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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 1 April 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven 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).

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Syrian Constitutional Declaration

1. **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of the Syrian constitutional declaration, signed on 13 March 2025. [903533]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): We welcome the provisions made in the constitutional declaration on freedom of expression, freedom of belief and women's rights. We also welcome the announcement on the formation of the new Syrian Government. The UK stands ready to support an inclusive, stable and prosperous future for the people of Syria. We will continue to encourage inclusive governance and will work with the Syrian Government to that end.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that reply. The fall of Assad was rightly welcomed by all Members of this House, but reports of mass killings of Christians and Alawites, which have now resulted in more than 1,500 civilian deaths, show that Syria is still a very unstable country. Will the Secretary of State therefore outline what support is being given to the new Syrian Government to prevent further violence and another appalling refugee crisis?

Mr Lammy: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are following steps closely. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), will be meeting civil society groups today. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) will know that we have allocated £160 million to support recovery and stability through lifesaving and other such assistance. Clearly, the recent violence was incredibly horrific and alarming. We will continue to work with the new Government as best we can to ensure that we get the inclusive political transition that we all want to see.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Foreign Secretary will know that this is a five-year draft constitution. Does he share my concern that the legislative, Executive and judicial separation of powers in it need to be beefed up? The appointment of the new Government appears, prima facie, to be inclusive, but does he agree that the people's committee also needs to be inclusive given that it will be mostly appointed by the President?

Mr Lammy: Clearly, it is welcome that the new Government have moved in this direction. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we recognise our skills in governance and in working with allies and partners, and we will use that strength to help to support the new Government. We are aware of his concerns and we will work with the new Government to get that better separation that he wants.

UK-Mauritius Treaty: Chagos Islands

2. **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Whether any costs arising from the proposed treaty with Mauritius on the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands will be met by his Department. [903535]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The UK-Mauritius treaty, which enables the continued operation of the base on Diego Garcia, is still subject to finalisation and signature. Financial obligations arising from the agreement, including departmental budgetary responsibilities, will be managed responsibly within the Government's fiscal framework, including through the upcoming spending review.

Joe Robertson: Oh dear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that is not the answer to the question that I asked. Perhaps the Minister has brought the wrong file with him. My question was very simple and it is one to which the British people deserve an answer. The Government are planning to give away sovereign British territory along with billions of pounds to Mauritius. The money was not referred to in the spring statement or in the Budget. Where is it coming from?

Stephen Doughty: I have answered questions on that matter a number of times in this House. This Government will not scrimp on security. The base on Diego Garcia will be secured for ourselves and our allies. Protecting the British people and our allies is our No. 1 priority, and full details will be provided in due course.

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

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Government have finally admitted to front-loading payments to Mauritius for their surrender deal, caving in to Prime Minister Ramgoolam's demands since he took office in November. Yet they still refuse to disclose the amount or clarify which budgets will cover the lease, economic partnership and Chagossian trust fund. Why the secrecy? Will the Minister disclose the details now? Will he also confirm whether the statement from the Prime Minister of Mauritius is correct in saying that concessions have been made, including the loss of sovereign rights on Diego Garcia and of unilateral lease renewal provisions?

When will this horrific deal finally come to Parliament, and what time will be provided to debate it? Or, better still, why does the Minister not dump the deal completely and keep Chagos British?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member neglects to remind the House that it was his Government who started negotiations on this matter, because they recognised that our national security interests and those of our allies were under threat. A financial element was crucial to protecting the operation of that crucial base. Once the treaty is signed, and after ratification in the usual way, it will be put before both Houses for scrutiny, and it will of course include costs. The Government will not scrimp on our security. Protecting the British people is our No. 1 priority.

Overseas Estate: Urgent Repairs

3. **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): What steps he is taking with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to provide funding for urgent repairs to his Department's overseas estates. [903536]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The UK's diplomatic estate directly supports the delivery of this Government's missions. Maintenance of the diplomatic estate, with an emphasis on safety and security for staff and visitors, has been a core priority for the Department during ongoing discussions with the Treasury about the spending review.

Edward Morello: The maintenance and upkeep of the 6,000 properties that constitute the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's overseas estate is estimated to cost £250 million a year. In recent years, that has been funded through the sale of assets. Drawdown on the receipts of those sales is due to run out either this year or next, and the Department has previously made it clear that there is no more family silver to sell. My question to the Minister is this: what conversations have been had with the Treasury about a long-term sustainable funding model for the estate, and if the Treasury is not forthcoming with the money, what cuts does the Department intend to make?

Catherine West: After the fire sale of assets by the former Government in 2010, the FCDO has been focusing on how to make good its estate. Now that that money is exhausted, the FCDO has developed a new estates prioritisation tool to ensure that finite resources are targeted at places of greatest need and weighted towards mitigating health and safety and security risks.

European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina

4. **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the UK's contribution to the European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina. [903537]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina is key to maintaining peace and security there. Although the UK does not contribute to the mission, we are committed to supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina through NATO and our bilateral defence co-operation, and we are open

to exploring enhanced co-operation with the EU, including through operations and missions as we strengthen the UK-EU security and defence relationship, including in the western Balkans.

James MacCleary: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that the Conservative Government previously withdrew from the EUFOR peacekeeping force—Operation Althea—in 2020, following their botched Brexit deal, letting our allies down. Will the Minister consider recommitting British troops to Operation Althea, as other third countries have, such as Turkey, to show our European allies that we want to work together and to demonstrate our continued focus on the region?

Stephen Doughty: I think the hon. Member heard what I said a moment ago. We regularly engage with EUFOR and the EU delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Indeed, I co-convened a call with Quint members and EU institutions on Friday with my French counterpart, and we are working closely on these very serious matters. We are also supporting security in Bosnia through our bilateral contributions, including our staff officers in the NATO HQ in Sarajevo.

Israeli Settlements: West Bank

5. **Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of Israeli settlements in the west bank. [903538]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): Israeli settlements are illegal under international law and harm the prospects of a two-state solution. On 21 March, the UN Security Council made clear that we oppose any attempt to expand settlements in the west bank. I have been very clear with Israeli Ministers that they must clamp down on settler violence and end settler expansion.

Lewis Atkinson: On Saturday night, the Israeli Government announced the approval of an expanded road network in the E1 corridor of the west bank with the stated aim of supporting the development of illegal Israeli settlements in the area. That area is critical to the territorial integrity of a future Palestinian state. Previously, unified international pressure has restrained the Israeli Government, so can the Foreign Secretary say how the Government are working with their allies to exert maximum influence on Israel in this matter?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I condemn categorically the development of settlements that are illegal under international law. Settlements do not offer security to Israel or to Palestinians. I also condemn calls to annex the west bank, which would lead only to violence and jeopardise prospects for a Palestinian state. I am clear with Israeli counterparts that settlement expansion must stop. We will continue to work with our partners to ensure prospects for a Palestinian state.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): We have heard Secretary of State after Secretary of State condemn the increase in settlements and settler violence in the west bank over the last 30 or 40 years and it has made not the slightest bit of difference to their expansion. When will the Foreign Secretary accept that the only

thing that the Israelis will respond to—we should not forget that these settlements are sponsored by the Israeli state—is action? When can we expect more sanctions, particularly on violent settlers and their organisations? When can we expect a full trade ban on settlement produce? In particular, will the Secretary of State consider proscribing those settler organisations that are perpetrating terrorism on an innocent Palestinian population?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. It is important that there is a cross-party position, and successive Ministers of both political parties have condemned expansion and condemned violence. We continue to work with partners across Europe and beyond on these issues. I do not say that it is easy. He will know that I announced sanctions back in October, and we continue to keep these issues under review, but the culture of impunity for those engaged in violence is intolerable. I remember just a few months ago sitting with Bedouins who had experienced that violence and were being subjected to that expansion—it is horrendous. That is why in both the UN and our dialogue with the Israeli Government we are clear that that harms the prospects of peace and security for Israel; it does not further its ambitions.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The scenes coming out of Palestine recently have been nothing short of shocking. Hundreds have been killed in settler violence in the west bank, the brutal torture of Palestinians in Israeli custody is commonplace and the collapse of the ceasefire means that the devastation and human suffering in Gaza has simply continued. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether his Department has received any evidence showing that international law has been violated? Will he share such evidence and his assessment openly?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. She will know that, in a sober and measured way, the Government had to make our own decision on the exports licensing regime, which was put in place by the last Government, and we assessed that there was a clear risk of a breach of international humanitarian law. Therefore, we have suspended arms that could be used in Gaza. That is a decision that Ministers have made from this Dispatch Box under different Governments.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Earlier this year, I visited the west bank with colleagues in the Chamber as part of a parliamentary delegation, where I saw the awful Israeli illegal violence in Hebron and Susya. We ran into two Israeli settlers who clearly wanted us off the area that they had burned down. Will the Foreign Secretary go further than he has in condemning that violence by agreeing to full sanctions and an embargo on all Israeli illegal settlements? Owing to the position of the City of London, that could have a profound impact and stop the violence.

Mr Lammy: I should make it clear that settlement goods do not benefit from any free trade arrangements that we have with Israel. Obviously, on 15 October, I announced new sanctions targeting three illegal settler outposts and four organisations that have supported the sponsored violence against communities in the west bank.

Official Development Assistance: Refugee Costs

6. **Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the value for money of official development assistance spending on in-donor refugee costs. [903539]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The Government are tackling the asylum backlog at record pace so that we can work towards ending the use of hotels and ensure that more of our ODA budget is spent on our development priorities globally. Detailed decisions on how the ODA budget will be allocated are being worked through as part of the ongoing spending review.

Noah Law: The British public increasingly feel that development aid has sadly lost its clarity of purpose. While I accept that there are multiple objectives behind aid, and that of course lifting the world's poorest out of poverty has long been at the heart of the FCDO's mission, a reset in the social contract around development aid is clearly needed. What consideration has the Minister given to shaping development policy that explicitly addresses the upstream determinants of mass migration?

Stephen Doughty: I agree with much of what my hon. Friend has said. Our development efforts, as the Foreign Secretary has said, have never just been about the aid budget. Peace and security, effective governance, access to private investment, remittance flows, efficient tax systems and access to trade opportunities are all essential foundations for development. That requires us to mobilise the full force of different resources and expertise across Government, our businesses and in universities, science and beyond.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Does the Minister agree that rather than being used to meet in-donor refugee costs, the official development assistance budget should prioritise tackling extreme poverty? It is now a year since the OECD development assistance committee's mid-term review, which showed that the UK had only made good progress on two of the 10 recommendations since the 2020 peer review. What progress has the FCDO made over the last 12 months in better meeting the committee's guidance?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady asks about important matters around spending on in-donor refugee costs. Thanks to the measures taken by the Home Secretary to reduce the asylum backlog and work towards exiting costly asylum hotels, we expect overall ODA spending on asylum to have been lower in 2024 than in 2023. There will always be some unpredictability, but we expect the actions to continue reducing in-donor refugee costs in this Parliament.

Official Development Assistance: Infectious Diseases

7. **David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of planned reductions to the official development assistance budget on efforts to tackle infectious diseases. [903540]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. Decisions on how ODA will be used will be considered as part of the

ongoing spending review. Reducing the overall size of the budget will necessarily have an impact on the scale and shape of our work. I can say, however, that our important work and support for Gavi is immunising 300 million children and saving up to 8 million lives, and our £1 billion pledge to the Global Fund for 2023-25 is supporting prevention and treatment for HIV, tuberculosis and malaria, and will help to save over 1 million lives.

David Davis: I agree with the Minister on what he just said, but Gavi says that the changing policy will mean that 37.9 million fewer children will be immunised, which means that over five years, 600,000 will die. How on earth does he live with himself with that policy?

Stephen Doughty: With the greatest of respect, the right hon. Gentleman will know my record on these important issues, having advocated for them over many years in this place and outside. I do not accept his characterisation. Decisions have not yet been taken; they are being taken as part of the spending review. He will know that the UK is one of the largest donors to Gavi. We have committed £1.65 billion in the current strategic period up to 2025 and that will make an important impact on children's lives around the world.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Gavi was created very much with the UK as a driving force. It is one of the proudest achievements of the previous Labour Government. It has immunised almost 2 billion people in the world, and not only is it saving lives but it is important for jobs and work here in the UK in our fantastic life sciences sector. Will the Minister give a commitment that we will continue to be a leading force in Gavi at the replenishment in June?

Stephen Doughty: The Foreign Secretary has been discussing these important issues with the Health and Social Care Secretary. My hon. Friend is right to point out the important role of Gavi, as well as our role in that. The decisions will be set out in due course, but I hear what she and, indeed, other hon. and right hon. Members are saying on this important issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is very clear from Ministers' answers that we still have no indication about which programmes and where will be affected by the planned reductions to ODA and from when exactly the cuts will be effective. We are told to wait for the spending review, but many organisations, including those tackling infectious diseases, are left to face uncertainty and to work at risk. Will the Minister tell us what instructions have been issued to his Department's humanitarian aid programmes about what they are expected to do between now and the spending review in June?

Stephen Doughty: We clearly have difficult decisions to make, but the FCDO is not pausing all ODA programming and not creating a cliff edge in this year. We are focusing on ensuring that every pound will be spent in the most impactful way in the new context. That is a very difficult decision, as the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I have set out. We will set out the details in due course, but we are listening closely to Members in this House and, indeed, to the many partners and stakeholders we work with on these important issues.

West Papua Critical Minerals: Human Rights

8. **Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): If he will amend the memorandum of understanding between Indonesia and the UK on a strategic partnership on critical minerals, published on 29 November 2024, to include conditions on the protection of human rights in West Papua. [903541]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The memorandum of understanding—as you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, having signed off on it in 2024—is an agreement to create a policy framework that promotes good environmental, social and governance practices in critical minerals, mining and processing. I was able to visit Indonesia in January specifically to raise concerns about human rights in Papua with the senior Minister for human rights.¹

Alex Sobel: In 2018, President Joko Widodo promised the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights that he would be allowed to visit West Papua. No visit has yet been facilitated by Indonesia, although two High Commissioners have been and gone. Without such a visit, it is impossible to assess the real human rights situation. Will the Minister ensure that the UK does not engage in critical minerals extraction in West Papua before such a visit takes place?

Catherine West: The UK continues to support the visit by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and, through initiatives such as the voluntary principles on security and human rights, and the UK-Indonesia critical minerals MOU—signed off by you, Madam Deputy Speaker—the Government promote best practice on sustainability and respect for human rights.²

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I am delighted to hear that the Minister has been raising human rights concerns with the Government of Indonesia about critical minerals. Would she perhaps have a word with her colleague the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero about the human rights concerns over other critical minerals conversions in China? It is going into a green energy economy that is supposed to have environmental, social and governance accords, yet somehow or other it fails on all of those: it fails because of its coal-powered production, it fails because its products are made by socially undesirable slave labour—I hope she agrees about that—and it fails on governance because there is no oversight. Will she have those same conversations within her own Government?

Catherine West: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise those pressing concerns, and all will be revealed when the China audit comes forward with the specifics on his question.

Middle East

9. **Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help advance peace in the middle east. [903542]

20. **Dr Zubir Ahmed** (Glasgow South West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help restore the ceasefire in Gaza. [903554]

1. [Official Report, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 7WC.] (Correction)

2. [Official Report, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 7WC.] (Correction)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): I am deeply concerned about the resumption of hostilities in Gaza. The Foreign Secretary and I are pressing all parties to return urgently to dialogue and to implement the ceasefire agreement in full. Since the renewed outbreak of hostilities, the Foreign Secretary has spoken to Secretary Rubio, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, EU High Representative Kallas and the UN emergency relief co-ordinator, Tom Fletcher. We have also been working with our French, German and Italian partners in support of the Arab plan for the reconstruction of Gaza as part of wider peace building efforts.

Ellie Chowns: It is often said that actions speak louder than words. The Government have repeatedly condemned what is happening in Gaza and the west bank, yet Israeli settler violence, Israeli settlement expansion, the unlawful demolition of Palestinian homes and violence in Gaza are continuing. Given that UK diplomatic efforts and condemnations are being so roundly ignored, will the UK now take action and ban the importation of products from illegal settlements on illegally occupied land, to give the signal that Israel cannot break international law with complete impunity?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Lady will know the importance that we have placed on international law since we came to power in July. We have been clear throughout this period that we want to see a ceasefire in Gaza. We regret that, at this point, we are still in disagreement with the Israeli Government, and we regret the scenes of the last few weeks in relation to the west bank and to Gaza. In relation to settlement goods, as the Foreign Secretary said earlier and as I have said before, different provisions exist for illegal settlements, which we consider to be illegal and which do not benefit from any of the provisions that would otherwise cover goods from Israel.

Dr Ahmed: Over the past week, I have been in touch with medical colleagues on the ground in Gaza and also with representatives of hostage families in Israel. In Gaza, they corroborate the worrying UN reports of a shallow grave containing the bodies of 15 paramedics and rescue workers, seemingly shot one by one by the Israeli army, some of them still wearing the surgical gloves that they were using to save the lives of others. In Israel, hostage families feel increasingly distant from their own Government and abandoned by them. Hamas is a terrorist organisation, but Israel is an ally. As a critical friend and ally, what further steps can we take to reinforce our message that the Israeli Government's current trajectory is destructive for peace and, indeed, for their own interests?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is right to ask this question. I know that he, himself a surgeon, has been closely engaged with the medical situation in Gaza and the incredible bravery of those who provide that assistance. As I said in answer to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns), the scenes in Gaza in relation to aid workers and, of course, the Gazan civilians themselves are absolutely horrific. It is why with France we called a special session of the UN Security Council on Friday, and we will continue to press with all diplomatic levers to see an improvement.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What assessment have the Government made of reports that Iran is considering pre-emptive strikes against American B-2 Spirit bombers that have recently been forward-located in Diego Garcia?

Mr Falconer: As the House will understand, I will not provide a detailed commentary on that reporting, but we remain deeply conscious of the potential threats from Iran, both in this country and in the region. We continue to have dialogue with the Iranian Government—the Foreign Secretary spoke to his equivalent just last week. We treat these matters with the utmost seriousness, as the right hon. Member would expect.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): Like many, I was extremely alarmed to hear the Israeli Defence Minister, Israel Katz, threaten the “total destruction” of Gaza. The UK and its allies are committed to a two-state solution, but that only works if there is a state left standing for Palestinians. Will that Minister ever be sanctioned, and will our Minister set out what role he sees the UK playing in the long-term reconstruction of Gaza?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question; I know how attentive to these issues she has been. The Foreign Secretary has condemned in this Chamber the comments of Defence Minister Katz, and this Government are clear what the path to reconstruction in Gaza must be. We have engaged closely with our partners in the Arab world, we welcome their plan for reconstructing Gaza, and we will continue to do all we can to see that as the path to reconstruction, with dignity for the Palestinian people of Gaza.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Today is the anniversary of the killing of the 33-year-old ex-Royal Marine James Henderson, who was killed by the Israelis among seven aid workers with the World Central Kitchen. A year later, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) has mentioned, mass graves have been found with eight bodies of those who worked for the Red Crescent and the Red Cross. That comes two weeks after eight aid workers from the Al-Khair Foundation were killed. It is believed that 1,500 aid workers have been killed. Does the Minister believe that it is illegal under international law to kill aid workers and, if so, what is he prepared to do about it?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to comment. Today is indeed the one-year anniversary of the appalling strike on the World Central Kitchen convoy, which killed seven people, including British citizens John Chapman, James Henderson and James Kirby. I would like to pay tribute to their bravery and remember again the appalling tragedy of that day. I, alongside the Foreign Secretary, met their families in November. They are determined to see justice for their family members, and I know that the whole Chamber will be united in that determination. Israel's Military Advocate General must quickly and thoroughly conclude their consideration of the strike, including determining whether criminal proceedings should be initiated. As the hon. Gentleman has said, Gaza is now the most dangerous place in the world to be an aid worker. This cannot continue.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): As others have said, today is the anniversary of the deaths of James Kirby, John Chapman and James Henderson—three former servicemen. We further heard about the 15 aid workers who were killed last week. UN Under-Secretary-General Tom Fletcher has described them as having been killed one by one and buried in shallow graves alongside their clearly marked ambulances, fire trucks and UN vehicles. I thank the Government for calling a UN Security Council meeting on the protection of aid workers. Will the Minister update us on the outcome of that meeting and the further steps we will take to protect aid workers in Gaza?

Mr Falconer: The meeting on Friday considered those questions. There was agreement across the Security Council on the importance of preserving the space for humanitarian action. As I have said this morning, we regret deeply that there have not yet been further improvements, and we will continue to use all available diplomatic steps to ensure that aid gets into Gaza, aid workers are protected, and the horrific scenes described by the emergency relief co-ordinator are not repeated.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Our thoughts continue to be with the hostages held in Hamas captivity in Gaza and with their families. What recent contact has the Minister had with counterparts in Israel, America and our partners in the region to secure their release and broker a way through this impasse? What steps are being taken across Government to address the threats to stability posed by Iran? How does the Minister envisage the removal of Hamas from the governance of Gaza?

Mr Falconer: On the shadow Foreign Secretary's important first point, we are, as she would expect, in regular contact with all those involved in negotiations. The Foreign Secretary spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister last week. I have been in regular contact with the Qataris, who are doing important work in this file. As she would expect, we continue to be in touch with the hostage families, whose concern I know the Chamber continues to share.

On the threats posed by Iran, we speak to the relevant players in the region and to the E3. As I said in response to an earlier question, the Foreign Secretary spoke to the Iranian Foreign Minister last week and underlined that we continue to support a diplomatic resolution to the tensions with Iran. We do not want to see Iran secure a nuclear weapon. We believe that a diplomatic solution is the best way to achieve that, but we will hold the snap-back of sanctions, and indeed many other measures, under review until we are satisfied.

Support for Ukraine

10. **Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support Ukraine. [903543]

16. **Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support Ukraine. [903550]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is leading international efforts to keep up the pressure on Russia through more than 2,200 sanctions, which have helped to reduce Russia's oil revenue by 25% between January and November 2024 compared with two years prior. We are of course also working hard to co-ordinate allies. Just yesterday I was in Madrid discussing these issues with European counterparts, and later this week I will be at the NATO Foreign Ministers conference, where the Ukrainians will be as well.

Andrew Ranger: I am incredibly proud that, since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Wrexham has welcomed many Ukrainian families. Among them are Yaroslav and Oksana, who had long dreamed of opening a café in their home town of Chortkiv. Despite the war preventing them from realising that dream at home, they now own a thriving business on Wrexham High Street. How are the Government continuing to support Ukrainian families who play a big part in communities across Britain, as well as those who, at some point in the future, may wish to return to Ukraine when the situation allows?

Mr Lammy: I am proud that the British people across our country have opened their homes and their hearts to Ukrainians fleeing Russia's brutal war. The Homes for Ukraine scheme has helped more than 160,000 Ukrainians to find refuge here, and since 4 February, Ukrainian refugees can apply to remain for an additional 18 months while continuing to receive vital support.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): As the Foreign Secretary knows, we have substantial engagement with, and deployment to, Estonia. Talk of peace in Ukraine is of course welcome and Britain should play its role in supporting that peace, but does he accept that any deployment of British troops to Ukraine increases the risk to the UK and its forces in Estonia?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman should know that the UK's commitment to the security of Estonia is iron-clad, and made real by our NATO forward land forces deployment. Discussions regarding how our military can support Ukraine's future security arrangements are ongoing, including with NATO allies and Secretary-General Rutte. Part of the discussion for countries committed to the coalition of the willing is about ensuring that those countries on the frontline are not left without adequate support. The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue.

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

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The whole House continues to stand united with the people of Ukraine in their existential struggle. Although there has been much coverage of tentative steps towards a Black sea ceasefire, does the Foreign Secretary agree that, with the brutal war raging on land, we must continue to constrain Putin's war machine with every tool at our disposal? Could he update us on his plans for doing so beyond sanctions? Does he agree that the onus remains squarely on Putin to prove whether he is in any way serious about the kind of lasting and just peace that President Zelensky wants to see?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Lady should know that, with EU colleagues yesterday, at the G7 a few weeks ago and, I am sure, with colleagues as I head to NATO, we are discussing an oil cap in particular and how that would limit Putin's reserves. We continue to discuss not just the freezing of assets but the seizing of assets. We recognise that some European colleagues are more exposed than we in the UK are. Nevertheless, why should we use taxpayers' money? We should use Russian money that has caused so much damage in Ukraine. Of course, we continue to look at the arsenal of sanctions that we can use, and I am sure that I will have more to say on that in the coming weeks.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Of all the horrors that Vladimir Putin has inflicted on Ukraine, the abduction of more than 20,000 Ukrainian children is one of the most vile. It threatens to rob Ukraine of its future, which is surely Putin's ultimate goal. The Prime Minister praised the work of Kyiv's Bring Kids Back initiative last week. Will the Foreign Secretary now commit to the UK filling the funding gap left by the Trump Administration's withdrawal of funding for Yale's humanitarian research lab, so that it can continue to research Russia's war crimes, especially to track the whereabouts of these children, so that they can be brought back home?

Mr Lammy: It was important for me to meet Madam Zelensky to discuss this issue when I was last in Ukraine. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), also met the relevant Minister in Ukraine to discuss this issue just a few days ago. I can absolutely give an undertaking to continue to support the group. It is not our assessment that we can meet the shortfall left by the withdrawal of USAID—United States Agency for International Development—funding, but we will continue to work with partners across Europe on this important issue, which is very personal to me.

Gaza: Aid

11. **Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD):** What diplomatic steps he is taking to help ensure that Israel allows aid into Gaza. [903545]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Aid should never be used as a political tool. As the Foreign Secretary made clear to the House on 20 March, blocking humanitarian aid into Gaza is appalling and unacceptable. Israel must allow aid into Gaza immediately. The Foreign Secretary made that clear to Israeli Foreign Minister Sa'ar on 21 March and issued a joint statement with his French and German counterparts on 5 March. Gaza is the deadliest place in the world to be an aid worker. More than 400 aid workers have been killed in the conflict. Restoring the ceasefire remains the best chance to see hostages released, allow a surge of humanitarian aid and bring this bloodshed to an end.

Wendy Chamberlain: It is clear from the Chamber this morning that we all despair at the recent breakdown of the ceasefire agreement, the resumption of hostilities

and the blockade of aid into Gaza. We now have warnings of an unprecedented humanitarian disaster in the Gaza strip, which is hard to imagine after what we have already seen there. The Minister mentioned the conversations that have been had with Israel. First, can he assure me that we are making it clear that the only way we will achieve a lasting peace is through a two-state solution, which will not be achieved by subjecting people to such hardship? Secondly, what conversations are ongoing with allies about restoring aid drops directly into Gaza?

Mr Falconer: I can confirm that we say regularly to our Israeli counterparts, and indeed to all others in the region, that the only route out of these horrors is a two-state solution, an outcome that provides for the safety, security and dignity of both peoples. We are talking with our partners about what might be done to try to ensure aid gets into Gaza through whatever means are at our disposal, but at the core, Israel must relax the restrictions and allow aid into Gaza. That is the way to get the scale of aid that is required into the strip. During the ceasefire, we saw a massive increase in aid, and that is what we want to do.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): With continued aerial bombardments impacting the flow of aid into Gaza, will the Foreign Secretary confirm whether UK-made F-35 parts have been used to enable air strikes in Gaza since 18 March?

Mr Falconer: To clarify my previous answer, the Foreign Secretary spoke to Foreign Minister Sa'ar on 5 March, not 21 March.

In response to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman), we will continue to press these issues with the Israeli Government. It is clear to the House that we have not succeeded, over these long months, in ensuring the level of aid into Gaza that we would like to see, or had the protections for humanitarian workers that we want to see. Deconfliction, with humanitarian aid workers, is a vital part of ensuring their security, and we are pressing the Israelis to do so.

Right of Self-Determination

12. **Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to increase the understanding of and respect for the right to self-determination globally. [903546]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The United Kingdom is committed to promoting and protecting human rights and the rule of law, and the right to self-determination is set out in the international covenant on civil and political rights.

Alex Mayer: Some 700,000 people in Washington DC are currently disenfranchised because their representatives in the Senate and the House of Representatives do not have voting rights or full control of local government affairs. It is the equivalent of everyone in Bedfordshire voting for MPs who have no chance of going through the voting Lobby. Does the Minister agree that that is a particularly strange anomaly?

Stephen Doughty: This is not a matter for us. The United States is a sovereign, democratic nation, and the issue of voting rights in the District of Columbia is a matter for the United States.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): In the interests of self-determination, will the Foreign Secretary take the earliest opportunity to remind his opposite number in the United States that Canada has chosen to be a member state of the Commonwealth, that the Head of the Commonwealth and the Head of State of Canada is His Majesty King Charles, and that there is no prospect whatsoever of Canada being annexed by the United States?

Stephen Doughty: Canada is a strong friend and Commonwealth ally. It is a NATO ally and a fellow G7 member. I have strong ties with Canada myself, as the right hon. Gentleman might know. I was delighted to reiterate our friendship when I met my ministerial counterpart the other week; Prime Minister Carney, the new Canadian Prime Minister, was welcomed by the Prime Minister; and in recent weeks, the Foreign Secretary has been meeting with his counterpart. We continue to work strongly with Canada on many global issues.

Israeli Military Presence: West Bank

13. **Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): What discussions he has had with his Israeli counterpart on that country's military presence in the west bank. [903547]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): We are concerned at the expansion of the Government of Israel's war aims and operations in the west bank. I made clear my serious concerns on the continuing Israeli operations when I spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar on 5 March, as the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), said, but also on 21 March. We are clear that civilians must be protected and the destruction of civilian infrastructure minimised.

Vikki Slade: It emerged today that a 17-year-old Palestinian boy who had been taken from the west bank has died in Israeli detention, having been held for 6 months without charge. Israel has been striking inside the west bank, and in doing so emboldening illegal settlers in their own violence. Given that Israel claims that it is targeting Hamas and not the people of Palestine itself, what specific actions is the Foreign Secretary taking to protect Palestinians in the west bank from both settler violence and Israeli forces?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady will know that we are giving considerable support to the Palestinian Authority in the west bank. We are in regular contact with President Abbas and Prime Minister Mustafa in relation to the west bank. She has heard our concerns about both the violence and the expansion that is taking place in the west bank. In my conversations with Ministers, I have heard legitimate concerns about security on the Israeli side and the way that Iran, sitting behind the scenes, is equipping some terrorist groups with guns and ammunition. We have to do our best to support Israel in standing up to that.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): The Prime Minister's commitment to host an international meeting this year in support of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace has never been more timely. Given the upcoming June summit in Paris in support of a two-state solution, can the Foreign Secretary provide for the House an update on progress towards meeting the Prime Minister's pledge?

Mr Lammy: We are very grateful for the work that our French colleagues are doing in this regard, and we are working closely with them. We are putting together a plan, and I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln, will be able to update the House in the coming weeks.

Armenia and Azerbaijan: Peace Negotiations

14. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts on peace negotiations between those two countries. [903548]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. The Foreign Secretary spoke with his Azerbaijani and Armenian counterparts on 19 and 21 March respectively, and I have also been in contact with representatives of both countries. We warmly welcome the progress made by both sides on concluding negotiations on the text of a peace agreement, and we urge them both to sign that agreement as soon as possible. We encourage all sides to refrain from rhetoric or actions that undermine the prospects for peace.

Jessica Morden: This is clearly a critical time for peace in the region. The offensive by Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in the forced displacement of up to 120,000 Armenians and the continued detention of 23 officials and civilians. There is much concern about the conduct of the trials, their welfare and their access to legal support, so what more can the Minister do to put pressure on the Government of Azerbaijan to look for their release and to get access to the prisoners?

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for her important work on these issues. The UK has consistently called for the release of all the remaining prisoners of war. We continue to urge the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure that those detained during the long-standing conflict with Armenia are afforded a fair trial and provided safe conditions. I raised that specifically with the Azerbaijani President's special representative in October, and we continue to engage with them on this issue.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday was the anniversary of the attempted genocide of the Azerbaijani people by the Armenians, and I am sure the whole House will issue its condolences for that purpose. In the newly liberated territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, hundreds of mines are still being cleared by hand. What action will the Government offer to support Azerbaijan in removing those mines so that the land can be used for beneficial purposes?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman rightly raises the issue of mines. He will know the important role that this country has played in de-mining efforts around the world. I am very happy to write to him with the details of where we are on that in relation to Azerbaijan, and we have discussed that with them on a number of occasions. The most important thing is that we continue to work towards the signing of that peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia so that the people of those two countries, with which we have strong relationships, can live in peace and harmony alongside one another.

Mauritius Treaty: Chagos Islands

15. **Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): When he plans to present to Parliament the proposed treaty with Mauritius on the sovereignty of the Chagos islands. [903549]

19. **Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): When he plans to present to Parliament the proposed treaty with Mauritius on the sovereignty of the Chagos islands. [903553]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): As we and Mauritius have repeatedly said, including in joint statements on 20 December and 13 January, both sides remain committed to concluding a deal on the future of the Chagos archipelago that protects the long-term effective operation of the joint UK-US base on Diego Garcia. Once the treaty is signed, it will be put to Parliament for scrutiny before ratification in the usual way.

Mr Bedford: Given that there is no binding legal basis for the ceding of the Chagos islands and that the deal will cost the hard-pressed British taxpayer north of £9 billion, £18 billion or possibly £50 billion a year, will the Secretary of State confirm what total financial liabilities will be brought to the UK and whether they will be funded from the uplift in the defence budget announced in the spring statement?

Stephen Doughty: I have answered those questions on a number of occasions, including earlier. I have been very clear that a financial element is crucial to protect the operation of such a vital base for our security and for the security of our allies. Once the treaty is signed, it will be put before the Houses for scrutiny before ratification in the usual way, and that will include costs. We will not scrimp on security: protecting our interests and those of our allies is the most important thing.

Dr Spencer: Politics is about choices, and the speculation about how much the Government want to hand over to Mauritius starts at £9 billion. That money would go a long way as official development assistance, so does the Minister regret that choice?

Stephen Doughty: As I have said, a financial element—let us remember that this is over 99 years—was crucial to protect the operation of the base. If we do not pay for our security, somebody else might attempt to get in there. That is one crucial reason we have worked closely with Mauritius, the United States and other allies and partners, including India, to protect our base on Diego Garcia.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): It is a sell-out.

Stephen Doughty: I can hear the chuntering from the shadow Minister, but it is simply not correct—we are protecting Diego Garcia, our interests there and our national security. I am afraid that I simply do not accept what he is saying, and of course, if there was not a problem, why did his Government start the negotiations in the first place?

Topical Questions

T1. [903557] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): Yesterday in Madrid, I discussed with counterparts strengthening Ukraine's hand. With Mr Speaker in Kyiv yesterday, the House is united on Ukraine.

One year on from the appalling Israel Defence Forces strike on the World Central Kitchen convoy that killed James Kirby, John Chapman and James Henderson, I am sure that the whole House mourns their loss and calls for accountability. We will keep demanding protection for all civilians and aid workers in Gaza, and will strive to restore the ceasefire, free hostages and end the war.

Munira Wilson: Research published by UNICEF shows that last time the overseas aid budget was cut, support for children—for their education and nutrition—was cut the deepest. Will the Foreign Secretary give assurances to this House that this time, children will not bear the brunt of his cuts, and will he commit to protect child-focused development programmes?

Mr Lammy: The last time that the development budget was cut, it was cut overnight. The Government abolished the Department for International Development, leading to terrible cliff edges and badly damaging our reputation in the world. We are not throwing the money that we have had to withdraw from development into a black hole, as the last Government did; we are investing in hard power. The hon. Lady will recognise that the war in Ukraine has cost the continent of Africa upwards of £7 billion. For that reason, it is important that we invest in hard power and diplomacy, and that we continue to invest in development. We will still be the sixth biggest development partner.

T3. [903559] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): The co-operative movement has a long and proud history of helping to rebuild local economies post-conflict. In this UN International Year of Co-Operatives, will the Minister agree to meet me and representatives of the co-operative movement to discuss the ways in which Governments can promote co-operation as a solution on the global stage?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues, not least as a Co-operative MP. I have seen the important work that co-operatives do around the world, and we continue to support them, including by funding the global agriculture and food security programme, which has a dedicated support facility for smallholder producer organisations. We regularly meet those who are involved in co-operative solutions on a range of matters, so I would be delighted to discuss those matters with my hon. Friend and other colleagues.

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

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Last month, the Foreign Secretary gave a speech on trade, but could not explain how much growth would follow the measures he announced, if any. What role is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office actually playing in supporting the trade negotiations with the United States? What discussions has the Foreign Secretary personally undertaken about the trade agreement, and can he confirm that this will be the comprehensive trade deal that the Conservative Government were negotiating?

Mr Lammy: No, because the Conservative Government badly failed in their negotiations with the US. We are engaged in intense conversations at this time to strike an economic agreement, and we are also continuing discussions with our Indian counterparts about a trade deal and with the Gulf, picking up from the last Government's failure to land the trade deals that will deliver growth to this country. In coming into the Foreign Office, it has been essential that I position it as the international delivery arm for growth—all our missions recognise this. I have announced measures that include working much more closely with business—measures that should have been introduced under the last Government.

