skills England and IfATE should run together for at least a year, despite their separate and in some cases conflicting remits. Let us be clear: this would only create chaos, with the different organisations stepping on each other's feet. The different remits would, if anything, dilute the impact of an industrial strategy. The risk is that all the proposals made by the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) would lead to the recreation of the failed organisation by the back door.

It is time to put an end to this blocking and fiddling. Skills England was in the Government's manifesto. The public voted for change and Skills England is a key part of delivering it. Let us end the delays, defeat these amendments, get Skills England set up and get on with the task of delivering for the British people.

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

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I find myself in complete agreement with the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), and our amendments—new clause 4 and amendment 6—are suggested in the same spirit. There were good reasons why standard setting was put at arm's length and closer to employers, but now the Government are bringing it into the Department. Alongside other changes, such as shortening apprenticeships and axing higher apprenticeships, that risks damaging the status of these qualifications, which we have been working to build up.

The Budget was bad for employment, and it will make it less likely that businesses will take on apprentices. Rather than addressing the problems that they are creating, the Government are reorganising. It is the umpteenth reorganisation in recent decades. The Government's own recent impact assessment says that the reorganisation will lead to a delay and drop in apprenticeships, hence our amendments.

For decades, politicians have said that they want to make apprenticeships more prestigious. On average, twice as many people started apprenticeships each year under the last Government as under the previous Labour Government, but higher apprenticeships grew fastest of all. The number of people on higher apprenticeships went from just 3,000 in 2010 to 273,000 last year—a huge increase. We increased the quality of apprenticeships, too, which was much needed, as has already been alluded to by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

In 2015, a devastating Ofsted report found that some apprentices who had been on an apprenticeship for more than a year were not even aware that they were on an apprenticeship, and the skills they were learning were things like making a cup of coffee, which are not life-changing skills. Things were being funded that did not benefit young people, but did allow employers to pay a lower wage. Whereas we lengthened apprenticeships, this Government have cut the length of apprenticeships to eight months. By abolishing IfATE and bringing it in house at the DFE, they are eroding that employer ownership that we worked to build up. Whereas we grew higher apprenticeships, they are about to abolish most level 7 apprenticeships. That is a taste of what is to come if our amendments are not accepted. The Government

are doing this because in opposition they promised that employers could take 50% of their levy funds and spend them on other things.

On 20 November, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State who will respond to this debate said that this commitment was “currently being reviewed”. But just weeks later, on 9 December, the Secretary of State said the Government were still fully committed to “50% flexibility for employers”. When I asked the Minister in Committee whether that was still the policy, she said that she would have to get back to me. As the Skills Minister said in the *Financial Times*, far from the 50% being a promise—as employers were led to believe—it will, in fact, all depend on the outcome of the spending review.

Businesses are starting to raise the alarm. The British Chambers of Commerce has said that a “lack of clarity” about the levy is creating “fresh uncertainty among businesses” and is “worrying and destabilising”. Employers say that this is leading to firms pausing hiring of apprentices.

Since the levy was introduced in 2017, real-terms spending on apprenticeships and work-based training have increased by about a quarter from £2 billion to £2.5 billion. Moving 50% of all that money out of apprenticeships would obviously lead to a substantial drop in the number of apprenticeships. In a written answer to me, Ministers have confirmed that the Department has an internal forecast for the number of apprenticeship starts, but they have also said that they will not publish it—I think we all know why that is.

The previous Government moved to make it more attractive for small and medium-sized enterprises to take on younger people. Since April, 16 to 21-year-olds have had 100% funding, rather than requiring the 5% employer contribution. We need to build on that and cut bureaucracy for smaller businesses, but the Government's answer is different: they plan to abolish the highest-level apprenticeships and redistribute the money. I thought the brilliant speech by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) on his amendment 2 was so right. I will not be as articulate as him, but I will try to add to the points he made, and I hope the Minister will listen to her wise colleague. Employers and educators can see that this is a trial run of what it will be like as Ministers take more control with this Bill, and they are warning that it is a big mistake.

Dan Lally at Sheffield Hallam University says that level 7 cuts will

“disproportionately impact on public services... We are meeting vital skill gaps in disciplines such as advanced clinical practitioner... These are NHS workers, civil servants and local authority employees. A high number of our level 7 apprentices... come from the areas of highest deprivation.”

For example, level 7 apprenticeships are absolutely central to the NHS's long-term workforce plan. Last year, we saw the Government's disappointing decision to cancel the level 7 doctor apprenticeships. That means there will be a shortfall of about 2,000 medical places a year. Students who had already started on the medical doctor apprenticeship have sadly been left in limbo, and I am concerned the Government will do something similar to nurses as part of the level 7 cuts. The NHS's workforce plan proposed an extra 50,000 nurses coming through the apprentice route. Around a quarter of them tend to be on an “Agenda for Change” band 7, which typically requires a master's equivalent, so we would expect about

[Neil O'Brien]

11,000 of those nurses to be coming via level 7 apprenticeships. If the Government get rid of them, that is a huge hole in the NHS plan.

As well as the NHS, local government makes huge use of level 7 apprenticeships, including the extra town planners that the Government say are needed to deliver on housing targets. Deborah Johnston at London South Bank University says:

“Over half of the employers we work with...on level 7 apprenticeships are local authorities. Our apprentices enable councils to deliver projects in the wake of...reintroduced mandatory housing targets. The suggestion that, as employers, local authorities should step in and pay for the level 7 apprenticeships themselves is fanciful.”

The professions are also worried. The Institute of Chartered Accountants has said that axing level 7 apprenticeships will lead to work leaving the UK. It says:

“removing Level 7 apprenticeship funding will mean that fewer UK training roles are created. Instead, organisations are likely to turn to offshoring to replace UK training roles”.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central rightly said that it would lead to people being outside Stoke-on-Trent, but in some cases it would lead to them being outside this country altogether. That is why the Campaign for Learning has called for a skills immigration worker test before defunding level 7 apprenticeships, so that we do not simply go from investing in British workers to importing workers from other countries.

Likewise, the Chartered Management Institute has said:

“cutting funding for level 7 apprenticeships would risk creating gaps in leadership...at a time when business and the public sector need them most.”

I have been contacted by several firms worried about the abolition of the solicitor apprenticeship—a way into the law for people from less privileged backgrounds. Attwells Solicitors, for example, says:

“Reducing funding to level 7 apprentices runs the risk of removing opportunities into professions”

and that

“Apprenticeships help break down barriers into not only Law but all career paths which could be inaccessible to young people without them.”

As well as hitting employers, on the other side of the ledger—this is why our amendment is important—axing level 7 will be destabilising for university providers. It will particularly hurt those institutions that have tried to do the right thing for those who traditionally do not go to university. Sixty-six universities deliver level 7 apprenticeships, and a prestigious institution such as Cranfield University, which is a postgraduate-only institution with deep industry links, will be hugely exposed if the Government wield the axe in the way they plan. York St John University has something like 100 level 7 apprentices. Other institutions such as the Open University, Manchester Met and the University of West London are all exposed, too.

Culling level 7 is a big mistake. These apprenticeships are vital across the public sector and are a way into the professions for people who might otherwise struggle to enter them. Above all, they are the capstone of a drive to make the apprenticeship system more prestigious. British Airways carried on running the Concorde even

though it was a small part of its business because of what it called the halo effect. It knew that it changed the way the organisation was seen. By creating the top of that pyramid—the very top of the ladder; people can go all the way—level 7 apprenticeships create a halo effect around apprenticeships, and that is a vital part of why we should not get rid of them. Worse still, it was crystal clear from the Minister’s replies in the Bill Committee that the Government are keeping open the option to move on and take an axe to level 6 apprenticeships too, which would make that mistake even bigger and will not, in fact, drive money towards L2 and L3.

The other day we learned that the DfE is to cut the adult skills budget by 6%—something for which Ministers criticised the previous Government but are now doing themselves. Ironically, that came out at the same time as, and was overshadowed by, the welfare reform Green Paper, which mentioned training 18 times. In Committee, the Minister refused to confirm whether the Government would continue to provide the extra 10% funding to get T-levels going, even though providers are crying out for clarity on that. It is no wonder that many employers would like the certainty that comes with a degree of independence from politics.

Wise people on the Labour Benches want that, too. Lord Blunkett said in the other place:

“When two years ago I led on the learning and skills document that was a precursor to Skills England...we never envisaged that an agency inside government would have to take on the assurance and accreditation of the relevant sector standards.”

He noted:

“A Skills England that has no legislative backing and no parliamentary references but is down merely to the changing face of ministerial and departmental appointments is in danger of losing its birthright before it has got off the ground.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 November 2024; Vol. 841, c. GC98.]

Even those on the Labour side who were involved in dreaming up Skills England have argued for its independence. Likewise, various employer bodies, including the Institute of the Motor Industry, the Skills Federation and the Construction Industry Training Board, have argued that it should be more independent.

As Labour peer Lord Knight has pointed out, the problem that some of us have with the Bill is that it feels as if the second half is missing, and that second half is the establishment of Skills England as a statutory body. The original draft of the Bill did not even mention Skills England. As Baroness Blower, another Labour peer, has pointed out, the appropriate move from where we are now would be to make it a statutory body. That is why our amendment would make the Bill do what the Government are pretending it does by actually setting up Skills England, which was clearly the intent of many on the Labour Benches.

Given all the problems that the Government are creating, the very act of a further reorganisation is likely to compound the effects of the Budget. The impact assessment states:

“The transfer of functions from IfATE to the DfE could potentially cause a temporary slowdown in the growth rate of new apprenticeships and technical education courses due to potential delays in the approvals process resulting from the Bill... This may disproportionately impact disadvantaged learners, who rely more heavily on these pathways”.

So there you have it, Madam Deputy Speaker. Employers and educators are criticising the uncertainty that the Government are creating; Labour peers are arguing

that Skills England should be made independent, but the Government are ignoring those on their own side with experience; and employers are warning against axing valuable qualifications, but the Skills Minister is determined to end them. Yet another reorganisation, yet more centralisation, no clear vision—it is another big mess.

8.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I thank hon. Members for their constructive engagement throughout the debate. However, from listening to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), one would think that this was all doom and gloom, when it is actually a new season of growth and skills. We are springing into action, and I encourage him not to be stuck in the past.

As I have said before, including when we discussed the Bill in detail in Committee, it is wonderful to hear the passion that Members from across the House have for improving our skills system. It is clear that we all share a desire to better meet the skill needs of employers and learners. The Government are determined to unlock growth and spread opportunity, and the Bill will help us to deliver the change that we absolutely need.

I will start by speaking to new clause 1 before touching on the other new clauses and amendments.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Can the Minister explain, in answer to the points made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and others, the rationale behind eliminating level 7 apprenticeships?

Janet Daby: Information on that will come out in due course, but if the right hon. Member gives me a little more time, I will be able to elaborate and respond to Members as I go.

New clauses 1 and 4 relate to the creation of Skills England and its legal status. New clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), would require the Secretary of State to lay draft proposals for a new Executive agency, to be known as Skills England, within six months of Royal Assent. New clause 4, tabled by the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston, would require the Secretary of State to establish Skills England as a statutory body.

Our position—that we establish Skills England as an Executive agency—remains extremely clear and is entirely in keeping with the usual process for establishing arm's length bodies. The Department is complying with the robust and vigorous process for establishing Executive agencies, which applies across Government. The Executive agency model balances operational independence with proximity to Government. That is needed to inform policy and support delivery of the Government's mission. That model enables us to move quickly, which is vital given the scale and urgency of the skills challenges that we face.

The Government have committed to reviewing Skills England between 18 and 24 months after it is set up. That will include an assessment of whether the Executive agency model is enabling Skills England to deliver its objectives. That is consistent with good practice. Skills will power this mission-driven Government and our

plan for change. Our approach means that we can get on with the job at hand: fixing the skills system and helping more people to get the training they need to build our homes, power our towns and cities with clean energy, and master new digital technologies.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for visiting the best town in England, Harlow, last week. Does she agree that this Bill will help benefit young people in my constituency and give them the skills that they need?

Janet Daby: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that the Bill will help young people to gain the skills that they need—in his wonderful constituency and in many other wonderful constituencies as well.

Amendment 6 tabled by the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston would frustrate the complete establishment of Skills England by delaying the transfer for a full year of the functions as set out in the Bill. Members have heard the Government set out already that delay is not an option; that has been repeatedly said. They should not just take my word for it: technology training provider QA has said that this is a pivotal moment for shaping the skills system to meet the UK's industrial and economic needs, and it is right. The complex and fragmented nature of the skills system is contributing to critical skills gaps in our economy today: opportunities are being missed today, growth is being held back by a lack of skills today, and we cannot afford to be sluggish in our pursuit of a more joined up, data-driven approach.

In the first set of apprenticeship statistics under the new Labour Government we saw an increase in starts, participation and achievement compared with the same period under the Tories in 2023, even in the constituency of the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston. When the Conservatives were in government, starts in his constituency fell by 13%; almost 100 fewer people were starting apprenticeships on their watch. This Government marked National Apprenticeship Week with a set of reforms going further and faster on growth, whereas under his Government a third of vacancies were due to the lack of skills. We will press on.