Priti Patel: We know that the Labour Government continue to cosy up to the Chinese Communist party because they are desperately seeking growth. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members might want to listen. The Government are unwilling to stop solar panels made by Uyghur slave labour coming into the UK; they are unable to stop China putting bounties on the heads of Hongkongers living here; and they are failing to put China on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. Can the Foreign Secretary explain how our economic and security interests are being served by the Labour Government's alleged reset with the CCP Government?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Lady uses the phrase CCP almost as if to suggest that I am some sort of communist. The last Government had 17 different approaches to China. They bounced around so much—there was the Iain Duncan Smith position, the Rishi Sunak position and the Liz Truss position—that we lost count of how many positions they took. We have been clear that there are areas where we will co-operate with China, areas where we will challenge China and areas where we must necessarily compete. It is right that we engage with China. Closing our ears and pretending they are not there is no strategy. That is why the Government have changed from the strategy of the last Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The Foreign Secretary does not need to be reminded that we reference sitting Members not by their names, but by their constituencies.

T5. [903561] **Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab):** As has already been mentioned in the Chamber this morning, a year ago today, my constituent, John Chapman, was murdered by the Israel Defence Forces while working for World Central Kitchen, delivering humanitarian aid in Gaza. His family now want to know when the Israeli Government will bring criminal charges against

the perpetrators, when the family will be awarded compensation for their tragic loss, and what our Government are doing to ensure that justice prevails.

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. Last month, I pressed Foreign Minister Sa'ar to conclude the Military Advocate General's consideration of the World Central Kitchen incident, including determining whether criminal proceedings should be initiated. I have met the families of those killed in the attacks and assured them that this Government will continue to support their calls for justice. Gaza is the most dangerous place in the world to be an aid worker, with more than 400 killed since the start of this conflict. We need to see lasting safety improvements for aid workers on the ground, and that would be a fitting legacy for those British individuals who have lost their lives.

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

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): My constituents who work at the BMW Mini plant in Cowley are deeply concerned by the impact of Donald Trump's global tariff war. The uncertainty the plant faces is made much worse by the red tape that now inhibits integrated car production with suppliers in the EU. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that, in addition to a robust response to the White House, the best step that the Government could take to support British businesses would be to start talks on a bespoke UK-EU customs union without delay?

Mr Lammy: We are an open trading nation, as we have been under successive Governments. It is hugely important at this time that we continue the intense conversations we are having with the US Administration on getting an economic agreement. Of course we prepare for the worst—all options remain on the table, as the Prime Minister indicated again just yesterday—but it is also right that the Business Secretary and I, and others across Government, continue to engage with business and industry so that we can give them the best support in what will be a turbulent economic time, not just for our own country, but across much of the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Topical questions must be kept short, otherwise there will be many disappointed colleagues.

T6. [903562] **Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab):** Given the recent decline in the number of international students coming to the UK, what measures is the Minister taking, along with colleagues from other Departments, to ensure that universities such as Stirling, which have long benefited from diverse international student populations, remain attractive and accessible to prospective students from abroad?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): Our strong knowledge economy is one of our best exports, and each Minister on the Front Bench makes sure to promote learning in the UK and learning in people's home cities, when our universities have a presence, and we will continue to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Father of the House, Sir Edward Leigh.

T2. [903558] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I am a simple soul, so I trust the Foreign Secretary completely. Will he assure me that nothing in the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, which we are debating only this afternoon, will in any way nullify Brexit by limiting our ability to make our own decisions on regulation and to conduct our own free trade deals? Above all, as a great British patriot, will he assure me that nothing in the Bill will allow any Minister to ever abolish that most glorious of British symbols: the great British pint?

Mr Lammy: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the British pint is safe under this Government, but I will write to him about the detail in the coming days.

T7. [903563] **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What discussions are taking place with China about Jingye, the Chinese owner of British Steel, which last week rejected a generous offer from the Government to put the industry on a stable footing? Does the Foreign Secretary agree that, given the importance of this strategic industry, Jingye should return to the table and agree a deal, and that if it will not do so, we ought to step in to ensure that British steel is made in Britain?

Mr Lammy: I have regular conversations with the Business Secretary. As the Minister for Industry made clear on Thursday, this Government believe in the UK steel sector. We have prioritised engagement with British Steel, and have made a generous conditional offer of financial support. We remain in negotiations with the company and trade unions to secure the best possible outcome.

T4. [903560] **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): What further information did the Foreign Secretary have that led him to make a decision that differed from the detailed objections of the police, the security services and our allies, and to support the new Chinese super-embassy? Will he share that information with the House?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman must have missed the letter that the Home Secretary and I, quite properly, wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who, acting in her quasi-judicial capacity, has a decision to make. We were clear about the fact that security interests are paramount, and we made our views very plain so that they could be considered.

T9. [903565] **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Last Monday, 24 March, another two journalists were killed in Gaza. More than 200 journalists have been killed there since 7 October 2023. In addition, last week saw the arrests of both BBC and Swedish journalists, as well as many local journalists covering the unrest in Turkey. What are the Government doing to protect the role of journalists—regardless of nationality—who are showcasing what is going on in conflict zones?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Whether in Gaza, Turkey or elsewhere, it is essential for journalists to be able to do their job. We are incredibly proud of the BBC and all the other UK outlets overseas that play a vital role in holding power to account, and we will continue to support them.

T8. [903564] **Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): Fifty-nine Israeli hostages are being held by Hamas in Gaza, having been kidnapped in the Hamas terrorist attack of 7 October 2023. Only 24 are thought to be still alive, and we know from released hostages that they have been starved and tortured, chained in tunnels. They have not seen sunlight for 543 days. What are the UK Government doing to bring them home?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. All those hostages need to come home, which is why we need to get back to the ceasefire and why we must continue to stand with hostage families. Let me reassure the hon. Lady: I spoke to the United States envoy, Steve Witkoff, on Friday evening to obtain an update on the conversations that are taking place, and Egypt and Qatar are playing an important role in getting back to that ceasefire and getting Hamas to do what they should do. It was interesting to see Palestinians taking to the streets to campaign against Hamas and the way in which that they are holding the Palestinian people ransom at this time.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): HIV/AIDS has killed 40 million people across the world and remains a major threat to public health, but over the weekend the House Foreign Affairs Committee Majority account posted a gloating, sickening tweet including an image of the coffin representing the closure of USAID, which, according to experts, will lead to a tenfold increase in the number of deaths from HIV/AIDS. Will the Minister reaffirm that notwithstanding the recklessness of the Trump Administration, this Government remain committed to working to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030?

Stephen Doughty: Obviously, USAID is a matter for the US Government. However, I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that we are committed to the 2030 target. He will know, from my long time campaigning on these issues, of the importance that I, and indeed the Foreign Secretary, place on this issue.

T10. [903566] **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): When it comes to global public health, we know that nobody wins unless everybody wins, and that an infectious disease elsewhere on the planet can affect us here as well. What steps is the Department taking to secure funding for overseas development projects involving diseases that will specifically be a risk to the UK, including in relation to antimicrobial resistance?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman makes important points. He will know that we make important contributions to the Global Fund and other bodies on global health. We remain committed to global health as part of our development spending, even despite the difficult decisions we are having to make, and I hear what he has to say.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): More than half the countries that have submitted UN biodiversity plans have not yet released plans for how they will protect 30% of land and sea for nature, despite agreeing to do so at COP15. What steps are the Government taking to ensure more countries develop plans to protect at least 30% of land and sea?

Catherine West: The Government remain strongly committed to tackling the international climate and nature crises. The UK played a key role at the COP16 biodiversity conference, and we are working closely with a wide range of partners to build global ambition on nature ahead of London Climate Action Week in June and COP30 in Brazil.

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): In February, the Foreign Secretary rightly criticised America's aid cuts. Two weeks later, he was humiliated by his own Prime Minister when his departmental budget was smashed to bits. What is he doing to re-establish his and his Department's credibility on the world stage, so we can once again have genuine influence internationally?

Mr Lammy: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that this Government have not made an ideological decision to cut aid, and he knows that. There are other Governments around the world making ideological decisions to cut aid. This Government did not make the decision that the last Government made to switch off aid overnight. We are ensuring that there are no cliff edges. He will know—and I know he knows this—that investing in hard power also saves lives and acts as a deterrent in our own country and across much of the world.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, BBC reporter Mark Lowen was arrested and deported from Turkey after covering the ongoing protest movement, as part of a broader crackdown on journalists. This followed the arrest of President Erdoğan's leading political rival. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to conveying the concerns of this House to his Turkish counterpart at the earliest opportunity?

Mr Lammy: The UK is a staunch supporter of democracy, the rule of law and media freedom. The Government have raised recent events in Turkey with our counterparts at a number of levels. Most recently, on 29 March I spoke to my Turkish counterpart, Hakan Fidan, to raise our expectation that Turkey upholds its international commitments and the rule of law, and that it protects the fundamental rights to free speech, peaceful assembly and media freedom, including in the treatment of British journalists reporting there.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Are the British Government going to act, as the French and American Governments have done, to support Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara?

Mr Lammy: We continue to have discussions with our Moroccan friends. This is a complex issue. The position remains the position we had under the last Government. Of course, we keep that under review as we continue to discuss these issues in the region.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has said repeatedly that the UK should move from freezing to seizing Russian state assets, although I am still waiting to hear what proportion of those are in the UK. Meanwhile, €300 billion sits in the EU. When peace eventually comes, the rebuilding of Ukraine will need to be paid for by the Russians, so those frozen billions will be key. When I was at a security conference in Poland last week, everyone seemed to agree that these assets need to be seized. I ask the Foreign Secretary again: what are the remaining barriers to seizing those assets, and what concrete steps is he taking to ensure that he can bring our allies with us?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. It is a complex issue, and one on which it is best to act in concert with our closest allies, recognising that allies in Belgium, Germany and other countries in Europe are more exposed than we are. We continue to work at pace with our allies. This was an item I discussed yesterday in Madrid with the Weimar+ group, particularly with our Polish, French and Spanish colleagues, and I am sure it will be an item discussed at the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting later this week.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): In the light of the Prime Minister's announcement of the impending official development assistance cuts, how will the UK Government be a global leader on water security and climate-affected communities, to adapt and build WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—systems that are resilient to climate change?

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Member for pointing out the importance of those issues; he knows the UK has a strong record on them. Obviously, all decisions on future ODA spending will be discussed as part of the ongoing resource allocations in the spending review, but I note what he says.

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

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): On 23 March in Gaza, eight medics in the Palestinian Red Crescent, five responders from the civil defence and a UN staff member were killed by the IDF while responding to casualties. Their bodies have been returned today. International humanitarian law is clear: medical personnel, ambulances, humanitarian relief workers and civil defence organisations must be respected and protected. International humanitarian law is not something for debate. The Foreign Secretary understands the importance of upholding the law and holding to account all who breach it, including our friends, so why is Israel seemingly allowed to act with impunity when it comes to the protection of medics, humanitarian workers and civilians?

Mr Falconer: On this day, the one-year anniversary of the World Central Kitchen incident, I want to be clear that nobody has impunity and that we expect full legal processes to be followed, including in Israel. The Foreign Secretary and I have both spoken about the important

role the Military Advocate General will play in that. On my hon. Friend's wider question, it is clearly deeply problematic that deconfliction does not exist in Gaza and that aid workers continue to be in such peril, as she described. We will continue to use all methods at our disposal to try to improve the situation.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP):
On 17 March, the Foreign Secretary told the House that there had been

“a breach of international law”

by Israel in blockading aid getting into Gaza.—[*Official Report*, 17 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 41.] If he takes international law seriously, will he tell us what sanctions are in place as a result of that?

Mr Falconer: We have announced to this House a series of sanctions in relation to the risk of breaches in relation to the attacks on aid workers, which I have covered a number of times in this session. [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure the Minister can follow up in writing.

Point of Order

12.47 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. After much chasing in October last year, the Foreign Secretary committed to give oral evidence to my International Development Committee early in the new year. He has not done so to date and we do not have a date in the diary, despite repeated requests from my Committee team. Can you advise me on how I can encourage the Foreign Secretary to give evidence? Much is going on in the world that we need to discuss.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. The Chair is not responsible for ministerial appearances before Select Committees, but I can see that the Foreign Secretary is keen to respond. No doubt he will have a positive response to her point of order right now.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just remind the House that I appeared before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 4 December and I will be appearing in front of the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee on 30 May. We have made changes to development, as has been discussed in the House this afternoon. My right hon. Friend Baroness Chapman will be appearing before the International Development Committee on 13 May. Of course I will appear again before the Foreign Affairs Committee and in front of my hon. Friend's Committee in due course. I hope to do that by the end of the summer or in the September recess period.

NHS Pensions

12.49 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on NHS pensions in the light of the statutory deadline for both remediable service statements and remediable pension savings statements being missed.

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I thank the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for asking this question, which gives me the opportunity to provide further information following the written parliamentary statement that I issued yesterday to update the House on the delivery of remediable service statements to affected members.

I have extended the deadlines for the NHS Business Services Authority to issue statements to ensure that members have enough time to make informed decisions. Once members have received statements, they will be able to use a tool provided by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to retrospectively adjust their annual allowance between 2015-16 and 2022-23.

Separately, the original deadline to issue the 137,000 remediable pension savings statements was 6 October. The NHS Business Services Authority issued statements to 57,000 members by this deadline, of which 23,000 were found to contain incorrect information; these have since been recalculated and reissued. The NHS Business Services Authority is working to issue outstanding statements as quickly as possible.

A revised delivery timetable has been developed and shared with trade unions and employer representatives. By the end of March, 106,000 statements had been issued. Statements for 11,000 members will be produced once further information has been received from their employers. The remaining 20,000 statements require additional manual input from the NHS Business Services Authority before they can be produced, and will be issued in July. There have been delays on all sides, which we have been aware of since last July. In fact, the Department had escalated issues of design with the previous Government, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman understands.

We know that this matter is really important and that there are high numbers of high earners in the NHS, which is why we have taken the decision to be open and transparent about the timeline that we can now commit to, having worked tirelessly to reduce the delays. Although these delays will cause inconvenience to some members, I have been crystal clear that no one will face any financial detriment as a consequence. Compensation arrangements are in place for direct financial losses, certain HMRC interest charges, and the costs of financial and accountancy advice.

The Government do acknowledge the impact of the delays on affected members. We are working hard to issue outstanding statements and to protect members from any financial detriment the delays may cause.

Dr Evans: What is going on with NHS pensions administration under this Government? I declare an interest as someone with an NHS pension. Today, the Government have missed the statutory deadline for

issuing remediable service statements to doctors, and they are now pushing the deadlines back to December 2026. In mid-March, the Government confirmed that just 21 statements had been issued out of 380,000; as of yesterday's written statement, there are still more than 370,000 outstanding. This creates huge tax liability uncertainties.

We and the British Medical Association have been raising concerns for months. Why has it taken the Government so long to act? Ministers have announced a revised delivery plan, but how will it work in practice? Will there be more staff to help with the backlog? What changes are being put in place to ensure that the deadline is not missed again?

What was most concerning, however, was the complete absence of any mention of the remediable pension savings statements in the written statement. This issue really matters, as doctors who are taking on overtime or who work privately rely on these statements to be able to track their contributions and avoid excessive tax bills. According to Dr Sharma from the BMA,

"There's no doubt that without up-to-date information, doctors will be pre-emptively reducing or turning down extra work to avoid additional pension...bills that they might not even be due."

The statutory deadline for the 137,000 statements was, as we heard, 6 October 2024. In February, Ministers confirmed that 60,000 were outstanding and that the majority would be issued by the end of February; by March, however, the backlog had actually grown to 70,000. Can the Minister explain how two legal deadlines have been missed? Will the Government be following up with the regulator to ensure that this does not happen again? Do the Government have confidence in the NHS Business Services Authority? With the Secretary of State abolishing NHS England, what does this mean for the future of this vital organisation?

We all want to see waiting lists fall, but as one newspaper put it today,

"Labour's pledge to slash NHS waiting lists is being sabotaged by a litany of administrative errors, pension delays and punitive tax rules."

I urge the Government to take swift action.

Karin Smyth: As I outlined in my response and in the written ministerial statement, we have taken action. We were made aware of some of these problems when we came into office in July, and we have pushed the NHS Business Services Authority to move faster than it would have done under the hon. Gentleman's Government, so that action is happening quicker than it would have done before. We do have faith in the NHS Business Services Authority to get on with this and ensure that there is no financial detriment, in line with the timetable outlined yesterday, and as I have further made clear today.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the hon. Gentleman could have asked me more about waiting lists, which have fallen for the last five months in a row. He could have asked me about the 2 million more appointments that have been provided to deliver for patients seven months early. He could have asked me about the hundreds more GPs who are now working in the health service, or the impact of cancelling the strikes on services for people, or the record funding. In fact, last week in the Chamber he spoke on behalf of the National Pharmacy Association; this week, he could have congratulated the Minister for Care, who is sitting next to me, on the agreement to produce more pharmacy services.

We are making improvements to the NHS every day. The Darzi report reported not only the breadth but the depth of the decline that we inherited. We are resolving that, and fixing the fundamentals of the NHS.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming to the House and giving her response. We all know the issues she is talking about when she mentions the state of the NHS that we inherited, and I echo that with the issues I hear about from patients and staff at Princess Alexandra hospital in Harlow. On pensions, can she outline what the Government have done to mitigate the delays in the process?

Karin Smyth: It is important that people have confidence in the pension system. That is why we took action in July on coming into office to understand the depth of the problems that occurred under the previous Government. This is a complicated issue, which is why we want to be clear with people that there will be no financial detriment to them. We will continue to work with employers and trade unions to ensure that the issue is resolved as quickly as possible, in line with the timelines I have outlined.

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

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The delays will be deeply worrying and will make financial planning very difficult for those affected, all of whom are people who have dedicated their working lives to supporting the NHS and tirelessly saving lives. NHS workers and their families are being left in the dark by Government delays and may as a result miss out on using their full allowances, which is unacceptable—they deserve better.

The revised delivery plan prioritises members based on their likelihood of facing financial detriment, so clearly some financial detriment is expected for those who are impacted. Can the Minister estimate what the likely financial detriment is of missing the statutory deadline, or how much compensation, as she just mentioned, is likely to be paid? Can she tell us why the NHS Business Services Authority has failed to meet the deadlines? In response to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), the Minister said that there are 112 people working on it. Will she confirm whether that is likely to be sufficient to ensure that future deadlines are met?

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I do not have to hand the exact number of people working on this, but I will make sure that I respond to her on that point in writing. We are ensuring that individuals do not face detriment as a result of these delays. The NHS cost claim back compensation scheme provides resources for direct financial losses incurred by the NHS pension scheme members impacted by the McCloud remedy, including professional service fees and certain HMRC interest charges that may arise, as I outlined in my statement. HMRC has also confirmed that self-assessment late filing penalties will be waived on appeal in certain circumstances where a member receives a delayed pension savings statement as a consequence of the implementation of the McCloud remedy.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that it is important that the affected members receive those statements to allow informed decision making? The Government have worked to minimise financial detriment to those affected, but this issue is part of the mess we have been clearing up. We have had record investments into pharmacies and more GPs, and we have cut waiting lists and stopped the junior doctors' strikes. We are on the road to recovery.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are on the road to recovery—and that, of course, is what the Opposition cannot stand. This is a complicated issue, as they well know. As I said, we inherited this complication in July, when we were made well aware of it. The Conservatives could have done more about it while they were in government, but it is yet another issue on which they have let people down—this time, it is staff.

We will ensure that we remedy that. The timelines are available in the written ministerial statement that I issued yesterday. We will continue to work with trade unions and employers to ensure that people understand. As my hon. Friend said, it is important that people do understand their own personal positions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I have to say that I am none the wiser about what exactly has happened. If we are to ensure that this will not happen again—that these deadlines will be met—we need to know how we got into this position. It may well be the fault of the previous Government. Will this Government commit to a full review of exactly how we got here, so that we can ensure that the published deadlines are met this time?

Karin Smyth: The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee makes a good point, as she so often does, about what went on previously. This is an issue from the McCloud judgment that runs across many Departments. It was a problem under previous Governments, starting with the coalition Government. I know that the Public Accounts Committee, on which I served, and the Treasury Committee have looked at the matter over time. The Department will certainly co-operate with any inquiry and investigate what happened across Government. I am happy to get back to the hon. Lady on that point.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): This issue appears to be yet another example of the hangover left by the previous Conservative Government. Does the Minister agree that part of getting the NHS back on its feet includes cleaning up this mess and cutting waiting lists, which have already dropped for five months in a row?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes absolutely the right point. As I have said, Lord Darzi has helpfully outlined the breadth of the mess that we inherited back in July, and it makes for stark reading. We have still not had an apology from the Conservative party, so I am happy to take an intervention now if anybody decides to provide one. In these issues, we are seeing the depth

of the destruction that the Conservatives have caused widely across Government. We will continue to fix that on behalf of the British people.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I declare my interest as a practising doctor and a public sector pensioner who has been through the McCloud process. Does the Minister understand that we will not improve productivity in the NHS as far as doctors are concerned if they continue to retire routinely in their mid-50s—in their prime? They do so because their accountants tell them that they would be foolish not to, given the fiscal environment and the structure of the NHS pension scheme.

Karin Smyth: I understand that point. Obviously, it is a source of much discussion. The change came about during the pandemic to encourage people to return to work, and it is a complex issue. We want to continue to use the skills of doctors at all stages of their careers, and we shall continue to work with them, the British Medical Association and others to make sure that there is no detriment to their returning to service in the NHS.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the NHS pension scheme. Can the Minister confirm that this issue arose only because the previous Government carried out their NHS pension reforms in a way that was found to be age discriminatory? More widely, does she agree that giving NHS staff the terms and conditions and the reward and recognition that they deserve also requires prompt action each year on agreeing the NHS pay award, which the Conservative party routinely failed to do when in Government?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point on our commitment to staff to be clear on their terms and conditions, and our commitment to honouring that reward. That is why we acted promptly when we came into office. We have issued statements and provided answers to parliamentary questions to make sure that people are clear about the system and that we are transparent.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It takes rather a long time to train a doctor—up to six years—so it is a good job that the previous Government had the opportunity to train more doctors. Will the Minister look at one aspect of concern, which is that if doctors start reducing their overtime hours because of fiscal aspects, it will hamper the opportunity to get more patients treated and to shorten the length of waiting lists?

Karin Smyth: As I said in response to the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), we understand that, and we will continue to work with all staff in the NHS to make sure that we deliver on our commitment to reduce waiting lists, which were left at a shocking level by the previous Government.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I have a constituent who is suffering both financial and emotional distress as a result of these circumstances. I wrote to the NHS Business Services Authority, and it took four months to get a response. In written questions to the Government, I have asked how I might make representations about

my constituent being affected by financial distress. The response that I received from Ministers simply said that NHSBSA has all the evidence that it needs, and there is no need for anyone to provide extra evidence. There is a very real risk that some people who are affected by this are suffering financial distress but have not been identified by NHSBSA. For those people, can the Minister please outline what mechanism we as Members can use to make those people known to NHSBSA, so that they can access their pension choice earlier?

Karin Smyth: I am sorry to hear about the emotional and financial distress of the hon. Lady's constituent. If there is a gap, I am happy to go back to the NHSBSA on her behalf and make sure that I update the House.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Does the Minister have full confidence in the chair of the NHS Business Services Authority?

Karin Smyth: As I said in my statement, we have confidence in the business authority to undertake the actions that I have outlined.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers to the questions. Waiting lists are clearly beyond the pale. If the Government were able to address the remedial pension savings statement, we might be in better position to entice our doctors to take on additional hours. Will the Minister confirm that this is a Government priority, and that there is an understanding that a functioning NHS requires straightforward paths to working overtime, and payment at every level?

Karin Smyth: One of our major priorities is ensuring that the entire NHS workforce are doing the work that they are trained and committed to do, so that they can get down those waiting lists and deliver an NHS that is fit for the future. The staff, as Lord Darzi has outlined, have felt very severely the detriment caused by the previous Government. They are working under really difficult conditions, and we want to make sure that, through the 10-year plan and the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, we offer them hope, so that they are ready to deliver the services that they have been trained to deliver.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for her responses this afternoon. I will allow a moment for the Front Benchers to swap over.

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund

1.7 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on whether the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund will continue.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I welcome the opportunity to respond to this urgent question. The adoption and special guardianship support fund has for many years provided valuable therapeutic support to adopted children and special guardianship children who were previously in care.

I very much recognise that funding over that period has supported many children and families and helped them towards a stable family life. I have in recent weeks heard many more stories of how important the adoption and special guardianship support fund has been to many, and I pay tribute to the Members from all parts of the House who have been advocates and champions for adopted children and children in special guardianship placements in their constituencies.

I very much appreciate that the delay in confirming the continuation of this fund has been a very difficult time for many. I am especially concerned about children and families, because many of those whom the adoption and special guardianship support fund supports are in great need of continued help.

I also recognise that there has been an impact on providers of therapy, who have not been able to plan and prepare for the year ahead in the way they would have liked. However, the Department has been clear with local authorities and regional adoption agencies about transitional funding arrangements, which means that therapy that started in the last financial year can continue into 2025-26, even ahead of full 2025-26 budget announcements.

Appropriate transitional funding has been agreed for a significant number of children. I regret the delay in making this announcement, but I am happy to confirm today that £50 million has been allocated for the adoption and special guardianship support fund this year. We will be announcing further details to the House in the coming days and opening applications to families and children across our country as soon as we can.

Munira Wilson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this urgent question; I thank you especially on behalf of the thousands of vulnerable children, their adoptive parents and kinship carers who rely on the adoption and special guardianship support fund. I declare an interest as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care and co-chair of the APPG on children.

I welcome the Minister's announcement, which none of us were expecting, because many Members on all sides of the Chamber have spent the last few months asking question after question only to be being batted away time after time and told that answers would be forthcoming. This vital fund is there to help the most vulnerable children who have experienced the deepest trauma. Those who have been looking to renew applications for this coming financial year, like the constituent I mentioned in my question to the Prime Minister last

[Munira Wilson]

week, have been left hanging in limbo. While I am grateful for today's announcement, has the Minister considered what impact there has been on those families?

In the case I mentioned of my constituent Sarah, she said that her daughter has started to regress in the period between finishing her last lot of therapy and being able to secure the next lot of therapy. Another woman contacted me to tell me that she is special guardian for a child who at the age of just two witnessed her mother being murdered by her father, and she has been unable to access the right level of support.

The Minister mentioned the impact on providers. The Purple Elephant Project in my constituency of Twickenham is desperately fundraising to continue providing support, while others are taking their support elsewhere. Therefore, there are concerns about whether there will be sufficient provision. While I am grateful for the announcement, can the Minister confirm how long the £50 million will last, and whether Ministers are considering expanding the eligibility criteria for the support fund to include all kinship carers, not just special guardians? It is the least we can do for these most vulnerable children.

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for her points. I very much appreciate the concern caused by the delay in this announcement, and I recognise the potential impact on children and families, as well as local authorities, regional adoption agencies and providers of therapy. Under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, there is a statutory duty for local authorities to have support services in place for adopted children. The Government very much support that. To her questions about kinship carers, the plan is for the support fund to open to kinship carers as well, and that £50 million is for the year. Further information will be provided shortly about those arrangements.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I clearly welcome today's announcement, but it is a tragedy that many services have closed and people's therapy has been stopped as a result of this funding hiatus. Will the Minister ensure that those impacted by the gap in funding will have additional support for the trauma that it could have caused to those young people? Will she ensure that the Treasury signs off funding ahead of deadlines when the funding ends?

Janet Daby: The Government remain committed to adopted children and children who are in kinship placements or have special guardianships. The Government will continue to work together to make sure that sufficient funding is in place and is more timely.

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

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this important UQ.

It is utterly extraordinary that we have had to summon the Government to the Chamber to provide clarity on whether they have axed a programme that ended yesterday—or so we thought—which supports 20,000 of our most vulnerable young people. The Government have been given lots of opportunities to clarify the funding

situation. The Prime Minister was asked about it in the Chamber just last week. Either they did not know at that stage, or they just did not want to tell us—or, more importantly, the thousands of young people using the programme. Even by current Department for Education standards, this is utterly chaotic.

I do welcome the decision today, but can the Minister tell us when it was made? She recognises the impact that it has had on children and families up and down the country, but that impact is the result of her decisions and her delay. Can she please explain to us why this has happened and why the Government could not confirm the future of a £50,000-a-year programme sooner?

Janet Daby: As I have already said, I am delighted that we are now able to confirm that there will be £50 million for the adoption and special guardianship support fund for '25-26. We will announce further details to the House in coming days, and we will open up the fund for applications as soon as possible.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my neighbouring MP and the Liberal Democrat leader on education, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), on being granted this urgent question. Her constituents and mine benefit from the Purple Elephant Project, through which more than 50 families get much-needed therapy that ensures that children stay out of higher-cost services. Like other groups that MPs have been hearing from in their constituencies, those families have been devastated by the delay; not knowing whether this important therapy would continue was already having an impact on them. I therefore also thank my hon. Friend the Minister for listening—I know this issue is close to her heart, too—and for the work she has been doing with Treasury Ministers, which I assume has enabled her to make this announcement.

How can we ensure that this does not happen again? It became the norm that groups serving vulnerable constituents would not know until right at the end of the financial year whether they would get continuation funding. How can we guarantee that that does not happen again for these groups and others serving vulnerable constituents?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for her concern and her lobbying. Many Members and organisations have lobbied me on this matter. I appreciate all of the therapeutic providers up and down our country, especially the one in her constituency. Under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, local authorities have a statutory duty to have support services in place for adopted children. As a Government, we will continue to support local authorities to do that.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): On Friday in my surgery, a constituent came to talk to me about her eight-year-old adopted son who was born withdrawing from the drugs that his birth mother took during pregnancy as well as from alcohol abuse. The birth mother also suffered significant physical and emotional abuse. That has left this poor boy with many needs; he has foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, developmental trauma, attachment disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyspraxia, dyslexia and a damaged nervous system. The therapy, play therapy and occupational therapy funded by the adoption and special guardianship support fund is essential for that boy. If there is one thing the Government

should do, it is to prioritise children who have those needs. While I welcome the £50 million for the financial year we are just starting, boys like him and thousands of children around the country need not only certainty for the upcoming financial year but long-term certainty that they will get the care and support they need. Will the Minister work with the Treasury to find a long-term settlement, so that the most vulnerable in our society are not in this year in, year out funding trap?

Janet Daby: I absolutely hear and recognise the concerns the hon. Member has raised regarding the eight-year-old adopted child. As I said in my statement, the Department has been clear with local authorities and regional adoption agencies about transitional funding arrangements, and that should apply to many of the children our constituents have been contacting us about. That means that therapy that started in the last financial year can continue into '25-26, even ahead of full '25-26 budget announcements. However, I would say to the hon. Member that the Conservative party had a decade in which to ask Ministers those types of questions, so perhaps he should be turning his attention to his own Front Benchers.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I also congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing the UQ and thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her response. I will ask a question on behalf of the 340 kinship families in east Durham who are living in a constant state of anxiety. They are worried each month about how they will make ends meet, worried about whether their local authority would be among the 10 included in the pilot scheme and, until the Minister's announcement, they were worried about losing access to the adoption and special guardianship support fund, which provides vital funding for therapeutic services to many families. The Minister has ended uncertainty with the announcement, but will she ensure that all kinship families receive stable, long-term financial and emotional support that is tailored to their unique needs, regardless of their kinship arrangement?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for his question about kinship carers. They are essential and provide invaluable support and care to kinship children. The Department announced a £40 million package to trial a new kinship allowance, to test whether an allowance to cover the additional costs of supporting the child could help to increase the number of children taken in by kinship carers. That is still being worked up, but I hear what my hon. Friend is saying about the uncertainty around some of that. In October, we appointed a national kinship care ambassador and the Department for Education published new kinship care statutory guidance for local authorities. We have 140 peer support groups across England, and there are various other areas of support and training for kinship carers. I would be happy to speak to him further on this matter.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I rise as a proud adoptive auntie who has seen for herself the impact of the fund on the most vulnerable children and their families. I also rise as the MP for Christine, a child therapist who lives in Hazel Grove, who wrote to me about the impact that the uncertainty around the fund was having on the families she works with. Children who have been through trauma, who have been neglected

and who have ended up moving into a new family need safety, security and certainty. Does the Minister agree that we should be encouraging more people to be adoptive parents and not put off those who cannot afford it? Does she also agree that those who are self-employed and currently do not get any financial support from the Government should get that support in line with the biological cohort?

Janet Daby: The hon. Member has given me something to think about, so I thank her for that. I congratulate her on being an adoptive auntie. Since 2015, over £400 million has helped support nearly 53,000 children who have received therapeutic support. I agree that more people should consider being adopters and that their financial situation should not prevent them from being able to adopt.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this really important UQ. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care. I welcome the Minister's confirmation that £50 million will be allocated this year to this incredibly important fund. That will end the limbo that families have found themselves in while they have experienced this unfortunate delay.

It is essential that we give all kinship children the same opportunities to heal, to achieve and to thrive. This is the second service affecting kinship families that has received late confirmation in the past few months. I know that the Minister, as a former social worker, cares for and has a particular interest in this group of young people. Will she work with the APPG to support longer-term planning for funding for kinship families?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for all her comments. I assure her that I remain committed to working with the APPG on kinship care.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): This fund is really important to so many vulnerable children and their families. Although it is disappointing that many families and children have been left in limbo for a good few months, I welcome the Government's announcement of the extension of funding. I would like to raise two points. First, will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to speed up applications and reduce any potential logjam in the system while funding is being released? Secondly, will she commit to the House and to families and children that she will meet Treasury Ministers and look at the potential for a longer-term funding settlement to reduce such uncertainty in future?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the fund. We will announce further details to the House in coming days and open the fund for applications as soon as possible. I will continue to work closely with my Treasury colleagues.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to answer the urgent question. I know from her visit to Harlow last week how much she cares about supporting young people. Having worked in the charity sector before I came to this place, I recognise that short-termism in funding for services to support vulnerable people is not a new problem. Will she confirm that the Government are committed to ensuring that adopted children are given the support they deserve?

Janet Daby: We believe that children need to be secure in a long-term home, whether that is with kinship families, adoptive families or various others. Our commitment and our endeavour is to make sure that we provide the best home for a child so that they can grow, learn, play and thrive.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): John, my constituent in Chichester, is 12. He sent an email to Beacon House, a therapy provider in Chichester, which said:

“I’m really sad and worried that I won’t be able to see Becky any more.”—

Becky is his therapist. The email continued:

“Can someone please tell me how to not feel so sad?”

John will be delighted that his support from Becky will continue, but the lack of clarity has been felt acutely by vulnerable families, who find uncertainty incredibly triggering. Will the Minister please provide clarity on the Floor of the House today—that we will not be back here next year having the same discussion?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for sharing that information regarding John. I would like to think that many children are being protected from certain information so that it does not cause them further anxiety. I am delighted that we have been able to confirm that there will be £50 million for the adoption and special guardianship support fund for 2025-26, and I absolutely understand the need to ensure that such funding is ongoing and delivered in a timely manner.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Last week, I had the honour of speaking to a parent who had cause to use the special guardianship service in Calder Valley. I know the anxiety that that has caused. Will the Minister confirm that the spending review will seek to provide more assurance that we will properly fund both children’s social care and the special guardianship service?

Janet Daby: We are always keenly working across Departments and within our Department with the Treasury to ensure that we can have enough funds to do the things that we would like to do in government.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on obtaining the urgent question and dragging this information from the Minister, whether kicking and screaming or not. First, I thank Tim and Rachel and Matt and Kelly from my constituency: two families who have adopted youngsters and benefited from the fund. I was adopted some 55 years ago, but the world is now a much more complex place, so children are much more likely to have had adverse childhood experiences and therefore need this funding.

One had hoped that, following the general election, the adults were back in the room. Will the Minister assure the House that the funding will continue year after year?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for his question and pay tribute to his constituents. This Government have no plans at this time to prevent the funding from continuing. As I have said, under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, local authorities have a statutory duty to have support services in place for adopted children.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Like many colleagues, I wrote to the Minister recently regarding the fund, so I welcome today’s news. The adoption and special guardianship fund was described to me as a lifeline. I know that the Minister has touched on the timelines for funding allocations, but will she confirm that it will be up to county councils to apply for the funding, and will she give any indication of when the extra funding will reach councils and, therefore, families and children?

Janet Daby: I have sort of already answered my hon. Friend’s question. We will ensure that we look at the matter straightaway and that the roll-out takes place straightaway.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her clarity. She will know only too well the distress that this has caused to many children and young adults, particularly those from vulnerable households and families. Will she confirm that Northern Ireland kinship children and adoptees who have been adopted to England will benefit from the fund? Will she also clarify whether any ongoing conversations about best practice and learning on the issue are being shared with the Northern Ireland Executive?

Janet Daby: Good practice is always being shared across our devolved nations. On the other point that the hon. Lady mentions, I will endeavour to get back to her.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the confirmation that she has given today and, in particular, I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) on their championing of this issue in the House. I think I heard the Minister say that there might be a slight expansion of the fund’s remit so that it can help more people in kinship care. Will she say more on what the Government’s thinking is about whether the children who can access this fund have to have experienced care directly? There are many children who grow up in a kinship setting, as I did, and who never actually see care, but for whom this fund would be hugely valuable.