The British Chambers of Commerce has urged us to work at pace to establish Skills England, and we are doing exactly that. Since being set up in shadow form, Skills England has got to work. It has got to work by identifying skills gaps in the economy and building relationships with strategic authorities, employers and other groups. Indeed, Skills England has worked with mayoral, strategic authorities and other forms of regional government as well as regional organisations to ensure that regional and national skills needs are met in line with the forthcoming industrial strategy. Skills England will work closely with the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council so that we have the skilled workforce needed to deliver a clear long-term plan for the future economy, and with the Migration Advisory Committee to ensure that growing the domestic skills pipeline reduces our reliance on overseas workers. Our constituents will not thank us for sticking in the slow lane. There is no need to wait another year, and we are ready to go now.

New clauses 2 and 3 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston

[Janet Daby]

respectively would impose a duty on the Secretary of State to publish within one year of Royal Assent reports on the impact of the Act on T-levels and higher education. Members will be aware that we have already included in the Bill a duty for the Secretary of State to report on functions transferred from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education that will be exercised by Skills England, including their impact on technical education and apprenticeships. This report will need to be published not after a year but after six months, which is much sooner. We have therefore already made commitments to transparency in the Bill, and that was welcomed by stakeholders, including the Association of Colleges in its written evidence to the Bill Committee. We all agree that T-levels and higher education are central to fixing our skills challenges and, as I made clear in Committee, the Skills England six-month report will include necessary information on T-levels as well as technical education and apprenticeships delivered in higher education settings. The Conservative party has argued that we must avoid Skills England being overlooked and distracted from its important work. Surely, then, we should avoid forcing it to spend its first year producing more and more reports covering the same issues.

Amendments 1 and 2 were tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central and by the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston respectively. These amendments would also place additional reporting requirements on the Secretary of State, this time in relation to degree apprenticeships. As with T-levels and higher education, the report that the Government have committed to providing after six months will necessarily include information on apprenticeships, including degree apprenticeships. Amendment 1 is about funding for those apprenticeships. We are setting Skills England up to build the evidence and the partnerships needed to deliver change, but policy and funding decisions on skills provisions will not sit with Skills England; they will continue to sit with the Secretary of State. That is entirely right and appropriate, and nothing in the Bill changes that. We will set out more information on level 7 apprenticeships in due course.

Gareth Snell: If I have heard the Minister right, the first report that will come out will include aspects of the implications for higher-degree apprenticeships, but the funding decisions will still sit with the Department, as they should. Will the report refer to the funding decisions made by the Secretary of State, so that when it comes to the impact of the decisions made, we can see correlation and causation?

Janet Daby: I absolutely hear my hon. Friend and his concern for level 7. I do not want to stray too far from the Bill and what it seeks to achieve, but I am very happy to look at that further with him, and to get back to him.

On Sunday, it will be eight years since the levy was introduced, and only now, under a Labour Government, are employers getting the flexibilities they have been crying out for, including on maths and English, and on the length of apprenticeships. That is in response to industry needs, and recognises the needs of jobs, and the need to get young people a foot in the door, so that they can start good careers. After nine months in government, this Labour Government have cut through

red tape and are driving the skills that our employers need, showing that Labour is the party of business. We are reforming apprenticeships, tilting the system towards young people most in need of developing skills, and ensuring that young people get a foot on the careers ladder.

Amendments 3 and 5 were again tabled by the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston. They would create a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to have due regard to the reasonable requirements of employers and individuals when considering whether to approve a standard or assessment plan where it has been developed by a group of persons. As I made clear in my response to the hon. Member in Committee, the Secretary of State is already subject to a general public law duty that requires them to take into account all relevant considerations when making decisions relating to the functions for which they are responsible. There is therefore already a requirement for the Secretary of State to balance the needs of users of the system when executing the functions described in the Bill. In fact, the public law duty is broader than the factors listed in the amendments and includes, for example, consideration of value for money and quality.

Turning lastly to amendment 4, tabled by the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston, it is critical that technical qualifications and apprenticeships reflect the needs of employers, and that they have confidence in them. Employers tell us that speed and flexibility are crucial if we are to work together more effectively to plug skills gaps. The precise make-up of “a group of persons” is not currently mandated in legislation. Flexibility is necessary to ensure that the membership of every group reflects the factors relevant to an occupation. Specifying in the Bill that a group must always include a particular voice would introduce new and unnecessary constraints on the structure of groups.

To conclude, this Government are committed to transforming the skills system so that it can deliver the highly skilled workforce that our country needs. Skills will power this Government’s relentless focus on delivering our mission. That is why this Government’s first piece of educational legislation paves the way for Skills England to identify and fill skills gaps.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 168, Noes 302.

Division No. 161]

[8.44 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Braverman, rh Suella
Amos, Gideon	Brewer, Alex
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote</i>	Brown-Fuller, Jess
<i>cast by Mr Mohindra)</i>	Campbell, Mr Gregory
Andrew, rh Stuart	Cane, Charlotte
Aquarone, Steff	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Babarinde, Josh	Cartlidge, James
Bacon, Gareth	Chadwick, David (<i>Proxy vote</i>
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	<i>cast by Mr Forster)</i>
Barclay, rh Steve	Chamberlain, Wendy
Bedford, Mr Peter	Chambers, Dr Danny
Bennett, Alison	Chowns, Ellie
Berry, Siân	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Blackman, Bob	Cocking, Lewis
Bool, Sarah	Coghlan, Chris
Bowie, Andrew	Collins, Victoria
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Cooper, Daisy

Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 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
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glen, rh John
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 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
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian

Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

Tessa Munt and
 Susan Murray

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glendon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jøgee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah

Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Kendall, rh Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena

Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote
cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Race, Steve
Reader, Mike
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogham, Michelle
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Swann, Robin
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon

Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul

Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
**Vicky Foxcroft and
Gen Kitchen**

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 4

CREATION OF SKILLS ENGLAND

“(1) A body corporate known as Skills England is established to carry out the functions transferred to the Secretary of State under this Act.

(2) At the end of a year after the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must make regulations transferring to Skills England all the functions transferred from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education under this Act.

(3) Nothing in this section prevents the Secretary of State from transferring more functions to Skills England under other enactments.” — (*Neil O'Brien.*)

This new clause would put Skills England on an independent statutory footing rather than as part of the DfE. The role of IfATE would be included in that planned for Skills England.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 167, Noes 306.

Division No. 162]

[8.58 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aqarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Forster*)
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis

Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy
vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Ford, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark

George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glen, rh John
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 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
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran

Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
David Simmonds and
Ben Obese-Jecty

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum

Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex

Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive

Lightwood, Simon
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote
cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Race, Steve
Reader, Mike
Reid, Joani

Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogham, Michelle
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
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, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David

Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Gen Kitchen

Question accordingly negated.

9.10 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 25 February).

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

Clause 12

COMMENCEMENT

Amendment proposed: 6, page 5, line 6, leave out subsections (1) and (2) and insert—

“(1) This Act comes into force at the end of the period of one year beginning on the day on which Skills England is created.”—
(*Neil O’Brien.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 166, Noes 305.

Division No. 163]

[9.11 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Amos, Gideon	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	Dyke, Sarah
Andrew, rh Stuart	Evans, Dr Luke
Aquarone, Steff	Farron, Tim
Babarinde, Josh	Foord, Richard
Bacon, Gareth	Forster, Mr Will
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Fortune, Peter
Barclay, rh Steve	Fox, Sir Ashley
Bedford, Mr Peter	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bennett, Alison	Freeman, George
Blackman, Bob	French, Mr Louie
Bool, Sarah	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Bowie, Andrew	Garnier, Mark
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	George, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra	Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)
Braverman, rh Suella	Glen, rh John
Brewer, Alex	Goldman, Marie
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Gordon, Tom
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Grant, Helen
Cane, Charlotte	Griffith, Andrew
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Griffiths, Alison
Cartlidge, James	Harding, Monica
Chadwick, David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster</i>)	Harris, Rebecca
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hayes, rh Sir John
Chambers, Dr Danny	Heylings, Pippa
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hinds, rh Damian
Cocking, Lewis	Hoare, Simon
Coghlan, Chris	Hobhouse, Wera
Collins, Victoria	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Cooper, Daisy	Hollinrake, Kevin
Costa, Alberto	Huddleston, Nigel
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Hudson, Dr Neil
Cross, Harriet	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Dance, Adam	Jardine, Christine
Darling, Steve	Jarvis, Liz
Davies, Gareth	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Davies, Mims	Jones, Clive
Davis, rh David	Jopp, Lincoln
Dean, Bobby	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Dewhurst, Charlie	Kohler, Mr Paul
Dillon, Mr Lee	Kruger, Danny
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Lam, Katie
	Lamont, John

Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Miller, Calum
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mr Forster*)
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew

Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
David Simmonds and
Ben Obese-Jecty

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
 vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
 Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary

Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast
 by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chownes, Ellie

Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Sollom, Ian
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Giindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast
 by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris

Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote
cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Race, Steve
Reader, Mike
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogham, Michelle
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John

Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
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, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
**Vicky Foxcroft and
Gen Kitchen**

Question accordingly negated.

Third Reading

9.23 pm

Janet Daby: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

We are on a mission to deliver strong and sustainable economic growth and to break down the barriers to opportunity. Skills will power this mission-driven Government and our plan for change.

I thank Members across the House for their contributions. I especially thank members of the Bill Committee for their scrutiny; the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) for chairing the Committee; and my hon. Friends the Members for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) and for Lewisham North (Vicky Foxcroft) for their crucial work in guiding the Bill through Committee and the other House of Commons stages.

The Bill has benefited from scrutiny both in this House and in the other place. I welcome the broad support for the creation of Skills England and its work. It is clear that we are united in our recognition of the need to develop a world-leading approach to skills. It is vital if we are to build the highly skilled workforce that we need to meet today's challenges and grasp tomorrow's opportunities.

We need skills to get Britain building; we need skills to deliver energy security; and we need skills to advance AI and increase productivity. We need to improve the quality and availability of training to give people from all backgrounds from across the country the power to seize opportunities and improve their lives and their family's lives. That is why this Labour Government's very first piece of education legislation will pave the way for Skills England.

According to employers, over one third of vacancies in 2022 were due to skills shortages. This must change. We need to move fast to identify and plug skills gaps in the economy. The Bill is a crucial step in delivering this change. Skills England will combine for the first time insight into skills gaps with the development of technical education to meet the gaps, and the network will ensure that skills needs can be tackled across the country. Skills England is already making a difference. It is changing the way skills gaps are identified and how key organisations are working together to fill them.

This Government are ready to go. As soon as the Bill passes, Skills England stands ready to take forward its work as a strong, coherent, single organisation. Delay is not an option. We must act and we will act. We are acting now. I commend the Bill to the House.

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

9.26 pm

Neil O'Brien: I have already read out quotes from employers and those in education and the public service warning about the problems building up in the skills system because of the decisions the Government are making. This evening the Government have decided not to listen to some of the wise people on their own side, including a former education Minister, but I hope that they will listen to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), because they are on the edge of making a huge mistake by butchering higher apprenticeships—a huge mistake that they will live to regret. They are not listening to their own Members this evening, but I hope that they will in the future.

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

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 62.

Division No. 164]

[9.27 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Ali, Rushanara
Allister, Jim
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen

Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Dowd, Peter
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Frith, Mr James
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha

Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Kendall, rh Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor

Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Prinsley, Peter
Race, Steve
Reader, Mike
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogham, Michelle
Shanks, Michael
Shannon, Jim
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Swann, Robin
Tami, rh Mark

Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie

Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Vicky Foxcroft and
Gen Kitchen**

NOES

Amos, Gideon
Aqarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Bennett, Alison
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Forster*)
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Dean, Bobby
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dyke, Sarah
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote
cast by Anna Sabine*)
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Harding, Monica
Heylings, Pippa
Hobhouse, Wera
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jones, Clive
Kohler, Mr Paul

MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Forster*)
Olney, Sarah
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
**Tessa Munt and
Susan Murray**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Agriculture (Delinked Payments) (Reductions) (England) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 13 February, be approved.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

The House divided: Ayes 296, Noes 164.

Division No. 165]

[9.38 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris

Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Dowd, Peter
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmill, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam

Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh

Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Prinsley, Peter
 Race, Steve
 Reader, Mike
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 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, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon

Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Michael
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul

Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Gen Kitchen and
 Vicky Foxcroft

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark

Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glen, rh John
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Miller, Calum
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen

Morrison, Mr Tom (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster</i>)	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Morrissey, Joy	Smith, Rebecca
Morton, rh Wendy	Sollom, Ian
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Spencer, Dr Ben
Munt, Tessa	Stafford, Gregory
Murray, Susan	Stephenson, Blake
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Stone, Jamie
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Stuart, rh Graham
O'Brien, Neil	Swann, Robin
Olney, Sarah	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Patel, rh Priti	Taylor, Luke
Perteghella, Manuela	Thomas, Bradley
Philp, rh Chris	Thomas, Cameron
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Timothy, Nick
Pritchard, rh Mark	Trott, rh Laura
Raja, Shivani	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Rankin, Jack	Vickers, Martin
Robertson, Joe	Vickers, Matt
Robinson, rh Gavin	Whately, Helen
Roome, Ian	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Rosindell, Andrew	Wild, James
Sabine, Anna	Wilkinson, Max
Savage, Dr Roz	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Shannon, Jim	Wilson, Munira
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil	Wood, Mike
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Simmonds, David	Wrigley, Martin
Slade, Vikki	Young, Claire
Smart, Lisa	Tellers for the Noes:
Smith, Greg	Rebecca Paul and
	Jerome Mayhew

Question accordingly agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 4 and 5 together.

ADMINISTRATION

Ordered,

That Gill Furniss be discharged from the Administration Committee and Bambos Charalambous be added.

FINANCE

That Matt Bishop be discharged from the Finance Committee and Paul Davies be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Croydon Area Remodelling Funding: Brighton Mainline

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

9.50 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue in the House. At this time on a Monday night, Members may not find the prospect of discussing the Croydon area remodelling scheme, or CARS, the most exciting way to spend their time, but I can assure them that it is. The scheme is not just about providing vital upgrades to two of busiest train stations in the country and bringing much-needed investment into one of London's most significant areas of opportunity, but about supercharging growth, opportunity and transport links right across the south-east.

CARS is a Network Rail plan to add capacity and ease congestion on the most complex part of Britain's rail network, and to improve services on one of the country's most critical rail lines: the Brighton main line. The lack of capacity at East Croydon station and the complex series of junctions north of Croydon—the Selhurst triangle—mean that trains across the Brighton main line, including the Gatwick Express and those across the wider south-east network, have for many years been vulnerable to delays and cancellations.

At the time of developing those plans, Network Rail reported that service punctuality on the Brighton main line was the lowest of any major route, with the bottleneck at Croydon being one of the main causes. The Croydon opportunity area is earmarked for 14,500 new homes and 10,500 new jobs by 2041, there will be extensive housing delivery in the Brighton city region, between Horsham and Crawley, and along the south coast, and Gatwick is forecast to grow by 58% by 2047 even with only one runway, so the pressure on the Brighton main line is set only to increase.

However, the Croydon bottleneck means that there is no practical way of improving journey times, meeting passenger demand and opening up new destinations on the Brighton main line in the future, because the maximum number of trains that can be scheduled through East Croydon is 70 per hour. In 2019, the service was running at maximum capacity; it is now almost back to pre-pandemic levels, with 62 scheduled trains.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I look forward to hearing how Mr Shannon's intervention relates to the Croydon area remodelling scheme and the Brighton main line.

Jim Shannon: The most important thing, Madam Deputy Speaker, is to congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. I spoke to her beforehand to try to help her in some small way. Does she agree that years of underspending on public transport have left railway and bus services drowning in repair work, and that if the Government wish to have a thriving public transport service outside London, local authorities must be given the funding to fix services—be they in Croydon or Newtownards—rather than having to shake a begging bowl for pennies, as they do now?

Madam Deputy Speaker: A successful intervention.

Natasha Irons: I agree with the hon. Gentleman: sustainable long-term funding is the only way for any area outside London to grow sustainably.

In addition, CARS would see significant improvement to East Croydon station, Britain's 21st most used station, by adding two new platforms, a larger concourse to improve facilities for passengers and better connections to local transport networks. It also provides an opportunity to modernise Norwood Junction station, Britain's 117th most used station, by extending the platforms so that more services can stop there and adding a footbridge with a lift to finally bring step-free access to this much-loved local transport hub.

Despite a consultation with stakeholders and passengers showing that 90% of respondents were in favour of CARS, in 2020 the previous Government shelved these crucial infrastructure plans, turning their back on economic growth in Croydon and across the south-east. However, passenger numbers on the Brighton main line continue to recover well post-pandemic, with station entries and exits at East Croydon station now back up to almost 80% when compared to their pre-pandemic levels and back up to 92% at Gatwick Airport station when compared with the same period.

Given the renewed interest in the expansion of Gatwick airport, the need to look again at CARS is more vital than ever. Gatwick is Europe's busiest single-runway airport and with the Gatwick airport to Victoria route being the seventh busiest flow for rail passengers nationally—second, when we take out the Elizabeth line extension—even without a second runway, demand for train services into Gatwick are already reaching capacity. The economic case for Gatwick expansion, creating an estimated 14,000 new jobs and generating an estimated £1 billion a year for the British economy, has been well documented and the Government have outlined that any expansion would need to see the number of passengers arriving at Gatwick via public transport increase from its current 44% to 54%.

It is not hard to argue that without the urgent improvements that CARS brings to this line, that ambition is difficult to achieve. Further delays in getting CARS off the ground could not only hold back economic growth for the coast-to-capital region—a region estimated to be the seventh largest regional economy in the country—but it could also hold back economic growth for our country.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent case for solving the Croydon bottleneck, as it is known. As she has outlined, it affects not only her area of Croydon, but my area of Carshalton and Wallington—the hon. Member and I have seen each other on the train on the way into this place. Does she agree that public transport and train demand in particular can be affected by the frequency and reliability of the services? If we were to fix this problem, that could actually increase the demand for train use in our areas, which would be a good thing not only for the economy, but for the environment.

Natasha Irons: I absolutely agree that once people get into the doom loop of thinking that the train is not going to arrive, they find other routes or stick to their

cars. If we can improve rail performance in every region across the country, I am sure we will see passenger numbers also go back up to those pre-pandemic levels, and even increase beyond that.

I appreciate that the Government have rightly stated their intention to grow every corner of this country and that good public transport will no longer be confined to the boundaries of our city. I urge the Minister to consider the wider impact that investing in CARS could have for our coastal communities, what it could do for towns and regions outside London, and what it could do for my part of outer south London. With an estimated extra 4,000 seats per hour on the Brighton main line, 15% higher than what would be provided without it, CARS is not just good for Croydon and the whole of the south-east—it is good for our country, too.

9.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) for securing this debate and allowing us to discuss this critical area of rail infrastructure.

As my hon. Friend has so clearly outlined, the Brighton main line is a crucial artery connecting the south coast to the heart of London, carrying millions of passengers each year. It is a lifeline for commuters, a gateway for visitors and a crucial link for businesses that are driving our economy forward. It also provides a direct rail link into Gatwick, the UK's second busiest airport. In her constituency, East Croydon station is a major public transport hub, providing links to services across Sussex as well as the London Tramlink. The line facilitates billions of pounds in economic activity every year, enabling businesses to thrive and communities to stay connected. That is reflected in the substantial investment in the line in the recent past. The £7 billion Thameslink programme transformed north-south travel through London, delivering faster, more frequent and more reliable journeys for passengers. Thameslink saw an entirely new, bespoke fleet of class 700 trains introduced to the Brighton main line, radically increasing onboard capacity and improving the reliability of the service. In addition, major stations such as London Blackfriars and London Bridge were entirely rebuilt, and the vital link to the Elizabeth line was created at Farringdon—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Simon Lightwood: Indeed, via the major hub of East Croydon station in my hon. Friend's constituency, the Thameslink programme also established new direct connections to Peterborough and Cambridge. More than £250 million was recently invested in upgrading Gatwick airport station, delivering a new, more accessible station concourse and doubling the space for passengers.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Minister for outlining the investment made in the line historically. Indeed, in Gatwick's case, a very large portion of the investment was made directly by the airport,

[Peter Lamb]

rather than by the Department for Transport. This debate is about the fact that in shortly over a decade, the line will be completely at capacity, so any train leaving Brighton will be full by the time it arrives at my constituency of Crawley. Not a single passenger from Gatwick will be able to get on the train to London without these improvements, and we are running out of time to secure the change necessary to avoid that outcome.

Simon Lightwood: Gatwick Airport Ltd has applied for a development consent order to bring its northern runway into routine use alongside its main runway. I understand that it has committed to providing a £10 million rail enhancement fund to support improvements to the network required to accommodate additional passengers and mitigate the impacts on performance.

As I said, more than £250 million was recently invested in upgrading Gatwick airport station, delivering a new, more accessible station concourse, doubling the space for passengers, improving the reliability of trains calling at the station and ensuring that it is a fitting gateway to the UK. For too many years, Gatwick airport station has been a major bottleneck on the Brighton main line due to the extended time that passengers need to board and alight from trains. Since the significant expansion of the station and the widening of platforms, passengers can board and alight much more quickly, reducing knock-on delays further up and down the line.

As part of the Gatwick upgrade, the track layout through the station was remodelled to increase capacity and speed, reducing journey times between Brighton and London by five minutes and improving performance. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East and her constituents have started to see the direct benefits of those interventions at Gatwick, be it in the efficiency of their train service or the ease with which they can start their holiday.

Despite those investments, demand and crowding on the line continued to grow up to 2019. It was a victim of its own success, we could say. Before the pandemic, the Croydon area remodelling scheme was rightly identified as a priority scheme to address crowding and provide more capacity on the line. As my hon. Friend has outlined, the complex junction at Selhurst and pinch points at East Croydon and Norwood Junction stations create limits on capacity. CARS was developed to address that

through significant remodelling of the tracks and rail junctions north of East Croydon station and as far up as the Norwood Junction station area.

CARS also envisaged a major redevelopment of East Croydon station. At the time, Network Rail estimated that it would take over 10 years to fully deliver the CARS scheme, at a cost of around £2.9 billion. Delivery would also involve significant and ongoing disruption for passengers up and down the Brighton main line. However, the pandemic created significant changes in travel patterns and uncertainty about future demand, while at the same time stretching public finances. In response, the previous Government took the decision to pause the scheme at the 2021 spending review. No development work has been undertaken on CARS since then.

In her spring statement last week, the Chancellor was clear about the challenges facing our public finances and the steps that she is taking to restore stability and support growth. The ongoing spending review is an important part of that process. We are working to carefully assess each element of public spending, including rail investments, ensuring that every penny spent supports our missions and the plan for growth. Given that this process is ongoing, I regret that I am not able to comment on individual projects such as the Croydon area remodelling scheme until the spending review has concluded in June.

My Department and I certainly recognise the substantial benefits that the CARS programme could bring by unlocking development in Croydon and providing capacity for growth across the coast-to-capital region. I also restate the offer made on Thursday by the Secretary of State for Transport to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East to discuss CARS and the drivers for investment she has outlined so clearly. However, I remind her of the multibillion-pound costs of the scheme, in the context of the significant funding challenges that the Government face across a range of public services and infrastructure investment ambitions. We will continue to work with rail industry partners, local authorities and stakeholders across the region, exploring opportunities to improve rail services in the south-east and to ensure that the Brighton main line remains a world-class transport link—one that meets the needs of its passengers and supports economic growth.

Question put and agreed to.

10.5 pm

House adjourned.

—[Official Report, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 3.]

Westminster Hall

Monday 31 March 2025

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

Political Donations

4.30 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 707189 relating to the rules for political donations.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I begin by thanking Mr Jeremy Stone, who is here today, for starting this petition, and congratulate him on gathering more than 140,000 signatures, which is a fantastic feat. The petition, titled “Tighten the rules on political donations”, states:

“We want the government to...Remove loopholes that allow wealthy foreign individuals to make donations into UK political parties (e.g. by funnelling through UK registered companies)...Cap all donations to a reasonable amount...Review limits on the fines that can be levied for breaking the rules...We think that ultra-rich individuals or foreign state actors should not be able to use their money to give unfair advantage to a political party in order to further their own agenda.”

I think that is a principle that all of us here will agree with—that foreign interference through donations has no place in British elections or politics, and that democracy cannot be for sale.

I declare an interest: I am a member of Unite the union and I have received donations from both Unite and the Communications Workers Union, the full details of which are freely available on my MP profile on the UK Parliament website. Functions like this mean that we, as MPs, can be constantly transparent and honest to our constituents about where money is flowing in politics. As a member of a political party, I am very aware of how much parties rely on donations; however, donations can become concerning when their origins are unclear and the public cannot be sure whether some foreign interference, or any other suspicious dealings, may have slipped through the cracks in the rules.

About a month ago, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) introduced a similar debate on political finance rules, which covered a lot of the points that I am sure will be mentioned again today. He similarly began by declaring his interest of being a member of a political party, a sentiment that many others here will echo. He used his speech to highlight Transparency International’s research on questionable sources of donations.

In particular, the group found that almost £1 in every £10 reported by political parties and their members since 2001 has come from unknown or questionable sources. Some £13 million comes from donors who are alleged, or proven, to be intermediaries for foreign funds or hidden sources; £10.9 million comes from companies that have not made sufficient profits to support the political contributions that they have made; and £4.6 million comes from foreign Governments, Parliaments and regime-linked groups.

Reported donations from private sources are growing, from £30.6 million in 2001 to £85 million in 2023. That is unsurprising, given that, in this period, former Governments increased campaign spending limits by 45% to be in line with inflation, meaning that the larger parties’ de facto fundraising targets rose to around £100 million in the major election years. The previous Government also increased the threshold for reporting donations by 50% in 2023, thus demonstrating how complex the system is.