Janet Daby: For clarity, I have not said that we are looking to expand the fund—that is important. However, we are delighted to confirm £50 million for the fund, and it is available to kinship carers as well. I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that there is a lot of focus from this Government on kinship care, and I would be happy to fill him in on further details on that.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): In Mid Sussex, Beacon House provides help to so many children. It was led to believe that only a small minority of families were eligible for continued ASGSF funding, but it appears that, in fact, more than half of its service users were eligible. It would have known that had timely and detailed advice from the Government been forthcoming.

We must not forget that at the heart of this are the children and families affected. My constituent Joe has had to explain to their distraught child why their therapy would not continue. As Joe rightly says, this is “cruel”. This is the fourth time I have raised the matter and the urgent need to continue the funding. I welcome today’s

decision, but given that the Minister is clearly unable to answer my colleagues' questions about whether the funding will continue in future years, would she like to apologise on behalf of the Government for the distress caused to those children and families?

Janet Daby: We have no intention of ending the funding. What I will say is that we are pleased that we can announce the funding for 2025-26.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for raising this matter. I declare that I am an adoptive parent and a foster carer. My family is currently accessing post-adoption support, with a view to potentially applying for therapy. I have also had fellow adoptive parents in my constituency get in touch about the delay in the announcement and the concern that that has caused. Will the Minister acknowledge the need for timely decision making when it comes to support for vulnerable children and young people, so that there is continuity of support and a gradual stepping down rather than abrupt cut-offs? Will she also assure the House that officials in her Department are working at pace to ensure that the very welcome £50 million for adoptive parents and kinship care placements is made available as quickly as possible?

Janet Daby: I absolutely agree that such decisions need to be made in a timely fashion. The Department and my officials are working at pace with the new information, and I very much appreciate the concern that the delay in this announcement has caused. We need to get on with the job to make sure that we can start ensuring the children's therapies can continue and begin.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Due to the funding uncertainty, my Havering constituent has not been able to access sensory therapy for her adopted son from the adoption and special guardianship support fund. She asked me in her utter frustration:

"why is this government trying to give my two biological children—raised in a good home—free breakfast while denying therapy for my adopted child, who desperately needs the support?"

I very much welcome today's rushed announcement, but will the Minister provide assurance that resources will be put into processing any backlog in applications so that adopted children do not miss out on critical support?

Janet Daby: I understand the political points being made here. What I will say is that we are really pleased about the £50 million announcement. We are working and further information will come out as soon as possible regarding the funding.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for her advocacy on this issue, as well as the Minister for her announcement. I, too, have received many emails from desperately worried constituents as we approached and then crossed the cliff edge in adoption support funding. They will struggle to square that with reports that the Government are willing to scrap the tax on US social media giants. Can the Minister please assure me that any future difficult decisions needed in this area will benefit vulnerable children more than they benefit Elon Musk?

Janet Daby: We will continue to support adopted children. According to the Adoption and Children Act 2002, there is a statutory duty for local authorities to do that and we will continue to ensure that we carry through with our children's social care reforms.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this urgent question. Zach and Iesha were placed in the care of my amazing caseworker, Sammie, nine years ago. They had a really hard start in life and were shortly due to start receiving trauma therapy and life story work. I am really pleased that it seems that work and their journey can continue. However, does the Minister recognise the burden for families of being put on hold for so long? Will she confirm that support will go forward, beyond this year?

Janet Daby: As I have already said, this Government have no intention of getting rid of the funding in future years. It is down there in law that support needs to be given to adoptive families and, indeed, we are giving that support to children placed in special guardianships and to kinship carers.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I am talking to a family in my constituency who adopted a young boy and a girl in 2021. They understood at the time that the children were likely to have special needs because of their upbringing, but they were prepared to take on the challenge. The boy in particular requires therapy to keep him in mainstream school. They have been very distressed over recent months at the possibility of losing the funding. Does the Minister not appreciate that this damages our great need to recruit more people to be adoptive parents, which does the state a great service and the children themselves the best possible service?

Janet Daby: There are many families, people or couples who wish to adopt, and I encourage them still to consider including a child in their family and in their life. I will also say, as I have said before, that local authorities have a duty to support adopted children, and no adoptive person or couple should ever not adopt for financial reasons. Obviously, they also undertake an assessment to make sure they are suitable.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The Sensory Smart Child in my constituency does fantastic work providing vital therapies for 115 adopted children and their parents, but 77 of those children were unable to secure a temporary extension in support while the Government considered the future of the adoption fund, and that caused huge trauma for the families. I welcome today's announcement, but can the Minister guarantee future funding? Will she also acknowledge that such therapies fill huge gaps but barely touch the sides in mental health and special educational needs provision in schools, which is not funded properly? I hope that the comprehensive spending review will look at this properly and fund it better.

Janet Daby: I think I have already answered that question, but I say again that there are many excellent therapies out there that are absolutely necessary for children, and that children from all backgrounds and lifestyles benefit from. I absolutely appreciate the work that is done for children in our country.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham for securing this urgent question and the Minister for her commitment on the £50 million. I have secured an Adjournment debate on Thursday on adoption breakdown, and over the past few days I have been asking people to tell me their stories. I have heard that things such as the adoption and special guardianship fund are crucial to preventing it. With that in mind, what assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the fund on ensuring that adoptions can continue, and will she make that information publicly available, if possible?

Janet Daby: I look forward to speaking to the hon. Member during his Adjournment debate—I am sure that he will ask me many more questions, as is absolutely appropriate. I would say that this should not prevent people from coming forward to adopt children, and that children will still get the support they need and so rightly deserve.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham on securing this urgent question and this commitment from the Government. I recently received the following email from a constituent:

“Since adopting my children I have received absolutely no support at all. After 15 years of caring for a severely traumatised child, I heard about the post adoption support team... They applied to the fund and my son has just had his first assessment session and we are awaiting the report... He has been failed at every step of his life—please don’t fail him again.”

My constituent will be pleased to hear today’s announcement, but on their behalf I want to ask the Minister two questions. First, will she do everything in her power to ensure that local authorities are signposting adoptive parents to the support of this fund and the

eligibility for it? Secondly, taking into account her comment that she has “no plans” to prevent the fund continuing, will she and her Department ensure that the announcement is made no later than September on the funding of the scheme in future financial years, given that the spending review is due before the summer?

Janet Daby: This Government absolutely support this fund and this funding being made available. If the hon. Member would like to share any more information regarding the 15-year-old and the family’s experience of lack of support, I would welcome him to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers to the urgent question—no one can doubt her compassion or understanding, given the way she has answered. I am mindful of the fact that children are our future—as a grandfather of six, I understand only too well what it means to have them there—but 18,000 children are left in limbo throughout every region of the United Kingdom, and to get to the point where there is no confirmation of whether essential therapy can continue is terribly disheartening, to say the least. These children feel abandoned. How will the Minister ensure that the lack of a decision, and the hesitation, will not add to their sense of abandonment?

Janet Daby: I congratulate the hon. Member on being a grandfather of six, and I hear the concerns he has raised. I share those concerns, and the Government will continue to work to ensure that the support services are in place for all children who need it, including those who are involved with this funding.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for her answers this afternoon. I will allow a few moments for the Front Benchers to swap over.

Sentencing Council Guidelines

1.45 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on sentencing in England and Wales. As the House will be aware, new guidelines from the Sentencing Council on pre-sentence reports have come under scrutiny in recent weeks, specifically on whether an offender's faith or the colour of their skin should be a factor in their use. This is a question of huge import: whether we all stand equal before the law. That is an ideal that has underpinned justice in this country for centuries and an ancient right that each of us in this House has a responsibility to uphold. The new guidelines on the use of pre-sentence reports were due to come into force from today, but in recent weeks I have had constructive talks with the Sentencing Council and I am grateful to its chair, Lord Justice William Davis, for that engagement. As a result, I am pleased to tell the House that the guidelines have been put on pause while Parliament rightly has its say.

It is important to first understand how we got into this position. Under the previous Government, the Sentencing Council proposed changes to its imposition of community and custodial sentences guidelines, which are concerned with whether a judge should make a community or custodial order when sentencing an offender, and the thresholds for these disposals. When the courts are deciding whether the community order threshold is met, or the custody threshold is met, they are required by law to obtain a pre-sentence report unless they consider it unnecessary to do so. These reports provide more information to the court, helping to provide a greater understanding of the background and context of the offending behaviour. They are a tool at the disposal of judges. The guidelines provide further guidance to courts on how to approach the decision whether to request a pre-sentence report. In this instance, they help them to determine what sentence might best be handed down.

In general, I should be clear, I welcome the use of pre-sentence reports. In the last few months, I have created capacity within the Probation Service to ensure that it has more time for vital work such as this. But the new guidance, if it came into force, would encourage judges to request them for some cohorts of offenders and not others. Specifically, it notes that it would "normally be considered necessary" to request pre-sentence reports for ethnic, cultural or faith minorities. It is important to be clear about the impact that a pre-sentence report is likely to have in this instance: it is more likely to discourage a judge from sending an offender to jail. It is this that creates the perception of differential treatment before the law and risks undermining public confidence in the justice system.

A repeated theme of my engagement with the Sentencing Council over the guidelines has been the intention behind them. It was attempting to address very real inequalities that exist in our justice system—inequalities that are evident in the sentences that offenders receive. It is unclear why this happens, as the Sentencing Council acknowledges. There is no doubt that more must be done to understand the problem we face and to address it. Some measures are already taking place across our

justice system to make it more representative of the public that it serves, such that it can deliver outcomes in which we can all have confidence, and I note that the proportion of ethnic minorities within the judiciary has risen from just 7% 10 years ago to 11% today.

While change can feel slow and must accelerate, my view is that despite the noble intentions behind these guidelines, in attempting to address inequalities in our justice system they sacrifice too much. They raise a serious question of policy: in the pursuit of equality of outcome for different religions and races, should we treat them differently before the eyes of the law and move so far away from an ideal that has underpinned justice in this country for centuries? On this, I am clear: all must be equal before the law.

I know there will be disagreement in this House with regard to the correct policy to pursue. There have been, as I have noted, differences of opinion among the Opposition. I expect that the shadow Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who opposes these guidelines, and the now shadow Transport Secretary, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who welcomed them while in office, have been having some robust conversations in recent days.

I doubt, however, that there is any disagreement that this is a question of policy. How the state addresses a systemic and complex issue is clearly the domain of policymakers. It is right that questions like these are discussed and debated here. It is right that the public can hold us to account for the decisions we take and that they can ultimately reward or punish us at the ballot box.

The role of judges is entirely different. They are concerned not with how policy is made but how it is applied. The independence of our judges to make those determinations is fundamental to our justice system. Over centuries they have built a reputation for fairness, making them world-renowned and respected. They are the embodiment of the rule of law in our country. To play that role, they must be able to make decisions on the facts without any outside influence. They must know they have the Government behind them, protecting them as they do that vital work. When I swore my oath as Lord Chancellor, I made a solemn pledge to protect and defend the independence of the judiciary, and I always will. But to do so, it is essential that the boundaries between what is policy and what is judicial decision making are clear. For that reason, the Government will today introduce the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill. It is a tightly focused Bill. It does not interfere with the vital work of the council providing guidance to judges on how to sentence offenders. It addresses the issue of when a pre-sentence report should be ordered.

The Bill adopts a targeted approach. It does not prevent council guidance from advising in general terms that pre-sentence reports should be requested when judges need more information about an offender's personal circumstances. It will remain the case, for example, that where an offender is a victim of domestic abuse, a judge can consider it in deciding whether to order a pre-sentence report. But it prohibits the council from making guidelines about pre-sentence reports with specific reference to the offender's personal characteristics, such as their race, religion or belief, or cultural background.

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

The Bill will not affect the court's existing duties to obtain a pre-sentence report in appropriate cases, nor does it change court precedent around them—like the recent case of *Thompson*, in which the Court of Appeal noted the importance of obtaining a pre-sentence report in cases involving pregnant women or women who have recently given birth; like the case of *Meanley*, where the court referred to the importance of pre-sentence reports in serious cases involving young defendants; or like the case of *Kurmekaj*, where the court emphasised the defendant's traumatic upbringing, vulnerability and the fact they had been a victim of modern slavery as reasons why a pre-sentence report should be ordered. Judges will continue to request pre-sentence reports in cases where they ordinarily would—for example, those involving pregnant women or young people.

I accept that the Bill will, however, raise wider questions about the role of the Sentencing Council. The council does important work bringing greater consistency to judicial decision making, but we are here discussing a question of policy—a difficult, disputed and uncertain one at that. If the Government cannot determine national policy on the question of equality of treatment before the law, we have uncovered a democratic deficit. The Bill exposes that question but does not address it. The proper role of the Sentencing Council, and the process for making guidelines of this type, must be considered further, and I will do so in the coming months. It is right that this question is considered in greater depth, and should further legislation be required, I shall propose it as part of the upcoming sentencing Bill.

The Sentencing Council, although only 15 years old, holds an important position within the firmament of our justice system, and any changes must be made carefully and with due consideration. I am sure they will be discussed more in this House in the months ahead. The Government will today introduce the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill. The issues it contains are of great consequence because the path to a more equal society can only be paved by equality before the law. Again, I thank the Sentencing Council for putting a pause on its guidelines while Parliament has its say. I believe that we must reverse them and reassert that no race or religion should receive preferential treatment before the law. The Bill we will introduce today will achieve that, and I commend this statement to the House.

1.54 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Lord Chancellor must be living in a parallel universe if she is giving herself a pat on the back today. The truth is she has completely lost control of the justice system. She sat on her hands for weeks and took seven days to gather her thoughts and put her views in writing to the Sentencing Council. Her incompetence took this down to the wire.

Magistrates and judges were updated by the press office of the Sentencing Council only at midday that the guidelines due to come into force had in effect been suspended. That raises the very real prospect that magistrates and judges sitting from 10am this morning were unaware of this chaotic last-minute change and sentenced people under guidelines that the Justice Secretary

herself has conceded are two-tier. But it gets worse. In that very email to thousands of judges and magistrates sent just 90 minutes ago, the Sentencing Council states: “we remain of the view that the guidelines are necessary and appropriate”.

Confusion reigns. They are being told one thing by the Lord Chancellor and another by the Sentencing Council. Who really is in charge here? Yet again, the Justice Secretary has been humiliated and undermined by activist judges seeking to undermine the will of this place—our Parliament. Her authority has been shredded—she is being treated as a two-tier, second-tier Justice Secretary.

This situation was entirely preventable if the Justice Secretary had simply put party politics to one side and backed our Bill weeks ago to restore accountability and empower her to actually control justice policy, but the Labour party blocked it. If the Prime Minister has been tricked into sitting at the front of the docklands light railway thinking that he is in charge, as his chief of staff mocked him for the other day, the Lord Chancellor has chosen to sit there in the passenger seat allowing the judiciary to take charge. She decided to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, all-powerful to be impotent.

Even after this complete shambles, the Lord Chancellor will not even re-establish ministerial oversight. We are told via frantic press briefings that her Bill, which we have not even seen yet, will surgically remove these two-tier sentencing guidelines. That does not tackle the root cause of the problem at all, which is an activist legal quango that holds views completely divergent to the public, to Parliament and—now we are told—to the Government. Unless she follows the formula of the Bill produced by Conservative MPs, we will be back here time and again to unwind the next piece of madness coming out of the council.

Take the Sentencing Council's immigration guidelines that water down sentences for immigration offences below the 12-month threshold for automatic deportation: if published, it will mean hundreds of illegal migrants and foreign national offenders will avoid deportation every single year. It will blow a hole in border security. It even waters down the maximum life sentence for people smugglers that was legislated for just under a year ago. It completely disregards parliamentary sovereignty.

At our last exchange, the Justice Secretary said there would be no two-tier justice on her watch. Well, there it is—and it is worse than that. On 2 January, her own Department—not the Sentencing Council—published guidance ordering the prioritisation of bail for ethnic minorities and transgender people, continuing a practice introduced under Gordon Brown. Contrary to the misinformation peddled by her press office, the Department produced new guidance on pre-sentencing reports that have been in force for months, which state that probation officers should consider the “culture” of an offender and whether they have suffered “intergenerational trauma” from “historical events”. Well, that is cultural relativism, which violates the rule of law and puts the British public at risk. This time, nobody is to blame other than her. It is her Department; it is black and white; it is two-tier justice.

I have some questions. Will the Justice Secretary reassure the House that nobody was sentenced this morning under guidelines that she concedes are two tier? Can she honestly say at the Dispatch Box that she has confidence in the head of the Sentencing Council, Lord Justice Davis, given that he has brought it into

total disrepute—yes or no? If she can, is she aware that he took to the airwaves yesterday, in an astonishing departure from the expected standards of judicial conduct, to advocate for abolishing short sentences, especially for hyper-prolific offenders, effectively instructing lower courts to follow suit? It is time for him to go, and if she will not sack him for that, what will it take?

Does the Justice Secretary have confidence in Johanna Robinson, another member of the Sentencing Council, who took a moral objection to border control and described the Illegal Migration Act 2023 as appalling? Lastly, will the Justice Secretary change the guidance that her own Department is producing and which has created a two-tier Probation Service? Or is it, once again on her watch, two-tier justice under two-tier Keir?

Shabana Mahmood: Dear, dear, dear me. It seems that the right hon. Gentleman's amnesia is as bad as ever: 14 whole years appear to have disappeared entirely from his memory. He talks about parliamentary sovereignty, but when his party was in government and he was a Secretary of State or a Minister, he appeared never to know what on earth parliamentary sovereignty was or how to exercise power.

I think the right hon. Gentleman is rather distressed that my approach has led to a pause in the guidelines, that I will introduce a Bill that will deal with the offending bit of this guideline, and that I will consider the wider role and powers of the Sentencing Council ahead of the sentencing Bill later this year. I understand that it must be very disappointing for him that he has been exposed as someone who is all talk and no action, and that I get the job done. I can see that that annoys him greatly.

Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would like to begin by apologising to the country, as I often invite him to do when we have our exchanges across the Dispatch Box. In 14 years, he never appeared to discover any of the things that he now discusses regularly from the Opposition Benches. He did nothing about those matters when he was a member of the Government that ran the country. Perhaps that is the problem: the Conservatives never really ran the country; they gave up on the job. He never rolled up his sleeves and put in the hard work to get the job done. That is why we inherited prisons on the brink of collapse, and why I am now unwinding all the mistakes that his party made and the guidance that he and his party welcomed.

The right hon. Gentleman did not tell me what discussions he has had with the shadow Transport Secretary, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon). Before the Conservatives explain why they are so het up about things now, they should explain why they welcomed those things when they were in office. There was no answer to those questions. I do not believe that there were many questions in that diatribe from the shadow Justice Secretary.

On sentencing, the pause in the guideline was communicated—that is a matter for the Sentencing Council. I will, of course, engage with the judiciary to ensure that all is understood regarding the pause. Nothing has changed in relation to the ordering of pre-sentencing reports by judges in all the circumstances in which they would ordinarily do so. The guideline is what has been paused, and it will now not come into effect until Parliament has had its say. The right hon. Gentleman

references two individuals. That is the difference between me and him: I do not make it personal. I just focus on the job, and I get the job done.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Mother of the House.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I realise that this is not a popular view in the House, but the Justice Secretary will be aware that some of us are astonished that she thinks our judges are so weak-minded as to be affected by what are guidelines in relation to how they sentence black and brown defendants.

The Justice Secretary will be aware that report after report and repeated statistical analysis have demonstrated what some of us consider to be unfairness in relation to black and brown people and the criminal justice system. She will also be aware that the reason the Sentencing Council was made a statutory independent body was to avoid even the appearance of ministerial interference in sentencing. This is not the United States; our political and judicial systems are entirely separate. Can she explain why she is so triumphant about not just interfering in sentencing, but passing a piece of legislation to cut across what the Sentencing Council is saying?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my right hon. Friend for her questions—at least she asks some proper questions. She says that her view on the policy might be an unpopular one, but this is the place where views on policy, popular or unpopular, can and should be debated. That is at the heart of my disagreement with the Sentencing Council on the guideline.

I think that the matters that my right hon. Friend raises in relation to race and the disparities in the criminal justice system are the proper preserve of politicians. The answer to how we deal with those issues will be a policy answer, and it is for the Government, the Opposition and other Members to debate that policy answer and pursue it through Parliament. That is why I reject entirely the suggestion that anything I have done impinges upon the independence of the judiciary or calls into question the separation of powers in this country.

The Sentencing Council is itself a creature of statute; it is only 15 years old. It is entirely proper for a politician—a Government Minister, the Lord Chancellor—to assert that there is a boundary between that which is policy and a matter for Parliament and that which is judicial practice and consistency in judicial cases. I have sought to reassert that boundary. I look forward to working with Members with differing views from across the House in considering the wider role and powers of the Sentencing Council. As I have said, I will return to those matters in the coming months.

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

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): There is only one group in this House that lost control of our justice system: the decimated former Government on the Opposition Benches. Overcrowded prisons, reoffending through the roof, victims waiting for justice—what a disgrace. That disgrace continues today through the downplaying of the impact of intergenerational trauma—of which child abuse is a form—by the shadow Justice Secretary.

[Josh Babarinde]

I thank the Lord Chancellor for engaging with me on this issue in advance of her statement. Our criminal justice system's ability to take someone's freedom away is one of the most humbling powers that it holds, which is why sentencing decisions must include all available information. Pre-sentence reports are a critical part of that process. She mentioned pregnant women, survivors of domestic abuse and survivors of modern slavery as important examples of where that is considered. However, because everybody has a context, the Liberal Democrats believe that such reports should consistently be made available whenever anyone's liberty is at stake. We will therefore scrutinise the legislation through that lens of equality before the law.

It is rich of the Conservatives to complain about inequality in our justice system when it was they who presided over a state of affairs in which someone from one of our country's most deprived areas is 10 times more likely to be in prison than someone from the least deprived, someone who looks like me is four times more likely to be stopped and searched than others, and people with special educational needs represent half the prison population compared to a fifth of the general population. Will the Justice Secretary outline how she will fairly tackle those disparities to restore confidence in the justice system, which was so shattered by the Conservative party?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesman for his questions. He is right: as I said in my statement, pre-sentence reports are an incredibly vital tool for judges. In fact, the requirement is that they should ask for a pre-sentence report unless the court considers it unnecessary to do so. There is a strong push towards obtaining pre-sentence reports in the vast majority of cases. The Probation Service that I inherited from the previous Administration has struggled under increased workloads. It was a service that the Conservative party privatised and then partly renationalised—our Probation Service officers, who do vital work every single day, have been through the mill.

I have been making changes to the focus of the Probation Service in the last few months to pivot its work to focus on high and medium-risk offenders and free up probation capacity, so that more time can be spent doing vital work such as the preparation of pre-sentence reports. I will carry on working with the Probation Service to ensure it is ready to do what is asked of it, to a very high and consistent standard, which I know will be important to all Members. I have already announced 1,300 extra probation officers in the financial year that has just passed and another 1,000 in the coming financial year. Probation remains vital to the preparation of pre-sentence reports, and we will ensure it is in a position to meet the asks that are made of it.

On the hon. Gentleman's wider points about disparities across the criminal justice system, I thank him for the spirit in which he has engaged with me on those matters. I have the same concerns as him, but I believe we should understand what the latest data is showing us. That is why I have asked for a review of all the current data, and we should test any solutions we come up with. They are policy solutions, so they would have to be debated and passed in this House, and politicians are

ultimately responsible at the ballot box for the choices they make, but those solutions have to work—they have to yield a change in these disparities. That is what I want to test.

In my engagement with the Sentencing Council on this particular guideline, it has accepted that the causes of the disparities are unclear, and no one is sure whether the changes to pre-sentence reports would make a difference anyway. I am not willing to sacrifice public confidence in the criminal justice system or chip away at the idea of equality before the law for solutions that are appropriate for debate in this place and that we are not even sure would work. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman closely in the coming weeks and months on these issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The Sentencing Council is a judicial body whose president is the Lady Chief Justice and whose chair is a distinguished Court of Appeal judge. Its function was previously executed by the Court of Appeal. It is fully independent but is linked to Parliament, not least because the Justice Committee is a statutory consultee for all its guidelines, including those under discussion today. Its judicial leadership, independence and democratic accountability are its strength and a primary reason it is held in high esteem in the criminal justice system. Will the Lord Chancellor reassure me that those attributes will remain integral to the council, whatever changes are proposed in the current legislation, sentencing review and sentencing Bill?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his question. Of course, I respect the independence of the judiciary. I think I was very clear in my statement and the remarks I have made that I not only stand behind that principle, but have taken an oath that I fulfil and consider my duty to do so. Where I consider to be in disagreement with the Sentencing Council is that this is properly an area of policy, rather than a mere tool for the consistency of judicial practice when it comes to sentencing. That is the point of principle on which we have a disagreement, and it is why I will be considering a further review of the wider role and powers of the Sentencing Council. I simply repeat to my hon. Friend that ensuring that a creature of statute is operating in the way that was intended when that statute was put in place is the proper preserve of politicians and Parliament. I hope we can all agree on that.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I thank the Lord Chancellor for her rather belated statement. I particularly welcome her observation that recent events have uncovered a democratic deficit. Is she not concerned that it was the shadow Justice Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who uncovered this deficit, and not herself, her ministerial team or her Department? It was my right hon. Friend who first raised the issue of two-tier sentencing guidelines in this Chamber on 5 March, four weeks ago. Could the Lord Chancellor tell us why she has waited until the eve of their introduction to bring forward her emergency legislation?

Shabana Mahmood: If the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the guidelines and what was brought to his attention when, perhaps people in his party should not have waved them through before the general election and welcomed them, as the shadow Transport Secretary did. I notice that none of them is engaging on the substance of that point. I am the one who is dealing with the democratic deficit. They had 14 years in power and did nothing about it, and now they just carp from the sidelines.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Does the Lord Chancellor agree that the previous Government were consulted on and, indeed, welcomed the Sentencing Council's new guidelines, and therefore it is totally unfair of Conservative Members to accuse this Government of having a two-tier system? Does she agree that it is yet another example of this Government having to clear up the previous Government's mess?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right: many Conservative Members appear to have a very loose relationship with their own track record.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Lord Chancellor is right that equality before the law lies at the heart of popular respect for justice. However, I must say to her that it is not this House that endangers the separation of powers, but judicial activists, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) has made palpably clear, who are more interested in making laws than applying them. Will she, as my right hon. Friend requested, let this House know whether she retains faith in the Sentencing Council and its members or whether, like me, she believes that having been exposed, they should now do the honest and right thing and resign?

Shabana Mahmood: I have already said that I am not interested in making a personal attack on anybody. I have a disagreement on a point of principle with members of the Sentencing Council about what is the proper preserve of policy and what is the proper role they should play. We have tried to resolve it. They have agreed to pause their guideline. We will move forward constructively.

I will not stand back and let people attack the independence of the judiciary. I have sworn a solemn oath; I will fulfil that oath. We are very lucky in this country to have the sort of legal system that we do and a judiciary that is held in high regard. These are public servants of the highest order. It is easy for politicians to attack on matters of policy or politics they do not like, but as I have just shown, if politicians or parliamentarians disagree with something, we have the power to change it.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): The juridification of law should worry us all, and we should make sure that primacy remains with this House; the Lord Chancellor has taken an important step towards that today. What is worrying is that for 14 years, no action was taken by the Conservative party. Does my right hon. Friend believe that that was because of incompetence or just a lack of understanding of what it meant for the country?

Shabana Mahmood: Who can say? I suggest asking any of the Conservative Members here whether they have an answer to that, but they appear to still wish to live on another planet and never reckon with their own track record in government.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Black people in Wales were the most over-represented ethnic group in prison in 2023, followed by those from a mixed background and people belonging to an Asian ethnic group. That over-representation is worse in Wales than in England. Pre-sentencing reports can help us to understand why people of black and minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be sent to prison. Even if she disagrees with the method, surely the Secretary of State agrees that action is necessary to tackle evidenced inequality within the criminal justice system, so what solutions is she bringing forward?

Shabana Mahmood: The proper role of a pre-sentence report is to give a judge who is about to pass down a sentence vital information about the context of that offender—for example, whether there has been domestic abuse, their age and other vital factors relevant to the offending behaviour—so that the judge can make a decision about the best sentence to pass. The pre-sentence report is not about setting right any other wrongs that exist, however legitimate they are—that is not the point of the pre-sentence report—but about giving the sentencer in every single individual case the information that they need, such as whether a woman is pregnant or has recently given birth, as the Court of Appeal upheld recently. Those circumstances should be properly understood by judges. The position in law is that a pre-sentence report should be sought by judges in all cases, unless the court considers it unnecessary to do so. That covers the majority of cases where a pre-sentence report should be sought, but we should not confuse the proper role of what the pre-sentence report is there to do.

To the extent that there are over-representations, I see them too. Over 70% of my constituents are non-white and, as the right hon. Lady can see, I am from an ethnic minority background myself, and I am also from a faith minority. I see those disparities—they are a lived reality of my own life—but I am not prepared to sacrifice the principle of equality before the law to put those disparities right. I wish to be more curious than anybody else has been in previous years about what lies behind those disparities, and about what are the proper levers that have to be pulled to put them right. We often discuss judicial diversity, but I am not sure that increases in diversity have necessarily led to a change in what the underlying data shows. Clearly, there is more going on. Any solutions that politicians come up with have to be tested in the House, because they are properly the domain of policy and Parliament.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on a victory over the Sentencing Council on the fundamental principle of equality before the law? The independence of the Sentencing Council does not entitle its members to go over its boundaries, into the area of policy and politics into which they have strayed. That is such a fundamental issue that having made those fundamental errors of judgment, those members of the Sentencing

[Graham Stringer]

Council should no longer be able to carry on in the job, whether it is by their own decision or that of the Secretary of State.

Shabana Mahmood: In fairness to the Sentencing Council, it sought views from the previous Government and was told that the Government welcomed its findings, both in the consultation and the guideline. The Sentencing Council did not do anything wrong in the process that it followed. I invited it to consider that there had been a change of Government and a change of policy since it began work on the guideline, and asked it to consider reopening the consultation. I was disappointed that it chose not to do so, but I am not interested in making this a personal debate about individuals. I am grateful to the Sentencing Council for pausing the guideline, which has not come into effect. All our previous arrangements in relation to pre-sentence reports remain in place. As I say, I am considering the wider role and powers of the Sentencing Council, and I will return to the House with further proposals in due course.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): The cherished idea of equal treatment before the law is fundamental to my constituents' understanding of British justice, so why did the Justice Secretary not act immediately to stop the imposition of two-tier sentencing, rather than the last minute scramble we saw yesterday? In her statement today, she says:

"The proportion of ethnic minorities within the judiciary has risen from just 7% 10 years ago to 11% today."

To what extent does she consider that that simply reflects a wider demographic change, rather than discrimination in the judiciary?

Shabana Mahmood: On diversity in the judiciary, there has been consensus in this House on that point. A lot of effort has gone into encouraging applications from people who may want to consider leaving private practice and becoming judges, which has started to have an effect. Having institutions that are more representative of the country that they represent is an important principle. I hope that there is cross-party consensus that it is important for Parliament to look, at least a little bit, like the people that it seeks to represent. However, I am not sure whether an increase in the diversity of judges is necessarily going to be the fix for the disparity issues that we see in the criminal justice system. That is why I have asked for a review of what the current data is telling us, to tease out whether there is a relationship between those two things. If there is not, then we will need to think more carefully about the other policy levers that might be needed. I think those are proper matters for this House to discuss.

On the hon. Lady's broader point about the Sentencing Council, I used a power that has never been used before, in the 15 years of the Sentencing Council's existence, to ask it to think again. I have done everything the proper way: I asked it to think again and I engaged with the Sentencing Council. At the end of last week, it told me that it was going to stick with and publish the guideline, and that it would come into force today, 1 April, which is why I said I would legislate. I brought forward a Bill, which has been published today, and thankfully the Sentencing Council has chosen to pause the guideline

until Parliament has had its say. I have done everything exactly as I should have done, instead of rushing to rhetoric, which I do not believe solves anything.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Pregnant women and new mothers are at high risk in custody. They are seven times more likely to experience a stillbirth and at least two baby deaths have taken place in recent years. Among other important measures, the Sentencing Council has issued guidance on the use of prison sentences for pregnant women and new mothers, which were supposed to come into effect today. Any delay to that risks causing untold, preventable harm. I am relieved that the Lord Chancellor has committed to protecting that guidance, but how quickly will it be implemented, because women cannot wait any longer?

Shabana Mahmood: I can offer my hon. Friend immediate reassurance. The Bill that we have published today is a very targeted Bill on the ability of the Sentencing Council to bring forward guidelines relating only to pre-sentence reports and personal characteristics. It is a very tightly focused Bill and nothing in that Bill affects any Court of Appeal precedent, and there is already strong Court of Appeal precedent on the desirability of a court obtaining pre-sentence reports before it passes sentence in cases involving pregnant women and women who have recently given birth.

More widely, on the issues of policy relating to women in the criminal justice system, I hope my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that I have set up the women's justice board specifically to look at the needs of female offenders across the whole criminal justice system. I am determined—it is a position of policy for this Government—that we will send fewer women to prison and ultimately have fewer women's prisons. That is properly a matter for policy. I am sure it will be contested in this House, but that is the realm of politics, Parliament and ultimately the ballot box.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the news today that the Sentencing Council had a last-minute change of heart on pre-sentencing reports. To go back to the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), why did it take the efforts of the shadow Justice Secretary to get the Lord Chancellor to have a change of heart on that important matter? We did not get an answer on that before.

Shabana Mahmood: I did answer the question: it did not.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Whatever their ethnic background, my constituents in Rochdale are united in supporting the ancient British principle of equality under the law. I welcome what the Justice Secretary has produced today, in stark contrast to the Opposition, who welcomed the previous attempts at two-tier justice. Does she agree with me that pre-sentence reports should be available for all offenders and should never be linked to ethnicity, culture or faith?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right. I wish to see the widest possible use of pre-sentencing reports. It is my job to ensure that the Probation Service is in a position to provide pre-sentencing reports whenever

they are required by the court, and that courts have confidence in the reports that they are getting. I will ensure that that is the case.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has the Lady Chief Justice been rebuked for the impertinence of her letter to the Prime Minister following Prime Minister's questions on 12 February, when he perfectly properly questioned another absurd judicial decision?

Shabana Mahmood: No. I have very positive conversations with the Lady Chief Justice. She has an important constitutional function and obligations, as do I. Our conversations are collaborative and constructive. On that matter, the Government made their view clear that the exchange at Prime Minister's questions turned on a question of policy, which is the proper realm of politicians and ultimately Parliament.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): I thank the Justice Secretary for her decisive action on this issue and note that this Government are not ducking political decisions, farming them out to quangos like the last lot did with bodies like NHS England, or blaming the blob for crashing the economy when it was Liz Truss's mini-Budget that did that. Does the Justice Secretary agree that politics and policy are the domain of this House and its Ministers, and can she reassure me that this Government will continue to make sure that we in this House can make the decisions that the public expect us to make?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right. The business of government is difficult and requires lots of effort. The contrast between this Government's approach and the approach taken by the Tory party over its 14 years in government is stark. We are getting on with the job.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): While the Sentencing Council guidelines do not apply in Northern Ireland, does the Lord Chancellor accept that controversial changes in England, such as a reduced likelihood of custodial sentences for certain groups, risk undermining confidence in the justice system across the entire UK? Can she outline what steps she is taking to ensure fairness and consistency in sentencing across all jurisdictions, regardless of ethnicity, culture or faith?

Shabana Mahmood: In Wales, these are reserved matters, and the guidelines would impact only on England and Wales. There are devolved arrangements here as well, which I do not propose to upend in any way, but I am always happy to have constructive conversations with colleagues in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales on any such matters. In the end, we are a UK system, even where some matters are devolved, and I really appreciate and value that collaboration.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I join colleagues in paying tribute to the Lord Chancellor for her decisive leadership and for the thoughtful way in which she has answered questions today. *[Laughter.]* I welcome, as will my constituents in Pendle and Clitheroe, her confirmation that equality before the law will remain, and I look forward to seeing the Bill that she proposes. I can see the Tories railing against the justice system

that they left us, but we on the Government Benches really are mad about it: we had a backlog of 70,000 Crown court cases, there were no prison places left and neighbourhood policing was hollowed out. Is it any wonder that voters so comprehensively rejected the Tories?

Shabana Mahmood: I think the country had its say on 14 years of the Tories in charge. To be honest, given their legacy in the criminal justice system, I would not take the same approach, but I am not surprised that they are laughing; the only other thing they could do is to cry.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Why does the Lord Chancellor propose to take only a very narrow power in respect of the two-tier pre-sentencing reports rather than a general power, given that other guidelines and draft guidelines, including for immigration offences, are far below the levels agreed to by this Parliament? The Sentencing Council is ignoring policy determined by this House. What more evidence does she need to act, and to act now?