Alongside that, the Elections Act 2022 constrained the independence of the Electoral Commission and banned it from prosecuting criminal offences under electoral law. The Electoral Commission said:

“The UK Government does not consider this to be an area of work we should undertake and considered it to duplicate the work of the Crown Prosecution Service...and Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland”.

Ministers can now even set the Electoral Commission’s strategy and policy priorities through their own strategy and policy statements. Transparency International said:

“This is inconsistent with international good practice, unnecessary, and fetters the Commission’s independence.”

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Member is making a very good speech. With her permission, I might just broaden the concept of a political donation, because, in many ways, it is not always quite as simple as a cheque hitting a given political party’s bank account. Whatever one thought of him—he was a great man in Scottish politics, and is no longer with us—it is a fact that Alex Salmond, for a number of years, hosted a show in his own name on RT, a Russian television channel, on which he, on a regular basis, put forward views that were not always particularly helpful to the concept of a United Kingdom. That seems to me to be a subtle way of foreign Governments influencing decisions and trying to interfere.

Irene Campbell: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution, and I agree with his point.

At the time of the Elections Act 2022, the House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, whose corresponding Department was responsible for introducing the Act, also concluded that there was no need for such statements and no evidence to justify their introduction. The recent Backbench Business Committee debate on political finance rules mentioned some case studies and evidence from previous elections of overseas donations. For example, the 2020 report of the Intelligence and Security Committee found that Russian oligarchs had used their business interests, donations to charities and political parties to influence UK affairs.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She talks about the considerable parliamentary interest in this issue; we know there is considerable interest among the public too, because of the number of signatures on Mr Stone’s petition. Is she also aware that survey evidence has indicated that over three quarters of those polled do not want foreign nationals not registered to vote here to be able to donate to our political parties? As a result, does she agree that we need to see legislative change?

Irene Campbell: I absolutely agree that we need to see change; my right hon. Friend makes the point very well.

More recently, as people will be aware, Elon Musk proposed to donate a large sum to Reform UK. While he could not make a personal donation, there are ways that he could get around the rules, which I will describe. The current rules on donations to political parties are defined in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which is based on the 1998 report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, "The Funding of Political Parties in the United Kingdom". A lot of what I have said already demonstrates how complex this area is.

The Committee summarised the purpose of the rules by saying that

"what happens here is the concern of those who live and work here and the political parties should not be entitled to fill their coffers with donations from abroad, made by persons and corporations who have no genuine stake in the country."

More recently, the Elections Act 2022 changed the electoral rules, removing the 15-year limit on the voting rights of British citizens living overseas to vote in UK parliamentary elections, and allowing them to register on the electoral roll and donate to political parties without a time limit.

To be clear, under current UK electoral law, foreign donations are banned as they are not a "permissible source." Permissible sources include individuals on the UK electoral register, UK registered companies, trade unions, unincorporated associations and limited liability partnerships, or LLPs. It is worth noting that, under the rules, parties can accept donations or loans with no upper limit, as long as they come from one of those permissible sources. Donations are defined as

"money, goods or services given to a party without charge or on non-commercial terms, with a value of over £500."

There are additional rules around the thresholds for party headquarters and local accounting, but I will not go into detail because they are not straightforward.

There are ways for foreign individuals to get around those rules. For example, a multinational corporation owned by a foreign national could legally donate to UK political parties. Additionally, unincorporated associations, which are permissible donors, do not have to conduct permissibility checks on their own donors, leading to a lack of transparency in their donations.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): The hon. Member made an interesting point about the role of companies, and specifically referred to Reform UK. Will she join me in putting on the record that Reform UK is not a political party like most of ours are, but in fact a limited company registered at Companies House, with the primary shareholder being the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage)? Does she agree that, where necessary, any change to legislation needs to incorporate such risk factors?

Irene Campbell: I fully agree with the statement the hon. Member has just made.

The Electoral Commission, the independent regulator for the rules, has said that, at present, donations can be made using funding from otherwise impermissible sources, including from overseas. There are variable monetary penalties from the Electoral Commission for breaking

the rules, which are outlined in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act. These can be between £250 and £20,000, depending on the severity of the breach, which is another area that the petition seeks to address.

There are many electoral reform recommendations from independent bodies that address some of the concerns in this petition. In relation to fines for breaking the rules, the 2021 report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommended reviewing the maximum fines that can be issued for breaking electoral rules, saying that the maximum fine the Electoral Commission may impose

"should be increased to 4% of a campaign's total spend or £500,000, whichever is higher".

The Electoral Commission supports that, saying in 2020:

"The Scottish Parliament recently raised the maximum fine to £500,000 for Scottish referendums, and we believe this would be a reasonable benchmark for the maximum fine in relation to other parts of the UK's political finance regulations".

Additionally, the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommends that political parties introduce caps on donations. It said:

"A cap of £10,000 should be placed on donations to a political party or regulated donee from any individual or organisation in any year."

Similarly, Australia's new electoral reform Act imposed caps on political donations and electoral expenditure, after recent elections where a multimillionaire donated 117 million Australian dollars to a political party.

Both bodies have also addressed the loopholes that allow possible donations from foreign parties. In particular, the Electoral Commission said last year that parties and campaigners should

"only accept donations from companies that have made enough money in the UK to fund...their donation."

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): A 2020 report from Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee found:

"Several members of the Russian elite who are closely linked to Putin are identified as being involved with charitable and/or political organisations in the UK, having donated to political parties".

It is really important that we close these loopholes so that we are not at risk of Russian interference.

Irene Campbell: I agree with my hon. Friend. To further close loopholes that allow foreign interference, the Committee on Standards in Public Life added that the Government

"should legislate to ban foreign organisations or individuals from buying campaign advertising in the UK."

As public office holders, we are all beholden to the seven principles of public life, known as the Nolan principles: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. To dedicate ourselves to these principles, we must ensure that there is no question about the transparency and lawfulness of the donations that we receive. Any rules regarding electoral donations must reflect and represent those principles, which we hold dear.

The Labour manifesto promised to "protect democracy by strengthening the rules around donations".

In December, the Prime Minister's spokesman confirmed that the Government are committed to

"strengthening the rules around donations to political parties."

Regarding the commitment to reviewing the rules on political donations, he said there will be a “relevant update in due course.”

In her response to the debate in March, the Minister agreed that foreign money has no place in the UK electoral system, and that the current rules do not provide strong safeguards. She also made clear the crucial role that the Electoral Commission has, and the possibility that its roles and responsibilities may change.

There is much evidence and many policy interventions to be considered before the Government’s approach to electoral reform is published. However, now is the time for robust legislation that works. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response, and the contributions of hon. Members from both sides of the House.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I remind Members who wish to speak that they should bob, and they need to have been here from the beginning of the debate. Interventions—should Members take them—are meant to be just that: short and relevant to the points being made.

I point out to Members that if you mention a current Member by constituency, you need to have formally informed them beforehand, so that they will know they have been mentioned. I call Jamie Stone, Chair of the Petitions Committee.

4.44 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thank you, Mrs Harris. I do not want to add much to what I said in my intervention. This is a very dangerous principle. I have people saying to me in the street, “It’s getting like America—you can buy political results, politicians and policies.” This strikes me as fundamentally dangerous. We call ourselves the mother of Parliaments, and we pride ourselves on the way we do democracy in this country. Every time such things are said to me, I feel that another little brick has been taken out of the edifice of what we do.

As the Chair of the Petitions Committee, I thank the petitioners for bringing forward the petition, which expresses what an awful lot of people out there think. The very fact that the Committee, which I have the honour of chairing, gets the honour of a Government reply each time we have a petitions debate strikes me as a very good thing indeed.

I will leave my comments there. As I said in my intervention, there are more subtle ways of influencing politics in any country than a cheque or cash in the bank. We need to be constantly vigilant.

4.45 pm

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading the debate.

The Labour manifesto pledged to

“protect democracy by strengthening the rules around donations to political parties.”

I am pleased that these important proposals are being developed. Both today’s debate and the 2021 recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life focus on foreign money entering the UK via companies and unincorporated associations, but I urge the Government, when they develop their proposals, to go further than that.

In 2009, Lord Campbell-Savours of Allerdale, who also happens to be my father, was involved in the tortuous debates in the other place before the passing of the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009. He and other Members worked to secure an amendment to the Government’s proposals. That amendment meant that individuals giving or loaning more than £7,500 to a political party must be resident or ordinarily resident and domiciled in the UK for the tax year in which the relevant donation or loan is made.

The Bill and the amendment were later given Royal Assent, but that clause, as with many other provisions of primary legislation, was subject to the development of commencement regulations. At the time, the Minister of State envisaged that secondary legislation would be completed not long after the summer of 2010. A general election interrupted that process. However, primary legislation is still in place, ready to be enacted—a quick win, one might say.

As has been said, the Conservatives enormously expanded the number of foreign residents eligible to donate to political parties in our country by removing the 15-year limit on British citizens overseas being able to vote and donate to a political party. Now, up to 3.5 million overseas residents can influence elections.

I am going to take on the baton handed to me by my father and his colleagues in the other place, some of whom are no longer with us, and urge the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Electoral Commission to take on the task of drafting the secondary legislation required to ensure that overseas residents who do not pay tax in this country are no longer allowed to influence the outcomes of elections with their money.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Member may not be aware that nearly \$20,000 was donated from the United States to Sinn Féin’s 2017 Assembly election campaign—representing nearly one third of Sinn Féin’s spending in that election. Those who have been so exercised by political donations here have often done nothing to close the loophole that allows huge amounts of foreign money to influence politics in Northern Ireland. Nowhere else in the world would it happen that someone would be paying the bills of a foreign political party, yet that is what seems to happen with Sinn Féin. Does he agree that this loophole must be closed very quickly?

Markus Campbell-Savours: The hon. Member is quite right: I was unaware of that.

Under the rules set out the amendment, and made into law, these people would still be able to vote, and could even stand for election—arguably, that would be legitimate participation—but they could not spend money to disproportionately influence the outcome of elections in a country where they do not pay tax. Who runs this place should be a matter decided by those who live and pay their way here; it is they who live with the consequences of those electoral outcomes.

4.49 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. Conservative Friends of Russia, later renamed the Westminster Russia Forum, was founded in 2012 as a lobby group, posing as a think-tank, with absolutely no research published.

[Cameron Thomas]

It was founded at the Russian embassy in London by, among others, Vladimir Putin's man in London, Sergey Nalobin, and Matthew Elliott, chief executive of the official Vote Leave campaign. The opening was attended by Boris Johnson and his wife, Carrie. To date, the public has never had access to the group's activities or fundraising records, but, through this group, Putin's regime had access to Conservative MPs and, according to one of Britain's top spies, Kremlin money changed hands to influence the Brexit campaign.

We know that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), whom I will shortly email to notify of this mention, then leader of the UK Independence party, met the former Russian ambassador to London, Alexander Yakovenko, which the hon. Member initially denied. We know that Arron Banks, who donated millions to the leave campaign, met the Russian ambassador at least three times. We know that event organisers for the forum were largely London-based businesses but with an interest in Russia, and that, at its peak, events drew 170 attendees. We also know that the Conservative party took millions of pounds in donations from Russian oligarchs, and accepted such donations at least as recently as March 2022, after Russia's full invasion of Ukraine and several years after its occupation of the Donbas and Crimean peninsula. The Westminster Russia Forum was disbanded shortly after the full invasion.

I consider it a matter of public interest that the full extent of the group's activities and fundraising is published unredacted. The Liberal Democrats further call for the full, unredacted release of the Russia report to pierce the veil of secrecy of Russian influence in UK politics. We call for greater independence for the Intelligence and Security Committee to investigate Russian interference. The Conservative party declined to do so, and it is easy to imagine why. No longer should the PM have control over its membership, nor the authority to prevent publication of its reports, as Boris Johnson did with the Russia report. This is both a matter of national security and of public confidence in our politics.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I think I made myself clear: if you are going to mention a Member, you need to inform them before you mention them, not after, to give the Member the opportunity to turn up. I suggest that you inform the Member concerned as a matter of urgency, Mr Thomas, and apologise for not doing so beforehand.

4.52 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Mrs Harris. In the interests of transparency, I would like to declare that I have received no donations from business, but I have received donations from UK citizens, including via the trade union GMB, of which I am a member, and through fundraising dinners and quizzes in my constituency, which anyone is welcome to attend.

I would like to thank Mr Stone for starting this petition and having such great success in raising the issue with the public right across the country. We cannot be complacent in protecting our democratic rights, and we must take heed of what has happened elsewhere. When the US relaxed funding laws, it changed the course

of election costs. In 1990, the average cost of a successful campaign to the House of Representatives was \$981,000, while a successful Senate race cost an average of \$9.3 million. In 2022, after the relaxation of the political donations legislation, the average cost of a successful campaign for the House of Representatives was \$3 million, while the average cost of a successful Senate campaign was \$28.5 million. We cannot afford to let that happen within the UK.