Shabana Mahmood: On the immigration guideline, I will correct something that the shadow Justice Secretary said earlier. Nothing in that guideline prevents the deportation of any foreign national offenders, and this Government have been getting on with the job, having deported more than 24,000 foreign nationals. Our record on foreign national offenders is one of a 20% increase in removals this year compared with the same period last year. I wanted to ensure that the guideline did not come into effect, and that is why I published the targeted Bill. I have acknowledged that there is a debate to be had about the wider role and powers of the Sentencing Council, which I will return to in the weeks and months ahead.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): The Sentencing Council was created in April 2010; a month later, the Conservatives came to power. If, as so many on the Conservative Benches seem to think, the Sentencing Council is a shadowy, revolutionary group of activist judges dangerously undermining the British way of life, why on earth did they not do anything about it?

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I agree with that.

Jake Richards: I think they agree with that now—interesting. Does the Lord Chancellor agree that this episode shows that our constitution is working? Parliament is sovereign, and if Parliament seeks to change this guidance, under this Government it will.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is exactly right. At no point has anybody on the Conservative Benches shown any humility or tried to answer the question of why they did nothing about it. As I say, the case of amnesia from which the shadow Justice Secretary is suffering seems to be as bad as ever.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I certainly welcome the fact that the Sentencing Council has been forced to back down on its woke proposal. As the new legislation progresses, can the Lord Chancellor assure the House that there will be no dilution of the robust principles of the separation of powers and the independence of our judiciary; and that the right approach will continue to

[Jim Allister]

be that Parliament sets the maximum sentence for any criminal offence, and our judges decide on a case-by-case basis what the sentence should be?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right. It is for Parliament to set the overall sentencing framework, but every single judge has to see the case in front of them and make their own decisions. As I made very clear in my statement, I will always defend the independence of our judiciary; they do vital work and are a crucial part of the separation of powers. Everything that I have sought to do, given this recent episode, has been to respect that separation of powers and assert what we properly consider to be the realm of policy, politicians and Parliament, and what is the realm of the judges.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Lord Chancellor for her statement. Does she agree that we should all hold closely the ideal of equality before the law, and that the biggest cause of two-tier justice was the mess that the Conservative party made of our Probation Service?

Shabana Mahmood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because he gives me an opportunity at the conclusion of my statement to support the Probation Service. In all of the Tory party's terrible legacy in the criminal justice system, including prisons on the point of collapse, what it did to the Probation Service was unconscionable. This Government are putting things right. I have already made changes to the Probation Service, and I will ensure that it is on the strongest possible footing going into the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Lord Chancellor for her statement.

Foreign Influence Registration Scheme

2.36 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the foreign influence registration scheme. FIRS is a fundamental component of the National Security Act 2023, which was a response to the evolving threat of hostile activity from states targeting the UK. Parts 1 to 3 of the Act came into force in December 2023 and have been transformative for our operational partners, with six charges already brought against those conducting activity for or on behalf of foreign states acting in the UK. A further five individuals involved in those cases have been charged with other offences.

FIRS provides crucial additional powers to protect our democracy, economy and society. It does three things: provides transparency on foreign state influence in the UK; gives the police and MI5 a critical new disruptive tool, with criminal offences for those who fail to comply; and deters those who seek to harm the UK. They will face a choice to either tell the Government about their actions or face arrest and imprisonment.

Given the benefits of the scheme, I can tell the House that FIRS will go live on 1 July. The political influence tier of the scheme, which applies to all states, will allow the UK to be better informed about the nature, scale and extent of foreign influence in the UK's political system. It will strengthen our resilience against covert foreign influence. The political tier requires the registration of arrangements to carry out political influence activities in the UK at the direction of any foreign power. In most cases, registrations under this tier will be made available on a public register. For the first time, Members of this House will now be able to check whether anyone who seeks to influence them is doing so at the direction of a foreign power, a move that I am sure will be welcomed right across this House.

The enhanced tier of the scheme has been specifically designed to shed light on activities directed by foreign powers or entities whose activities pose a threat to the safety and interests of the UK. It enables the Government to specify those foreign powers that pose the greatest threat to our society, to ensure transparency over a much broader range of activities than just the political tier. It will provide an important tool for the detection and disruption of harmful activity against our country. Last month, I set out our intention to specify Iran under this tier of the scheme. I can announce today that we will also specify Russia under the scheme.

Russia presents an acute threat to UK national security. In recent years, its hostile acts have ranged from the use of a deadly nerve agent in Salisbury to espionage, arson and cyber-attacks, including the targeting of UK parliamentarians through spear-phishing campaigns. Clearly, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine has also highlighted its intent to undermine European and global security. To ensure we are responding to the whole-of-state threat that Russia poses, the Government intend to specify the Head of State of Russia and its Government, agencies and authorities, which will include its armed forces, intelligence services and police force as well as its parliaments and judiciaries. We also intend to specify several political parties that are controlled by Russia, including the United Russia party. This means that any person—either an individual or an entity, such as a company—that carries out activity as part of any

arrangement with those Russian entities will have to register with FIRS. Should any of these foreign power-controlled entities, such as political parties, carry out activity in the UK directly, they would also have to register with FIRS. I hope it will be clear what a powerful tool this is.

It is clear that FIRS has the potential to provide greater protection for our security, our democracy and our economy, but we must get the implementation right. In support of the scheme, the Government have today laid before Parliament draft regulations specifying Russia and Iran, introducing new exemptions from the scheme and making provision for the publication of information. Both this House and the other place will have the opportunity to consider and debate these regulations under the affirmative procedure. The Government have also laid a further set of regulations relating to the collection and disclosure of information under the scheme. To support the consideration of the regulations, and to assist potential registrants and others to better understand their responsibilities under the scheme, the Government have published comprehensive guidance online.

By bringing the scheme into force on 1 July, the Government will be giving sectors three months' notice to help them to prepare for it. During that time, the Government will work closely with the relevant sectors, including academia and business, to ensure that they understand their obligations. Taken together, this package will ensure strong compliance with the scheme from day one. There will also be a three-month grace period to register existing arrangements. I know that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber recognise the challenges posed to the UK by foreign interference, and I hope that all Members can support these further steps to keep our country safe. Of course, as with all national security issues, we must stay agile, and, as I have said, FIRS will be kept under review. Any new announcements will be made to the House in the usual way.

It is our duty to defend the safety and interests of the UK. That is why we are commencing FIRS; it is why we are introducing greater protections for our democracy; and it is why we are clamping down on the threat from states that conduct hostile activities in, and against, the UK. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.44 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I start by thanking the Security Minister for advance sight of his statement, which he provided with his customary professionalism and courtesy. We on the Conservative Benches welcome the commencement of the FIRS regime, legislated for in the last Parliament, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friends the Members for Witham (Priti Patel), for Braintree (Mr Cleverly), for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) and for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman), for their work in bringing that legislation forward. I also welcome the announcement that Iran and now Russia will be included on the enhanced list, meaning that all activity undertaken in the UK by those countries or those acting for those countries must be registered.

However, I will address the bulk of my remarks to the elephant in the room, which the Security Minister did not mention at all in his statement: China. MI5's director general, Ken McCallum, said in July 2022, almost three years ago:

"The most game-changing challenge we face comes from the Chinese Communist Party. It's covertly applying pressure across the globe."

In October 2023 he added:

"We have seen a sustained campaign" of Chinese espionage on an "epic scale". In January 2024 the director of the FBI, Christopher Wray, said that China is "the defining threat of our generation".

As such, I have a very simple question for the Security Minister this afternoon. He had plenty to say about Iran and Russia, quite rightly, but why is he silent on China? We know that China engages in industrial-scale espionage, seeking to steal technology from Governments, universities and industry. It represses Chinese citizens in this country and has sought to infiltrate our political system. In 2022, MI5 exposed that China sought to infiltrate this very Parliament via its agent Christine Lee. It has set up undeclared and illegal police stations in the UK, and in December last year it placed a bounty on the head of three Hong Kong dissidents living in the UK. I would like to ask again a question that was not answered last time: why has the Chinese ambassador not been summoned to explain that?

There is no question in my mind that China should be in the enhanced tier of FIRS, and it is an astonishing omission that it has not been listed as such already. Why are the Government silent on this issue? In the past, Governments have prioritised economic growth in their relations with China, but we now know a lot more about how China operates than we did 10 or 15 years ago—we know what it is up to. Is the truth not that, in their desperation to get economic growth going after the Chancellor's rather unfortunate autumn Budget, the Government seem to be prioritising economic links over national security when it comes to China? I imagine that is why the Government appear to be intending to grant planning permission to China for its super-embassy, which we all know will be a base for espionage activity.

The Minister has rightly spoken about the threat posed by Iran and Russia. He is right to take action, and we support him in doing so. However, MI5 and the FBI have both warned about the epic threat posed by China, so will he please answer this simple question: will he place China in the enhanced tier?

Dan Jarvis: To begin on what I hope will be a point of consensus, I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for the gratitude he expressed in general terms for the progression of this scheme. I certainly hope that there is cross-party agreement about the importance of this new tool, and I am very grateful for his support. I am also grateful for the work done by the previous Government on the development and subsequent implementation of the National Security Act 2023.

Before I turn to the question that the shadow Home Secretary posed, I just say to him that we are trying, through the use of FIRS and other means and mechanisms, to ensure that the UK is as hard a target as possible, and to make it the most challenging operating environment for those who would do us harm. The Government take these matters incredibly seriously, and I hope he would

[Dan Jarvis]

acknowledge that we have progressed the process of FIRS at pace, despite some accusations from one or two Opposition Members that that was not the case.

I hope that the shadow Home Secretary would acknowledge that the main geographical focus today was on Russia. We covered Iran a number of weeks ago, but in addition to the other remarks I have made about FIRS, the focus has been on Russia. He did not have very much to say about Russia, but I welcome him welcoming the fact that we have specified Russia on the enhanced tier.

For reasons that I completely understand, the shadow Home Secretary asked about China. He will recall the remarks I made to this House on 4 March, where I was very clear that countries will be considered separately and decisions will be taken by this Government based on the evidence. I said then, as I say again now, that I will not speculate on which countries may or may not be specified in future. That is the right way to proceed, and I hope he understands that.

I hope that the shadow Home Secretary recognises that the Government, with the wider strategy we are pursuing on China, are taking a consistent, long-term and strategic approach to managing the UK's relationship with China. I did not agree—this will come as no surprise to him—with how he characterised the nature of the relationship with that country. The Government's policy is clear: we will co-operate where we can, compete where we need to and challenge where we must, including on issues of national security.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and his trademark constructive and authoritative tone. Often it is frontline police officers who deal with the consequences of aggressive action by hostile states on Britain's streets. I specifically welcome the Minister's announcement that training on state threats activity will be offered by counter-terrorism police to all 45 territorial police forces. Can he provide a further update on the roll-out of that training?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Often where the rubber hits the road is the incredibly important work done by police officers on the beat, and I pay tribute to them and their service. It is important that we ensure as a Government that all police forces are ensuring that those police officers out and about in the course of their duties get the training they require to be able to identify and appropriately respond to matters that may constitute either transnational repression or state-directed activities. I can give her an assurance that we are working with police forces to ensure that that training is taking place at pace. Along with the Policing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), I am liaising with chief constables and police and crime commissioners to ensure that that work is under way. That will provide a valuable tool for those policing our streets, ensuring that they have the requisite skills, training, knowledge and experience, should they encounter the kinds of issues we are discussing today.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I thank the Minister, as always, for advance sight of his statement. We on the Lib Dem Benches welcome the further implementation by the Government of the foreign influence registration scheme, but I find myself in the rather unusual position of agreeing with a lot of what the shadow Home Secretary has said—very dangerous territory. Last year, Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee issued the excoriating China report, which said that the Government do not have a clear strategy on China and have not devoted sufficient resources to tackling the threat it poses. I will therefore ask the Minister some new questions that the shadow Home Secretary did not.

Will the Minister confirm whether the Government have plans to generate a human rights and democracy report, to conduct the audit on China that they have promised, and to ensure that China is fully considered in the strategic defence review? As has been mentioned, many are severely concerned by the proposed Chinese mega-embassy, for which the Government have indicated their support. Does the Minister believe that the building of this embassy will encourage the Chinese Communist party to carry on its attempts to subvert our democracy? What conversations has the Minister had with colleagues across Government about blocking this plan and making protecting our democracy a key national security priority?

Can the Minister say more about how the political influence tier will be administered? How do we ensure that every relevant foreign individual signs up to the register? It is right, if there is a top tier of the scheme, that Russia and Iran are on it, but will the Government now go further by proscribing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation?

Finally, the Liberal Democrats have long called for reforms to funding to prevent foreign interference and to increase transparency in political donations. What plans do the Government have to close loopholes that allow opaque and potentially corrupt funding of political parties, enabling foreign and dark money to influence British politics?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady asked a number of questions, and I will endeavour to respond to all of them, but if I do not, I will certainly come back to her outside of the Chamber. She asked a number of questions about ongoing activity across Government, and she referenced the China audit, as well as the strategic defence review. I know she would acknowledge that those matters are not within the bailiwick of the Home Office, but sit with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence. I can give her a categorical assurance that we address these matters across Government, and we work closely as different Departments. She will know that the Prime Minister made an announcement just recently about the publication of a national security strategy. The Prime Minister has committed to publishing the national security strategy in advance of the NATO summit in June. That document is being worked on across Government, and it will provide, I hope, some of the answers to the questions that the hon. Lady has rightly raised.

The hon. Lady asked about the embassy. I say to her and to all Members across the House that national security has been our core priority throughout that process, which is why the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary jointly submitted written representations

to the Planning Inspectorate to reflect those considerations. I hope she will understand that I am limited in what I can say, not least because a final decision on the case will be made in due course by the Deputy Prime Minister, acting in her capacity as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. It will be done in an independent, quasi-judicial role, so I am unable, for legal reasons, to say anything further on that particular matter at this moment.

The hon. Lady helpfully asked about the political influence tier, which will strengthen the resilience of our democratic institutions against covert foreign influence. It will require those in arrangements with foreign powers who conduct, or arrange for others to conduct, political influence activities in the UK to register those activities within 28 days. Most registrations made under the political influence tier will be included on a public register, and I am sure she will recognise the transparency associated with that.

The hon. Lady also asked me about proscribing the IRGC. She will remember, because she responded to it, the statement I made on Iran last month, during which I confirmed that the Government have asked Mr Jonathan Hall to conduct an independent review into the legislative framework around proscription. He is making good progress with that work, and I hope we will be able to update the House further in the near future.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about funding, and she will have seen the comments from the Electoral Commission in the past day or two. There is separate electoral law specifically relating to funding, but we look carefully at these issues and we are working across Government, not least with the work I lead on through the defending democracy taskforce, working with colleagues in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and in other Departments.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, which is of real significance given the increasing external threats that our country faces. Given those threats from hostile state actors, it is more important than ever that we take effective action to protect our critical national infrastructure from cyber-attacks and ransomware attacks. Can the Minister update us on the plans announced in the King's Speech for a new Bill on cyber-resilience and the other actions being taken to improve our protections in this area?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend has raised an important point, albeit one that is not often the source of much debate. This Government take our critical national infrastructure extremely seriously, and we work with all colleagues in all Departments, not least those in the Cabinet Office. I can assure my hon. Friend that we in the Government are absolutely committed to using all our levers to disrupt cyber-threats to that critical national infrastructure, and we welcome the plan announced today by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to introduce a cyber security and resilience Bill. We work closely with the Department on these matters, and we know that that important Bill will help the UK's digital economy to be one of the most secure in the world, giving us the power to protect our services, our supply chains and our citizens, which is the first and most important job of any Government.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It was good to hear the Minister confirm that the scheme will be kept under review. Two definitional matters will certainly need to be kept under review: first, what counts as being "at the direction" of a foreign power or specified entity, and secondly, in respect of the political tier, what is the extent of the definition of "political influence"? Up until now we have tended to think in terms of influence over elections, parliamentarians or Government decisions, but given the continuing development of technology and new media we can also see the potential for more direct action—direct to the public—which could conceivably have very high-impact effects. Will the Minister keep both those matters under review?

Dan Jarvis: It is good to see the right hon. Gentleman in his place. There is a relatively small band of former Security Ministers left in the House, and I think he is the only one in the Chamber at present. I always appreciate his constructive, sensible and reasonable contributions. He is absolutely right: definitions do matter, and we have taken a long time to think very carefully about how best to do this in order to ensure that we define it in the most effective and appropriate way. As he will recall from my opening remarks, we have published today regulations and guidance providing substantial detail, but I look forward to discussing these matters further when we debate them through the affirmative procedure, and I hope very much that the right hon. Gentleman will contribute to that process.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Border security is national security. What steps is the Minister taking, along with other Home Office Ministers, to strengthen the enforcement of the UK immigration law against those who seek to promote hostile state threats here in Britain?

Dan Jarvis: My right hon. Friend is right: border security is national security. She will know that the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill has now completed its Committee stage, and she and other Members will have noted that yesterday the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary hosted an organised immigration summit in London, which was attended by countless international partners and was a very constructive and worthwhile gathering. She will also know of the important work that is now being done by the Border Security Commander, who is working closely with our international allies. We are making good progress with these matters, which we take extremely seriously, and although we will have more to do, I am pleased with the progress that we have made to date.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Two of the four ugly totalitarian sisters have been included in the list so far, and I trust that China and North Korea will both be added to the enhanced tier in the fullness of time; but will the Minister take back to the Government the message that the House is concerned about the building of the biggest Chinese communist embassy in western Europe—in fact, the biggest embassy—in London? It is not clear why the Government needed to call it in on security grounds, given that the local authority wanted to refuse permission completely. Will the Minister also explain the differential between the penalty that people will face when exposed for acting on behalf of a foreign power if they have registered and the penalty that they will face if they have not registered?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman speaks with great experience and authority on these matters, and I know he will agree that the implementation of FIRS gives us a critical capability that we have not had previously. It also provides a very clear choice for those who are considering whether they want to engage in this kind of nefarious activity or not. They can declare their activities to the Government, and that is what we want them to do, but if they do not, they will face arrest and imprisonment over a protracted period. That will provide a significant deterrent that we do not currently possess, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and others will welcome it.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's points about the embassy, I know he will understand that I am very limited in respect of what I can say. The shadow Home Secretary is shaking his head. I am very limited for legal reasons because a process is under way, and if I say anything to undermine that process there will be significant consequences. However, the right hon. Gentleman has made his point constructively, so let me think about whether there is some mechanism whereby, perhaps on a Privy Council basis, there can be a briefing in which we discuss these matters in a way that is not subject to the scrutiny that the House will rightly bring. As I have said, I am very limited in terms of what I can say, but I recognise the right hon. Gentleman's concern, and will look into whether there is a way in which we can discuss it in another forum.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): While aligning myself with the concerns expressed by the shadow Home Secretary, I am happy to take the Minister at his word. In the last decade, the previous Government badly misjudged Vladimir Putin's aims regarding the United Kingdom, and his exploitation of our naivety. So that the current Government do not make the same mistake with the Communist party in China, will the Minister commit himself to releasing a full, unredacted Russia report, and an audit and report on the activities of the Conservative Friends of Russia—or, as they were more recently termed, the Westminster Russia Forum?

Dan Jarvis: I think I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, although I would probably need to consider it for a while longer to make an authoritative judgment on whether I am grateful to him or not. The Government's position—certainly on the publication of the report—is clear, but I am happy to discuss it with him further. Mindful of the comments that he made about previous Governments, I can give him an absolute assurance of how seriously we take these matters, with Russia and other countries. I understand why he mentioned China, and I understand why other Members have mentioned it as well. I hope he understands that the focus today is on Russia, as the focus last month was on Iran, but I am happy to discuss these matters further with him and his Liberal Democrat colleagues.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): On the subject of the political tier, can the Minister say how domestic politicians might be affected—those who have foreign interlocutors, as well as those who are simply involved by virtue of all-party parliamentary groups? As for the enhanced tier, while I appreciate that he is reluctant to be drawn on specifics, can he say whether the scope of what he has in mind might include

a foreign jurisdiction with a stated intention to annex the territory of a European neighbour and Commonwealth partner?

Dan Jarvis: I am always grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. With great respect to him, I will not go into the specifics of his second point, because I am particularly keen not to do so, but let me respond to his important question about parliamentarians. Hopefully he, along with other Members on both sides of the House and in the other place, will welcome the fact that for the first time, collectively, we will be able to see, and check, whether those who are seeking to influence behaviour or activities in this place are doing so at the behest of a foreign state. We are not able to do that at present. The fact that we will be able to do it in the future represents a significant step forward, and I hope everyone will recognise that.

On the point about the political influence tier, let me reiterate what I said previously. This will require the registration of activities carried out at the direction of a foreign power that seek to influence Members of this House. That will help protect the integrity of Parliament by ensuring that we are all informed of any attempts to influence us where a foreign power is driving the influence. Where a parliamentarian is named on a registration as a potential target of influence and the registration is to be published, the FIRS case management team will be in contact with that parliamentarian. This is a good and positive step forward for parliamentarians, and I hope that will be recognised across the House.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I welcome the statement from the Minister, but if the Government are so concerned, and rightly so, about malign foreign interference with national security, what does he make of the statement from the Trump Administration that tariff decisions will be contingent on judicial decisions in the UK, or of the letter sent from the White House to US embassies in Europe last week ordering foreign companies with US contracts to obey Trump's Executive orders not to promote diversity, equality and inclusion, and would those companies require FIRS registration?

Dan Jarvis: I am reluctant to get into the specifics of the way in which particular arrangements may work, as that is not entirely helpful. However, I hear what the hon. Member has said, I will consider it further and I will come back to him with a considered response.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Although I welcome the Government's invoking and activation of the FIRS scheme, like a curate's egg, it is good, but there are missing bits. The elephant in the room—and it is a very big elephant—is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) and other Conservative Members have said, which is the missing bit about China. The fact is that China is behind all this. We know that China is involved in supporting Russia in the war that is named in this report. It is also behind Iran and the work it has done in destabilising Gaza and so on, and it is behind North Korea.

Therefore, the question for us is: if it is shown that China is a danger and a threat to us internationally, is that the case internally? We know that the United Front Work Department reports directly to President Xi. It is

made up of thousands of organisations that set out to disrupt life here in the UK, and it enters into organisations that have influence. We know that it has put a bounty of 1.2 million Hong Kong dollars on the heads of people here who have fled tyranny in China. We know that the illegal police stations still exist that have been dragging in Hong Kong dissidents. We know they have made attacks on dissidents in Manchester, physically and brutally attacking them. We know that China has spies involved inside the House of Commons and outside it as well. We know that slave labour exists in the net zero arrays and the wind farms we are putting up, and we say nothing about that. In fact, we voted to continue with slave labour last time around. The truth is that we have a real problem because China is at the epicentre of everything to disrupt democracy and freedom. Why is China not in the statement today?

Dan Jarvis: I always appreciate the contributions made by the right hon. Gentleman. As I have explained to the House, in addition to announcements about FIRS in a more general sense, the focus today has fundamentally been on Russia. The House will have heard the comments he has made, and I hope he will accept that this Government take these matters incredibly seriously. I hope he has heard the remarks that I made, both earlier and in my previous statement in response to the threat from Iran, about how we will consider countries on an individual basis and take evidence-based decisions about how best to proceed.

I am sorry that I will not be able to speculate on which countries may be specified in the future, but I hope the right hon. Gentleman will accept that the announcement we have made offers real value in three particular areas. There is the point about transparency, and he will have noted the point on the political tier about requiring all countries to register. He will also have noted the point about disruption and the point about deterrence. This policy will introduce a difficult choice for those who are seeking to influence the UK in a way that has not previously been the case. That is the right way to proceed, but as I say, we keep these matters under very close review. I am always happy to discuss them outwith this Chamber should he wish to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for his statement.

Point of Order

3.14 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Very worrying media reports have emerged overnight that the Iranian regime may be contemplating a military strike on our base on Diego Garcia. For instance, *The Telegraph* has reported:

“A senior Iranian official said military commanders have been asked to target the joint UK-US base, which sits on Britain’s Chagos Islands, in an attempt to deter Donald Trump from striking Iran.”

Moreover, in the last hour or so—with Foreign Office questions conveniently out of the way—there are emerging media reports that the Government may have come to a so-called deal with Mauritius over the future of the Chagos islands themselves. If that is true, the UK Parliament has yet again been kept in the dark about the future of what is still, today, British sovereign territory and a vital strategic installation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I ask if you, or indeed Mr Speaker, have been given any indication that the Government intend to come to this House to make a statement tonight, or at the very latest tomorrow, about, first, an implied military threat to the Chagos islands, and secondly, a legal and diplomatic threat to the Chagos islands, which are and should remain fundamentally British?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. Of course, the Chamber has just been hearing a statement that was in part about threats posed by Iran to the United Kingdom and its interests. However, I can inform him that the Chair has not received any notification of a statement on the specific matter he raises. He will know that those on the Treasury Bench have been listening to his point carefully. As an experienced Member of this House, he will also be considering other ways in which he can make sure that this matter is raised.

BILLS PRESENTED

SENTENCING GUIDELINES (PRE-SENTENCE REPORTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Shabana Mahmood, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Angela Rayner, Secretary Yvette Cooper and Secretary Peter Kyle, presented a Bill to make provision about sentencing guidelines in relation to pre-sentence reports.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 217) with explanatory notes (Bill 217-EN).

STREET WORKS (PENALTIES FOR UTILITY COMPANIES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daisy Cooper presented a Bill to make provision for the daily issuance of Fixed Penalty Notices against a utility company which has committed certain offences under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991; to

require the minimum amount of any such penalty to be equal to the costs associated with the issuance of the related Fixed Penalty Notice; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July, and to be printed (Bill 214).

Transport (Duty to Cooperate)

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

3.17 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con):
I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for a duty on transport authorities and other specified persons to cooperate to reduce transport disruption and to ensure the effective operation of transport networks; to provide for reporting requirements in connection with that duty; to require the publication of assessments of expected transport disruption resulting from maintenance, construction, and other works related to transport infrastructure and ancillary services; and for connected purposes.

As the Member of Parliament for Runnymede and Weybridge, my mission is to keep them moving. We rely on our transport networks to get to work, school or college and doctor's appointments, or just to see friends and family, whether by road, rail or even air. We are dependent on our transport networks. Discussions about critical infrastructure often focus on big, apparently unprecedented events, such as the recent power failure at Heathrow, but even the smallest road is critical infrastructure if someone cannot leave their house because of an engineering diversion route.

We all welcome work to improve our roads and transport network, and we of course recognise that this may cause some disruption. We understand that there will be temporary disruption for unexpected emergency works, such as a power cut or a gas leak. However, all too often our transport infrastructure in Runnymede and Weybridge is brought to a halt due to multiple planned works happening at the same time, or planned utility works causing recurrent disruption through multiple providers—gas, electricity, water, broadband—digging up the same road over and over again. Disruption should be avoided and minimised, by authorities and providers talking to each other and co-ordinating works. Ensuring co-ordination when road and rail works take place is the purpose of my Bill.

Sadly, in Runnymede and Weybridge, we have loads of examples where co-ordination has not taken place, despite repeated assurances that authorities do co-ordinate and discuss issues regularly. We have had full M25 closures coinciding with mainline rail engineering work, despite reassurances otherwise. Roads in some areas of Chertsey have been repeatedly dug up, often under the guise of urgent works, from gas to water to electricity. Perhaps most infuriatingly, authorities or utilities sometimes do not adequately staff works or leave them unattended, meaning that when the signals failed at Painshill roundabout, and separately in Weybridge, it took hours to resolve because the right equipment and staff were not on site to fix the problem. We understand and expect there to be some disruption, but I believe better planning and co-ordination can prevent and avoid much of what we have seen locally.

Surrey county council has been working hard to address issues on our local road network. I thank the council, and in particular Councillor Jonathan Hulley for his leadership and work on this issue. Surrey has established a new taskforce to drive better co-ordination and communication of works across our road network. Surrey, along with National Highways and six major utility providers, has called on the Department for

Transport to make changes to systems and processes to reduce the negative impact of emergency utility works across the county. It has called for changes to digital services used to manage highways works in England to enable prior notice of urgent works where possible, improving communication and co-ordination. Surrey has also called for, among other things: mandatory onsite signage for emergency works to explain delays, the lead agency to improve information for road users, and of course, a requirement for swift completion of works to reduce disruption and support economic productivity.

I fully support the proposals, which could resolve many local issues, but they alone cannot achieve the co-ordination required across networks to address all the issues I have highlighted. That is why I am bringing forward the Bill, calling for a statutory duty to co-ordinate. Under the duty, National Highways could not have informed me that it was unaware of the impact excess trains on the Chertsey branch line would have on level crossings and the local road network on the same weekend as a motorway closure, because it would have been required to communicate, co-ordinate and assess the likely impact of its actions. Under the duty, Network Rail would not have been able to inform me that while it usually does communicate with other authorities, on “this occasion” it forgot. Combined with the work undertaken by Surrey county council, under the duty, utility companies would not have been able to place repeated and unannounced works alongside major diversion routes with impunity. When utility companies dig up the road, they would need to check if anything else needed to be fixed at the same time.

Our transport links are the lifeblood of our communities and our economy. In 2021, National Highways estimated that total delays on its network alone cost £3 billion each year. Add to that the cost of delays on local road networks—hours missed from work, goods stuck in transit—and the value of addressing the issue is clear, if not just for the benefit to our communities but to the UK economy as a whole. I ask the Government and colleagues across the House to support the Bill and the work of colleagues in Surrey to address these issues, and to ensure our national transport infrastructure operates effectively and efficiently for all. Let us keep Runnymede and Weybridge moving.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered, That Dr Ben Spencer, Rebecca Paul and Gregory Stafford present the Bill.

Dr Ben Spencer accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April, and to be printed (Bill 216).

Product Regulation and Metrology Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The reasoned amendment in the name of Andrew Griffith has been selected.

3.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way? [*Laughter.*]

Jonathan Reynolds: Of course—why not?

Sir Desmond Swayne: When did weights and measures become metrology? Is this use of newspeak deliberate to cover an Orwellian attempt to cloak this huge grab for power, and to what end?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful for that intervention very early on in proceedings. I cannot provide a definitive answer to the right hon. Gentleman on the naming of the Bill, but I promise that I will find out and put it to him in writing. But he will know that the Bill was, I believe, originally planned by the previous Government because of the need to repatriate powers to the United Kingdom as a result of our exit from the European Union. It is something we need in our toolkit, so, far from being Orwellian, it is a pragmatic, practical proposal. I look forward to now making the case for it in more detail.

The primary mission of this Government, and the driving force of my Department, is stronger economic growth: not just growth that looks good on paper, but growth that is seen and is felt on our high streets, in our towns and cities, and in the communities we serve; growth that reverses 15 years of stagnation, with all the negative consequences we all felt during that time. To do that, we need an economy in which shops and small businesses can compete on a more level playing field with online marketplaces and the big tech giants. We need an economy that promotes investment and innovation, but at the same time ensures consumers and businesses have real, modern protections. That is why the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill is a small but hugely important piece of legislation, one that will further cement the UK’s status as a world leader in product regulation and safety.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is giving an important introduction to the Bill. Does he agree that international alignment in the standards we are discussing on scientific matters is essential for the smooth operation of modern advanced manufacturing?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am hugely grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I believe I am correct in saying that he is not only a metrologist, but the first metrologist elected to Parliament. I put no heavy expectations on his speech today, but we are all looking forward to it with interest.

[Jonathan Reynolds]

My hon. Friend is right that there are areas where we will choose to work with international standards, and there will be areas where we choose to diverge, but that decision is made possible only by having the powers to begin with. No decisions will be made in this Bill, if it becomes an Act of Parliament, as to how we will do that; however, without it, we would not have the toolkit to make those decisions. The essence of these proposed laws is that we are taking back control for the House of Commons and Parliament to make these kinds of decisions.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware from the Second Reading debate in the Lords that a number of what I shall gently refer to as Eurosceptic peers have expressed concerns that the Bill is a form of dynamic alignment with the European Union, and that, far from taking back control over which standards are involved and which guidelines are necessary, we will be abdicating control in favour of whatever the European Union decides. Can he set our minds at rest over those concerns? I am sure he would not wish to be diverted along such a dead-end route.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention; he always brings wisdom to these debates. I can absolutely give him the assurance that the Bill makes no decision as to how we should use these powers. The reason we are bringing it forward today is the same reason the previous Conservative Government first proposed a Bill of this kind: having left the European Union, we need the powers to properly regulate these products in this way; without this legislation, we would not necessarily have the ability to do that.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On that specific point, further to the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), that presumably means that the Government will press for recognition of UK standards where they prevail and where we think we are doing the job better. There will absolutely be occasions where we can learn from others, and other occasions where they can learn from us. Is that the Government's intention? Will the Secretary of State make that clear now?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am more than happy to make that clear. We see that in a number of areas—it is the case across the whole field of regulation. Let us look at AI, which is topical right now: we have chosen a different regulatory path in the UK from the European Union, which is to our economic advantage. I am very confident in the approach that we are taking. I am sure that when I get to the provisions of the Bill, and in particular when it comes to weights and measures, the whole House will be united in being able to say that we believe that traditional British standards are particularly important to us.

I say again, however, that having the power to set standards in itself makes no decision as to how these powers are used. We can all clearly recognise the need to repatriate these powers to our own statute book.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) *rose*—

Jonathan Reynolds: I was going to make a little progress, but I cannot resist the right hon. Gentleman.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I just want to raise a small point. When I was doing some work on this matter for a previous Government, looking at what we could do with our regulations and standards on leaving the EU, it became apparent that the UK is behind only America and China globally in setting standards for the rest of the world. To what degree is the Secretary of State planning to enhance that, rather than returning to any European usage of standards, when we already dominate the field?

Jonathan Reynolds: The right hon. Gentleman will have heard me say just now that our intention is to cement the UK's status as a world leader in product regulation and safety. I am sure we would all recognise the tremendous benefits for both consumers and businesses that come from being a jurisdiction whose consumer protections are widely recognised and where people have confidence that the goods and services they buy will be to the highest standard possible. Where we see gaps in our provision, because of the substantial change that has occurred with our leaving the European Union, we would surely want to fill those gaps so that we are in a position to continue our success in this area.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister gives the House the assurance that the idea is not to take us back to EU laws or to have EU laws imposed on the United Kingdom, and yet the Bill heavily references EU laws. How does he explain that?

Jonathan Reynolds: I can explain it very clearly. Colleagues who are interested in this legislation will have followed the proceedings in the other place and the discussions on this area. I put the case very straightforwardly: we do not have the ability without this Bill to regulate product standards in a whole range of areas. There are some cases where there will be a strong consumer or business demand for alignment with other jurisdictions; there will also be cases where we wish to diverge, because we see that as being in our economic interests.

However, we surely all accept that we cannot have a position where we do not have the ability to regulate key products, and in particular products that have come from the new technology that is available and the opportunities that come from that. Once again, I say politely to anyone on the Opposition Benches who is not quite reassured that the previous Conservative Government were planning a similar Bill to fill this exact gap in the statute book.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I would like to make two points. First, this House can do what it wants. It does not need this Bill to regulate anything. To say that it does simply is not true. Secondly, on the question of whether the Bill will lead to dynamic realignment with the EU, can the Secretary of State explain what clause 2(7)(a) is for? It seems to me that it could be used to dynamically realign with EU regulations.

Sir John Hayes *rose*—

Jonathan Reynolds: I will give way to the right hon. Member.

Sir John Hayes: I wish to give the Secretary of State time to read the clause. He owes me now, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The key thing is that we must not use EU standards as the default. The hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) is right that we have the authority to make our own standards, and we often do so very well. But the risk is that where we have not yet done that, the EU standard will become the default position. The Minister can make it crystal clear to us today that that is not the case.

Jonathan Reynolds: As ever, I am particularly grateful to the right hon. Member for his courtesy. To my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer), I say that clause 2(7) says:

“Product regulations may provide that a product requirement is to be treated as met if—”.

It clearly says “may” and “if”. Again, I say that there will be times when it is in our economic interest to have a close relationship with the product standards in, for instance, the European Union or another jurisdiction. There will also be times when it is not. That will be our choice. I think we would all recognise the absence of powers without this Bill.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman makes reference to the ability of this House to make regulations. We can, of course, do so by primary legislation. There was a parliamentarian who said that

“the use of delegated powers carries a risk of abuse by the Executive, which is not something the Opposition could ever support.”—[*Official Report, Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Public Bill Committee*, 1 February 2018; c. 305.]

The Secretary of State should agree with that, because it was he who said it.

Jonathan Reynolds: That was obviously part of a very wise set of remarks that I made from the Dispatch Box. But, yes, we must recognise that. I say again, because the Bill has been through the other place, that changes have been made as a result of that feedback: we have removed a number of Henry VIII powers; we have introduced a consultation requirement; we have provided for additional affirmative resolution procedures; and we have said that we will publish a code of conduct that sets out the statutory and non-statutory controls to ensure that regulation is proportionate, evidence-based and developed through consultation. Because of the process that we have been through, we have responded to the kind of concerns that I was wisely articulating in relation to primary legislation.

Perhaps it will be of use to the House if I say a little about that journey and the work of the other place in this regard. I wish to thank in particular my ministerial colleague, Lord Leong, for his great efforts in taking the Bill through the other place. I also thank the many Members and Committees of the other House for their assistance in creating what I believe is strong and effective legislation—legislation that will benefit millions of UK businesses, tens of millions of consumers, and, of course, all those who enjoy a pint or two at the pub.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): On pints—

Jonathan Reynolds: I give way on that point.