Standing for Parliament is an honour and a privilege, but not only for those who can afford it or have rich friends; it is for those who come from all walks of life. One of the big loopholes that I perceive within our campaign finance rules—I hope that the Minister will consider it in fulfilling the campaign pledge in our manifesto to clean up political donations—is the rules for political party spending and the long and the short campaign. Although we have rules for the short campaign that are adhered to in the final few weeks, we do not have a consistent set of rules for the 55 months when political parties of any sort are campaigning.

The rise of online spend is much more difficult to track and understand. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) mentioned, there are ways of supporting political parties that are not always about straight donations, but that can be done through algorithms and other online activity. I will not mention any particular Member, but I will mention the behaviour of two parties when it comes to donations received. We have people with backgrounds very much linked to tax havens, such as the billionaire property developer Nick Candy, who is one of the main fundraisers for the Reform party. He is also a link between the Reform party and Trump and Elon Musk. He was very clear when he told *The New York Times*,

“We are going to have fund-raisers all over the world, in every part of the world where there are British nationals”—

not necessarily British taxpayers. He went on:

“We will have fund-raisers in the US, in Monaco, and we will have huge fund-raisers in the UAE, where we have an expat community there who are unhappy with the amount of regulation and tax in the UK.”

To be clear, he is the UK treasurer for the Reform party. We need to close the loophole, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) said earlier. If someone is not a UK taxpayer, they should not be funding a political party in order to create outcomes around regulation and tax. There are other examples I could point to, and I am sure many will.

Alex Sobel: I am sure my hon. Friend knows of the Carlton Club, which is a private and unincorporated association with close links to the Conservative party. It has received over £200,000 in donations from companies run by wealthy Swiss, German and Russian nationals. Over the same period, since 2020, the Carlton Club has donated £312,000 to the Conservative party. Do we not need to remove the ability to use unincorporated associations to wash money that would otherwise not be able to be donated?

Emily Darlington: That is a very good foray into my last point. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention unincorporated companies or LLCs that are not transparent about where their money comes from. I have to ask why businesses are the ones giving money in the first place. I always think: what is the reward? I understand it

better when it comes from a trade union that represents millions of workers. The trade union pulls together donations. Its members are asked whether they want to donate. Under the current legislation, they are asked whether they are happy to pay their dues and make political donations. Those individuals work and pay tax here in this country. But when there is a lack of transparency and the public cannot see how much money the company is making and then donating—the Carlton Club may fit into that; I have never been there, but I hear it is pretty lavish—that is the final loophole that I ask the Minister to consider.

I end my comments there because I know that many colleagues want to speak. I ask the Minister to consider my points and take action.

4.59 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading this important debate. I rise to speak on behalf of the 177 people in Bolton West who signed the petition.

Before I came to this place I dedicated more than a decade of my career to tackling bribery and corruption in all its forms across the UK, India, the UAE and the US, so I have a professional imperative to speak out on cleaning up our politics, as well as a moral one. That is why I have been campaigning on the issue week in, week out since I was elected to this place in July of last year. I was pleased to attend the launch of Transparency International's "Checks and Balances" report in the autumn of last year, along with the anti-corruption champion, Baroness Margaret Hodge.

Having pored over the petition data in granular detail, I know that this is one of the rare issues that cuts across north and south, blue and red, and urban and rural. We all want our politics to be clean and fair so that it can deliver the very best outcomes for our constituents. For me, that is the heart of the issue that we are discussing. Our democracy relies heavily on donations to provide funding for parties and candidates to engage with the electorate.

However, recent scandals across all major parties involving donations being linked to criminal, unknown or potentially malign foreign sources have led to some of the lowest levels of public trust that we have ever seen. Only 12% of people trust political parties, and there is a corrosive view that politicians are all in it for themselves. The issue has become so severe that I argue that the very integrity of our political system is under serious threat. Our constituents will not cast their votes if they do not believe that their vote makes a difference. Without voting, of course, they lose their stake in our politics. Who can blame them? For far too long, successive Governments have failed to act on political finance reform, leaving our system vulnerable to exploitation by those who seek to subvert our much-cherished democracy.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting the Electoral Commission, which has warned that significant loopholes in our political finance laws allow money of unknown origin, and potentially foreign influence, to infiltrate British politics. Independent scrutiny bodies, including the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament and the Committee on Standards in Public Life, have

repeatedly warned about the risks posed by opaque political donations. That is why we desperately need what I hope will be a forthcoming elections Bill. I urge the Minister, in her response, to provide a clear timeline for that piece of legislation. We desperately need to close loopholes, empower regulators and protect our democratic institutions from foreign influence.

Jim Shannon: Continuing that line of thought, Northern Ireland will need to be part of such a new legislative ruling. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must all be subject to the same rules in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Phil Brickell: I agree that we need to move across the entirety of the United Kingdom to clean up our politics. Time waits for no person, so we must act now. With that in mind, I would like to propose five key reforms, which I gently ask the Minister to consider.

First, and most importantly, the campaigning organisation Spotlight on Corruption has called for "know your donor" checks, which would legally require political parties to conduct thorough checks on the source of donations. If a donor's origins cannot be verified, that donation should be rejected outright. As a former compliance professional for more than a decade myself, I know that such checks can be proportionate and risk based, avoiding excessive administrative burdens. This approach would align with anti-money laundering practices already established in the private sector and mirror existing requirements in the charity sector. If charities must conduct due diligence on their donors, why should political parties be exempt?

Secondly, has the Minister considered reducing the donation reporting thresholds to bring more donations into light? Coupled with the "know your donor" checks, I think that would improve scrutiny and put off lower-value donations from dubious sources.

Thirdly, there is a glaring loophole around shell companies. Under current rules, companies that have never turned a profit in the UK can still donate to political parties. That is an obvious weakness for potential foreign influence, and I am yet to hear a convincing argument as to why it is permitted. The solution is simple: the Government should mandate that a UK-registered company can only donate from the UK profits that it makes. That seems like a principle we can all get behind, and it would go a long way to protecting our much-cherished democracy.

Fourthly, as we have already heard, we must address the role of unincorporated associations, which provide a potential trapdoor for dark money entering our politics. Currently, candidates are not required to verify the ultimate source of donations received through these associations, effectively creating opaque slush funds. Forcing unincorporated associations to conduct better checks on the sources of the original donations would very quickly put an end to that risk.

Fifthly, despite the current political financing laws being riddled with loopholes, they are not even enforced properly. The Tories neutered the Electoral Commission and stripped it of its independence in the Elections Act 2022. What better way to return politics to service than by equipping the commission to hold all parties, including my own, to account? We could start by increasing its capacity for deterrence, by putting up its fining powers. In this era of

[Phil Brickell]

plutocrat donors, the current paltry fines that the Electoral Commission can impose are hardly going to put wrongdoers off. As I understand it, enhancements to the regime in that respect would not even require primary legislation.

This is an existential issue for our politics. It is not about one person, one party, one donor or even one jurisdiction. Transparency International UK has found that between 2001 and 2024, nearly £115 million in political donations came from unknown or questionable sources, with £1 in every £10 donated to political parties having an unclear origin. Reflect on that for a moment. It is simply unacceptable. The early signs are positive, and I thank the Minister for her engagement with myself and colleagues on this matter already. It demonstrates that the Government understand why today's debate is crucial. Failing to act sends a dangerous message that British democracy is for sale; we cannot and must not allow that to happen.

5.7 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I am proud to declare my membership of Unite the union. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests for support I have received from other unions, because trade union money is the cleanest money in politics; we know exactly where it comes from.

We all know the saying, "Money is power," and I would hope that none of us are naive enough to think that this does not apply to the UK. If we want to create a democratic system where everyone's vote has equal value, we need strong protections in place to prevent the very richest individuals in our society from warping our democracy. As we heard today, we are not the worst in the world. I remember a visit I took with you, Mrs Harris, on an international delegation, during which I spoke to a Member of Parliament from another country, which I will not name. We got talking about election spending limits for individual candidates. When I told them what it was in the UK, they turned to me and said, "What are you going to buy with that?" But just because we are not as bad as some does not mean that we cannot do better—and we have to do better, because public confidence in the financial transparency of our system has plummeted.

Just 15% of Brits surveyed by the Electoral Commission last year believed that spending and funding is transparent in our system. Sadly, the evidence shows that this is a problem of trust, as big money continues to have a corrosive influence on our politics. The last Government stripped the Electoral Commission of its ability to prosecute criminal offences and placed it under ministerial control—hardly impartial. As well as manoeuvring the electoral system further in their favour, the last Government quietly passed a statutory instrument to raise campaign spending limits. National election spending caps rose by 80%, and the amount of money that an individual can donate to a party without declaring who donated it rose from £7,500 to £11,180.

I am sure that there will be some Members who think that there is nothing wrong with very wealthy people putting their money behind a party that reflects their principles, but why should we not know who they are? We have to be a little more clear-sighted about the reality: first, because of the size and scale of these donations;

and secondly, because if we follow the money, we notice a pattern of some people suspiciously changing teams whenever we are about to see a changing of the guard. It would be naive to suggest that large donors are doing this purely out of the goodness of their own hearts.

I was alarmed to read the recent report by Transparency International, which found that 10% of all UK political donations originate from dubious sources. That is because it suited the last Government to allow front companies, which are set up for the sole purpose of laundering money. I was unsurprised to read that two thirds of that dark money went to the Conservative party. While I am pleased that my party in government has introduced the foreign influence registration scheme, I am concerned by reports that we may have not moved further on plans to ban any foreign political donations. This should not be a left or right issue—it just has to be based on the idea that every vote is worth the same.

It goes without saying that people like the owner of the social media website that I will only ever call Twitter, who is not even registered to vote in the UK, does not own companies incorporated in the UK and invariably avoids paying his full share of tax in the UK, should not be free to throw money at our politics, but here we are. The wealthiest man in the world could conceivably shower huge sums on any party that will help him to advance his divide and rule politics, which are designed to protect his vast wealth. This exemplifies why we need to get big money out of our politics and protect it from the undue influence of the super-rich.

The Institute for Public Policy Research has recommended capping individual and corporate donations to political parties at £100,000 a year. That seems like a modest starting point. We need a crackdown on dark money entering via shell companies that have never turned a profit in the UK and through unincorporated associations with no legal requirement to disclose their funders. We should also reinstate the Electoral Commission's ability to monitor and prosecute offences and put the resources it needs behind that—nothing hon. Members have not already heard today. I would also like to see my Government revisit the proposals to ensure that individuals donors are registered electors and that companies that donate are owned by people who live in Britain and pay their fair share of tax here. That is extremely important.

Political funding is not the only way that the very rich are able to exert undue influence. However, it is the most obvious place where we can take decisive action now. After a decade in which billionaire donors more than trebled their wealth and working people saw the biggest pay squeeze since the Napoleonic wars, we absolutely need change.

5.12 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell), for opening this debate, and Mr Stone, who started the petition. May I also say to the parliamentarians present that the speeches today have been excellent? I have really enjoyed listening and I thank hon. Members for that. I also thank the 235 people in Stroud who signed the petition and the many more who have emailed me about their worries regarding political donations. I have spent a lot of the last two years knocking on doors and the most common theme has been, "You're all

the same—you're all corrupt." The lack of trust in politics was very alarming, and it is something that parliamentarians of all parties need to be aware of.

I would like to talk briefly about two issues: the financing of political parties and lobbying. In Stroud, we were supplied with a contract by a Tory councillor for personal protective equipment that was 85% faulty. People on the frontline were left with faulty equipment. We all wonder, but do not know, why that contract was issued. Something like £93 million has been donated to political parties, and two thirds of that was donated by 19 individuals in this country. Is it fair, in a democracy, that there is so much power in the hands of so few people? That is something of which we need to be aware. As many hon. Members have said, the external foreign donations are what brought this debate to a head, because we are all extremely alarmed by stories of hundreds of millions of pounds going to certain political parties.

I will not talk for very long because we have heard so many excellent speeches, but I would first ask if we should question whether the donations system is a good one on which to run our politics in the first place. Secondly, "know your donor" checks, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) mentioned, are incredibly important. We must vet donors and make sure that the money is coming from a fair place. We need to look at all overseas donors. In fact, I would say that we need to ban any overseas donors to our political parties. I also believe in a cap on any political donations, if we are going to have political donations in the first place; £100,000 seems rather generous to me—we should bring that down.

Briefly, I want to talk about the influence of lobbying. This came as a slight shock to me. I became a politician having been a medic all my life. If we ever had any influence from the pharmaceutical companies, we totally ignored that evidence, yet as politicians we allow lobbyists to come and talk to us. I was on a platform talking about obesity, and there was even someone from Sainsbury's supermarket on the platform. Is it right that we allow people to influence our policy in that way?

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Member hits on an important point. It is surely up to us all to judge the value of what we are told by any particular lobbyist. We listen to constituents who lobby us all the time, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. What is bad is the lack of transparency about lobbying, not just of parliamentarians but of officials in government. Does he agree that a much more open and transparency register of lobbyists would be a big step forward?