Dr Murrison: The Minister is right to praise the House of Lords for making sure that the great British pint is in this Bill as an exclusion from the metrology regulations. However, this will not satisfy the metric martyrs. The Minister will remember that the ability to sell in imperial measures was a big issue a few years ago. Why is it that there is an elaborate schedule to the product regulations, but not to metrology, and why in particular is food generically not included in the exemptions from what the Minister proposes to do?

Jonathan Reynolds: We would say with confidence that there was never a danger to the pint, but because of the concerns that were raised in the other place and perhaps by some colleagues here, I am more than happy to have made the changes to assure everyone present and everyone watching that the pint will be defended and secured in the Bill. I have to say that I have received no entreaties from businesses that they wish to sell in imperial measurements. However, if the right hon. Gentleman believes that there is an absence of provisions in the Bill, he can write to me and I shall write back to him and hopefully be able to reassure him. I think he may be misplaced in thinking that that is a principal issue for UK businesses.

As all hon. Members know, the digital age in which we live has created significant growth opportunities. The consumer and technology landscapes that we have today are almost unrecognisable from those we had 20 or 30 years ago, so the products that we buy and the way in which we buy them are evolving rapidly. That means that the relevant rules and regulations must adapt, too. If we are to protect consumers and businesses, especially smaller firms, that is essential.

As we have examined in some detail, product regulation and metrology are policy areas that have largely been repatriated from the EU following our withdrawal in 2021. Since then the UK Government have simply not had the necessary powers to continue regulating these areas effectively. We have brought forward this legislation so that we can respond to anticipated changes in the global regulatory landscape. That is why, to be frank, I am somewhat bemused by the reasoned amendments tabled today.

The Bill will ensure that the UK is better placed to address modern-day safety issues. It gives us the power to better regulate items such as potentially dangerous baby sleep products and toys. It will enable us to reduce burdens on business and keep up with technological developments, for example by updating the outdoor noise regulations in Great Britain. It will align testing methods across the UK, which was overwhelmingly supported in our recent call for evidence, and it will protect the public from noise pollution from products like lawn mowers and power generators.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I have only closely scrutinised the Bill today, so I am just bringing myself up to date on this. It appears to give the Secretary of State the power to ban any product he wishes for whatever reason. We make law in this place not for when we are dealing with a Minister of the moral calibre of the right hon. Gentleman, but on the basis that we might have someone who lacks such

[*Graham Stuart*]

qualities; that is who we legislate for. Is it true that this Bill would give the Secretary of State the power to ban literally any product, and that all that would have to be done is to notify this House?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his concern and his regard. I believe that if we were of the view that a product was a danger to the public, the right hon. Gentleman would expect me as Secretary of State in my Department to take action. If he is concerned about provisions in the Bill, he can look to the changes that have been made. It has been through an extensive scrutiny process in the other place, particularly in relation to the powers and delegated powers given to the Secretary of State. I think he recognises the case we are making for the safety of the public; indeed, it is why Opposition Members themselves recognise the need for a Bill of this kind.

The Bill will help to create a level playing field between the high street and online marketplaces. Critically, we are able to protect consumers by reducing the number of unsafe and non-complying goods that are sold online. This could include asking sites to verify third-party sellers before allowing them to list their goods or to have a product safety reporting function for customers on their sites. One example is e-scooters and e-bikes, which like many products are reliant on lithium-ion batteries. These batteries have been attributed as the cause of a number of fires in recent years, both in households and on public transport.

While we know that the vast majority of products are safe, in recent years we have seen some goods mis-sold by a minority of unscrupulous manufacturers and sellers. As a result, low-standard, high-risk products have been able to enter the UK market. Some people have paid for this with their homes and, in some cases, their lives. I think we would all recognise that that is unconscionable.

I want to pay tribute to the family of Sofia Duarte. Sofia tragically died when a bicycle that had been converted into an e-bike burst into flames. The bike's lithium battery pack failed, causing a fire on new year's day 2023. I know that the whole House will join me in recognising the bravery and courage of Sofia's family in campaigning for change in memory of their daughter and in fighting for better regulation of e-bikes, along with the batteries and chargers associated with them. I also thank the London Fire Brigade for its campaigning on this issue in recent years. It has been on the frontline, seeing at first hand the devastation that has been wrought by some of these products.

This Bill is about keeping the public safe. The Office for Product Safety and Standards has taken action in this area already. It has issued 26 withdrawal notices on eight online marketplaces, two manufacturers and 16 sellers. This has removed two dangerous models of e-bike battery from sale, and I am glad that the legislation we are discussing today will allow us to consider further steps on enforcement.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I have campaigned for greater regulation of bicycles, which have got away with killing individuals, not to mention e-bikes. I want to pick the Secretary of State up on a particular point. I do not disagree with him on the need for regulation, and it

should have been done some time ago, so we are as one on that. However, I still do not think that he has quite answered the question posed by the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (*Graham Stringer*) and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (*Graham Stuart*) just now. Why do we need to have a wide-sweeping Bill like this if we could do it already in the House by vote?

If we have a powerful enough argument to say to both Houses, "This must be done," then they will see it through very quickly by the power of persuasion, but they would have the right to vote on it and to disagree. The Bill takes that right away and achieves the same result, but only by way of a diktat from whoever is in power—and, by the way, I agreed with what the Secretary of State said in opposition.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am sorry that we have not convinced the right hon. Gentleman, but I am certain that the Government need powers in this area. We need to be able to respond to fast-moving changes in technology and regulation. The public would expect me, as Secretary of State, as well as my Department and the Government, to have these powers to keep them safe. Perhaps we have not convinced him at this stage, but he can look at proceedings in the other place and in Committee.

Jerome Mayhew *rose*—

Jonathan Reynolds: I will give way one more time before we come to the amendments that were made in the Lords.

Jerome Mayhew: I am genuinely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He says that he has failed to persuade Opposition Members in this place, but does he accept that he has also failed to persuade the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee in the other place? That Committee, which is chaired by Labour, said last month:

"We remain of the view"

that

"the delegation to Ministers of law-making powers in this Bill involves legislative power shifting to an unacceptable extent from the...legislature to the Executive."

Why does he think the Committee remains against his view?

Jonathan Reynolds: I find that when political parties go into opposition, all of a sudden they seem less keen on the Government having decisive powers to take action in a whole range of areas. We have listened carefully to the criticism from the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, and significant changes have been made to the legislation, which I am happy to take the hon. Member through. They relate to the number of Henry VIII powers, the consultation requirement and the additional affirmative resolution procedure. We are always seeking feedback.

I will now go through some of the other amendments that were made in the other place.

Graham Stuart *rose*—

Jonathan Reynolds: The question I always have for the right hon. Gentleman is: is it going to be good? I will give way one more time.

Graham Stuart: It will be brief. Forget the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee; what about the Secretary of State's colleague, Lord Leong? He said in the House of Lords that he did not think the Bill was right. In what way does it need to be improved? Will the Secretary of State look carefully at the extent of these powers? Even from this short debate, it is clear how wide-ranging and over the top they are.

Jonathan Reynolds: On Second Reading, we have a Bill that is even stronger than the one that started in the other House. Once again, I thank all our colleagues in the other place for their constructive feedback and contributions to the debate. I will not go through every change that has been made, but I will mention some aspects of the Bill that have been strengthened.

First, we have amended the Bill to ensure that there is more parliamentary scrutiny, and we have provided for a statutory consultation requirement to ensure that regulations are informed by those who would be impacted by them. There will also be that additional use of the affirmative procedure for regulations stemming from the Bill. Secondly, the Bill now includes a requirement for me, as the Secretary of State, to publish a statement setting out how my Department expects to identify and assess high-risk products.

Finally, contrary to previous suggestions from the Conservative party, the great British pint will clearly not be affected by this legislation, whether that is ale, cider or indeed milk. We do not believe that the Bill in its original form posed any threat to the pint, but we do not want to run the risk of colleagues thinking that my reassurances are small beer, so we accepted an amendment tabled in the other place that will give the pint statutory protection. That means, Madam Deputy Speaker, that in a few weeks' time, when I hope you will confirm to the House that the Bill has received Royal Assent, we will all be able to raise a pint—protected under statute—to the Bill. I did inquire about whether I was allowed to bring a pint with me to the Chamber to illustrate the point, but that is apparently not in order; only the Chancellor has that ability. Given the week I am having, perhaps we will look at that at a later date.

To summarise, this legislation will finally enable the Government to properly regulate in areas where we have been unable to do so post Brexit. It will also give us the tools we need to better regulate modern-day consumer products. The Bill will help to create a fairer environment for high street shops and small businesses, support our growth mission and provide better protection for millions of consumers. For all those reasons, I commend the Bill to the House.

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

3.49 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question and add:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill [Lords] because it will provide for regulatory alignment with the European Union, and it has been condemned three times by the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee as a skeleton Bill which provides, without justification, inappropriately wide powers for Ministers to re-write the regulatory regimes for product safety and the weights and measures of goods by regulations."

Too often when the public think of Parliament, they think of out-of-touch power and bad laws. The Bill is the archetype of everything that is wrong with Westminster. There should be an unwritten rule in this postcode: never trust a Bill with a convoluted name. This Bill is no exception.

Although it professes to simplify our regulatory framework, the reality is that this is an EU Trojan horse of a Bill, which will sabotage our Brexit freedoms, undermine the integrity of the United Kingdom, disrespect Parliament, befuddle British business with uncertainty and take us back to being a Brussels rule-taker—all from a party that voted 48 times to overturn the will of the British people.

Jonathan Reynolds: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will not, but before I get into further—[*Interruption.*] I will say something nice about the right hon. Gentleman in a minute.

Before I get into detail, let me welcome the Government's U-turn on their plan to scrap the great British pint. Let us hope that that is the first of many. When I raised that on 26 February, Labour Members described it as "a conspiracy theory". The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) said it was "scaremongering", and the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), said that an amendment was no more needed than a

"law to say that the sun must rise in the morning."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 812.]

The truth is that the Government were caught red-handed trying to ditch our British pint by this back-door Bill. Had the Opposition not fought back, the power to crush the British pint would have rested on the whim of a Minister's pen. Welcome though that U-turn is, let us not ignore the fact that the Labour Government wanted to give themselves the power in the first place.

Jonathan Reynolds *rose*—

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab) *rose*—

Andrew Griffith: I will give way to the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner).

Laurence Turner: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way, and I hope he will also give way to my right hon. Friend on the Front Bench. Will he tell the House what possible motive he thinks a Labour Government would have for scrapping the pint?

Andrew Griffith: The Labour motive is all too plain to see. This is a Labour party that voted 48 times to reject the will of the British people, led by the Prime Minister, who sought a second referendum to overturn that will. I accept that the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield was not in the House at the time, but he might want to spend some time with his colleagues in the Tea Room and hear precisely what happened.

Adam Thompson: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Griffith: No, I will make some progress.

The anti-pub, anti-hospitality agenda goes far beyond this Bill. The jobs tax, the threshold change, the attack on seasonal and flexible working, the more than doubling of business rates, the war on pub banter and the garden

[Andrew Griffith]

smoking ban are all from this Government. Our hospitality industry—the Secretary of State is smirking—deserves infinitely better than this from this Government.

Jonathan Reynolds: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Griffith: I am happy to give way if the right hon. Gentleman talks about what he will do to repeal the Employment Rights Bill.

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Member was a senior member of the previous Government and played a well-known role in the mini Budget, as well as a number of other things that that Government did. Will he confirm that they were planning exactly the same piece of legislation because of an absence in the statute book?

Andrew Griffith: Once again, the Secretary of State has failed to engage on the key issue, which is that British businesses—[*Interruption.*] It is not funny. British businesses are bleeding out, business confidence is at a record low, unemployment is rising, and all the Government have to talk about is the past, not what they are currently delivering.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend was asked just now whether the previous Government were likely to have introduced this legislation. May I set the record straight? Had we done so, the Secretary of State would have voted against it.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend has great wisdom on these matters.

Jonathan Reynolds: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Griffith: Let me move on. The biggest flaw of many in this Bill is that, as the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) have both identified, it hands over too much power with too little accountability. There is

“a real need to consider the balance between primary and secondary legislation, which in recent years has weighed too heavily in favour of delegated powers...excessive reliance on delegated powers, Henry VIII clauses, or skeleton legislation—”

such as this Bill—

“upsets the proper balance between Parliament and the executive.”

Those are not my words, but those of the Attorney General. They are taken from a speech that he made in October, while in government, about the importance of restoring parliamentary sovereignty. No one who considered that speech could fail to agree.

The Lords’ Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee has slammed the Bill not once, not twice, but three times, including after the Government’s changes were made. To put this into context, the wide powers contained in this 15-page Bill will allow Ministers unilaterally to amend product safety regulation, impose obligations on online marketplaces, meddle with standards for weights and measures or entirely align British regulatory standards with the European Union, posing a threat to the integrity of the UK internal market. It is 15 pages of the most egregious Whitehall overreach.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another hammer blow to British businesses? We have had the Labour Government introducing £25 billion of tax with the employers’ national insurance contribution, £5 billion of costs with workers’ rights and a never-ending increase in energy bills as they drive forward on their net zero fantasy. Now they will be able to change regulation more or less on a whim, whenever they feel like it, destroying certainty and confidence for British businesses.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend makes a serious and important point. I take the Secretary of State in good faith when he says that he desires for his Government to grow the economy—every Government should, and I believe that this Government should as well—but he must recognise that every single action he takes will take us further away from that goal by piling on the red tape and increasing the level of tax. The regulatory jeopardy in this Bill will do the same, by simply making it impossible to know what product regulations will look like. How can any business plan for the future when the powers offered up by the Bill introduce such a prospect of unpredictable regulatory change?

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that someone sitting at home watching this will be worried by the argument that it is more important to stick to some anti-EU dogma than it is to protect their children from dangerous products, or to keep dangerous electric bikes off the market and regulate for their safety?

Andrew Griffith: With the very best will in the world, I think the hon. Lady can do a great deal better than that. As hon. Members have said, this House can legislate. If there are dangerous products, bring those use cases here, and I believe that across the House we will legislate rapidly to protect our constituents’ safety. However, our constituents did not send us here to pass a 15-page Bill full of skeleton powers to give the Secretary of State an unlimited ability to regulate without having to consult this place.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The challenge for many of us who were here during the previous Parliament, when the hon. Member was in office and had the power to diverge, is that we watched what happened and we saw the cost to British business. That is why the previous Government decided in the end to abandon the British charter mark, is it not? Would he care to tell the House how much proceeding with his plans would have cost British business? It was £1.6 billion, in case he does not know. British businesses need to hear that we get it. They do not want more paperwork; they want less.

Andrew Griffith: I am genuinely intrigued, and I shall sit here and listen to the hon. Lady’s speech later on. Does she want divergence? Does she want us to use our Brexit freedoms, or does she seek to go back to being a rule taker and converge?

We have not heard a compelling argument from the Secretary of State today as to why these powers should be granted. It is right that we in this House adopt the precautionary principle, and if the Secretary of State, or the Minister in winding up, can give us some more compelling use cases, I am sure we would consider that.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This is all very important. There has been some merriment about the pint, but in the novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four” by George Orwell, the hero goes into a pub, and somebody there laments the fact that the despotic regime has just abolished the pint and forced people to drink litres. The road to serfdom is paved by many steps such as this. By the way, when I was Minister for consumer affairs many years ago, we regularly banned things. We did not need this Bill.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend makes the perfect point that this is precisely what the road to serfdom looks like, whether it is serfdom to an individual Minister at a moment in time or serfdom to an unelected Brussels bureaucratic elite. Why would we give up the powers of this House, the reason why we are sent here, and the ability to hold the Government to account?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Member described the Bill as a Trojan horse—it is more like a Trojan donkey. Does he agree that clause 2(7) is a particular problem, because it appears to take European Union regulations as the baseline for determining safety? To many of us, the assumption that European Union regulations should be the starting point for any safety regulations that we might want to make seems somewhat bizarre.

Andrew Griffith: The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right, and we can contrast the number of references to the European Union throughout the Bill with, for example, our biggest single country trading partner—the United States.

Jonathan Reynolds: I want to directly answer the point made by the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and provide clarification that I have just sought. Clause 2(7)(a) is not about alignment; it is about recognition. We already recognise certain EU product requirements on a mutual recognition basis, and where it is of benefit to do so, that is what the clause allows. Rather than take European standards as the basis for our own and align with them, it enables that where it is recognised that we have the interest. I can write to him in detail if he wishes.

Andrew Griffith: On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), I thank the Secretary of State for intervening. It is important that we legislate with full understanding of what the law says, but the point still stands on the overweighting of references to EU standards versus comparable standards from the United States and Commonwealth friends of this great nation.

Sir John Hayes: On that note, the point is the one I made to the Secretary of State: where, as the impact assessment suggests, regulations are moving at pace—the Secretary of State repeated that—we will default to a European set of standards. That is the problem, and that is certainly implied in the Bill’s impact assessment. I sought the Secretary of State’s assurance that that will not happen. If it does not happen, will there be no rules or regulations? How will that work in practice?

Andrew Griffith: We are having the proper debate through these interventions that perhaps we should have had when the Secretary of State was introducing the Bill. That illustrates the point about putting a vast

amount of ambiguity—even if it is well intentioned—into the law and how things will operate, and for a reason of which we know not. If there are instances of, for example, e-scooters catching fire in people’s halls, this House has the ability to legislate, and legislate fast where necessary, against those particular harms at that particular moment in time. My right hon. Friend, with his many years of experience in this House, understands that point, and I think that was what he was saying.

Sammy Wilson: Although Opposition Members will perhaps deliberately choose to believe that the words and assurances given are ambiguous, does the hon. Member accept that even Government Members in the House of Lords believe there is an ambiguity that needs to be cleared up? One comment was:

“The question of dynamic alignment with the EU remains unanswered yet ever more topical.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 March 2025; Vol. 844, c. 712.]

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Member makes exactly the right point. This is a blank cheque Bill and a Trojan horse Bill. It is simply not clear under this Secretary of State, or any Secretary of State in the future once these powers have been ceded by this place, how they will be implemented. There is a real asymmetry in the constant litany of references to the European Union—a valued trading partners of ours, but only one valued trading partner of ours, as I hope the Secretary of State is about to reveal over the coming days. Tomorrow we understand that tariffs will be imposed by the United States on British exporters. If that is the case, that would be the worst failure of trade policy for a generation. It is businesses, jobs and our economy that will all pay the price. The Chancellor’s emergency Budget will not have lasted a single week because she made no provision for the imposition of tariffs—if that is indeed what is to come.

It is frankly outrageous that the Government have failed to make a statement about where we are, despite the Prime Minister’s official spokesman briefing the Lobby, and the Business and Trade Secretary himself finding time this morning to conduct a round of media interviews. If the Secretary of State would like to comment on the progress of US talks, I will happily give way.

Jonathan Reynolds: This is a little off-topic for a Second Reading, but the hon. Gentleman could have just listened to the “Today” programme this morning. He would have heard me articulate those concerns. We are engaged with our US counterparts, more so than any other country, in those negotiations. He will know that I will not share the content or detail of those talks. The policy originates with the President of the United States and we are responding to and engaging with it. The hon. Gentleman will understand that it comes from the mandate and the agenda of the US Administration.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State that we are debating the Second Reading of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, and not necessarily tariffs.

Andrew Griffith: Of course, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am nearing a conclusion in any case. However, I do think that the issue of product safety—the rules and regulations that govern our economy, as the Secretary

[*Andrew Griffith*]

of State himself said—is intrinsically linked with trade, mutual recognition and growing the economy by removing trade frictions and barriers rather than erecting them and subjecting businesses to the tyranny of simply not understanding the corpus of rules and regulations.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he, like me, hope that the Liberal Democrats, despite their hobby-horse love of the EU, do not allow the EU flavouring of the Bill to blind them to the frankly illiberal Executive-enhancing, legislature-diminishing aspect of the Bill? If they genuinely aspire to being His Majesty's Opposition, they will join us this evening in voting against Second Reading.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I hope, as the Secretary of State slightly alluded to in his remarks about the ability of a country to make its own rules and regulations, that we will soon be back in the House with a Government statement at which we can celebrate the mother of all Brexit benefits: securing the ability to conduct our own trade. I look forward to hearing from the Liberal Democrats exactly how much they welcome that ability on behalf of their constituents.

Christine Jardine: Although I cannot speak immediately for all Liberal Democrats, it puzzles us that the official Opposition do not seem to recognise that if they had legislated properly when we left the European Union, this legislation would not be necessary. Do they not accept any responsibility for where we are today?

Andrew Griffith: We will not accept any lessons from the Liberal Democrats about what it takes to Brexit successfully and go back to being an independent nation, but if that is what the hon. Lady will speak about, I look forward to hearing it.

To conclude, the Bill is flawed in so many ways. With the best will in the world, Ministers should not be proposing it, particularly given their failure so far to protect us from US tariffs. It is a bad Bill from a Government who are already failing. It is a travesty for anyone who cares about respect for parliamentary democracy and the role of this House versus Ministers. It is, as I said, a Trojan horse Bill that will sabotage our Brexit freedoms and take us back to being an EU rule taker, which the British people had long put behind us. I urge the House to back our reasoned amendment and end this terrible Bill.

4.9 pm

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): I welcome this essential and timely Bill, which upgrades our product safety, regulation and metrology—a word that I admit I had to look up, but it does not take much to understand it—framework, delivering a much-needed boost to protections for consumers and ensuring that every company in the UK, whether they operate online or on our high streets, upholds the high product safety and quality standards that working people in this country deserve and that have been absent for too long.

Whether it is faulty carbon monoxide alarms, dangerous children's toys or the issue of spontaneously combusting e-bikes and scooters, which has been raised with me by

my constituents in Worsley and Eccles, examples of hazardous products being on sale are far too common. Clearly, there is an urgent need to raise the bar on consumer product safety in this country. The Bill achieves that aim, establishing a modern safety regime that will enable companies to operate safely, while accounting for the post-Brexit regulatory landscape.

In an increasingly turbulent international trading environment, it is imperative that the Government update the UK's product regulations. However, since our exit from the EU, the Government have not had the necessary powers to meet the challenges presented by the fast-moving global product safety standards environment. That has left British consumers vulnerable to falling behind with regard to protections.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's argument. I have been in this House for a little while; I have sat on both sides of the House, and I have been in government. I have never come across a Government who have failed to get regulation through when they feel it is necessary to do so, but it goes through with debate. We cannot just impose regulations because we think it is right. There has to be some measure of whether it is balanced and whether it works, and that is normally done by this House. Why give it to the Government alone?

Michael Wheeler: If the system we have in place was working, we would not be here debating this, and we would not see these shoddy products on sale or these fires. The only explanation is either that the system does not work or the last Government failed in their duty to the people of this country.

As I was saying, this has left British consumers vulnerable to falling behind with regard to protections in rapidly emerging areas of product safety that need reaction—for example, those related to new technologies such as AI and lithium-ion batteries. I therefore support the Bill's provisions to enable the Government to meet the fast-moving challenges of the day in these areas.

Graham Stringer: I am interested that my hon. Friend mentions AI. There are three major systems around the world being proposed for artificial intelligence regulation: those in China, the EU and the United States. If we have to make a choice for our own framework, which might be different from those, for the safety of people in industry, why should that not be done on the Floor of this House rather than through delegated regulation? It is one of the most important issues that will face us in the coming years.

Michael Wheeler: I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention. I will happily admit to the House that I am not an expert on AI. I do, however, recognise that the fast-developing nature of AI as it relates to consumer safety and product regulation requires a rapid response, which is potentially not necessarily suited to a full debate on the Floor of the House.

Graham Stuart: Can the hon. Gentleman give a single instance of a Government at any time in the past decade not being able to take action on a seriously risky product? I cannot think of one.

Michael Wheeler: I can think of several—for example, the lack of regulation around the e-bikes and e-scooters on our streets that are causing fires. We are in a fast-moving environment, and we are creating a framework that will future-proof our system.

Ms Creasy: I want to help my hon. Friend out, because he was not here when the previous Government introduced the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which deleted more than 4,000 laws and used statutory instruments to replace them. The right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), who was a Minister at the time, is nodding his head as if that process was acceptable. He is now challenging a colleague who was not here at the time by saying that somehow it is not acceptable now, but it was acceptable then. My hon. Friend is right to be concerned and slightly sceptical about the Opposition's sudden agreement that statutory instruments are perhaps not the best way forward.

Michael Wheeler: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. We are dealing with a regulatory black hole that was left behind, and the absence of a framework is letting down the consumers and people of this country—[*Interruption.*] I was about to say that I am sure we would all agree on that, but that is potentially a stretch in this debate and in this Chamber.

I hope that we do agree that consumers should be able to buy products online without worrying about their safety, and that product standards should not be bypassed or compromised on any platform, digital or otherwise. However, research by the Office for Product Safety and Standards found that 81%—eight in 10—of products for sale on online marketplaces between 2021 and 2022 failed to meet safety standards, which underlines the need for the Bill. We cannot allow companies to circumvent essential safety standards, presenting a public health risk just because they sell their products online.

However, the Bill is not just about safety, critical though that is; it is also about ensuring fairness. We simply cannot continue with a product safety regime that enables online marketplaces to undercut bricks-and-mortar retailers, or that allows rogue traders to out-compete responsible retailers with unsafe, low-quality products. That is unfair on consumers, reputable manufacturers and the small high street businesses that must compete with the online giants. With online sales already making up over a quarter of total retail sales in 2023, we must level that playing field now, providing our high streets with a long overdue boost to their competitiveness.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about product regulation, but is the issue that he is highlighting not actually about enforcement? I have no issue with legislating for product regulation safety standards, but they already exist. In fact, he says that there are products that do not meet the safety standards, so we know that those standards exist. The issue that he highlights is purely around enforcement, which this Bill does nothing to address.

Michael Wheeler: I disagree that the issue is “purely” around enforcement. Obviously, there are elements of enforcement, but separating out one part of a package—a regulatory framework that will future-proof us from other issues—is not a coherent argument.

To conclude, it is vital that we create a product safety, regulatory and metrology framework that protects consumers, encourages fair competition and meets the changing picture internationally. This Bill delivers that framework, and I look forward to supporting it further in this House.

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

4.17 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I declare an interest having spent 40 years in the toy industry and, in another life, having been the chair and the president of the British Toy & Hobby Association. It was a wonderful job—the second-best job. The best job is being the first ever Liberal Democrat MP for Wokingham.

Graham Stuart: And the last.

Clive Jones: I doubt that very much.

Nearly a decade since the Brexit referendum, this House is still grappling with what it means to be outside of the European Union. Away from the big headlines about trade deals and newly erected borders, the technical nitty-gritty of product safety and metrology is ever more important now that we must decide what we want our policies to be in this area. Our original framework, derived from EU law, must now keep up with fast-evolving technologies and consumer behaviours. Technological changes in the 21st century may have created new opportunities, but they have also left us exposed to new risks, such as AI, battery hazards and e-bike fires.

Our online marketplaces and the complex digital commerce that facilitates them have reduced barriers to small and medium-sized enterprises sharing their products across the UK and the world, but the internet is still a wild west in many ways, leaving small businesses and consumers exposed. That is why the Liberal Democrats welcome aspects of this Bill. We fully understand and support the need to update the regulatory framework for the UK marketplace to give businesses and consumers confidence in their products. We welcome in principle the powers in the Bill to put new responsibilities on online marketplaces throughout the supply chain, and we support enhanced consumer protection for products that pose a safety risk.

The product regulations falling in scope of this Bill will have an impact on our country's trade policy, and the Liberal Democrats are clear when it comes to trade: we believe the Government must pull the most powerful and readily available lever at their disposal to kickstart economic growth by urgently launching negotiations for a new UK-EU customs union. That would create jobs, boost our public finances and reverse much of the damage inflicted on our economy by the previous Conservative Government's terrible trade deal with Europe. I take this opportunity to urge the Government to move in that direction and to commit that, as part of these trade negotiations, they will use the provisions in the Bill to facilitate a new customs union, which could have such a transformative effect on our economy.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman for engaging with the issues about product safety and consumer protection in the Bill, and he is making a serious speech in relation to them.

[Jonathan Reynolds]

First, on the point of the customs union, which was skilfully woven into his speech, that would preclude us from reaching any arrangements with the United States, India, the Gulf states or other countries. For my money, if we wish to be part of something without a say in how it would affect our trade policy, that would be a very difficult position to take. I will come back to the references made by Conservative MPs, who often feel like they are fighting the old, last war. They cannot get past it—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. First, I gently suggest to the Secretary of State that he is meant to be making an intervention. Secondly, we are quite definitely debating the Second Reading of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, not a customs union. Perhaps the Secretary of State will conclude his remarks.

Jonathan Reynolds: I will, Madam Deputy Speaker. In relation to the number of references made to the EU in this Bill, the EU is explicitly referenced simply because UK product regulations are derived from a lot of EU regulations. We have to reference that when looking to the future, particularly when we recognise some of those European standards, but it is wrong to simply look at those references and try to make them out to be something they are not.

Clive Jones: Thank you for your intervention, Secretary of State. You are right—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): “He” is right!

Clive Jones: Sorry. The Secretary of State is right when he talks about us needing to keep up with EU regulations. We definitely need to do that.

Despite the potential in this Bill, unfortunately it contains very little actual policy. It relies far too heavily on secondary legislation, which limits opportunities for parliamentary scrutiny and provides little clarity on what the Government actually intend to do with the powers they are giving themselves. The Bill hurls us into a hokey-cokey trade policy in which, at Ministers’ political whims, we can stick ourselves into aligning with the EU just as easily as we can throw ourselves out of it all over again if another Government decided they wanted to do that. It will also hurt business confidence, because the underlying regulations of our country can be easily altered without the appropriate levels of scrutiny from Parliament.

Taking a step back from the issue of EU alignment, this principle can apply across any of the areas that this Bill seeks to regulate. It is developing opaque mechanisms on which the Government expect us to trust them to do better. However, Government Members must contend with the fact that they will not be there forever. All the potentially positive things they could do with this legislation could be reversed or made worse by a different Government.

It is at this point that I must recognise the excellent work of the Liberal Democrat peers. For example, a Lib Dem lord introduced an amendment that protected the use of the unique British pint measurement, ensuring that the Bill could not prevent or restrict its use for beer,

cider, or milk in the iconic pint bottle. Liberal Democrat peers pressed the Government to introduce stronger protections against lithium-ion batteries, and a Liberal Democrat peer also ensured that the Government included an important amendment that requires the Secretary of State to publish a statement setting out how the Government expect to identify and assess product safety risks before legislation is laid. Put simply, this will ensure greater scrutiny of regulations that are designed to make products safe.

Despite those improvements, the Bill is still ultimately a skeleton framework that shifts legislative authority from Parliament to the Executive without the necessary level of scrutiny. Many great Ministers agree with me that skeleton Bills are the wrong way to deliver legislation. In fact, in 2023—a mere two years ago—one shadow Minister stated that such Bills were not

“a model example of how Parliament would like to see legislation brought forward”,

and that we should be minimising

“the use of delegated powers where possible”.—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2023; Vol. 726, c. 409.]

I agree with that then shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), who is now sitting next to the Secretary of State who has brought forward today’s Bill. I am sorry that he does not agree with himself any more.

I also note the assurances that the Government gave to my Liberal Democrat colleagues in the other place that a process for editing statutory instruments will be brought forward. We will be pushing for details of that pre-legislative consultation as the Bill progresses through the Commons. Any Government will say that they are acting in our best interests, but all of the things that this Bill could do—such as enhance consumer safety, reduce trade barriers and build an economy fit for the future—could be undone at the stroke of a pen. That is a pen that Parliament should hold, not Ministers.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The use of hazardous chemical flame retardants in domestic furniture has been criticised by the Association of Master Upholsterers and Soft Furnishers and in a 2019 Environmental Audit Committee report, because those chemicals have been shown to cause more toxic smoke, increase the production of carbon monoxide and hydrogen cyanide and increase the prevalence of health conditions, including developmental disorders, breathing difficulties and reproductive disorders. As this Bill would provide the Government with more powers to act on that issue, does my hon. Friend agree that Ministers should outline how the Government plan to address the dangers associated with CFRs?

Clive Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I hope that Ministers will address her question—if they heard it. The Bill makes it possible for the Government to use those new powers, and that would be a good place for them to start.

The Minister in the other place stated that this Government are not looking to reduce consumer protections. However, what measures in this Bill make sure that parliamentary scrutiny cannot be bypassed to weaken those protections? The skeletal nature of the Bill also makes clear what is missing—the very heart of our changing economy is nowhere to be seen.

Mr Holden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Jones: Can I just carry on a bit? Thanks.

Online marketplaces are rapidly expanding in number and popularity, competing with high streets across the nation, but unfortunately, there is no level playing field on which those two competitors can battle it out for consumers' cash. That is what the Bill should be addressing, because our high streets and our small businesses must contend with regulations that online marketplaces are not equally liable to. That is not a level playing field. For example, unsafe products are flooding online marketplaces. A study by Which? revealed that 90% of toys purchased from Amazon, eBay, AliExpress and Temu were illegal due to choking and strangulation hazards. Another study from the British Toy and Hobby Association found that 85% of toys from online marketplaces were unsafe, with 8% also illegal due to missing warnings. Do we want that situation to continue?

Sammy Wilson: I note that the hon. Member has described many of these toys as "illegal". In other words, the law is there already. This Bill is therefore not necessary to deal with children choking on toys and all the other things he has outlined. The law is already there; the question is, do we actually implement the law?

Clive Jones: The law needs to be tightened up. We definitely need to be taking a lot more interest in the unsafe products that online companies are selling.

Do we want to allow unsafe toys to be sold to our precious children by some faceless online operation through an online market? I am sure the answer is no, but the Bill as it is written fails to address that. The problem is not just limited to toys, but extends to heaters, phone chargers and batteries. The Government have signalled an ambition to bring online marketplace liability in line with more traditional models of retail, but an ambition can be easily reversed by a different Government without parliamentary oversight. Without the measure being explicitly put into the Bill, consumers and the high street are not receiving the guarantees they deserve.

This is a serious issue for children and personal safety, and we therefore need explicit guarantees of minimum duties for online marketplaces in the Bill. What is the Minister's view on whether a duty to notify consumers who have been sold unsafe or illegal products should be placed on online marketplaces? Such a duty could enhance consumers' rights to seek a refund of the purchase price. Will a requirement to verify the identity and activities of sellers be established? If it is a yes to any of those questions, the Minister should do the right thing and amend the Bill so that those guarantees are enshrined in primary legislation.

I could go on. The Bill requires a tighter definition of an online marketplace to ensure that there are no loopholes for platforms to avoid appropriate regulations. That is especially the case for platforms that do not exist solely as an online marketplace, such as TikTok Shop and Facebook Marketplace.

Finally, the Bill does not make explicit reference to e-bikes, e-scooters or lithium-ion battery safety, despite safety being one of the explicit aims of the Bill. E-bike

and e-scooter battery fires pose a uniquely high risk to consumers, with the London Fire Brigade estimating that it attends a fire incident caused by one of these devices once every two days. There need to be stronger regulations on these things. Can the Minister explain why they are not included in the Bill?

4.35 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents would be forgiven for thinking that the clock had turned back, so I will focus on the issues that they have asked me to raise, which are not political in the slightest, but relate to safety. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that while this is a small Bill, it is very important. It is of great interest to my constituents, especially the members of Torphichen community council in my constituency who asked me to speak in this debate. They back the Electrical Safety First campaign, and they spoke to me about the danger of fires caused by lithium-ion batteries in e-scooters and e-bikes and in everyday products. The lithium-ion battery safety campaign is calling for stronger measures, including improved enforcement efforts, particularly online; disposal guidance at the point of sale; and measures to ensure safer charging. I hope that the Ministers who are present will give strong consideration to those suggestions in due course.

Lithium-ion batteries are integral to many modern devices that most of us have in our homes, from e-scooters to laptops, but widespread use has exposed significant safety concerns, largely owing to the lack of oversight. Batteries have been linked to numerous fire incidents and pose serious risks of injury or worse. Thermal runaway is a dangerous phenomenon: battery cells overheat and catch fire, releasing toxic gases and often causing extensive damage. By their very nature, e-scooters are often left in town centres, walkways and communal areas in flats and hallways, putting other members of the public at risk in the event of thermal runaway. As we have heard, in London e-bike and e-scooter fires occur as often as once every two days. Worse still, I am aware of domestic incidents in my constituency, including one in which, sadly, a family lost their home and all their belongings as a result of an e-scooter fire.

The Bill introduces welcome steps to deal with those risks, creating a landscape to address the dangers associated with products that are so widely used. The mandates on safety standards for the storage, use and disposal of lithium-ion batteries will help to mitigate the dangers associated with thermal runaway. I also welcome the new powers to monitor compliance and enforce regulations effectively. It is critical that only safe and reliable products reach the market, and reach our homes. Such measures are essential to prevent incidents and protect people from serious harm, such as that which affected my constituents.

There is much in the Bill that has been long awaited at a local level, and I am glad that the Government are responding to people's concerns in a timely and stringent manner. The danger posed by poorly maintained or unsafely stored lithium-ion batteries is too great to be ignored.

Graham Stuart: Is it the hon. Lady's understanding that the existing regulations on lithium-ion batteries are insufficient? There is a British standard, and there are

[*Graham Stuart*]

environmental and disposal regulations. There is a swathe of regulations relating to lithium-ion batteries, but if there is a failure to enforce them, that should not give Ministers carte blanche to decide on a whim what products, in this area or any other, should be available for sale in the UK without any recourse to Parliament.

Kirsteen Sullivan: I do not think that we want to rerun the arguments relating to Brexit, which is what this debate has largely been about so far. The Bill has clearly been introduced to address gaps that have left consumers exposed to great harms.

The prominence of online marketplaces is an established trend in our society. We all know from the pandemic how important essential—and sometimes non-essential—online purchases can be to our daily lives. They have become commonplace, and that trend is only set to continue. By the end of the decade, online purchases will be worth £156 billion. Nevertheless, many products are poorly regulated, faulty and—too often—dangerous. Whether it is the carbon monoxide alarms that do not work that have been used to kit out a cheaply renovated student flat, the faulty chainsaw attachments used by a neighbour or the faulty e-scooter sitting in a back garden, these faulty products have come about because the pace of change online has been poorly matched by regulations. We are now in a situation where regulations in the online world do not match the protections in the real world. Quite simply, if a product is too dangerous or fails the standards for those sold in shops, it should not be available in online marketplaces. As a society, we need to be protected in our increasing reliance on and use of the digital world; otherwise, the lack of online protections will have yet more devastating real-life impacts.

Jerome Mayhew: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsteen Sullivan: I am about to conclude.

This Bill is a welcome step to alter the regulatory landscape. More importantly, it will ensure basic product safety and better oversight of products such as lithium batteries. The Bill will reduce the risks associated with thermal runaway and protect our communities from potential harm. As online marketplaces continue to expand, it is essential to extend these regulations to the digital realm to respond to the evolving challenges of modern technology and safeguard public safety.

4.41 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I have deep concerns about this Orwellian Bill because of what it does not explicitly say and its ambiguity regarding EU dynamic realignment. The Henry VIII powers the Bill gives Ministers will have serious consequences for businesses, consumers and our ability to trade, but does so with little detail on how they intend to use such powers.

Let me first turn to regulatory alignment. As you may recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, I spent much time taking the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 through as a Whip, and I believe passionately that that Act was vital to take back control, for parliamentary sovereignty and in freeing businesses to compete by shedding unnecessary EU regulations, directives and red tape. So I will say plainly that this Bill will lead to regulatory alignment with the EU through the back door.

I invite the Minister to confirm from the Dispatch Box that this Bill and the powers it gives Ministers will not be used by this Government for dynamic alignment with EU regulations. I doubt that any such categorical reassurance is likely to be forthcoming, but I await with bated breath and a hopeful heart that it be so.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Joy Morrissey: Let me make some progress, and then I will give way.

The Government have always claimed that they would not return us to the single market and the customs union, and many believed them. I was always a healthy sceptic, but I am willing to be proven wrong. However, my fear is that this Bill will lead to back-door EU regulatory alignment, and whether that is deliberate or unintentional matters not. We had our democratic instructions from the British people, and we must honour them.

I now want to talk about competition—

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Lady give way on regulatory alignment?

Joy Morrissey: Let me make some progress.

Gareth Snell: It is on the point the hon. Lady is moving away from.

Joy Morrissey: Well, I am now on competition. Would the hon. Member like to make a comment about that?

Gareth Snell: No, this is on the last point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. This is turning into a debate in itself. It is very clear that the Member does not want to take an intervention right now, Mr Snell, but she may do so later.

Joy Morrissey: I now want to talk about competition—

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Lady give way on a point about competition?

Joy Morrissey: I will give way on a point about competition.

Gareth Snell: Persistence sometimes pays off, Madam Deputy Speaker. I genuinely want to pick up the point the hon. Lady is making about competition in relation to alignment. In the ceramics sector, the food contact materials regulations set by the European Union are essential to enabling the export of the products we create and make. They are product regulations for safety, but she seems to be suggesting that any regulatory alignment is a bad thing. Is that her party's message about alignment for the purposes of export that I should take back to the thousands of workers in Stoke-on-Trent?

Joy Morrissey: With exports, we can apply any kind of regulation we want to maximise our market advantage from leaving the EU. We could apply a statutory framework for Japan, or any country we want, to ensure we can export our products. The point of leaving the EU was so that we could remain globally competitive, and so that we could choose to adopt any regulatory framework we wanted if that market enabled us to export our products, support our businesses and help to grow our economy. I would support that, but nothing of that is

mentioned in the Bill. If it mentioned realignment with market values in relation to Japan, so we could export things to Japan or to other markets, I would be interested in looking at the Bill holistically, but not once is any country or trade grouping mentioned except the EU. That gives me pause, and it makes me wonder whether this is an attempt to achieve a backdoor realignment with EU regulatory frameworks without the scrutiny of Parliament.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Lady also accept that the Bill is not necessary to promote exports? If a company wants to export its products to Japan or Timbuktu, it will have to align with the regulations that exist in those countries anyway. It does not need a Government Bill, and—far worse—it does not need a Minister to have the power to make regulations without coming to this place.

Joy Morrissey: I agree completely with the right hon. Gentleman. I will leave it there, because that is an excellent point.

This is about free trade and expanding our global reach by making money, growing our economy and allowing everyone to benefit from a tax base that grows because our businesses can export freely. I am very supportive of that. If the Bill in any way addressed the concerns I have raised, I would be happy to support it, but it is vague and does not give us the insight we need into the kind of alignment that is intended. That vagueness presents a challenge that was mentioned repeatedly in the other place. In this House, we must address the Bill's challenges with a similar rigour. It may look quite harmless on the outside, but under the surface it will deliver profound change and threaten our ability to scrutinise these regulatory changes. In the other place, the noble Lord Sandhurst described it as:

“a Henry VIII Bill par excellence”. —[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 November 2024; Vol. 841, c. GC44.]

We would do well to heed those words.

Where is the policy framework under which Ministers will decide to use these powers? On parliamentary sovereignty or Ministers' decision to use the powers, there is no such framework.

Michael Wheeler: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. As a fellow member of the Procedure Committee, I do enjoy a good procedural debate, but I wonder whether she will get to the meat of the Bill at any point. Will we be talking about Brexit bogeymen, or will we be talking about consumer safety, representing those we are here to represent, looking after their interests and making them safer?

Joy Morrissey: The Bill is a legislative blank sheet of paper for Ministers to fill with whatever legislation they feel like. The Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee stated that the Bill

“signifies an exceptional shift in power from Parliament to the executive and entails the Government, in effect, asking Parliament to pass primary legislation which is so insubstantial that it leaves the real operation of the legislation to be decided by Ministers”.

I say to Members right across this House: heed those words. If we do not stay alert to legislation that looks so harmless yet confers such powers on Ministers, we are failing in our role as legislators.

Mr Holden: Is my hon. Friend aware of any other piece of legislation on which the DPRRC in the other place has reported three times with exactly the same conclusions?

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I am not aware of any other legislation that has received the same recommendation three times. That represents a substantial warning.

The Bill, either deliberately or unintentionally, will lead to realignment with the EU and once again leave our country beholden to others' decisions on regulatory standards. It will hamper our businesses in this fast-changing world, making them less agile and less competitive and making us poorer as a nation. It gives Ministers too much power—a fact that in this House should always be pause for thought, no matter who governs. I urge the Government to think again.

4.49 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I hope to offer a course correction from the Opposition's attempts to fight many things today, not least the concept of geography and what is in the interests of British businesses. In this debate, we are watching the last gasps of the Brexit delusions that have fallen on hard contact with the paperwork reality. That is what this piece of legislation is about; it is about making it easier for British businesses who have been harmed by the previous Government's approach to their basic needs. This is not about free trade. What came about as a result of Brexit was not free trade, but mountains and mountains of paperwork.

I want to focus on that in my speech, but I cannot let go of what the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) said. She was, as she says, a Whip on the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023—my goodness me, I welcome a sinner that repenteth. In that Act, the Government were going to rip up more than 4,000 pieces of legislation overnight without any parliamentary scrutiny, simply because they had the word “Europe” in them. That included things like airline regulations, because of course what we needed were our own separate regulations so that a plane would have to take a different course in mid-air. That was the Brexit benefit.

Under the previous Government's watch, more than 2,000 statutory instruments were laid before the House as a direct result of retained EU law. I welcome opposition parties' commitment to parliamentary scrutiny, but I simply say that some of us on that Bill Committee tried to offer arguments about the importance of parliamentary involvement in such decisions, and they fell on deaf ears. I will come on to that.

Now that Opposition Members have suddenly discovered that statutory instruments might not always be the best way to look at such things, I hope they will be able to focus on what really matters here, because British business needs us to do that. British business needs us to clear up the mess created by the previous Administration and their approach to Brexit. That is what this legislation does. It is common-sense politics.

Mr Holden: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Creasy: I will, if the right hon. Gentleman can tell me which of those 2,361 statutory instruments he now regrets forcing through this House.

Mr Holden: The hon. Lady is making an interesting point. The key point with that carry-over of EU law is that all the regulations had already been debated and had already gone through Parliament. All we were doing was replacing like with like. With this Bill, the Government are introducing huge Henry VIII powers to create brand-new legislation, perhaps around production regulation, but on who knows what else? Who knows what impact it will have, and on which countries? That is the difference. We are removing parliamentary scrutiny, rather than just carrying over old EU laws into current UK law.

Ms Creasy: There are so many things to unpack there, not least the right hon. Gentleman's recognition that our previous regulations as part of the European Union were perhaps not that bad. With rules on bicycle safety, for example, perhaps it was pretty sensible to say that if something was safe in the UK, our colleagues in Europe might also be looking at it and we could share the burden of working out good regulation. That is not what happened with the retained EU law Act or with divergence, and it does sound like he needs to look at divergence. Thankfully, I have some statistics for him—I know he will be delighted to hear them.

Before we move on, let me just say this. Opposition Members have not spoken for British business today, although I accept that the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), did try, and I recognise his expertise in toy manufacturing. He will recognise that we are talking about thousands of British businesses that are affected by regulations. What rules will those businesses have to follow to be able to sell in a market that makes their business sustainable? Some 12% of businesses in this country will be affected by this legislation, not because there are new rules, but because if we start to diverge from existing regulations, they will face a choice. Do they continue to follow European legislation so that they can sell into a larger market, or do they try to follow UK legislation, EU legislation and maybe Japanese legislation as well, with all the paperwork that comes with that?

Graham Stuart *rose*—

Ms Creasy: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman; I can see that if I do not, he will have a heart attack.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but I shall survive. Given the time that she has spent in this House, I am surprised that, like some newer Members, she may have been taken in by the Government's wording. The Bill gives Ministers such blanket powers. Sure, they can align more with EU regulation, as she desires; equally, another Government or Minister could go the opposite way and do all the damage she is talking about—needlessly differing from Europe purely out of ideology—and the House would have no say in it. Surely, the hon. Lady must be more like the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) and share with her colleagues the need to restrict Ministers' powers.

Ms Creasy: I tried in vain to make exactly such arguments to the right hon. Member when he was a Minister telling me that European legislation was not good enough for this country. *[Interruption.]* I now ask him to let me finish my speech, because I want common

sense in this legislation, as I think Ministers do. We need to stand up to those who puff and spout about Europe as though somehow it is a bad thing to make it possible for British businesses to trade with our nearest neighbours post Brexit. For the avoidance of doubt, this is not an argument about rejoining the European Union.

Jerome Mayhew *rose*—

Ms Creasy: I will, if I may, continue with my speech, but I shall take an intervention a bit later.

Our colleagues in Northern Ireland know the practical consequences of divergence—the obsession with the concept that somehow we have always to be different, which is somehow believed to be sovereignty. They will know what the “not for EU labels” mean. They will know, too, the impact that that has had on them and their colleagues. Neil Johnston, director of the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, recently told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee about just that. He described how suppliers have to have separate print runs for labelling, and how the requirements in shops for posters and edge-of-shelf labelling are massively burdensome for small businesses. We end up with a sausage roll that we cannot take across the border between Castlederg and Castlefin simply because of the way that the previous Government undertook Brexit.

Sammy Wilson: I wonder whether the Member has read the schedule to the Bill. Agri-food products are not covered.

Ms Creasy: I hope the right hon. Member can understand that my point is about divergence—about what happens when we try to ask businesses to run two different regulatory regimes out of a mistaken ideology that somehow we cannot find a way forward. That is what this piece of legislation will do. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield wanted to tell us that British businesses were better off as a result of the “Brexit freedoms”. Well, the numbers and statistics tell us the exact opposite. I am talking about not just the fall in GDP or the fall in trade that is predicted, but the thousands of businesses—16,400 of them—which have given up exporting to the European Union because of the additional paperwork and the additional regulatory regime.

Jerome Mayhew: I am so pleased to have eventually got through to the hon. Lady. She heard the Minister at the Dispatch Box say that this was not about dynamic realignment. Am I right in understanding that her view of this legislation is that it is 100% about EU dynamic realignment?

Ms Creasy: The hon. Member is completely wrong. I hope that he will give me a chance to make my speech before getting too excited about the word Europe.

He should try to understand what we are talking about here, which is British businesses and the regulatory certainty that they need from their Governments. My goodness, if we think how a Tory hard Brexit has hit British businesses, we should also consider how it has hit small businesses, which simply could not afford to comply with multiple regulatory regimes. We do know

that we live in uncertain times, and that the threat of tariffs will kill what little business our firms might have left.

As the OBR pointed out to us last week, if global trade disputes escalate to include 20 percentage point rises in tariffs between the USA and the rest of the world, it will reduce GDP by a peak of 1% and reduce our current surplus. In that environment, we owe it to British businesses to talk common sense and to talk about what they actually want, which is a reduction in the Brexit red tape that they have had to deal with. We have been here before—on the practical insanity that Brexit generates. There was the obsession with blue passports, which came at the expense of being able to trade and keep a business going.

We have also been here before with the previous Government, which is why all those Conservative Members who were here before 2024 need to hang their heads in shame at some of the arguments that they are making about this. The previous Government wanted us to have our own UK charter mark. They wanted British businesses to run two separate charter mark arrangements. Undertaking testing requirements for both the UKCA and the European CE to allow a business to be able to sell in both markets was costing businesses hundreds of thousands of pounds. The costs could go as high as £200,000 per product range. I am actually quoting from the previous Government's own impact assessment of the legislation, and I am happy to send that document to the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), who is chuntering from the Opposition Benches.

UK conformity assessment marking covered goods worth £109 billion. It is little wonder that after four years, and I believe the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham might have been on that very Committee when it happened, those obsessed with the Brexit freedoms were hit with cold, hard reality and had to climb down and say that British companies that had met European standards had also met the British charter mark. They had to roll over the charter mark, because if they had not, their own impact assessment would have shown that it cost British businesses up to £1.6 billion in the decade. That is the Brexit bonus of which Opposition Members are so proud—billions of extra cost to British businesses because they are trying to fill in two forms at once to sell the same item to different sets of consumers.

The Bill is about so much more than just kitemarking. We need to be clear that it does not mean that we have automatic access to the EU market. It means that British businesses can see what the regulatory landscape might look like ahead of them. That is very important in these uncertain times. It also prevents the UK becoming a dumping ground for goods that are no longer considered safe in the European Union. I certainly believe that my constituents need to be confident that we will not be flooded with cheap goods that are bad for them.

It also does not mean that we have to align automatically, and I hope that answers the question from the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham. I am not here arguing for automatic alignment. After all, there are examples of where we have taken a different approach. The vaping legislation was something that Conservative Members opposed, but it put us ahead of European product legislation. The Bill has protections for the British pint. The Lords wrote those in.

It is also clear that choosing not to participate does not mean that UK consumers are not affected. We saw that with mobile phone charging cables. Even though we are too small a market to influence Apple, the European Union acting together made Apple stop selling us multiple cables. As somebody who was carrying around multiple pieces of equipment, I am very grateful for that.

We may also want to look at examples where we might learn from our colleagues. Right now the European Union has been taking the lead on carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons—basically what is in a synthetic football pitch. Our kids right now in the United Kingdom play on pitches that have dangerous chemicals in them, but our European colleagues' kids are not playing on those. When we talk about alignment, sometimes we are talking about sharing good practice on how to make our kids safer—the consumer regulations product safety that we were talking about.

I suspect that is why the previous Government, in the end, with all their obsession with Brexit freedoms and with all the powers they had, did not diverge very much. Indeed, under their watch, there were only five cases of active diversion. There were 15 cases of passive divergence, where basically they did not update regulations. For all the huffing and puffing, when faced with the cold, hard reality of having different regulatory regimes for goods in this country from those of our next door neighbours, where we might also want to sell, the previous Government took the better approach; they did not look to make British businesses try to double up on their paperwork. Indeed, where we have diverged there are clearly problems being stored up. Anybody watching the court case about sandeels knows what is coming down the line.

This Government are not going to mess British business around in the way that the previous Government did with their huffing and puffing about whether previous Governments in other countries were friend or foe. We need to make trade work. British businesses need less paperwork. That means being clear about where we will diverge, where we will align, why that makes a difference and what that means for product standards.

I think we agree across the House that we want high standards. That is delivered not by being not European, or pro-European, but by looking at what the regulatory regimes are. That is why it matters that we have paused some of the current proposals of divergence—on a new recycling label regime, on the “not for EU” labelling, and on the new checks on agrifood imports. We are looking at what works for British businesses so that we can make it easier for them to trade. That is why I wanted to speak in this debate.

What we need to do in the Bill—I hope the Minister will be open to this—is be clear about the direction of travel and the proper, right way and point for Parliament to be part of that process. If we are going to diverge, we should be clear why that would be in the British interest and how we as a Parliament will have that conversation. Where we have information, we should update our constituents, who might have businesses with products that take 18 to 36 months to develop. They need to know the regulatory regime, for example of the toys they want to make, and which markets they can sell into. That is why it matters that we have parliamentary scrutiny.

[Ms Creasy]

I welcome sinners who repenteth about the value of that, but I do not want to see British business faced with the idea of us having to consult on absolutely everything. I do not have an erratic fear of the Europeans somehow holding us back if they help us ensure that our kids are not playing football on pitches that have carcinogenic chemicals on them. That is common-sense British politics, and that is what the Bill needs to deliver.

Regulatory uncertainty undermines economic growth. If economic growth is our primary ambition, we need to reduce the amount of times we ask British businesses to be part of consultations, because they need to have confidence about where regulation is going. That is why it matters that we say, “We are not going to start diverging for the sake of it, but only because we can see there is a national interest in it.”

I will finish on this point. It matters to so many of our growth ambitions that construction materials are also covered under the Bill. Construction costs are due to rise much further here than in the European Union. Many of us who want our hospitals rebuilt and house building to happen know that if we spend our time giving uncertainty to British businesses about which way the regulations will go, we will not get the investment that we want. The cold, hard reality of businesses’ decision making is that they do not want to invest on a risk. My question to the Minister is: how can we give British business certainty about the direction of travel and ensure that we have the right consultation and engagement process for Parliament so that, where there are points where we would diverge—like we did on vaping—we can do that, too? It is not an either/or. Frankly, we have to get over the idea that if something is European, it is somehow taking us back. Nine years after we voted to leave the European Union, and six years after the legislation to do that, what the EU is doing still affects our British businesses.

We have a choice in this House. We can continue to peddle fantasies—I am sorry that the shadow Secretary of State is no longer in his place; he seemed not even to know about the capitulation that his Government must have made in his eye over the charter mark—but we owe it to British businesses who are being hammered by Tory Brexit and facing economic uncertainty not to add to the pile of paperwork in their in-trays as the Opposition would. I hope that when the Minister sets out that direction of travel, he will be open to ideas about how we can secure that. British businesses may have stopped listening to Opposition Members, but they will listen to us if we get this right.

5.7 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): There are three fundamental points to be made about the Bill, and I will make them more briefly than the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), although I am delighted to follow her. First, there is a constitutional issue at the heart of the legislation about the power of this House and this Parliament, and the power of the Executive.

The Bill creates a permissive power for the Executive to introduce by regulation, through statutory instrument, all kinds of measures. Those who have been in the House for a long time, and perhaps those of us who

have been in the House for a rather shorter time, will know what that means in practice: a brief debate in a room upstairs that will take a few minutes or perhaps a little longer. It will be thinly populated and the measure will be given scant scrutiny. The Executive should be held to account on the Floor of the House or by a Committee designed for the purpose.

That brings me to my second point about the Bill. We once had a European Scrutiny Committee whose task was to look closely at all kinds of things that emanated from the European Union. The hon. Lady who spoke immediately before me described those of us in the House who are sceptical about the European Union as not being rational; she said these were irrational fears about the European Union. Were that to be true, she would probably have a point, but actually our fears are entirely rational. We know what emanated from the European Union during our membership, and it was endless bureaucracy. I acknowledge that it was often gold-plated here, but none the less it was every kind of rule and regulation, some of which were entirely superfluous to our needs because they were introduced on a pan-European basis. I learned long ago that power is best exercised when it is exercised closest to its effect. When decisions are made, they need to be sensitive to the difference they make to those affected by them. One of the reasons I was a passionate supporter of Brexit is that I want power to return to the place where it has its effect. I fear, therefore, entirely rationally, that if the default position as a result of the Bill is that we end up with European regulation, it will not be sensitive to its effect but instead will be decided upon far from where the businesses that it affects are located.

So, given the second issue is about how the measure is scrutinised, I invite the Government to reinvent some kind of European Scrutiny Committee or similar. Perhaps we can call it a regulatory scrutiny Committee; perhaps it may be a body that allows the full consideration of each of the measures that the Government introduce under this umbrella Bill to ensure the House was happy with them and felt they were appropriate and had been tailored in the right way. That might be an amendment that the Government will accept, given that the Secretary of State said he was open-minded about improving the legislation during its passage.

The third problem that this Bill has at its heart is the assumption about harmonisation. That term is often used and one should always be terribly fearful when it is, because it’s usually not about creating harmony but about accepting control from elsewhere. I worry that that process will snuff out some of the measures that might more usefully be adopted by Government and impose on businesses and others blunt measures that are insensitive to the particularities that prevail in our country. I do not say that is with intent, as it seems to me that the Secretary of State made clear it was not his intention, but I just fear that it will.

The regulatory impact assessment and the explanatory notes that we already had seem to imply that. They say, and the Secretary of State repeated this in his opening remarks, that there are all kinds of changes—new rules, new regulations and new restrictions—happening at a pace that require the attention of Government, and that pace is so great that it is hard for the Government to keep up. My fear is, therefore, that they will adopt very broad measures rather than ones that are sufficiently tailored and sufficiently refined to meet domestic needs.

With that constitutional problem of the balance between the Executive and Parliament; with that lack of scrutiny and oversight that comes from not having a body that can look at these things on a one-by-one basis; and with that tendency to produce broad-brush measures emanating from the European Union, as implied both in the Bill and in supporting documents, I have grave doubts about this legislation.

It is true that we should regulate where necessary, of course; it is right in the public interest that we do so. However, we must always do so with care, because when that regulation becomes burdensome, when it frustrates innovation and when it tempers the ability to produce goods that meet popular demand, rather than becoming helpful to either customers or those that supply them, it inhibits the very things that support those businesses and aid those customers. I simply invite the Minister when he sums up to re-emphasise that the Government believe, as I do, in light-touch regulation and in regulation that only applies when there has been appropriate discussion with those affected by it, that there will be a proper dialogue between business and business representatives before new measures are introduced, and that all that is introduced will have the character that I have set out: tailored, specific and in the British interest.

Our role in this place is to defend the national interest. I know that a kind of heady internationalism permeates particular parts of this Chamber—I look to my left towards the Liberal Democrats—but I have always thought that it was more important to stand up for the British people, to represent my constituents to the best of my ability and to be, as I described earlier, sensitive to the particularities of the locale that I represent and the country that I love. Is that too much to ask of Members of this House?

So, I do not regard my fears about this Bill as irrational, contrary to the hon. Member for Walthamstow's assertion; they are deeply rooted in a rational fear of the worst this Bill could bring.

5.15 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Good regulation is basically the immune system of our nation, and it is often unseen. When regulation is working well and having the desired effect, we rarely see it happening because it is keeping us safe and protecting us from those harms that we outsource to the Government to keep watch over for us. It is taking the necessary steps and measures to make sure that we are safe, the things we buy are safe, the interactions we have in our communities are safe and our children are safe. That regulation is a protection, essentially, and this Bill gives the scope and the agility for the Government—any Government—to respond quickly and in a timely manner to new and emerging potential threats that regulation is required to protect us from.

I worry when Governments of any colour—including, unfortunately, that of my own party of late—seek to suggest that regulation is inherently a bad thing, an inhibitor of growth or the heavy hand of the state stopping the illustrious bounds of enterprise, because it often is not. Often it is about a level playing field. It is about creating the circumstances where competitors in Stoke-on-Trent have as much opportunity to compete with their competitors around the country or around

the world in a way that we understand to be fair, balanced and proportionate. To me, this Bill sets us on a course where we are able to do that.

There are some areas where product regulation and the safety that comes with it are lacking. If the House will indulge me, I would like once again to talk about ceramics and the ceramic industry because I believe that the product regulatory framework and the existing protections for ceramics—in terms of the quality of goods that are purchased and also the protection of the level playing field—could benefit hugely from actions that the Government could take through the powers in the Bill.

We have discussed online drop-shipping platforms many times in this House. These are websites that bulk buy things and sell them into the UK, often at a fraction of the price that people could buy them for in this country, and often faking and forging the identities and brands of British companies, without any consideration for what people are actually buying. I was shown a great example by a company in Staffordshire, Dunoon ceramics, which makes a very particular style of ceramic mug. The mugs cost about £28 to make and they retail at about £35, sometimes up to £50.

An online drop-shipping website was selling a fake version—with the same artwork and the same “Made in the United Kingdom” sticker and backstamp on the base—into the UK for about £10. We have no idea whether that product was meeting the Materials and Articles in Contact with Food (England) Regulations 2012 that it is required in this country to meet in order to be considered safe. We had no idea of the levels of lead or cadmium in the paint, no idea what the glaze was made of, no idea where the clay had come from and no idea of the conditions under which it was made, but it was sold into the UK thousands at a time, undercutting the British company. For clarity, I have no idea whether the product was defective, but it could have been, thereby putting people at risk.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman may not know this, but I collect ceramics, by the way, so I am extremely interested in them. He is right that we should support and, indeed, revere the British ceramic industry, but many laws already prevent the kind of counterfeiting he describes and other laws prevent illegal substances from being used and sold in the manufacture of goods. There is a lot of existing statute that protects consumers from the kind of practices he describes.

Gareth Snell: The right hon. Gentleman is correct that there are existing protections for some of the things I have mentioned that, if enforced properly, could take those products off the market, but the enforcement of many of our regulatory frameworks in this country is quite weak. Funding for most enforcement agencies across this country was—not to make a party political point—reduced under the last Government. I hope this Government will reconsider that because a regulation is only ever as good as the enforcement regime sat behind it.

Sammy Wilson: Would the hon. Member accept that if Ministers got up at 9 o'clock in the morning and worked until 9 o'clock at night introducing regulations on the basis of this Bill every day, but there was no enforcement or the enforcement was as weak as he says it is on pottery, we would be no better off?

Gareth Snell: I do not think anybody would disagree with the right hon. Gentleman's assessment that if there is no enforcement of regulation, there is no benefit, but we are not saying in the Bill that there should be less enforcement. The Bill produces a framework in which the Government can take action to respond to create the good regulation necessary. I will freely admit that what has to come with that are the enforcement arrangements to ensure those new regulations are enforced properly, penalties to deter people seeking to circumvent the regulations, and the proper resourcing of enforcement agencies so they are equipped to take action against those people and companies seeking to circumvent the laws. Without that, I fully accept that regulation for the sake of regulation is no good any more than regulation being cut or diverged for the sake of divergence and reduction is any good. It comes down to enforcement.

To go back to the comments of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), there is one area in this Bill where Government action could bring in a new product protection regulation that would have a huge impact on the ceramic industry. That is around the backstamp on the bottom of a piece of ceramic or pottery. As an avid collector, he will be aware of the importance of those backstamps. In this country, if we turn over any plate, cup or anything made from good-quality British ceramics, we will normally find the words "Made in England" and the pottery name underneath it. Consumers then know they are buying a premium piece of British-manufactured ceramics that has been made to a suitable product standard that we accept in Stoke-on-Trent is one of the best in the world. It is perfectly plausible, as has been done with some of the fakery, to replicate that phrase when it is not true.

The other challenge we have is companies that import things into the United Kingdom augmenting the wording of that particular backstamp to suggest it has been made in the UK when it has not. It may have been bisque-fired overseas, imported and then decorated and glazed in the UK, but it will normally have a company name, the word "England" and the date upon which that historic brand was established. It gives consumers the idea that they are buying a piece of British-made ceramics that would therefore be protected by the normal product regulations when in fact it is not.

There is the potential for the Minister to use the new powers in the Bill to produce new regulation that says anything produced in the UK that is considered to be ceramic has to have a proper mark on the base that demonstrates where it was made and where it has come from and to demonstrate that it was made in the UK. If a company is not making it in the UK, they become prohibited from putting the words "England" or "Made in the UK" on it.

Sir John Hayes: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way a second time—it is very generous of him. I think that we should jointly sponsor a Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker—the hon. Gentleman and I, not you and I, although we would love for you to be involved. He and I could jointly sponsor a "Made in Britain" Bill that would do exactly what he describes. I am not sure that this piece of legislation is necessary to do that, for we have that power in this House as it stands. Let us get little crowns printed on eggs again, let us have "Made in Britain" printed on everything,

and let us go back to "Foreign made", which was formerly widely used. I would love to see "Foreign made" stamped on imported goods—then people would not buy them!

Gareth Snell: I am very sorry to disappoint the right hon. Gentleman, but I and a number of my colleagues have already presented the Ceramics (Country of Origin Marking) Bill. He is more than welcome to support it should it ever be given its Second Reading. However, because of the nature of this place and the way private Members' Bills work, I am realistic about the fact that if we are to see that regulatory protection for British ceramics, it will have to come through a different mechanism. The mechanism in this Bill, which allows the Government to make those protective arrangements through secondary legislation, could increase the protection of British ceramics.

My final point is about a level playing field for exports. I take the point that the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) made, after I had intervened on the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), about our regulatory regime and where we want to export. The bulk of the ceramics made in my constituency are exported to the EU. We could diverge from the EU food contact materials regulations and have a secondary system in this country, but all that would do is create a separate set of regulatory regimes for small companies with small margins, requiring them to make products twice. We simply could not stand that burden. Before I get attacked for being one of those horrible remainers, I urge Members to check my voting record during the 2017 to 2019 Parliament. There are times when sticking with what we know—the European regulations—absolutely makes sense. We should control that, but it makes sense to align ourselves where we should.

I support the Bill. I hope that the Minister will, as one of his first actions with his new powers, consider my points about ceramics. If he does not, perhaps he would like to support my Ceramics (Country of Origin Marking) Bill.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. If colleagues speak for too long, others will be disappointed, so, unofficially, let us try to keep our speeches to under 10 minutes.

5.27 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Anyone listening to the debate would think that it is all about saving children from choking on toys, buildings not burning down because of defective batteries in bicycles, saving lives, safe products, and even the internal market and safeguarding the Northern Ireland economy, but it is not about any of that. It is nice to dress it up like that, and I suppose using that kind of language is helpful to make the Bill relevant to constituents, but the Bill is nothing to do with that.

Time and again Members have spoken about those kinds of issues—batteries catching fire, defective toys and so on—but they can and have been dealt with already in law. Indeed, we have even heard Members talking about illegal products being sold, so we do not need some Minister to change the law; we need someone

to ensure that the laws in place are enforced. We already have a mechanism to make things illegal, so if there are gaps in the law, we can just use that mechanism.

Let us not obscure what the debate is all about. It is not about gaps and the need to safeguard people. It is all about the Bill's agenda, which is to give Ministers additional powers. The public see a Government with a majority of over 200 who have been able to drive through legislation that has frustrated and angered them, whether it is taking money off pensioners for winter fuel or the legislation that was driven through last week to meet the net zero agenda, which failed to prevent us from buying solar products from China that are made by slave labour. I could go through all the other things that have made people angry, but a Government with a majority of over 200 now want to take on additional powers to allow a Minister to avoid having to come to this House to ensure product safety.

I have no doubt that the real reason Ministers wish to retain that power is that the Government have already set their mind on resetting our relations with Europe. They know it is unpopular with many of their supporters. They do not want to have constant scrutiny in this House on a weekly or monthly basis of new regulations that align us with Europe, so it is far better to give Ministers the power to do that quietly, without consultation or a vote in this House. As a number of Members have said, the Bill gives Ministers the power to do that.

Indeed, some of the Government's own supporters in the House of Lords made the point that the Bill contains the potential for dynamic alignment. The Government have been ambiguous about whether the powers will be used to do that, but I am fairly sure that is the main reason. There is little enough opportunity for this House to look at and challenge legislation, but I believe it is wrong for a Bill to allow Ministers, under the cover of darkness, to take us back into arrangements that we have escaped from.

Members have mentioned Northern Ireland. We know the impact of the EU general product safety regulations already, because they apply in Northern Ireland. Businesses in the rest of the United Kingdom that want to sell their products in Northern Ireland will have to have agents in Northern Ireland. The EU makes these laws to try to tie other countries and companies to its regulations. I suspect the excuse the Government will use for pursuing dynamic alignment will be, "We're doing it for the good of businesses in GB as well as Northern Ireland, because if we're aligned to EU rules, we escape some of the restrictions on trade that the EU has imposed." But why did we leave the EU in the first place, and why did many businesses support leaving the EU? First, the EU introduced costly regulations that did not even need to apply to many businesses because they never traded with the EU, but they still had to adjust their products to meet the regulations, which incurred costs.

Sir John Hayes: I am listening with intent to the right hon. Gentleman's contribution. It may be that the Government are more innocent than he suggests and that there is not this hidden agenda he is describing, but in the words of a Northern Irishman, C. S. Lewis,

"Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive."

Even if there is not a hidden agenda, in the end, in the name of the victims—the customers—this will end up being regulatory, bureaucratic and costly.

Sammy Wilson: The potential is there, and it has been put in the Bill. I suspect that clause 2(7) has been included in the Bill to give that opportunity, if not now, then at some future time.

The other reason why businesses have opposed the implementation of EU regulations and the other danger of dynamic alignment is that many of the laws and regulations made in Europe that we may be aligning ourselves with only get there in the first place because powerful lobby groups lobby the European Commission to get regulations imposed. Those regulations may well suit one particular industry, or even powerful firms within that industry, but they do not necessarily benefit all of business. Some have said of the Bill, "Oh, this will give certainty to business," but it may well give businesses additional costs.

Given what has happened in Northern Ireland and the way that our market with the rest of the UK has been disrupted, some may think that I would welcome the measures, but I do not welcome them for two reasons. First, as I pointed out to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), many of the restrictions are on goods that are not even included in the Bill, as the schedule excludes them. Secondly, even if this problem is solved, it does not deal with the issue. We know that because Northern Ireland is subject to the EU single market regulations—300 areas of law, as the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) keeps reminding us on an almost weekly basis. The issue is that we have allowed the United Kingdom to be divided by the deal that was done with Europe. When the previous Government was in power, I warned that this would happen and that Northern Ireland would be the foot in the door. I believe that that will be used as one of the arguments for this legislation.

The DUP will oppose the legislation because we believe it is not in the interests of the United Kingdom and does not address the problems that are faced in Northern Ireland.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I thought it was remiss that the speech by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) did not have a literary person in it, but he managed to get C. S. Lewis into his intervention.

5.36 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): As the Secretary of State said earlier, I believe I am the first metrologist to be elected to this House in history, so it gives me great pleasure to rise to debate the Bill. I took the liberty of checking *Hansard* and until the Secretary of State used the word earlier, I was the only Member to have ever used the word "metrologist" in the House of Commons. I am proud to be here today and prouder still that the Labour Government have brought forward a Bill featuring metrology in the first year of our new Government.

Most of the debate has focused on the product regulation in the Bill, but given my background I will focus on the metrology. Prior to my election to this place, I was at the University of Nottingham, where I was active in research in metrology for advanced manufacturing, beginning with my PhD, continuing through several more years as a research fellow, and latterly as a senior research fellow. However, like most people I have known in my life,

[Adam Thompson]

when I began my PhD, I had absolutely no idea what metrology was. Indeed, I am sure several colleagues in the Chamber did not know what it was before today, and I fear some still do not, so I would like to provide an explanation of the nature of my science, and explain why, contrary to popular assumption, it has nothing to do with clouds. [Interruption.] Please forgive my terrible pun.

The international standard, “Vocabulaire international de métrologie”, formally defines metrology as

“the science of measurement and its application”,

noting that

“metrology includes all theoretical and practical aspects of measurement, whatever the measurement uncertainty and field of application”.

It is not the

“branch of science concerned with the processes and phenomena of the atmosphere, especially as a means of forecasting the weather”, which is, of course, meteorology—something I have explained almost every day of my professional career.