Dr Opher: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point. The lack of transparency is a key issue. In 2023, oil and gas lobbyists spoke to Tory MPs on average 1.4 times per day, so is it really any wonder that they are now stepping back from their commitment to net zero? We must stop that sort of influence in Parliament. We must take the evidence and respond in the right way.

We must restore trust in politics and reform how donations are made. We should look at the whole system of party funding and restore faith in politics.

5.17 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I want to start by taking stock of where we are as a country. We are in a particular moment in British history. The Conservative Government that this Labour Government replaced did a number on this country in two ways. First, as we have heard from other hon. Members, our electoral and political system has been diminished—for instance, the Electoral Commission has fewer teeth. Secondly, vast swathes of our country feel hopeless. When I knocked on doors over the past two years, I began to feel that the opposition was not in fact the Conservative party but hopelessness. Whether it is the fabric of our society being torn apart or our public services being underfunded, people have been cast adrift, and they are increasingly unconfident about the ability of democracy to fix our problems. That is why fixing these problems is so important for this Government.

We are also in a particular moment in world history. That moment is one of democratic backsliding, and of the rise of authoritarianism, populism and misinformation. If we as a leading western democracy do not fix our rules around political donations and our electoral and political system, we will not be able to contribute to the survival of democracy in this moment, when democracy faces such a significant challenge. We have to get it right for our own people, but we have to get it right, too, for the democracies of the world.

It is important, therefore, that the Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to protect democracy by strengthening the rules on donations, and that the Prime Minister has said that he wishes to protect democracy from the threat of interference. The Government are right that we need to move further and faster to protect our elections and our national security against foreign interference. That means shoring up and shielding the integrity of our democracy and our institutions, which have been made vulnerable to foreign actors by some of the changes made by the previous Government, which we have heard about.

We also need to reflect on the fact that this world moment involves a particular intersection between the concentration of wealth that can sway elections in the hands of a small number of people who happen to be tech billionaires, and the fact that these wealthy men are foreigners to our country. If they were to get engaged in our politics under the current system, they could sway our elections through donations, as well as through their use of technology and communication channels. That is particularly important, because there are challenges around the use of the online space to spread misinformation, the role of artificial intelligence and the role of hacks, as well as questions about donations to political parties, candidates and agendas.

We know the names of some of these tech billionaires: Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Larry Ellison, Bill Gates or Sergey Brin. There is also, as we all know, Elon Musk. I talk about Elon Musk here for illustrative purposes, rather than just to single him out as an individual; any of the individuals I have just mentioned could use their tech wealth to be involved in the political activities of this country. But as I saw when I went to Park school and spoke to some of the younger people there, they are concerned about foreign donations into our country's political system.

[Tom Hayes]

One young person said to me, “What do you make of Elon Musk?” I did not quite know what to say, so I flipped the question back and said to that child, “Well, what do you make?” Her answer was absolutely pitch perfect. She said, “Why is a South African-born person, who lives in the United States, has funded a presidential election there, and is now part of the US Government, threatening to get involved in UK politics. I can’t even have a say in UK politics.” I think she makes an interesting point, and I thank her for making it.

Elon Musk cannot legally make a donation personally to a British political party, but he could go through UK subsidiaries of his companies, and we ought to be worried about that. He has suggested that he could donate significant sums of money to a political party in the UK. My concern is not about who he chooses to give that money to—I would not want his money coming to the Labour party. My concern is about his ability to give that money under present rules and the influence that that could buy. We have to be concerned about that.

There is a second point: we have a prevalence of wealth among tech billionaires, who may be getting involved in the political system of our country, and these are individuals who also have control over platforms, such as X and Starlink in the case of Elon Musk. That gives him significant control over access to information, and also over the integrity of information on those channels. For instance, with Ukraine, he has made on-again, off-again threats to end Starlink’s support for Ukraine. With X, we know that he has removed content moderation, and as a consequence we have seen that site become a den—a haven—for misinformation and populist rhetoric. We need to think not just about donations and who donates, but about what power those people have to influence agendas through their control over tech and social media channels.

This is dangerous not just within a democracy, but on the world stage. Elon Musk might be talking about funding one political party in the UK, but he could fund parties around the world if their electoral laws allow. It is not just about his view of one particular party in this country, it is about his view of particular agendas—here I will mention his endorsement of *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany.

How do we go about toughening up the rules? I believe there are three things that we can do. First, we should close the loopholes, and ensure that when companies make their profits in the UK for two years, they are able to make donations, but at no other time. We should also introduce a requirement for political parties to know their donor and identify the true source of donor funds. Secondly, we need to have a tough deterrent for those who break the rules. Frankly, if Elon Musk were to become actively involved in financing UK political parties and then to breach election law, the maximum fine that the Electoral Commission could levy is £20,000. I do not think that a man who is worth £263 billion is going to be very concerned about £20,000.

Thirdly, we need to look at closing the loophole in our donations system that allows donations from shell companies that have never even made a profit in the UK. Often, they have chosen to be in shell companies because they do not want to contribute tax towards our

welfare system, to fund the schools and the hospitals that many of our voters depend on and whose improvement they say is their main priority.

We need to strengthen democracy by strengthening our rules around donations. We need to be conscious of the threat to democracy in the UK and around the world from the concentration of wealth in tech billionaires, who often have narrow agendas. We need to be especially conscious of the capacity of those billionaires not just to fund our politics but to distort it through the communication channels that they have.

5.24 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests regarding donations to my election campaign and through my local Labour party.

Often in debates like this, we look at our political system and there is a preoccupation with the form of the democratic system—for example, debates about our voting system or whether we should have a second Chamber. Important as they are, they can often dominate the discourse. The internal mechanisms of democratic political systems are important, but we also need to examine and discuss the relationship of those internal mechanisms with external actors and the political electoral systems in which we operate. That is why I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) moving the motion, and I am grateful to the petitioners for bringing the matter before us.

At the general election, I stood on a manifesto that pledged to protect democracy by strengthening the rules on donations to political parties. I take that commitment seriously, as effective regulation of political finance is, in my view, crucial for maintaining public trust in our electoral systems across the UK. As has already been mentioned, under current legislation, any company registered as conducting business in the UK is a permissible donor to a political party operating in Great Britain. It is therefore possible for money from foreign sources to enter our politics via donations from UK companies. That undermines the credibility of our political system and gives greater scope for a further decline in trust. That leads to the interests of those foreign groups or individuals, in practice or perception, being seen to have influence in our political system through their funding.

I want to address one point that has been raised in this debate, which is the matter of accountability and deterrence. Although foreign donations to political parties and other campaigners are illegal, the current legislation fails to act as a sufficient deterrent. There is an often-quoted behavioural study of day centres that sheds light on this issue—apologies, Mrs Harris, but I will cite it again. In the study, parents who arrived late to pick up their children were fined, but instead of reducing lateness, the number of late pick-ups actually increased. Understandably, the parents began treating the fine as a fee for extra childcare, seeing it as an acceptable trade-off rather than a punishment.

We face a similar risk in our political donation system. Under current rules, the electoral system can issue fines of up to £20,000 for breaches. However, for a political party that can spend millions of pounds on a campaign, that amount may be seen as a small price to pay for

breaking the rules. It becomes less of a deterrent and more like an operational cost, just as the day care fine became the cost of convenience. If we are serious about protecting the integrity of our electoral system, we must ensure that penalties are strong enough to truly deter illegal behaviour, and are not just seen as a fee to be factored into campaign budgets.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned, the Committee on Standards in Public Life agrees and suggests that maximum fines should be 4% of the campaign's total spend or £500,000, whichever is higher. Without sharper teeth in our regulations, we risk allowing those with deeper pockets to buy an unfair advantage, undermining the very principles of democracy.

I therefore support the Government's intention to strengthen the rules on donations to political parties to protect our democracy and uphold the integrity of elections. I understand that they will be published in due course, but I urge the Government to do it as quickly as possible. While the current rules remain in place, the potential for abuse remains evident. The Electoral Commission stated in January this year that it would use its expertise and experience in regulating the political finance regime to help to ensure that any changes are workable and evidence based. Any proposals to change the rules on donations should be properly scrutinised and debated before becoming law.

I look forward to this debate continuing when said changes to electoral law are put before the House. To maintain public trust in our electoral system, those rules must be strengthened. It is upon all of us in this place to increase people's engagement with the political process. However, to develop that engagement and promote transparency, we need to build trust. One way in which we can build that trust is to take action on the rules on political donations.

5.29 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening the debate and the petitioners for bringing to Parliament this important petition, warning of the corrosion of trust between elected politicians and voters and of the vulnerability of our political finance system. I was proud last month to bring forward a ten-minute rule Bill on political donations, and I am pleased that Members from across the House continue to shine a light on this important issue. I hope that today's debate has further encouraged the Government to take political finance reform seriously and give it the priority it deserves.

This debate has made one thing very clear: there is growing agreement across the House that our system of political donations is in urgent need of reform. We must act to restore public trust in our democracy, and that means protecting it from undue influence, whether foreign or domestic. For too long, our political finance rules have lagged behind the reality of modern campaigning. The result? A system that concentrates too much power in too few hands, while many voters feel increasingly unheard.

Politics should be for everyone, not just the super-rich. The Liberal Democrats would introduce a cap on political donations and close the loopholes that continue to allow foreign money into our system. Our current rules leave the door dangerously open to influence from sources that do not always reflect the values or interests of the British people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) rightly observed. We believe that every voice should count equally. That is the only way we can ensure that it is the people of this country—not billionaires, not oligarchs and not corporate lobbyists—who decide our future at the ballot box.

We have heard good points from the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about the lack of transparency in lobbying. Trust in politics is faltering. A recent poll showed that more than two thirds of the British public support a cap on political donations. The case for change is clear, and the public know it. It is time that the Government caught up.

Under the current rules there is still no limit on how much a single person or company can donate and, despite years of warnings, loopholes in our political finance laws remain wide open. These weaknesses have allowed foreign actors to funnel money into our politics through opaque networks and UK-registered companies. Successive Governments have failed to act. Now the new Government have a real opportunity to deliver meaningful political finance reform and safeguard our democracy. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what steps will be taken to ensure fairness and transparency.

Public participation in politics is worryingly low—and why would it not be when so many people feel that their voice does not count and that decisions are made in private boardrooms, not public debates? As public servants, we have a duty to change that, and we can start by strengthening the integrity of our political system.

This is not just a question of fairness; it is a question of national security, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) explained. The malign Russian influence on one of the most important referendums in British history must be investigated as a matter of urgency. Our current rules leave our democracy exposed. Whether through digital interference, shell companies or strategic donations, hostile actors have found ways to reach into our democratic process. We have seen worrying headlines about foreign billionaires expressing interest in bankrolling political parties. Under our current rules, we are worryingly powerless to stop that, even when the money could distort public debate and undermine faith in our institutions.

Britain has long taken pride in being a beacon of democracy, but pride alone is not enough. We need meaningful action from the Government to protect what we value. Our political finance system is riddled with loopholes, and they are not minor technicalities: they are gaping vulnerabilities that can be and have been exploited. If we are serious about protecting our democracy, we must introduce a fair and proportionate cap on political donations, and close the blatant loopholes that allow foreign money to flow unrestricted into our politics. These are not radical ideas; they are overdue reforms backed by a broad public consensus.

[Manuela Perteghella]

Our politics must serve the British people, not the privileged few. Every citizen deserves an equal voice, and protecting our democracy from undue influence is the test of our commitment to that principle. Let us act now. Let us introduce fair caps, close the loopholes and give our constituents confidence that their votes matter just as much as anyone else's. If we want to restore faith in our democracy, we must show that it really belongs to the people.

5.34 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): This is the second time in a few weeks that we have debated this issue. I am aware that we are likely to be interrupted shortly for multiple votes, but I will do my best to make some progress in responding to the many and varied points that have been made.

The debate about political financing always feels like an equal opportunity debate: we can all find something in other political parties' financial arrangements that we would like to criticise and call into question. However, the high degree of cross-party commitment—and the fact that Governments of all parties over the years have passed legislation to ensure a high degree of security in UK political financing—demonstrates that our politics, on the whole and by any international comparison, is pretty clean. Members have raised a number of points, however, that have been widely debated and that are worth our consideration, and that I know the Government are already looking at.

The first point that is important to highlight is that foreign donations to political parties in the UK are already illegal. It is also illegal for foreign citizens to channel their own money through UK sources. Although we have heard a great deal of political debate about donations, prompted by Mr Musk and his comments, it is clear that if a UK company acted as an agent for a donation by a foreign company, that would be an impermissible donation under current laws. If a person or an organisation makes a donation on behalf of another without disclosing who that donation is from, that is also against our laws as they currently stand. The key thing is to make sure that we have effective measures in place for the enforcement of those rules.