Metrology broadly encompasses the various fields of research that seek to develop the science and technology of measurement, be that measurement of any of the seven base quantities from the système international d’unités—the SI—or any of the units derived from those base quantities. The seven base quantities are, of course, length, mass, time, electric current, thermodynamic temperature, amount of substance and luminous intensity.

The great physicist Lord Kelvin once expressed:

“To measure is to know”.

He also said:

“If you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it.”

Those sentiments are rarely more applicable than in the advanced manufacturing industry, where we are interested both in ensuring that a manufactured component meets the dimensional specification laid out by its designer and in constantly improving on existing products.

Metrology is a science that fundamentally underpins all other science. Without tools that allow us to measure and know, we cannot gain any understanding of the world around us, nor can we improve on it. In the fundamental scientific pursuit of understanding our universe, we are most often concerned with the metre, the first of the SI base units. The metre is defined formally by taking the fixed numerical value of the speed of light in a vacuum, c , to be 299,792,458 when expressed in the unit of metres per second and where the second is defined in terms of the caesium frequency. In fact, that definition changed very recently—it came into force in 2018. The metre is more simply described by its older definition, which is simply the distance travelled by light in a vacuum in a time interval, in seconds, of one divided by the speed of light. In my opinion, the metre is one of the most beautiful creations in science: it is defined by light itself, and it is a creation that allows us in turn to create everything in our world.

At the start of this debate, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) asked the House when weights and measures became metrology. The answer to that question is: several thousand years before the common era. Behind every great scientific advancement in history, there has been a metrologist.

Behind the pyramids, there was the first standardised unit of measurement—the royal cubit, defined as the length of the pharaoh’s forearm as measured from the tip of his forefinger to the base of his elbow. The cubit was a technology so advanced that it allowed the ancient Egyptians to position the building blocks of the pyramids with an accuracy almost equal to modern methods. Thousands of years later, there remains speculation on whether they were in fact built by aliens, because of how incredible an achievement that was. They were, of course, built not by aliens, but by metrologists.

Graham Stringer: At the start of this debate, as a fellow scientist, I wondered what the difference was between mensuration and metrology. When I was an undergraduate, we did not use the word “metrology”—it seems to be a new word. Perhaps my hon. Friend can enlighten the Chamber.

Adam Thompson: Certainly. It is not a new word as far as I am concerned; I believe it was brought into common parlance in the Victorian era.

I will move on to some more examples. There is the James Webb space telescope—something more modern than the pyramids. It takes images of our universe more than 13 billion light years away that are deeper, more brilliant and more beautiful than anything we have ever seen. Behind that, there is the construction of a 6.5-metre mirror, flat to within just a few tenths of billionths of a metre from its highest top to its smallest valley. If we were to expand the size of the 6.5-metre mirror to the size of the Earth, the distance from the highest mountain to the deepest valley would be of the order of the height of my hip.

Behind the discovery of gravitational waves, there is a series of interferometers, kilometres in size, which can detect signals from noise at levels considered unachievable throughout human history until the past 20 years or so and which are capable of listening to the collision of black holes across spacetime.

Sir John Hayes: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, because he is making a wonderful contribution to our affairs, which is indicative of the beauty of science, about which we hear too little. Before he rushes—hurtles, one might say—into the future, can he say a word about the peculiarly British measurements that informed my childhood? I mean things such as pecks, perches, rods and bushels, for each of those was rooted in the way that he described.

Adam Thompson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I am happy to explain. Those particular forms of measurement are not in common use any more, but of course many right hon. and hon. Members of this House will have grown up with them. Broadly, the ones that are still in use are defined in the modern parlance, but it is important to remember that the modern metric system accounts for all of those heritage measurements. The common inch, for example, is formally defined as 25.4 mm, and while I apologise to Members across the House, it is important for me to let them know that the pint is formally defined as 568 ml. Those heritage measurements and, indeed, the entire imperial system are now referenced on to the metric system; defined very simply, the imperial system is the metric system. There is no reason why we should not use those historical measurements—where

they are useful, they are perfectly valid—but they are formally defined with reference to the modern metric system. I will talk more about this shortly.

Metrology lies at the heart of everything we know, from telescopes to speed cameras and from knee replacements to jet engines. Every single thing made by human hand was designed first, constructed second and then checked by a metrologist to ensure it met its specifications—if we cannot know it, we cannot improve it. However, ensuring that parts meet their specifications is not simple, as each measurement, dimensional or otherwise, has an associated measurement uncertainty. That is a non-negative parameter characterising the dispersion of the quantity values being attributed to the thing being measured, based on the information used. Estimation of measurement uncertainty is a complex procedure—one that formed much of my career prior to coming to this place—and is usually performed in line with the “Guide to the expression of uncertainty in measurement”.

Uncertainty estimation is generally performed by making measurements that are traceable to the definition of the SI metre—when we are concerned with the metre. Again, the “Vocabulaire international de métrologie” defines traceability as a property of a measurement result whereby the result can be related to a reference through a documented, unbroken chain of calibrations, each contributing to the overall measurement uncertainty. Traceable measurements allow for the successful estimation of uncertainty and are generally a base requirement for the verification of manufactured goods. Traceability is considered by the international community to be the only means by which evidence can be provided towards a given product fulfilling the requirements set out by its designer.

To provide an example, let us consider a length measurement made between two faces of a manufactured part, such as a Rubik’s cube. Imagine that I am holding a Rubik’s cube—I could not possibly have brought a prop, Madam Deputy Speaker. The length between two faces could be measured by a calliper. That calliper would be calibrated using a measurement artifact, most commonly a metal cuboid called a gauge block. That gauge block would in turn be calibrated by a more accurate instrument, which itself is calibrated using a more accurate gauge block. That more accurate gauge block would then be calibrated with reference to an optical interferometer using a laser source. That laser source is finally calibrated against the iodine-stabilised laser that is used to realise the definition of the metre, so traceability is established from the shop floor measurement all the way up to the definition of the metre by an unbroken chain of calibrations.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It feels impertinent to intervene, because my hon. Friend is giving a hugely passionate speech about a subject he clearly knows so much about, but how can he can help the next generation of metrologists to be as inspired about this topic as he clearly is?

Adam Thompson: That is very kind, and I thank my hon. Friend very much for his intervention. If he wishes, I have a 97-slide lecture that I would be more than happy to deliver afterwards.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Nobody wishes for the 97 slides, Mr Thompson.

Adam Thompson: Do not worry, Madam Deputy Speaker—it is not one for today. I am nearly finished.

Each stage of the traceability chain has some discernible uncertainty, which generally increases as we move down that chain and instrument accuracy decreases. Estimation of uncertainty at each link in the chain is essential; it is impossible to have a traceable measurement without the inclusion of an uncertainty with that measurement. When applied in manufacturing, traceability allows us to create anything we can imagine within the confines of our chosen manufacturing process. It is the cornerstone of our modern manufacturing industry.

Through this Bill, the Government seek to update metrology regulations and the means by which those regulations are enforced. We have heard at great length different opinions about that process, but the Government are today ensuring conformity with SI, ensuring uniformity in the measurement, sale, monitoring and quantity of goods. Further, they are ensuring that the Secretary of State and other appropriate bodies have the powers they require to inspect and enforce that conformity. The Bill will ensure that UK law is updated to recognise new or updated international regulations and keep us at the cutting edge of science and regulation.

Members said earlier in the debate how the UK was at the forefront of regulation. I spent many years on standards committees working through these things. Every standards committee I ever worked on fed into the British standard, which fed into the European standard and the international standard. Those are the frameworks we are updating today to ensure that we remain at the forefront. It will mean cost savings for business and it will promote regulatory stability.

Finally, the provisions laid out in this Bill continue the work begun by the ancient Egyptians—the work that allowed us to build everything from the great pyramids to the phones in our pockets, the paper that we hold in our hands and indeed the very floor on which we stand today. Our work today will ensure that the bulbs that light this room are of an appropriate brightness, that the air that we breathe and that surrounds us is of an appropriate temperature, and that we can finally get a fairly measured full beverage of exactly 568 ml in the pub. I support this Bill wholeheartedly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Follow that, Jerome Mayhew.

5.50 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I do not think I can; I thought that was an absolutely brilliant speech. I feel like a party-pooper, because I am going to drag the debate back to the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, and I can only apologise. I was going to assert boldly that I was the only Member of this House who had sat on a standards committee and drafted European regulations, but I stand corrected. There are now two of us.

At first glance, the Bill looks tiny. There are just four clauses on product regulations and four substantive clauses on metrology. There is a reason why it is so tiny: it does not actually say anything. There is no description of the changes anticipated by this legislation. There are no examples of what needs to be addressed. There is no indication of the direction behind any future decisions—nothing. Members, particularly those on the Government

[*Jerome Mayhew*]

Benches, have referred to e-bikes and e-scooters, electrical safety, defective toys and lithium-ion batteries, to name just a few, but not a single one of those things is in the Bill. They could be. This could be a regulation Bill trying to fix the problems that have been identified, but none of that is there.

Worse than that, there is no explanation for the silence. The Bill simply makes a request of this House—of us, as parliamentarians—by saying, “Please give me, the Minister, the power to change primary legislation through regulations, including the power to create new and novel criminal offences.” This is the very definition of a skeleton Bill, where almost all the substance is left to regulations. That is contrary to an established convention in this House and the other place that the principal aspects of policy should be in a Bill, and only its detailed implementation left to delegated legislation. That is an established principle of our legislature. If we wish to depart from that, there needs to be a very good reason.

In exceptional circumstances, there are good reasons, but are there exceptional circumstances here? The issue was picked up immediately in what proved to be a hostile reception in the other place on Second Reading on 8 October last year. That was followed by a review on 15 October by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, which is not some right-wing conspiracy theory group. This is not “Brexit or die”; it is chaired by Labour. It is chaired by Baroness Ramsey, and it is a cross-party Committee. By the way, in another role, she is the senior adviser to the Labour party on standards and ethics, yet her report has been entirely ignored by this Government, because it was damning in its conclusions. It said that Government guidance was that skeleton legislation should be used only in the most exceptional circumstances, but that test was “failed” by this draft legislation. As a result, that cross-party Committee, chaired by Labour, made the recommendation that clauses 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 9 all be removed. Those are the substantive clauses right through the Bill, on both sides. That is a stinging indictment of this category of draft legislation.

However, the Committee members were so concerned that they did not leave it at that. The following day, they took the exceptional step of summoning the Minister and his officials to give oral evidence. That is very rare, and it was the first time for three years that it had happened. The Committee members were clearly unimpressed by the answers—the attempted explanations—that they were given, because in a subsequent report, on 28 October, they reported that the Minister and his officials had

“failed to provide a convincing justification”.

As a result of that second damning indictment of the Government’s approach, there was some movement: the removal of some Henry VIII powers, and the addition of a duty to consult, at least in the first instance. However, other Henry VIII powers remain, and the duty to consult refers only to the first instance, not to any secondary attempts.

The Committee then produced a third report, on the Bill in its current form. It said that

“the delegation to Ministers of law-making powers in this Bill involves legislative power shifting to an unacceptable extent from the democratically appointed legislature to the Executive”.

and also that

“the Government have failed to provide a convincing justification for the inclusion of skeleton clauses in the Bill”.

Actually, I think the Government did understand what they were doing, because the Bill gives Ministers the power to make politically contentious decisions about the degree to which domestic law on product regulation and, indeed, on metrology should be aligned with EU laws. That is the real reason behind the Bill: the fear of EU alignment by the back door.

Sir John Hayes: My experience in this place—I am mindful of what my hon. Friend has said already—is that there are two types of Bill to beware of. The first is the Bill whose provisions are so permissive, so broad, lacking the tailored approach that I described earlier, as to allow law to be applied in a way that is not expected by those who debate it as it passes through the House. The second is the Bill that makes specific provision for delegated legislation—for subsequent action by the Government. Those two types of legislation are legislation to beware of, and I say that to Members on both sides of the House, having seen Governments of all kinds introduce such Bills which became, in the end, bad laws.

Jerome Mayhew: Of course I agree with my right hon. Friend, and that comes to the nub of what I want to say. Yes, inevitably we are party politicians. We have the official Opposition, we have the Government, and we have those who sit on the left-hand side of the official Opposition. Above that, however, we are parliamentarians, and some of us are quite new. I may look old, and indeed I am, but I was first elected in 2019, and an awful lot of Members in the Chamber who may be voting tonight are even less experienced than me. It takes a while to begin to understand the difference between the role of the legislature and the role of the Executive, and my profound concern is that we are at risk of handing very significant powers from ourselves, the legislature, to the Executive.

Michael Wheeler: Having heard these comments several times, I wonder whether the hon. Member will accept that wisdom is not necessarily proportional to the amount of time spent in the Chamber.

Jerome Mayhew: The conventions of the House, and the conventions of the legislature, cannot be brushed aside by a flip comment like that. There are reasons why we have conventions. There is a separation of powers between the Executive and the legislature, and the power to create legislation lies with us. There are grounds, sometimes, on which we can give it to Ministers, but there must be really sensible reasons for that to be done, and there simply are not in this instance.

Graham Stringer: I have been following the hon. Member’s arguments closely. It is certainly the case that, with or without wisdom, the House is capable of making poor decisions. I have voted for measures and against them on occasion, and the House has made poor decisions. However, it is much more likely that the House will get it right, rather than a delegated legislation Committee dealing with a statutory instrument where a Minister comes along and reads out a brief that she or he often does not understand, as is revealed under questioning—if, indeed, questioning takes place. The argument for the Bill is really to do with speed and capacity. We do not meet to vote on Thursdays, but we often do on Mondays. There is plenty of time for the House to do this.

Jerome Mayhew: I entirely agree. I did an analysis, and 48.3% of sitting days since the general election have been on one-line Whips, so there are no grounds for the Government to assert that they do not have time to put forward fresh legislation. It simply is not the case, and they do not have a legislative agenda that they are progressing with any urgency. There is plenty of room, and if we need to regulate, we can do it.

We have a big decision to take as parliamentarians. We are being asked by the Government to nod through a blank cheque—a blank cheque that is in breach of our parliamentary conventions. It is against the express advice of the cross-party Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee not once, not twice, but three times. I say to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that any parliamentarian worthy of the name will vote against this Bill.

6 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): As has been said, on the face of it this is a short Bill, but when we look beneath the surface, it is even more exciting than the bare title of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill suggests. Most of us go through our days without giving much thought to the measurement of the units that govern our everyday lives—I confess that, until very recently, I was one of them—but so many of our scientific and medical advances have succeeded or failed on the most precise margins, as my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) so brilliantly set out. It was a real privilege to be in the Chamber to listen to his speech.

In the city of Birmingham, best known throughout much of its history as the workshop of the world, many millions of hours must have been sweated out to meet the finest of measurements and tolerances. I suspect my hon. Friend is capable of accurately estimating just how many hours that would have taken. However, I note in passing that one of just two remaining proof houses, which fell under the scope of the Gun Barrel Proof Act 1868 and succeeding Acts—they attracted a lot of attention in the other place—is in Digbeth in the city of Birmingham.

At the start of my hon. Friend's speech, he raised the question of when exactly the word "metrology" entered common parlance. I do not know what that date was, but I note that when the National Physical Laboratory was created in 1900, it was established with a metrology division. One of the early guiding forces, Mr J. E. Sears, later found a second career as a scales manufacturer, again in the good city of Birmingham. Today, when pharmaceutical manufacturing jobs are starting to return to my constituency, 20 years on from the collapse of MG Rover, I know some of the exacting standards that those manufacturers must meet.

We need only look at the number of Weights and Measures Acts passed by this House down the years to understand the importance of these questions for our role as legislators. I fear that I am about to commit an unwise act by referencing Magna Carta in this place, as that text has been the subject of one or two interesting emails that I suspect a number of hon. Members have also received, but it is telling that it stipulated:

"There is to be a single measure for wine throughout our realm, and a single measure for ale, and a single measure for Corn... And it shall be the same for weights as for measures."

In the other place, and it is fair to say in this place as well, the arguments over the Bill have come down to a simple point: are delegated powers and statutory instruments the right processes for adapting to a rapidly changing landscape for product safety and international measurement standards? It is worth remembering two things. First, the theory that we could make sufficient updates through primary legislation can be tested against the history of legislation in this place. For example, some of the provisions in the Consumer Protection Act 1987 have been overtaken by events, and it has proved hard in practice to bring forward the necessary changes to that legislation.

Secondly, as has been said, this work was initiated by the last Government, who at the time made the case for delegated powers persuasively. As the 2021 response to the 2019 call for evidence stated:

"Over time, the limited powers we retained in domestic legislation became less effective. Rather than update these, the UK relied on powers in the European Communities Act (ECA) 1972 to introduce new harmonised legislation to deal with product safety and metrology."

Those powers have now expired. Governments of all colours must deal with

"A complex, forever changing landscape" and current legislation does

"not allow for many of the changes necessary to keep pace with technological advances and modern hazards."

A good example of the ever-changing metrological field can be drawn from the 2019 changes to the international system of quantities, which altered in subtle ways the definition of the kilogram, the amp, the kelvin and the mole, with implications across a very wide range of regulations. I think it is sensible to update those definitions swiftly by regulations. We have heard examples of some of the unsafe products that are on sale at the moment. It is worth noting that the Bill is not simply about definitions, but enforcement. Clause 3 will enable some of those stretched resources, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) referred, to go further. I also note that through the Transport Committee I received representations from Brompton Bicycle, a very good British manufacturing success story, which said that UK product safety regulations and enforcement have failed to keep pace with the development of e-bike technology. Unsafe, poor quality e-bike products are entering the hands of UK consumers with sometimes devastating consequences.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Many constituents around the country will appreciate the specific points he makes about the changing product environment, and the way that product design and development is moving very quickly. I have a large number of residents who are concerned about e-bikes being ridden irresponsibly, home-made kits attached to bicycles, and cyclists often speeding on pavements. That is an interesting example of how the Bill could be very effective, so I thank him for his work on that.

Laurence Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know that was one of the areas to which he paid a lot of attention in the transport brief. I am sure that as the Committee continues to look into this area, it will build on that work. As he says, this is an issue that comes up time and again in my constituency.

[*Laurence Turner*]

We might not ever be able to get every single one of those vehicles off the road, but we need the powers to bring more of them off our streets where they pose a threat to people's safety.

To illustrate the seriousness of the challenges the Government face and the need sometimes for very swift progress, we need only to look to the scale of technological advancements in the field of hybrid warfare and the implications of those advancements for dual-use civilian technologies. I note that clause 1(4)(d) draws specific attention to products that can

“cause, or be susceptible to, electromagnetic disturbance.”

In Ukraine, the two adversaries are locked into a cycle of innovation and reaction in drone warfare and electronic countermeasures that are escalating at a blinding speed. Some of those developments have implications for the potential misuse of civilian drones in this country. To suggest that primary legislation is capable of keeping pace with that is not realistic.

Similarly, in respect of intangible products, again an issue on which the House of Lords spent a large amount of welcome scrutiny time, there is a case that primary legislation cannot cover enough eventualities in good time, especially in the age of artificially generated code. I think back to the Volkswagen emissions scandal 10 years ago, when so-called “defeat devices” were intangible in nature.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is making a brilliant speech and he has focused on some of the key issues in ways that not every speech has. He makes a powerful case, but why does he think that those arguments have not persuaded, in three different attempts in three different reports, the cross-party Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, which provides expert insight into precisely such proposed legislation?

Laurence Turner: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, although I do not agree with his characterisation of the speeches we have heard today. I think hon. Members have brought a wide range of perspectives, and that even though there has been some disagreement across the House—and, on occasion, on the same Benches—all Members have made their points sincerely.

I have read the reports the right hon. Gentleman references and the Minister's evidence. My reading of that report is that the Committee held a very strong view on the principle of skeleton delegated legislation, but the point it made is that the case must be made for the use of such powers. My view is that the case has been made in this instance because of the seriousness of the matters we are discussing.

Jerome Mayhew: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the conclusions of the fourth report by the expert Committee, which states:

“We remain of the view...that the Government have failed to provide a convincing justification for the inclusion of skeleton clauses in this Bill that give Ministers such wide powers to re-write in regulations the substance of the regulatory regimes for products and metrology.”

He is wrong in his assessment, is he not?

Laurence Turner: No. With respect, I think the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood my point. The Committee has every right to express that view; we also have the right to express our view as legislators in this place as to whether the case has been made. As I say, I think the case has been made that primary legislation is not a sufficient vehicle in this instance. I will just say to the hon. Gentleman that there are numerous precedents under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, for example, for regulating dangerous products; the difference is that primary legislation does not cover all the eventualities for products of the kind we are discussing today.

I will finish by talking about the pint. I note, in passing, that the first legislation to clearly regulate the pint—the Act for the ascertaining the Measures for retailing Ale and Beer of 1698—did not see it as necessary to define the actual quantity; perhaps it was left to royal prerogative to define. The history books do clearly show that the pint is safe, so to speak, in Labour's hands: in his memoir of his time at head of the No. 10 policy unit, the noble Lord Donoghue details how Harold Wilson intervened to save the pint; and it was a Labour Government in 2008 who secured the metric opt-out that preserved the inch, the troy ounce and, of course, the pint.

I know that hon. and right hon. Members on the Opposition Benches have spent a lot of time chasing away phantoms on this particular issue, and I hope that they feel that was a good use of their time and that we see more of it in this Parliament. For the Government Benches, however, I look forward to following the progress of this important Bill and to voting for it tonight, and perhaps also to raising a pint—or, as clause 5(5) has it, 0.56826125 cubic decimetres—to the Bill's good health as it completes its remaining stages in this House.

6.12 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Forgive me for bringing the Commons back to the purpose of Parliament. Its historic purpose is to make laws for our constituents and to hold the Executive to account. That is the fundamental that has been loosened by this Bill. Although it is entirely skeletal in form, the Bill's effect is very far-reaching indeed.

It is quite obvious that the Bill has a clear purpose, which is to align Great Britain with the EU single market on goods. If it were not so, we would not have clause 2(7). The standard that is set in that clause is the EU standard. If the Bill was just about creating the opportunity to make regulations because of a regulatory gap, it would not be tethered to the EU provisions on goods. It would be open ended, and we would be free to make the choice that best suited us. However, the giveaway clause in the Bill is clause 2(7). That lets the cat out of the bag, as indeed did the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) when she quite clearly indicated that that was the direction of travel that she sought. Therefore, that is the purpose.

When we look at clause 1(2), we again have the open affirmation of the desire to make the compliance with “relevant EU law”, so it is abundantly clear that this is a creation to realign us with EU law. The intent is to create this vehicle for realignment without voters noticing. Of course that means realignment with laws that we do not make and that we cannot change because they are made by a foreign Parliament. The ambition in this Bill

in respect of clause 2(7) is to disenfranchise—as has happened already in Northern Ireland by our subjugation to the EU single market and all its rules—the people of the United Kingdom, so that, in their entirety, they are at the Government’s whim and can be subjected to laws they do not make and cannot change. That then inextricably ties us to the European Court of Justice. It is the ECJ that mediates and deliberates on those laws that this Bill wishes to tie us to. Therefore, it is an attempt to tie us not just to the EU single market, but to the court that rules the EU’s single market.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On the point the hon. and learned Gentleman is making about enfranchisement and the fact that he wishes this Parliament to be in control of the powers that it has, does he agree that it would be sensible for the UK Government to ensure that, where powers are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, for example, they seek consent from Scottish Ministers rather than just legislating? The Bill, as currently drafted, allows Ministers here to legislate in areas of devolved competency, much as he is making the case that the EU court would be allowed to do.

Jim Allister: One critical thing about the Bill is that, under the Sewel convention, it does not extend to secondary legislation. It does not extend to statutory instruments. The Bill drives a coach and horses through the Sewel convention as far as devolution is concerned, because it heaps all the powers into statutory instruments. One might expect such a bold move to realign the United Kingdom with EU law to be an up-front piece of legislation. I do not think that that is too much to ask—that it should be plain and clear for all to see. Instead, it is to be conveyed in these statutory instruments. And statutory instruments, as we know, are those that, in the main, pass through unnoticed. We have all been to Delegated Legislation Committees. We know that they are farcical in that the Minister comes in with a brief, which is simply rigidly read, and Members nod the motion through. It is a farcical way to make legislation of any sort.

Jerome Mayhew: Much of this debate has been about whether this Bill leads us to dynamic alignment. The Government’s position is that it does not and that this is all a mirage and a fantasy. If that is the case, does the hon. and learned Member agree that a simple amendment to this Bill to make that clear would go a long way to reassuring Members.

Jim Allister: Absolutely. If the Government are not—as many of us suspect—following a deliberate approach of circumventing debate in this House on key realignment issues, and is seeking rather to channel it through statutory instruments, then call our bluff, change this Bill in that regard. But this idea of skeleton legislation, which sets up the powers that have been taken from Parliament and given to the Executive, is something which, historically, this party of Government have railed against.

Indeed, within a week of Second Reading in the other place, the Attorney General gave the Bingham lecture. He said:

“excessive reliance on delegated powers, Henry VIII clauses, or skeleton legislation, upsets the proper balance between Parliament and the executive. This not only strikes at the rule of law values...but also at the cardinal principles of accessibility and legal certainty.

In my view, the new Government offers an opportunity for a reset in the way that Government thinks about these issues. This means, in particular, a much sharper focus on whether taking delegated powers is justified in a given case, and more careful consideration of appropriate safeguards.”

That was the Attorney General. Where did that go to?

Sir John Hayes: I am interested in the Attorney General’s view, and we should take it seriously. Does the hon. and learned Gentleman recognise that primary legislation in this place metamorphosises in its passage through scrutiny? I have been involved in many Bills, as shadow Minister, Minister and Back Bencher, and that is precisely what happens. Ministers listen to argument, and as Bills return to the House, they reflect that argument both from here and in the Lords. Secondary legislation does not go through that process. That is why it is so important that the Bills we pass here do not contain the kind of permissive powers that facilitate so much secondary legislation.

Jim Allister: The right hon. Member is absolutely right. If one wanted to realign the United Kingdom with the EU, the easiest passage would be by statutory instruments. That is why that is the chosen mechanism here.

I have one final point. This Parliament traditionally and properly makes the law on criminal offences. We set the tariffs. Sometimes we say what the minimum penalty for a criminal offence is, but we always say what the maximum penalty is. We say what the content is of the criminal offence—what are the *actus reus* and the *mens rea*. But amazingly under clauses 3(9) and 3(11) and clauses 6(9) and 6(11) of the Bill we are going to make criminal offences by statutory instrument. Surely we have lost the run of ourselves if we think it is appropriate to make criminal offences in that essentially uncontrolled manner. It deprives this House, and therefore those we represent, of the very careful scrutiny that should always go into making something a crime. That is but another of the fundamental flaws of this undeserving Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Dr Prinsley, I am told that your speech is just a few minutes long, so I hope you will honour that.

6.22 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I welcome this Bill, which will address the alarming proliferation of unsafe products in online marketplaces. I would like to talk particularly about the hazards of unsafe toys, which are increasingly being sold online.

As a very recently retired ear, nose and throat surgeon—yesterday actually—I know the very real harm that these dangerous toys cause. I have operated on young children who inhaled small components from unsafe toys, detachable parts or parts that were unsafely secured and were a choking hazard, and ribbon or string that exceeded the legal limits, creating strangulation hazards. These are frightening life-threatening situations that no family should have to put up with.

Those are not isolated incidents. A Which? investigation found that over 90% of toys purchased from some online marketplaces were unfit for sale in the UK. Shockingly, these toys falsely displayed UK and European safety marks, misleading parents into believing that they were buying something safe for their children. The tragedy is

[Peter Prinsley]

that in many of these cases the sellers simply disappear, vanishing from the platform, and the families are left with no way to seek redress from the harm caused.

That is why we must act. I am glad that the Bill will give the Government the opportunity to address this issue. It will give them the power to regulate new and emerging business models and marketplaces, which previous laws did not allow.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Lithium-ion batteries are essential for achieving our net zero goals, but as demand grows for products containing such batteries we need to do more to protect consumers against dangerous lithium-ion batteries. Since 2020, e-bike and e-scooter fires have—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is an intervention, not a speech.

Helen Maguire: Does the hon. Member agree that there should be a mechanism to recognise and regulate high-risk products so that we can protect consumers?

Peter Prinsley: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I would point out the particular danger of button batteries—something that is well known to ENT surgeons—which cause perforation of the oesophagus and the trachea by a chemical reaction.

In the last two years, 95% of consumers have purchased from online platforms, with approximately 23 million monthly transactions in UK. We certainly need strong accountability for these marketplaces. Without that, dangerous items will continue to resurface, putting children at risk. I urge the House to ensure that the Bill puts more pressure on the sellers of unsafe toys, forcing them to take responsibility for their actions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: You are an honourable man.

6.25 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. We have had excellent speeches from across the House. I think the whole House agreed on the brilliance of the speech made by the hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), and—perhaps I would say this—great speeches have come from Opposition Members in particular. My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) got to the heart and the nub of the critique of the Bill.

We have also heard many good speeches, including the last one, about issues of product safety and the need to have a system that can keep up. The speech that addressed both that issue and whether the Bill is appropriate—it was the outstanding speech by a Government Member—was made by the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner). He did not like my praise of his speech in so far as it disparaged in any way anybody else's, but he faced up to the issues directly. He did not just say, "Well, there are these problems with products and product safety, and here's a Bill that could do something about it." He dealt with the fact that the Bill gives enormous power to Ministers. As colleagues across the House have pointed out, the purpose of this honourable

House is to hold the Executive's feet to the fire, hold them to account and hold them in check, and ensure that we champion the will of the people who sent us here. As has been said, not only the Minister but, back in 2018, the Secretary of State warned the House that

"the use of delegated powers carries a risk of abuse by the Executive".—[*Official Report, Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Public Bill Committee*, 1 February 2018; c. 305.]

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) is not here, so I will try to be more polite than I would have been if she was, but if Brexit derangement syndrome is a condition, it is one that affects not only people who are maniacally in favour of Brexit, but those who seem unable to think rationally from the other side. The point that I tried to make to the hon. Lady in an intervention—I would make it again—is that giving such untrammelled power to Ministers is frightening, regardless of whether we prefer closer alignment with the EU. She said that we need common-sense alignment, but these powers would allow a super-ideological future Minister to come in and seek, entirely for ideological reasons, to stop any alignment with the most sensible of EU regulations purely to have some Brexit difference. That makes no sense whatsoever.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) *rose*—

Graham Stuart: I will press on a little, but I may come back to the hon. Lady.

I understand that, following the loveless landslide that brought the Government to power, the Government, and Government Members, have done an about-face. They now delight in more powers for the Executive, so much so that the Bill's very first subsection gives the same Secretary of State I just referenced the power to make regulations anywhere in the UK, without consulting Parliaments in Westminster, Holyrood, Cardiff Bay or Stormont, on more or less anything he likes.

I was so pleased that the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim raised the devolution question. I was a Minister for eight years, and such is the complexity of the devolution settlement now that even with thousands of civil servants working on primary legislation, Ministers can come to the House and suddenly it gets pointed out to them that they are in breach of the Sewel convention and ignoring how Northern Ireland has a slightly different environmental or energy regulatory environment from Scotland or Wales. They find that the situation is more complex than they first thought. Now, we are giving powers to Ministers who will not have to go through any of that rigmarole. They will not get to find out how they are trampling on the devolution settlement, and that is a serious issue.

We on the Opposition Benches can make the arguments, but what we must really do is engage Government Members and get them to recognise that they are not here just to back the Government. They need to question these things, and not just ask whether the powers could be used for good. The hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield gave a brilliant speech with examples of the speeding up and pace of technological change—I think he spoke about the drones in Ukraine. Even though Opposition Members may maintain that the system that we had worked perfectly well, he made the case that perhaps we need something speedier going forward, and I can see that he made a strong argument. None the

less, is the answer just to hand to Ministers, in this skeleton Bill, all the powers in the world? I suggest that it is not.

I know the Minister and the Secretary of State are decent people, and I hope that we will see, as the legislation proceeds through this House, ways to curb some of the powers while allowing us to have a regulatory system that can speedily respond to inappropriate products. None of us wants to see parliamentary pride getting in the way of an effective system; we have to find a way of making things work. This Bill, however, goes too far the other way. That is why the cross-party experts on the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee have looked at it and said that they do not feel that the case has been made to justify such massive powers.

Some parallels were raised by the hon. Member for Walthamstow, and I think it is fair enough to say, “Look at the way that Henry VIII powers and delegated powers were taken by the Government in the last Parliament.” Quite rightly, people questioned it, but that was about implementing Brexit; it really was something enormous that had to be done at a reasonable speed. Those of us involved were cognisant of the fact that we did not want it to set a precedent; we did not want Government to take the unique conditions of implementing Brexit and take it as a new way of governing. To the comment from the hon. Member for Erewash about rebuilding the world that the ancient Egyptians had, they were very good at centralising authority and I do not think that that is an entirely good thing. That is exactly what the Bill does, so I agree with him on that.

I am sure the Secretary of State is an excellent judge of things such as the safe operation of a laptop, say, for a trainee solicitor, but he will now have the power to regulate any product for sale in the UK on the basis of safety or functionality. The immense power given to him will allow him to decide what is and is not sold in the UK, without consulting this place and by merely providing a written statement. The Bill goes further, with Ministers acquiring the power to give inspectors the right to enter somebody’s home to seize any product that the Minister has decided, on the basis of non-compliance. That can be imposed on manufacturers, marketers, installers, importers or people who run an online marketplace, the definition of which, by the way, can be altered on a ministerial whim and at any point.

We have heard about dangerous and often unpopular electric bikes and scooters, but the powers in the Bill allow a future Secretary of State—we have had some eccentric ones in the past—to decide to ban bicycles because he considers them to be dangerous. He might look at the figures on that. After publishing a statement, he could instruct anyone he likes to enter the house of every bike owner and every bike shop to seize every bike in the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State could effectively end cycling in the UK without coming to Parliament. He could create legions of cycle inspectors who could enter people’s homes or businesses and seize their property before disposing of it. And the Government want to hide this act under the innocuous name of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill. It is a massive power to give to the Secretary of State.

I say this to the many new Labour Members: I am not very keen on any Government, even the one of which I was a member. It was Lord Acton who said:

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Well, there is an element of absolute power in this Bill, but we have an opportunity both to recognise the powerful case made by the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield for an appropriate system and by his colleagues talking about different challenges, and to make sure that we limit and reduce those powers as the Bill goes through the House. I know that my cycle example is a little extreme, but it is also true. It would not require the Government to return to this House; they would be able to do it.

The Prime Minister has told us that the No. 1 mission of this Government is growth, yet his Ministers, not satisfied with taking the fastest growing economy in the entire G7 and bringing it to a shuddering halt, have introduced what may be the most tediously named but potentially dangerous Bill in the history of Parliament. We can look at what the Government have done for business so far. They have ended the rate relief for hospitality, made part-time workers too expensive to hire, hiked the cost of employing people through next week’s jobs tax, strengthened the trade unions and made it impossible to fire new workers. I would not want to exaggerate this Bill’s role, but in a crowded field, it takes the biscuit in many ways. Businesses are struggling to cope with all these things already, and now we will have greater business uncertainty caused by the fact that Ministers can, on a whim, choose which products can and cannot be sold. This will provide the exact opposite of the certainty that Labour Members suggested the Bill could bring, in a way that has no logic behind it.

Jerome Mayhew: Every single one of the measures in that infamous list that my right hon. Friend just went through required a vote in this House, and Labour Members had to put their name to each proposed legislative change. They will not have to do that under this legislation, will they?

Graham Stuart: They will not. The Secretary of State—not the current wonderful, benign, insightful and genial Secretary of State, but a future rather less palatable one—could wake up one day and impose new regulations on business that effectively strangle and bring red tape to every business in the land. Remember how close we were in 2017 to having a Government that would have been very different from the one that is opposite us today, or indeed from the Conservatives.

Why are the Government doing this? I cannot look into a man’s soul, but I have an idea, because Labour spent years fighting the UK’s attempts to remove the burden of regulation on business after we left the EU. At every turn, Labour tried to cling to nurse rather than let businesses innovate and sell their goods. This Government are seeking to undermine and erode the freedoms we have won over the last few years. Indeed, that is in black and white in the Bill. The Secretary of State may reimpose EU law on products without the requirement to come to this place and ask our permission to do so.

I am not saying that this is the worst thing the Government have done. As I have said, there is quite a packed list, including cutting the winter fuel payment for pensioners, the farm tax, the jobs tax, imposing stamp duty on first-time buyers, which comes in, I think, today—*[Interruption.]* Suddenly someone wants to buy a house. There is also the hospitality tax. I could go on, but executive powers are at their most pernicious when

[Graham Stuart]

they have no limits. This legislation is not about metrology or about the better regulation of products; it is about giving the Government the power to do what they like, when they like, for reasons they do not have to explain, and then impose it as they see fit. The fact that we might like, and even trust, the current Secretary of State is no reason to give powers like this to Ministers about whom we know nothing now. I hope that Labour Members will join us in opposing this Bill.

6.39 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): This has been a genuinely important, interesting and lively debate on product regulation and metrology. It has also been a debate about the balance of power between the Executive and us here in Parliament. The UK product safety and metrology framework is derived from European Union law and it developed while the UK was a member of the EU, when we did not have the opportunity here to address product safety in our changing world as rapidly as we do now.