A number of Members referred to the role of the Electoral Commission. It is important that we reflect that more recent legislation is based on the original Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which was passed by a previous Labour Government. I draw the attention of Members who have criticised more recent legislative developments to the words of a then Labour Minister when that legislation passed through the House. With respect to the Committee that designed the legislation, he said:

“The Neill committee made clear its view that prosecutions in respect of breaches of the law relating to controls on donations and election expenses should be placed in the hands of the Director of Public Prosecutions and should not be the concern of the commission...the commission does not have that power... the commission will be an enforcement authority but not a prosecuting authority.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 November 2000; Vol. 619, c. 631-632.]

There had clearly been some drift over time, whereby there was a lack of clarity as to who was responsible. Given, in particular, the significant civil penalties that

can be levied by the commission, there was a requirement for absolute clarity that prosecutions for breaches of the law were a matter for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, since any objection to those would likely end in a judicial review anyway. That is something that all Members should welcome in terms of bringing clarity to the process.

I have a few brief questions for the Minister, which will reflect what we debated previously on the Floor of the House. First, it is clear that, contrary to the points that have been made, taxation has never been a basis for suffrage in the UK, and a number of situations relating to that have been clarified in recent caselaw. Students, for example, are exempt from paying council tax, but none the less have a vote in local elections where they reside. There are also expats from the UK who have paid no taxes for a long time but have the right to vote, while others pay significant UK taxes on investments, pensions and other assets held in the UK and do not have a vote. As such, it is important to recognise that although those who pay taxes in the UK have a significant connection to this country, that is not the only basis on which people may exercise a vote.

The last Government, in the previous Parliament, made a commitment during the passage of the National Security Act 2023 to enhance powers so that regulators, law enforcement and security services could share information with political parties. That was, in part, designed to help avoiding a repeat of the situation in which the Labour party found itself taking £700,000 from Chinese spies. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that those commitments are delivered, so that our political parties can access that information when risks are identified?

Will the Minister close the loophole that was created by the Labour Welsh Government and the SNP Scottish Government, which for the first time allows Russian, Chinese and Iranian citizens who are resident in Wales and Scotland to donate to UK-wide political parties and campaigns, when those donations would otherwise be banned? Will she tell us why China is not to be included in the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme? I appreciate that the Government are seeking to enhance relationships with China, but that does create a significance risk of foreign interference. Will she say on record, as she previously did in the House, that she accepts that UK politicians are low risk, and that—although there are significant rules in the politically-exposed persons agenda, which has had an impact on the ability of parliamentarians from both sides of the House and their families to access financial services—no significant risk has materialised?

Finally, will the Minister commit to ensure that there will be the fullest possible consultation with all political parties and wider stakeholders on any planned changes to political finance law? There is a long-standing precedent that, when Governments of any party seek to change such law, they engage with the widest possible group of stakeholders. However, thus far, there have been no discussions with the parliamentary parties panel, no formal consultations with parties, nor any discussions on Privy Council terms about what those changes may be. It would be helpful for the Minister to confirm from the Dispatch Box whether that will happen as it always has in the past.

It is clear that to address the concerns that many Members have set out, there needs to be a reflection on not only the influence of political financial donations but the impact of benefits in kind. For example, technology companies seek to use algorithms hosted, based and written outside of the UK to influence where the eyes of UK residents and voters fall when engaging with the political system. We know that that creates a significant risk that needs to be addressed. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing this debate, and it is a pleasure, once again, to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris.

5.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing the debate, and I congratulate Jeremy Stone on creating the petition, which received such a large number of signatories. It is great to see so many Members join this Westminster Hall debate, which builds on a previous debate on the Floor of the House. We have heard many passionate and principled speeches on a matter that should rightly concern all of us. Those speeches illustrate a shared desire to protect our democracy from those who would seek to disrupt it, and they help to illuminate our path forward on this vital agenda.

We inherit a precious democracy forged through centuries of struggle and reform. The Reform Act 1832 began to address electoral inequalities, and the Representation of the People Acts 1918 and 1928 extended suffrage to all adults, regardless of gender or property ownership. Our democracy has continued to evolve. The Government intend to continue that tradition by widening participation and extending the electoral franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds.

Over the years, our democracy has shown its resilience and ability to adapt to challenges. Faced with concerns about undue influence in politics, Parliament has repeatedly risen to the occasion. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 is a great example. The Act addressed concerns held then about political funding and established our modern regulatory framework. The UK has shown its capacity to preserve the core principles of democracy as the world changes and new threats emerge. Today, as democracies all over the world confront the challenges of foreign interference, we must again be vigilant and take action to safeguard what is precious.

Foreign money has no place in the UK's political system, which is why the law is clear that foreign donations are not permitted. The only exception is for donations from certain Irish sources to Northern Irish political parties. That exception recognises the special place of Ireland in the political life and culture of Northern Ireland and is consistent with the principles set out in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. Accepting or facilitating an illegitimate foreign donation is rightly a criminal offence: political parties are required by law to take reasonable steps to verify the identity of a donor and whether they are permissible, and there are rules that safeguard against impermissible donations via proxies.

Although it is clear that foreign donations to political parties and other campaigners are illegal, the Government recognise the continued risk posed by actors who seek to interfere in our democratic process. The current rules

no longer match the sophistication and perseverance of those who wish to undermine our laws, and that threat must be addressed through stronger safeguards. That is why the Government committed in our manifesto to “strengthening the rules around donations to political parties”, including through enhanced safeguards against foreign donations. We are considering a series of new measures that would achieve that, such as enhanced checks by recipients of donations and tighter controls on donors, including more restrictions around company donations.

Many Members raised the notion of restricting the size of individual political donations. The Government do not plan to introduce such restrictions, as we are rightly focused on safeguards that protect against the threat of foreign interference. I mentioned at the start that we must protect what is hard won. It is vital that those who play a crucial role in our democracy can fundraise effectively and communicate their ideas with the electorate. Those who choose to participate in electoral campaigns must follow the strict accounting and transparency rules that apply to political donations, and the strict spending limits for election campaigns.

Members have mentioned the important role that the Electoral Commission plays in the UK's democratic system as the regulator of political finance. The robust enforcement of political finance rules is crucial to promoting public confidence in our democratic processes, ensuring their integrity, and combating the threat of foreign interference. That is why we have also committed to reviewing the powers of the regulator to ensure that it has the tools necessary to fulfil its duties. I can assure Members that we are currently weighing evidence from stakeholders, including recommendations from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the Electoral Commission. [*Interruption.*]

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. The debate is now suspended for Divisions. We will suspend for 15 minutes for the first vote and 10 minutes for every subsequent vote. Everyone who has spoken in today's debate is expected to return for the winding-up speeches.

5.48 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

6.40 pm

On resuming—

Rushanara Ali: I want to sum up some of the contributions made by colleagues. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran, who of course opened the debate, for the points in her speech; to the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for his contribution; and to my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours). I thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) for his contribution, as well as other hon. Members—I hope I am not missing colleagues out—including my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell).

There were some excellent contributions about some of the outstanding issues that we need to address, as a Parliament and a Government, by my hon. Friends the Members for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), for Stroud (Dr Opher), for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes)

[*Rushanara Ali*]

and for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke), and, of course, by the Front-Bench spokespeople, the hon. Members for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) and for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds).

Various questions were raised in the debate. In relation to the issues surrounding donations, we recognise that further work needs to be done. The Government are concerned about the growing threat of foreign interference and are focused on ensuring that we have systemic resilience and institutional strength. Of course, any suspected breaches of the rules, now or in the future, will remain a matter for the Electoral Commission or the police.

A number of colleagues mentioned donations from overseas electors. As has been mentioned, the franchise change for British citizens living overseas came into effect on 16 January 2024, removing the 15-year limit on overseas citizens' voting rights. Overseas voters have the right to participate in UK parliamentary elections, and that includes the right to donate to the parties or candidates they support, but foreign money is not permitted, and it is a criminal offence to facilitate an impermissible donation. Political parties can accept donations only from registered electors, and overseas electors are subject to the same counter-fraud measures as domestic electors, including having their identities confirmed as part of the registration process. Colleagues asked questions relating to the 15-year rule; we have no plans to reintroduce it.

A further question was raised about increasing the maximum fine that the Electoral Commission can impose for breaches of the political finance framework. As I stated earlier, robust enforcement of political finance rules by the Electoral Commission is crucial for maintaining public trust in our electoral system. As I said, that is why, as part of delivering on our commitment to strengthen the rules around political donations, we will look at any changes that are necessary to ensure that enforcement provides a clear deterrent against breaking the law, while remaining proportionate.

The strategy and policy statement was raised. We recognise the vital role that the Electoral Commission plays in the UK's democratic system, promoting public confidence in the democratic process and ensuring its integrity, and this Government are committed to strengthening our democracy and upholding the integrity of elections. The current strategy and policy statement does not reflect the Government's priorities, and we will not keep it in its current form. Alongside our broader electoral reforms to strengthen democracy, we will be reflecting on what actions are necessary in relation to the statement in the coming months.

Hon. Members raised the issue of safeguards against political donors being given favourable treatment in relation to Government contracts—for instance, PPE contracts. The Procurement Act 2023 strengthens existing obligations in respect of conflicts of interest. Contracting authorities must take all reasonable steps to identify, mitigate and keep under review conflicts and potential conflicts of interest. Where a conflict of interest puts a supplier at an unfair advantage, and if steps to mitigate it cannot avoid that advantage, the supplier must be excluded from that procurement.

Hon. Members raised the issue of foreign nationals being allowed to donate in UK elections. Electoral law ensures that only those with legitimate ties to the UK can donate. That includes people of varying nationalities who are established in the UK and are legitimately entitled to vote in certain elections, such as resident Commonwealth citizens. We do not propose to renege on that principle; instead, we are focusing our efforts on the real risk of foreign interference coming from external actors with no such legitimate links.

Reference was made to lobbying. The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 ensures that there is transparency around meetings between Ministers and external groups. When it comes to foreign influence, additional controls are being implemented through the foreign influence registration scheme that will require those being directed by a foreign power to carry out, or arrange for others to carry out, political influence activities to register with the scheme.

I look forward to continuing discussions with colleagues, and I am happy to follow up in writing if there are outstanding issues that I have not been able to address.

Tom Hayes: The Labour party was elected on a manifesto that committed to giving 16 and 17-year-olds the vote; the Minister referred to this earlier. Can she confirm that we will give 16 and 17-year-olds the vote, and perhaps set out a rough timetable for when that might happen?

Rushanara Ali: We have already set out our plans in Parliament, and before the summer recess we will set out a strategy in relation to what we intend to do, including the legislation.

Cameron Thomas: I am delighted to hear that the Government will give 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote. Do the Government intend to appropriately educate 16 and 17-year-olds about the right to vote?

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I do not think I should have allowed that first intervention, and I certainly should not have allowed the second. This is completely out of scope. Can we stick to the motion?

Rushanara Ali: Hon. Members have raised a number of issues. That particular point is important, and I have addressed it in other debates in Parliament.

I look forward to working with colleagues across parties on the subject we are debating today, as well as on the broader democracy agenda. We will get this work done well only if we work across parties as much as possible, while recognising, of course, that there will be some differences. I think we can all agree that if we want the next generation to be prepared and active in our democracy, we must work together to ensure we get this agenda right.

I reiterate my commitment to working with colleagues on this important agenda. The work to protect our democracy is a cross-cutting and UK-wide effort that extends beyond political finance regulation. Working with the intelligence agencies, the devolved Governments, the police and external partners, we remain vigilant against the full spectrum of threats, from cyber-vulnerabilities to the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

Before the summer recess, we will publish a comprehensive document outlining the Government's approach to electoral reform for this Parliament. Once again, I thank hon. Members across the House for their contributions to this important debate. I believe we all want a robust, vibrant and representative democracy, and that means taking the necessary steps to ensure we safeguard ourselves against foreign interference and uphold the integrity of our elections.

6.49 pm

Irene Campbell: It has been an honour to open and close this debate. Democracy should not be distorted by money from unclear and illegal sources. Foreign donations can lead to foreign interference. Serious changes must be considered so that the public can once again have confidence in the transparency of political parties. I am encouraged by the response from the Minister on her progress with this.

I again thank Jeremy Stone, who started the petition and gathered more than 140,000 signatures. His hard work has ensured that this conversation continues in Parliament and is given the attention it deserves. I also thank the Petitions Committee staff for their hard work in preparing for these debates that we Members on the Committee have the honour of opening and closing. Finally, I thank the representatives from the Electoral Commission I met in preparation for this debate for the valuable briefings and information they gave me.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 707189 relating to the rules for political donations.

6.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 31 March 2025

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme: User-friendly Explainer

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): In August 2024 we established the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme. Since then, we have enshrined the scheme in law and published the Government's compensation scheme summary. I have been intent on producing a simple and user friendly explainer document. This was driven in part by feedback from the infected blood community and parliamentarians that a shorter, more digestible document which sets out the key relevant information was necessary.

I am pleased to announce that today this has been published on www.gov.uk to coincide with the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2025 coming into force. This document has been developed with key representatives from the infected blood community.

[HCWS565]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS England Revised Financial Directions 2024-25 and 2025-26

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I am revising the 2024-25 financial directions to NHS England made on 26 March 2024 and setting the 2025-26 financial directions to NHS England. The amendment to the total revenue resource use limit for 2024-25 has been agreed with NHS England as required under section 223D(4) of the National Health Service Act 2006.

The directions reflect recent funding settlements with HM Treasury and include a number of transfers of funding between NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care. The 2024-25 revisions include additional funding received in-year for the NHS pay awards and other in-year pressures, including elective activity. The 2025-26 total is as set out by HM Treasury at the autumn Budget, but with some additional transfers between NHS England and DHSC. They will be published on www.gov.uk. The existing NHS mandate remains unchanged by these publications.

[HCWS569]

Drug and Alcohol Treatment and Recovery Grant

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): On 31 March, the Government published the targeted drug and alcohol treatment and recovery grant funding for local authorities in England for 2025-26.

Drug and alcohol addiction costs the country billions of pounds in additional health and criminal justice expenditure.

Dedicated investment in high-quality treatment and recovery services will reduce crime and save lives. This will benefit people who are experiencing drug and alcohol addiction, their families, and communities, many of whom are vulnerable with complex needs. Through access to individual placement and support employment support, we can help people to sustain their recovery and local employers to recruit from an untapped pool of talent.

This funding is an important component of our plan for change in health, through which we will build an NHS fit for the future, tackle the underlying drivers of ill health and health inequalities, and deliver three fundamental shifts: from hospital to community, from analogue to digital and from sickness to prevention.

It contributes to the safer streets mission by reducing crime and re-offending and funding services that continue to provide support for people who are sleeping rough who have a substance misuse problem. It also supports the opportunity mission by increasing support and early intervention for children and young people's substance issues as well as reducing the adverse childhood experience of parental substance misuse.

Allocations will see £310 million go directly to councils to build on their vital work of improving outcomes for people who need treatment and recovery support.

Full details of the grant allocations to local authorities for 2025-26 can be found on www.gov.uk. This information has been communicated to local authorities.

[HCWS568]

NHS Pension Scheme: Remediable Service Statements

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): In 2014 and 2015, the previous Government reformed public service pension schemes with the intent to better balance the interests of public service workers, employers and taxpayers. When the reforms were introduced, they provided "transitional protections" which allowed members who were closer to retirement age to remain in the previous "legacy" schemes rather than move to the "reformed" schemes. In December 2018, the Court of Appeal found that these protections in the judicial and firefighters pension schemes gave rise to unlawful discrimination—the McCloud and Sargeant case.

Governing legislation—the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Act 2022—was enacted to remedy the discrimination identified by the courts. A core element of the remedy is providing affected members with a choice of pension benefits, legacy or reformed, for the period the discrimination had effect. Schemes must provide affected members with remediable service statements which set out how this choice will affect the value of their pension benefits. Members who have already retired must be provided with a remediable service statement to allow them to make their benefit choice retrospectively.

The governing legislation requires that a statement is provided to each affected member on or before 1 April 2025 or "by such later day as the scheme manager considers reasonable in all the circumstances in the case of a particular member or a particular class of member."

Today, I am updating the House on the delivery of remediable service statements for affected NHS pension scheme members.

The production of remediable service statements involves a complex and challenging programme of work. Technical complexities, some of which extend beyond the NHS pension scheme, have affected delivery timelines for statements.

The NHS Business Services Authority, as the scheme administrator of the NHS pension scheme, is prioritising the delivery of remediable service statements. However, in order to ensure that affected members receive robust statements that enable informed decision making I have agreed to a revised delivery plan for these statements with the authority, on which it is communicating with affected members. The revised delivery plan prioritises members based on their likelihood of facing financial detriment as a consequence of the discrimination. Government acknowledge that the revised timelines mean many members will receive their statement later than anticipated and that this will have an impact, especially on those retired members who will financially benefit from their choice.

As part of the revised delivery plan, Government will be holding the NHS Business Services Authority to account against extended deadlines for the delivery of remediable service statements. These extended deadlines are detailed in the table below:

Member Class	Number of Members	RSS Extension
Retired by 1-10-23—formerly unprotected and only legacy benefits in payment	5,012	1 July 2025 (three months)
Retired by 1-10-23—formerly taper protected and only legacy benefits in payment	25,827	1 July 2025 (three months)
Retired by 1-10-23—formerly unprotected and both legacy and reform benefits in payment	14,376	1 October 2025 (six months)
Retired by 1-10-23—formerly taper protected and both legacy and reform benefits in payment	21,175	1 October 2025 (six months)
Retired by 1-10-23—formerly protected and benefits in payment for remedy period	241,233	1 December 2026 (20 months)
Retired between 1-10-23 and 1 July 2025	67,690	1 December 2026 (20 months)
Active	561,572	1 September 2025 (five months)
Deferred	144,076	1 September 2025 (five months)

[HCWS566]

Community Pharmacy Funding 2024-25 and 2025-26

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I am delighted to announce we have now concluded our consultation on funding for community pharmacy for 2024-25 and 2025-26. We have agreed with Community Pharmacy England that in 2025-26 the funding will increase to £3.073 billion, an increase of £375 million compared to 2024-25. This means, in addition to other changes, that on a like-for-like basis the value of the funding will increase by 15.0% compared to 2024-25, compared to 5.8% growth to the budget of the NHS as a whole. This is on top of a consolidated increase in 2024-25 of 4.1%.

This investment will enable us to embed and build on the range of clinical services that we commission from community pharmacy as we seek to improve access through reform and better use the skills of pharmacy teams to keep people well in their communities.

In addition, we have agreed to allow pharmacies to keep £193 million of funding that was paid to them primarily over the pandemic period to support the vital supply of medicines. This will bring more certainty of funding for contractors and support pharmacies in purchasing the medication prescribed for patients.

We know that community pharmacy has been neglected. We are determined to work with the sector to get it back on its feet and delivering for patients. This agreement with CPE will provide much needed investment and start to stabilise the community pharmacy sector. It marks a show of confidence in this Government to deliver the left shift—moving care from hospital to community, and moving from sickness to prevention.

I would like to pay tribute to CPE's committee. I am grateful to them for working constructively and at pace with officials to agree how best to use this significant new investment to support the sector, and to continue to provide services to patients across the country. We have prioritised patient access to medication, support and advice. We are also embedding and extending the clinical service offer. We will provide additional support for people newly prescribed medication for depression, as well as offering access to NHS provided emergency hormonal contraception across the country for the first time.

We have also committed £215 million to grow the Pharmacy First service, as we look to build on the over 1.9 million consultations already delivered as of November 2024 and provide a platform for prescribing services in the future.

These services will continue to increase the access and support available for people close to home, in the heart of their communities.

I am therefore very pleased to share this announcement and look forward to continued collaborative working with Community Pharmacy England and the wider sector as we build on what we have announced today and deliver what we all want for community pharmacy, a service fit for the future.

[HCWS570]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Act 2024: Implementation

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Act 2024 (the 2024 Act) received Royal Assent in April 2024. The 2024 Act made targeted changes to the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (IPA) to enable law enforcement and intelligence agencies to continue to tackle a range of evolving threats in the face of new technologies and increasingly sophisticated terrorist and criminal groups.

The IPA provides a framework for the use and oversight of investigatory powers by the intelligence services, law enforcement, and other public authorities. It helps safeguard people's privacy by setting out stringent controls over

the way these powers are authorised and overseen. It consolidated regulatory oversight of the use of investigatory powers into a single body: the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office. It also created the "double lock"—the requirement for IPA warrants for the most intrusive powers to be approved both by a Secretary of State (Yvette Cooper) and then by a Judicial Commissioner. One of the key cornerstones of the regime is a requirement that public authorities must be able to demonstrate that any use of the powers is necessary and proportionate.

Today I have laid before Parliament the draft Investigatory Powers (Codes of Practice, Review of Notices and Technical Advisory Board) Regulations 2025, which are necessary to implement the 2024 Act. The regulations will bring into force eight new and revised codes of practice—the codes, which have also been laid before Parliament, and which provide operational guidance for public authorities to have regard to when exercising functions to which the codes relate. They also include a number of provisions relating to the IPA's notices regime, including to specify what types of changes may be included in the new notification notices, introduce timelines for the review

of technical capability, data retention, and national security notices, and amend existing regulations in relation to notice processes with regards to membership of the Technical Advisory Board.

These regulations, and the codes of practice, have been informed by a public consultation which closed on 6 January 2025. The consultation responses included various suggestions for amendments to the draft codes of practice and regulations. We have made several changes as a result, including stylistic changes, further clarity on processes, and changes to the Technical Advisory Board's membership requirement. A copy of the Government's response to the consultation has been published on www.gov.uk.

These regulations are a crucial step in implementing the 2024 Act, which will ensure that the UK's investigatory powers framework continues to protect our national security and to prevent, investigate, disrupt, and prosecute the most serious crimes. The Government have published an explanatory memorandum alongside the regulations.

[HCWS567]

Petitions

Monday 31 March 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Proposed 24-hour Adult Gaming Centre: Whitby

The petition of the residents of the constituency of Scarborough and Whitby,

Declares that residents of Whitby are very strongly concerned that a planning application has been made by the slots and gambling company, Luxury Leisure, to open a 24-hour adult gaming centre at 67-68 Baxtergate in Whitby; further declares that the gaming centre may cause issues with noise and anti-social behaviour; notes that, as at 6 March 2025, North Yorkshire Council has received 522 objections to the application, whereas only six people have supported it; further notes that residents are particularly disappointed that the site of the proposed gaming centre is that of the Halifax bank branch, which is due to close in May 2025, leaving the town without any bank branches; and further declares that what residents of Whitby want is access to banks, shops and services, and not the proposed 24-hour gaming centre.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage North Yorkshire Council to reject the application for a 24-hour adult gaming centre at the site on Baxtergate, Whitby.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Alison Hume, *Official Report*, 11 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 1015.]

[P003052]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

I hope you can appreciate that due to the role of Ministers in the planning system, I am unable to comment on individual cases.

By law, planning applications are determined in accordance with the local development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Each application is judged on its own individual merit and the weight given to these considerations is a matter for the local planning authority as the decision taker in the first instance.

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Communications infrastructure in Hazel Grove

The petition of residents of the constituency of Hazel Grove,

Declares that proposed new infrastructure such as telegraph poles and overhead fibre optic cables in the area south of Dean Lane are unnecessary and an eyesore.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the proposed installation of communications infrastructure in the area south of Dean Lane in the Hazel Grove constituency is cancelled.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Lisa Smart, *Official Report*, 5 February 2025; Vol. 761, c. 892.]

[P003041]

Observations from the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):

Communities across the country have raised concerns about the deployment of telegraph poles. This Government are committed to ensuring that both consumers and businesses have access to fast, reliable broadband. At the same time, we want to ensure that this happens in a way that minimises the harmful impact on local communities.

Telegraph poles are an established part of the infrastructure in many parts of the country and can play an important role in delivering cost-effective connectivity to communities, especially in hard-to-reach areas, and those areas where the sharing of infrastructure is not possible, for instance because the existing broadband infrastructure was directly buried in the ground, without ducts. Building new underground ducts in these areas is significantly more expensive than installing poles and comes with its own challenges, such as traffic disruption.

I understand from the operator Brsk that parts of the existing network in the area have been buried in the ground without ducting, and therefore some new infrastructure was deemed necessary to complete the network.

The Government's role in this is to set national policy, rather than deliver infrastructure, so it would not be appropriate or possible for me to intervene in the specifics of the network deployment in the Hazel Grove constituency. However, I have been urging operators to share infrastructure where possible, and to listen to local concerns, so I am glad that Brsk says that it is reviewing its build plans in response to community feedback in the area.

The Government are also taking further action to strike the right balance between network roll-out and public concerns about new infrastructure. There are regulations in place that require operators to share infrastructure where practicable, and I see greater infrastructure sharing as essential to minimising disruption to residents. Broadband operators must remain aware of the impact their deployment has on local communities, as I do not want this to undermine public support for the roll-out of fibre broadband.

Since taking up my post as Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, I have met with both MPs and telecommunications providers to understand the situation, and to seek resolutions that balance the need for rolling out future-proof full-fibre infrastructure and communities' concerns. In particular, I have emphasised to broadband operators my concerns about the duplication of infrastructure in areas where alternatives exist, such as ducts or poles that could be shared. I am confident that the industry has been receptive to these concerns. They have reassured me of their commitment to put greater focus on community engagement when deploying their networks, and alt-net operators have committed to work towards greater infrastructure sharing.

Indeed, as I have set out to Parliament on 25 March 2025, industry trade bodies have worked together to publish new guidelines for telecommunications operators installing telegraph poles. These new guidelines set out expectations for operators around community engagement, telegraph pole placement, and circumstances in which the appropriateness of telegraph poles should be reconsidered. The guidelines are available on the Internet Services Providers' Association website here: <https://www.ispa.org.uk/pole-siting-best-practice>

While I am confident that industry will better take into account community views as the roll-out of new full-fibre networks continues, I will not hesitate to

consider changing regulations if it becomes clear that industry does not take my concerns seriously. Thank you for bringing these concerns to our attention.

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**not later than
Monday 7 April 2025**

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