Following our departure from the European Union, the UK established its independent regulatory system, which must be flexible enough to accommodate emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and address changes in consumer purchasing behaviours. As the Bill's explanatory notes state, its purpose is to ensure that the UK is better equipped to tackle modern safety challenges, safeguard consumers, seize opportunities for economic growth and so on.

The Secretary of State said in his introductory remarks that the Bill was introduced in the previous Parliament, and I want to emphasise that it was not. I want to offer the Minister the chance to correct the record in his closing remarks, in case the House has been inadvertently misled.

Upon leaving the European Union, the UK created the UK conformity assessed marking, known as the UKCA, to replace the *conformité Européenne* marking, known as the CE. These markings are used by manufacturers to demonstrate product conformity. The UK still recognises CE markings; however, the EU does not recognise the UKCA. Will the Minister confirm that discussions are happening with the EU, including the resetting of discussions on trade, to ensure that UKCA markings and any products regulated here in the UK are mutually recognised?

Turning to the points raised in today's excellent debate, we heard fantastic speeches from my right hon. Friends the Members for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), and my hon. Friends the Members for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) and for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey). We also heard powerful voices from Northern Ireland on the adjacent Benches, from the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister). We also heard the expertise that the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) brings from his background in the toy industry.

From the Labour Benches, we heard impassioned speeches often about product safety, including from the hon. Members for Worsley and Eccles (Michael Wheeler), for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) and for

Walthamstow (Ms Creasy). She described us as sinners repenting, which I hasten to surmise might mean that she is a repentor beginning to sin. We heard from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who is a passionate advocate for ceramics from his constituency. We had the pleasure of hearing a masterclass from Parliament's first metrologist, the hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), on the ancient history of metrology; it was a very enjoyable speech. We heard speeches from the hon. Members for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley).

Before embarking on the reason why we will oppose the Bill tonight, I welcome the Government's U-turn in the other place on their plans to rule over the size of the great British pint or, as the hon. Member for Erewash would describe it, 0.56826125 cubic decimetres. Although they were initially resistant, Ministers eventually recognised that our great British pint should remain untouched. I am afraid that that is all I can welcome about this piece of legislation, because the Opposition are deeply concerned with the Government's overreach and excessive reliance on delegated powers within the Bill.

Henry VIII would be absolutely delighted by this piece of legislation. Labour Members claim that it will simplify our regulatory framework, yet all we see is the undermining of our sovereignty and the powers of Parliament. This 15-page Bill would give the Secretary of State unchecked powers to amend product safety regulations, change the definition of an online marketplace and introduce new penalties, inspection powers and charges on businesses, driving up the already soaring costs of doing business in the UK. As many hon. Friends have said, it would grant the Government sweeping powers to make us a passive recipient of laws made in Brussels. International trade and co-operation are welcome, but this is not what more than 17 million people voted for in 2016, when we took back control—it is a betrayal of Brexit.

The Bill is not purely technical; part of its purpose is to allow the dynamic alignment of goods with EU single market laws, giving the EU the power to rule on standards for manufactured goods produced in the United Kingdom. This EU Trojan horse Bill could see us readopting a regulatory regime over which we have no influence, input or sanction, leaving us as rule takers, not rule makers.

It is fundamentally not good practice or good governance to deliver substantial changes through delegated legislation.

“We must bear in mind that the use of delegated powers carries a risk of abuse by the Executive, which is not something the Opposition could ever support. Rather, it is our duty at this stage to check the powers of the Executive and ensure that we are not giving them *carte blanche* to change the balance of power permanently in their favour.”—[*Official Report, Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Public Bill Committee*, 1 February 2018; c. 305.]

These are not my words but those of the Secretary of State.

Tomorrow, the United States could impose tariffs on us. It is paramount that we secure a mutually beneficial UK-US trade deal as soon as possible, but I cannot see how the Bill, which drags us closer to the European Union, would give the United States any incentive to work with us.

In closing, let me ask the Minister a few questions. Can he confirm what the limits will be on ministerial powers? What oversight will Parliament have of regulatory

changes made under the Bill? What consultation will occur with the real-world businesses that are affected by the change? Will he confirm that no regulations made under the Bill will prevent or impede UK businesses from trading internationally?

The Bill undermines Parliament and risks tying British businesses to EU red tape on which we have no say. We cannot allow these excessive powers to create further uncertainty among British businesses of all sizes, which already face the soaring costs of doing business because of the Chancellor's tax grab. The Bill is a parliamentary sovereignty sell-out. We got Brexit done; let us keep it that way. The Bill gives away control, and that is why I call on the House to back our amendment and stop it.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for what has been an interesting and, at times, informed debate on the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in opening, the Government's primary mission is economic growth to help rejuvenate our high streets and promote innovation, and this legislation is an important element in that drive and will further cement the UK as a world-leader in product regulation and safety. The legislation will have real-world impacts that we can all relate to. As we have heard, product safety failures can have devastating consequences, and we are determined that our regulatory framework be as agile and flexible as possible in its response to new threats and complex modern supply chains but without stifling innovation.

There have been an awful lot of contributions, and I will try to cover as many of them as I can. I think it is appropriate that I start by referencing the excellent speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), which lit up the whole House. He is, of course, the first meteorologist to have spoken in this Chamber—

Hon. Members: Meteorologist!

Justin Madders: Meteorologist. He may well be on the Bill Committee, because he has definitely talked his way on to it with his insight into this issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) almost matched him in terms of technical specificity, and his historical knowledge was also very important. He has just finished sitting on a Bill Committee with me, but he is talking his way on to this one as well—perhaps I should not say that, because it might encourage colleagues not to speak in future debates.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), were among a number of Members who talked about the issue of e-bikes, which is a real concern. I am sure the whole House has been moved by the tragic cases of e-bike fires that we too often hear about. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred to the tragic death of Sofia Duarte. I met her mother last year to talk about what we can do through this Bill to prevent such tragedies from happening again.

In the wake of the increasing number of fires associated with e-bikes and lithium-ion batteries, there have been calls from businesses, trade associations, consumer groups and parliamentarians to tighten up the law. This legislation will allow us to ensure that the UK's product safety framework can keep up with technological developments, including on e-bikes. The powers in the Bill will allow us to update regulations to ensure the best protections for consumers and consistency with the majority of reputable retailers.

The Government are currently considering how best to use the powers in the Bill to regulate these products in an efficient and proportionate way, in particular to ensure that products that can pose a greater risk, such as lithium-ion batteries and e-bikes and e-scooters, are safe. That includes bringing forward powers in the Bill to better define online marketplaces and confer additional duties on them to help stop the sale of unsafe products, including converter kits. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles (Michael Wheeler) pointed out, this is a fast-moving environment, and the Bill will give us the flexibility to tackle that.

Clive Jones: Does the Minister agree that if a UK manufacturer wants to produce a product for the UK market, it should produce it to UK regulations, and if it wants to export it to Europe, it is sensible to produce that product to EU regulations, which will open up a massive market on our doorstep? Keeping up with EU regulations will generally be good for the British business economy and help economic growth.

Justin Madders: The Liberal Democrat spokesperson tempts me to set out a statement of policy, which the Bill is not intended to do. We want to give ourselves maximum flexibility in our ability to deal with issues as they arise. He talked in his speech about online marketplaces, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) talked about unsafe toys and button batteries, citing the fact that investigations have discovered that up to 90% of products purchased in online marketplaces are unsafe. Because we recognise that online marketplaces are in desperate need of regulation, the Bill will give us powers to clarify and modernise responsibilities for online marketplaces in a flexible and proportionate way, to protect consumers and create a fair playing field for law-abiding businesses. It will enable the Government to modernise the responsibilities of online supply chain actors.

While the growth of e-commerce has provided consumers with greater choice and convenience, it cannot be at the expense of consumer safety. We will continue to engage with consumer groups, businesses and online marketplaces in the development of specific online marketplace requirements to ensure that they are proportionate and to mitigate any costs to consumers. I can also confirm that it is the intention of the Government to consult on the duties for online marketplaces soon after Royal Assent and to bring forward subsequent regulations as soon as is practically possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) spoke with his customary passion about the ceramics industry in the Potteries. I acknowledge his ideas for protecting the industry. I am not sure whether this Bill is the right vehicle for his suggestion, but I will take it away and come back to him.

[Justin Madders]

It is probably worth talking about the issue that seemed to vex Opposition Members rather a lot, which is whether this Bill is in some way a reset to EU laws by the back door. It is about domestic regulation and we are not rejoining the EU by the back door. The Bill is about giving us flexibility to ensure product regulation, now and in the future, that is tailored to the needs of the UK. Of course, there will be some instances when we will want to take a similar approach to the EU, but there will be other times when we will want to take our own approach. Those decisions will be taken on a case-by-case basis in the best interests of UK businesses and consumers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) said, the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 gave significant powers to the Executive, and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wokingham, quoted me on that Act. It reformed 7,000 regulations, ranging across every function of society. Its regulations were far broader than those proposed in this Bill and the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Select Committee called it “hyper-skeletal”, which is some way beyond the criticisms it levelled against this Bill.

Turning to the reasoned amendment tabled by the official Opposition, it is worth restating that the Bill is not about rejoining the EU. David Cameron commented that he wanted the Conservative party to

“stop banging on about Europe”,

but there seems to be some way to go before his words reach fruition, despite the fact that we left five years ago. The Bill gives us the necessary powers to ensure public regulation, now and in the future, meets the interests of the UK. The powers set out in the Bill will be used solely and exclusively in the best interests of UK businesses and consumers.

I recognise that the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Select Committee raised concerns about this being a skeleton Bill, but the Government have considered those concerns and other representations made by Members in the other place. Our existing product regulations are necessary to keep consumers safe, and to provide clarity and a level playing field for businesses. They extend to many thousands of pages and cover a huge amount of technical detail. As the noble and learned Lord Pannick said in the other place,

“the practical reality is that technical regulations of the breadth and complexity that will be produced cannot sensibly be enacted by primary legislation.”

He went on to say that if we are required to use primary legislation every time we wanted to make a regulation on product safety, there would be

“little, if any, time for anything else.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 February 2025; Vol. 843, c. 1716.]

Conservative Members seem to have forgotten that since the Consumer Protection Act 1987, Governments of all stripes have recognised the need to make product safety regulations by secondary legislation. Since 1987, the Conservatives have been in power for 24 years, so they had more than enough time to find another way of dealing with product safety, but they did not choose to do that. We are taking a pragmatic approach. We have

taken notice of some of the concerns raised about the powers of the Bill: we have removed a number of Henry VIII powers, introduced a consultation requirement, added additional affirmative resolution procedures and published a code of conduct that sets out the controls that we will have to ensure regulations are proportionate and evidence based. I am grateful to Members of the other place for setting out some of their concerns.

As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), pointed out, the Conservatives did not introduce the Bill in the last Parliament; I am happy to confirm that that was the case. That shows that there was a gap in the law that needed filling and the Conservatives failed to act on it.

Some of the important consumer groups in this country, such as Which?, recognised that action was needed. Sue Davies, head of consumer rights, protections and food policy said:

“It’s encouraging that the government is prioritising a Bill that should address the huge gap in consumer protections which allows online marketplaces to facilitate the sale of unsafe and illegal products without facing repercussions.”

If Members vote for the reasoned amendment, we will not be having any of those protections. I do not think any responsible party would move an amendment along those lines.

This Government are never going to compromise on safety. The Bill is essential to strengthening the rules and regulations needed to protect consumers, businesses and the public. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 110, Noes 302.

Division No. 166]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	Easton, Alex
Andrew, rh Stuart	Evans, Dr Luke
Argar, rh Edward	Fortune, Peter
Atkins, rh Victoria	Fox, Sir Ashley
Bacon, Gareth	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	French, Mr Louie
Barclay, rh Steve	Fuller, Richard
Bedford, Mr Peter	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Bhatti, Saqib	Garnier, Mark
Blackman, Bob	Glen, rh John
Bool, Sarah	Grant, Helen
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Griffith, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra	Griffiths, Alison
Burghart, Alex	Harris, Rebecca
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Hayes, rh Sir John
Cartlidge, James	Hinds, rh Damian
Chope, Sir Christopher	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Hollinrake, Kevin
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Huddleston, Nigel
Cocking, Lewis	Hudson, Dr Neil
Costa, Alberto	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Jenrick, rh Robert
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Jopp, Lincoln
Cross, Harriet	Keams, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Davies, Gareth	Kruger, Danny
Davies, Mims	Lam, Katie
Dewhurst, Charlie	Lamont, John
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
	Lockhart, Carla

Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrisey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Philp, rh Chris
Pritchard, rh Mark
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
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
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Wayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
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 Ayes:
Jerome Mayhew and
Rebecca Paul

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniuzzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
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
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David

Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Cooper, Andrew
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eccles, Cat
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya

Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Grady, John
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
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
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen

Kumaran, Uma
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Macdonald, Alice
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Myer, Luke
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Owen, Sarah
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby

Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Prinsley, Peter
Race, Steve
Ranger, Andrew
Reeves, Ellie
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scroggham, Michelle
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
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, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
**Christian Wakeford and
Anna Turley**

Botterill, Jade
Brickell, Phil
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Cooper, Andrew
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary

Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Grady, John
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
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
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumaran, Uma
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Macdonald, Alice
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair

Question accordingly negated.

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 110.

Division No. 167]

[7.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
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

McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtislam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reeves, Ellie
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom

Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 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, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Christian Wakeford and
 Anna Turley

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Andrew, rh Stuart

Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria

Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartledge, James
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 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
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 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
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 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.

Bill read a Second time.

**PRODUCT REGULATION AND METROLOGY
 BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)**

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 20 May 2025.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Martin McCluskey.*)

Question agreed to.

PRODUCT REGULATION AND METROLOGY BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Martin McCluskey.*)

Question agreed to.

PRODUCT REGULATION AND METROLOGY BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Production Regulation and Metrology Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees under the Act.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ENERGY CONSERVATION

That the draft Ecodesign for Energy-Related Products and Energy Information (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 4 March, be approved.—
(*Martin McCluskey.*)

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until tomorrow (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 25 February, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

Question agreed to.

Trail Hunting

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

7.25 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. I am delighted to secure my first Adjournment debate, and for it to be on an issue so close to my heart: trail hunting and, more broadly, animal welfare.

Put simply, animal cruelty should have no place in modern, progressive 21st-century Britain. Having spent most of my life living in rural areas, I have witnessed at first hand the brutal reality of hunting with dogs. Contrary to the views of some, that opinion is shared by many rural residents. It is imperative that as lawmakers we address the concerns surrounding trail hunting, particularly in light of the Hunting Act 2004 and the Government's manifesto commitments.

Fox hunting is not a sport. It is an activity that involves tracking, chasing and killing a fox, typically using a pack of hounds and riders on horseback. It was banned by the last Labour Government through Hunting Act 2004. Drag hunting is an activity similar to traditional foxhunting, but with a key difference: instead of hunting a live fox, a scent trail is artificially laid for the hounds to follow. The scent is usually created using a mixture of aniseed and other substances, and it is dragged along a predetermined route. Just to be clear, I have no issues with drag hunting.

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals says that out of control hounds on trail hunts have harmed people, pets and themselves in residential areas. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is urgent that trail hunting should be banned as soon as possible to close the loopholes in the Hunting Act 2004?

Mr Speaker: Order. I advise Members that it is easier for us to hear them if they look to the microphone.

Perran Moon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I entirely agree.

Trail hunting, as it is commonly understood, involves a pack of hounds following a scent trail laid by a human, with the intention that hounds will follow the trail, rather than chase and kill a wild animal. The functional difference between that and drag hunting is that animal-based scents of the traditional hunting quarry are used in trail hunting. That is usually fox urine, but the body parts and carcasses of foxes, deer and hares can also be used. On the surface, it appears to be a harmless activity. However, there is now overwhelming evidence to suggest that trail hunting has become a thinly veiled pretence for illegal hunting activities under the Hunting Act.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this important debate. In my constituency several hunts, including the Heythrop hunt and the Warwickshire hunt which crosses the county border, have been caught red-handed hunting live foxes. Does he agree that such incidents show how urgent it is for the Government to honour their manifesto commitment to ban trail hunting?

Perran Moon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Not only that, but in his constituency I have personally cleared land on which local hunts had created an environment for foxes to thrive. It is a complete nonsense to suggest that fox hunting is of any use in terms of pest control. It is not.

The 2004 Act was a response to the growing public outcry over the brutality of hunting practices. It made it illegal to hunt with hounds except in certain circumstances, in the case of registered hunts using scent trails.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the hon. Gentleman. I spoke to him before the debate, so he knows where I am coming from. I have a very different opinion, and the hon. Gentleman knows that; he respects that, and I respect him. I just wanted to put that on the record.

This is clearly a devolved matter, so England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales will make their own decisions separately. The hon. Gentleman has outlined his point of view, but does he agree that the hunting community deserve to have their voices heard and considered in that legislative process? The hunting community would dispute some of what has been said tonight. Just for the record, as a hunting man—one who has never hunted with horses or hounds—I think the hunting community should have the right to pursue it. What does the hon. Gentleman think? Before we go any further, let's get the other point of view.

Perran Moon: I think it is absolutely right that all voices are heard, but that science is followed. Legislation should be based on evidence and science, and the evidence and the science suggest that the cruelty to the animal being pursued far outweighs the pleasure the hunt will give human beings. However, I am really happy for all voices to be heard in this debate.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The law must also be followed. The fact that 46% of registered trail hunts end up chasing a fox proves that the law needs tightening up and that we need tougher sentencing. Ultimately, this Labour Government will deliver that. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a priority?

Perran Moon: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I do agree, and I will be coming on to that later.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I am sorry to make another intervention on the hon. Gentleman—my neighbour in Cornwall. He is probably aware that I spent hundreds of hours in this House on this matter before the 2004 Act; I was pleased that in spite of all the intimidation and threats that I received at the time, the Act still went through. The point was made earlier that the voices of those who get their kicks out of chasing wild animals for sport need to be heard, and indeed they have been: we have already heard that the leaders of trail hunts admit that they are, indeed, a smokescreen. They have used that word themselves to describe what goes on with trail hunts.

Perran Moon: I agree with the hon. Member, and thank him not just for his intervention but for all his work to raise awareness.

The Hunting Act did not go far enough. It left certain loopholes, particularly the allowance for trail hunting, which has meant that the law is often undermined according to the RSPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports. Despite the requirement for hunts to obtain landowner permission and follow strict regulations, there is significant evidence that trail hunts often lead to the unlawful hunting of foxes and other wild animals.

According to sources in Cornwall, there are five foxhound packs. Alongside trail hunts, some of those packs have continued to hunt foxes illegally and have been filmed sending hounds to dig out foxes hiding in holes, woodland and hedges. Many landowners continue to suffer horse and hound trespass, and uncontrolled hounds regularly end up spilling out on to roads, causing a danger to road users, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell).

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Meur ras th'am keren—that is my very best Cornish, and I will not try to repeat it unless I have time to practise. I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. To go back to his point about the difference between drag hunting and trail hunting, a lot of the negative things that he describes would not come from drag hunts, which have predetermined routes and use a different type of scent. For the avoidance of doubt for anybody listening at home, particularly those in the hunting community who may be concerned, might we just reconfirm that this is about trail hunting, not drag hunting?

Perran Moon: I can say once again that I have no issues with drag hunting; this is about trail hunting. Trail hunts are often deliberately laid in areas inhabited by foxes, increasing the likelihood of hounds disturbing, chasing and killing a fox or other animals when the scent of live quarry is picked up.

These are not isolated incidents; they are part of a broader pattern of behaviour that undermines the intent of the Hunting Act. For example, between August 2023 and March 2024, during the last hunting season, several reports were made of illegal hunting incidents, including cub hunting, where the claim of trail hunting was used as a defence. In many of these cases, the evidence suggests that the scent trail is often a formality, with hunts continuing to chase and kill wildlife.

Several major landowners have taken steps to restrict trail hunting. The National Trust, Natural Resources Wales and Forestry England have all banned trail hunting. Additionally, United Utilities and the Lake District national park have suspended trail hunting activities, with the Lake District national park's suspension described as "indefinite". The Ministry of Defence has also halted the issuance of any licences for trail hunting on its land.

Additionally, in February 2025, the national lead on fox hunting crime, Assistant Chief Constable Matt Longman, publicly stated that

"of all the cases that I have reviewed"—

this is a point that was made earlier—

"where there have been successful prosecutions of the Hunting Act, trail hunting has been used as a defence."

His comments reflect the disturbing reality that trail hunting is providing a smokescreen for illegal fox hunting.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. His thesis seems to be that, because the direct hunting of foxes was made illegal, trail hunting is being used as a cover for it. What would happen if he had his way and trail hunting was banned as well? Would it not then be possible for drag hunting to be used in some way as a cover for illegal fox hunting? If so, is not this an endless process, and should he not come out and say straightaway that he wants every form of this activity stopped?

Perran Moon: I think that I have twice made the point that I have no issue with drag hunting. With drag hunting, the scent that is followed is not that of the carcass of an animal or the urine of an animal. Therefore, the likelihood that there will be wild animals included in drag hunting is much, much smaller. The evidence from the RSPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports supports the view that drag hunting is completely different from trail hunting, and that there is no issue with drag hunting. It is really important that this is not seen to be a witch hunt against people who want to have a hack across the countryside with dogs on a specific and pre-planned route. It is a really important nuance within rural communities that we are not against all forms of horse riding. We want to make sure that wildlife and the natural environment are protected, so, respectfully, I do not agree with the right hon. Member.

In fact, the League Against Cruel Sports' own analysis reveals that trail hunting has been used as a defence in cases involving alleged illegal hunting by registered hunts. That highlights the major issues with the current legislation, as the existing law is often unable sufficiently to hold to account those who flout the regulations under the guise of trail hunting.

Moreover, enforcement in the field has proven difficult. Although hunts are operating illegally, knowingly or intentionally hunting live quarry, it can often be challenging to prove that in court. The impact on animal welfare is significant, with wild animals, particularly foxes, being forced to run long distances while being relentlessly pursued, after which they are torn limb from limb while still alive by a pack of uncontrollable hounds. The suffering does not stop there. Non-target animals, including domestic pets and livestock, have also been disturbed, attacked and even killed when hunts veer off course, creating havoc in residential areas and rural communities.

This issue is not a matter for one party alone. Support for banning trail hunting crosses party lines. MPs from various political parties, including the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats and the Green party, have all expressed concern over trail hunting's role in perpetuating illegal hunting activities. This broad cross-party support demonstrates a shared commitment to protecting animals, wildlife and the natural environment. I strongly believe it is time for us to come together and close this loophole once and for all.

Public opinion on hunting in the UK has shifted dramatically over the years. Around 80% of the British public support the ban on hunting with dogs, and many of those people would like to see trail hunting banned as well. The moral case for ending trail hunting is clear: it is inconsistent with the values of a modern, compassionate society that respects animal welfare. Hunting, whether through traditional or trail methods, often takes place in areas of natural beauty and fragile ecosystems. The disturbance caused by hounds and hunters can have

lasting effects on the local wildlife, disrupt natural habitats, and lead to long-term ecological damage. Given the increasing concern over biodiversity and the need to protect our natural environment, banning trail hunting would be a positive step in safeguarding the UK's wildlife and habitats.

We need to strengthen the Hunting Act 2004 to make sure it delivers the protection that animals need. That means banning trail hunting, removing exemptions that enable illegal hunting and introducing custodial sentences for those who break the law.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. While a pledge to ban trail hunting is welcome, I fear that it could be insufficient. If legislation focuses solely on the term "trail hunting", hunts may adopt new euphemisms to exploit existing loopholes to continue their activities. Does my hon. Friend agree that effective reform must go beyond a symbolic ban and address the entire framework that enables illegal hunting to carry on?

Perran Moon: I agree with my hon. Friend. In addition to those changes, we must extend the time available to charge in illegal hunting cases, reverse the burden of proof of compliance with exemptions, and make hunting a notifiable offence. These steps would make it easier to enforce the law and ensure that those who break it face the consequences. I thank the Minister for his time today and I look forward to his response on this issue.

The way we treat our wildlife reflects the kind of society we are and the legacy we will leave for future generations. For me, hunting animals with dogs is nothing less than a profoundly cruel activity. It is an activity that I, like most of my fellow Labour MPs, campaigned during the general election to ban. Today I stand before this House to say that it is time to take decisive action and fulfil our promise to the electorate, and end trail hunting in the United Kingdom once and for all.

Dan Norris (North East Somerset and Hanham) (Lab): I should declare an interest as chair of the League Against Cruel Sports. Drag hunting was invented 200 years ago. It is a peaceful activity. Trail hunting is not. It is designed to get around the current legislation. Why does my hon. Friend think that centuries of tradition are being ignored by the pro-hunting fraternity?

Perran Moon: My hon. Friend raises a difficult question. Society moves on, and people's values change. Over the course of the last few decades, society has come to respect animal welfare far more than it ever had done before. Hunting was and is perceived to be a traditional rural activity, but that does not mean it is right. It is wrong. In a modern 21st-century Britain, it has to be banned. We have to bring in these changes. As I said, I have no issue with people who want to have a hack across the countryside in a controlled manner, but I have a profound problem if the outcome of that activity is the destruction of wild animals and the local environment.

My question to the Minister is a simple one. When will the Government make available parliamentary time to bring forward the necessary changes to the Hunting Act 2004 to ban trail hunting?

7.44 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) on

securing his first Adjournment debate and speaking with such knowledge and passion about this important subject. I welcome the valuable opportunity to close the debate by outlining the Government's strong commitment to animal welfare priorities, including taking action on trail hunting. I also thank all hon. Members who intervened during my hon. Friend's speech, because they showed the interest and passion there is on this subject.

The Government were elected on a mandate to introduce the most ambitious plans in a generation to improve animal welfare, and that is exactly what we will do. Banning trail hunting is only one part of that. We will also end puppy smuggling and puppy farming, ban the use of snare traps and ban the importation of hunting trophies. We are supporting the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill, which will close loopholes in the non-commercial pet travel rules that are abused by unscrupulous traders. It will also give the Government powers to prevent the supply of low-welfare pets to the United Kingdom. We will prohibit the bringing into Great Britain of puppies and kittens under six months old, dogs and cats with non-exempt mutilations such as cropped ears, and heavily pregnant dogs and cats.

We are committed to tackling low-welfare dog breeding practices to bring an end to puppy farming. As part of that, we are carefully considering the results of the post-implementation review of the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, the recommendations from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's inquiry into pet welfare and abuse, and the animal welfare committee's opinion on canine breeding practices.

As was outlined in our manifesto, we will also bring an end to the use of snare traps in England. I am aware that both the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government have brought in bans on the use of snares in recent years, and we are now considering the most effective way to deliver on that commitment. We will set out the next steps in due course. In the meantime, anyone using snares has a responsibility under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to ensure that their activities do not harm protected species or cause any unnecessary suffering.

The Government are also committed to banning the import of hunting trophies from endangered animals. The UK has a long history of championing global conservation, and the Government are carefully reviewing how to introduce effective legislation as soon as possible. We welcome the establishment of the national animal welfare panel by the all-party parliamentary group on animal welfare and look forward to working with it in the future. As a recent report from the animal sentience committee stated, there is work to do to improve compliance with animal welfare regulation. We will be considering recommendations and proposals as we work to bring that about.

I know that hon. Members in the Chamber will share my deep concern about the recent high-profile incidents of hare coursing that have been in the news. Hare coursing is an abhorrent activity that can quickly shatter rural communities' sense of safety and security. It is a serious crime, which is often carried out by organised criminal gangs. It is vital that rural communities are protected by effective policing to ensure enforcement of the law. DEFRA, alongside the Home Office, is working jointly with the National Police Chiefs' Council to

deliver an updated rural and wildlife crime strategy. This joined-up approach between Government and policing will help to ensure that the entire weight of Government is brought to bear on tackling rural and wildlife crimes.

The Government are continuing to provide support to the national wildlife crime unit alongside the national rural crime unit. Those units will receive £800,000 from the Home Office in 2025-26. DEFRA will also provide the national wildlife crime unit with a further £424,000 to help prevent and detect wildlife crime by obtaining and disseminating intelligence, undertaking analysis that highlights local or national threats, and directly assisting law enforcers in their investigations. That includes cases of cruelty to wildlife and supporting local police forces to take positive action against those who break the law through illegal fox hunting.

Let me turn to the primary focus of this debate: trail hunting. As we are aware, the Hunting Act 2004 made it an offence to hunt a wild mammal with dogs, except where it is carried out in accordance with the exemptions in the Act. Those found guilty under the Act are subject to the full force of the law. However, as many have said here today, the nature of trail hunting makes it difficult to ensure that wild mammals such as foxes are not endangered. The trail is not laid constantly but is occasionally lifted for a distance and dropped again to allow the hounds to search for the scent. Huntsmen and followers often do not know where trails have been laid and that can mean that, at times, the scents of wild animals are picked up. That makes it challenging to protect foxes, as well as other wild animals such as deer and hares.

From November 2023 to March 2024, as we have heard, the League Against Cruel Sports reported nearly 526 incidents of suspected illegal hunting and 870 incidents of hunts causing distress or nuisance. That is why the Government are committed to going further by putting in place a ban on trail hunting. My hon. Friend asked for a specific timeline. I am afraid that, at the moment, I cannot give him that, but I want to assure Members that we are working to move this forward and will deliver a thorough consultation later this year to ensure that the legislation that is brought forward is effective in practice and that its impact is understood.

I also appreciate that, as we have heard, there are people in this House who will not welcome a change in the law. I want to reassure Members here today that the Government recognise the contribution made to the rural economy by supporting professions such as farriers, vets and feed merchants. We will, of course, look closely at the impact that any changes may make. We will consult relevant stakeholders at the appropriate time and further announcements will be made in due course.

More generally, we will pull together an overarching approach to animal welfare across farmed animals, companion animals and wild animals. We have been meeting key stakeholders from each of those sectors and want to work in partnership with them on improving animal welfare. I conclude by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth for securing tonight's debate, and I very much look forward to working closely with him in future to secure progress on this very important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.50 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 1 April 2025

[GRAHAM STUART *in the Chair*]

Eating Disorder Awareness

9.30 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered eating disorder awareness.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart.

Eating disorders are among the most serious and life-threatening of all mental illnesses, but they have been overlooked and underfunded for too long. Because of this, they have one of the largest treatment gaps in modern healthcare, and we must ask why that is. In the face of overwhelming need, why are we still ignoring this crisis, especially as it is a documented fact that recovering from an eating disorder is possible, no matter how long and complex the illness has been?

In the past decade, we have seen an alarming rise in eating disorders—a trend that only worsened during the pandemic. What was already a struggling support system for those affected by eating disorders has collapsed under pressure. Too many people are waiting, too many people are failed and too many people are feeling neglected by the system. The eating disorders all-party parliamentary group, which I chair, recently published its report, “The right to health: People with eating disorders are being failed”, which highlights the increasing neglect we are seeing across eating disorder services—but that is by no means to say that those who are working in eating disorder services are not working their socks off. People with eating disorders are being told that they are not thin enough, that they are too complex, and in some situations are being moved on to palliative care and identified as treatment-resistant. That is why we are pushing for a complete reformation of eating disorder treatment alongside the development of a stand-alone eating disorder strategy.

During Prime Minister’s questions on 19 March, the Prime Minister emphasised the NHS’s goal of bringing eating disorder care closer to home. This is an important goal, but it requires equitable access to intensive community and day treatment, as highlighted in Beat’s report, “There’s no place like home”. Such services can reduce the need for costly hospital admissions and shorten stays for those who need in-patient care. However, Beat’s report shows that only one in six NHS integrated care systems in England currently offer enough intensive community and day patient treatments for both children and adults. Alongside this, it is crucial that we do not focus on only one end of the spectrum. Day services cannot always meet the needs of those with extreme malnutrition, and in-patient care is critical for many people who need high levels of physical, behavioural and psychological support.

The strain on family carers, who often lack medical expertise, must be considered too. In-patient and day patient care must be part of a well-integrated, stepped care system. If those services are not co-ordinated nationally, gaps will form in the care pathway and patients may fall through the cracks. I agree with the Government that if people are treated in a timely manner

in the community, there will be less need for costly in-patient care, but before we make any changes, we must ensure that all levels of care are adequately funded and can work in tandem to provide the best possible support.

I recently had the privilege of hearing Nicky Smith share the story of her courageous daughter, who has been in in-patient services for over a decade. Unfortunately, during her long stays, she has not always received the treatment she needs. Her current stay is now in its 21st month. For the last eight months, her team has been trying to find an alternative placement for her complex needs. Sadly, she has been rejected by every service she has applied to and now faces discharge. Nicky and her daughter acknowledge that although some in-patient units are better resourced than others, being in in-patient care has saved Nicky’s daughter’s life and continues to do so. Over the last 12 years, the community eating disorder teams provided limited, inconsistent support. That caused rapid relapse, sometimes in just a few weeks, leading to low body mass index and frequent readmissions, often to inappropriate units such as general hospitals or acute mental health wards. Ultimately, she was readmitted each time to a specialist eating disorder unit, under section 3 of the Mental Health Act 1983. That is the only way she can complete meals without the need for nasogastric feeding.

In addition to being deeply moving, this story drives home the importance of well-resourced specialist eating disorder units. We cannot cut back on those essential services and force those who are unsuited for discharge into community care. Specialist units are essential for keeping people alive, safe and supported, as they work towards recovery and reintegration into everyday life. That must continue, alongside investment in community and day-treatment programmes.

To tackle eating disorders and develop effective treatments we need to understand them fully. Worryingly, the International Alliance of Mental Health Research Funders found that eating disorders accounted for just 1% of the UK’s already severely limited mental health research funding between 2015 and 2019. That is despite people with eating disorders accounting for around 9% of the total number of people with a mental health condition.

Recent funding announcements are even more cause for concern. The Royal College of Psychiatrists found that 24 of the 42 integrated care boards planned real-terms spending cuts to children’s eating disorder services in the current financial year. That would result in real-terms cuts of well over £800,000. Those planned spending cuts come against a background of severely stretched children’s and young people’s eating disorder services: a 13% increase in referrals in the past 12 months; high thresholds to access services, resulting in more young people being in crisis; almost 800 urgent referrals still waiting for treatment at the end of December 2024; and a 30% true vacancy rate for all eating disorder consultant psychiatrist positions across England, as of March 2023. Following those troubling findings, will the Minister assure all of us here and across the country that all ICBs will invest sufficiently in those vital services in 2025-26 and beyond?

As well as providing an increase in funding, we must take a close look at measures to protect children from harmful online eating disorder content. There is growing evidence that social media is linked to an increase in

[Wera Hobhouse]

eating disorders among young people. Algorithms are showing harmful content to vulnerable people. Those include posts promoting fasting non-stop for days on end as a healthy lifestyle. There is an online trend of “thinspiration” posts, which glorify unhealthy weight loss. There have also been cases where, even after users have blocked certain accounts, they still see content that promotes eating disorders.

In research conducted by the Center for Countering Digital Hate, a fictional UK-based 13-year-old user watched a video about eating disorders for the first time. Following the video, one in four suggested videos were for harmful eating disorder content. More than half were for content relating to eating disorders or weight loss. Under the Online Safety Act 2023, YouTube will have a responsibility to protect children from primary priority content such as eating disorders. Yet, YouTube still does not appear to be taking that seriously. In fact, algorithms are pushing the content in order to increase engagement.

Harmful content viewed online can push children further into eating disorders that have a drastic effect on their health, wellbeing and life chances. From the evidence I have seen, I am concerned that, even when the provisions of the Online Safety Act 2023 come into force, the actions of those media giants may not change, which truly worries me. Social media is not the cause of eating disorders. Users who post much of this content are unwell and are not doing so maliciously, but social media can lead those who are already suffering further down the path of disordered eating. More needs to be done to hold social media companies accountable to legislation such as the Online Safety Act.

Another issue of grave concern is the need for more accurate recording of eating disorder-related deaths, and a better understanding of the factors contributing to them. As we know, eating disorders are one of the most life-threatening mental illnesses, however, all too often they are not explicitly listed on death certificates, despite being a significant factor in the person’s death. For example, someone suffering from anorexia and severe malnutrition may have their cause of death recorded as organ failure, without any mention of the underlying eating disorder. That is a crucial gap that we must address.

The APPG has heard first hand from people who have experienced the heartbreak of losing a loved one to an eating disorder. One particularly moving example is that of the Laurence Trust, a Northern Irish charity founded by Laurence’s family after his tragic death. Laurence had struggled with bulimia and depression, and eventually suffered a fatal heart attack. His mother Pam shared with the APPG that his death certificate did not list the eating disorder as a contributing factor. Instead, the cause of death was recorded as undetermined. That misclassification not only deprives families of closure, but hinders our understanding of the true scale of eating disorder-related fatalities.

To better prevent such deaths in future, we must ensure that coroners’ reports accurately reflect eating disorders as contributory factors. Only by tackling these deaths can we gain a clearer picture of the impact of eating disorders, and take meaningful steps towards prevention and improved care. Accurate recording will

raise awareness and ultimately save lives. It is high time that eating disorders are treated with the seriousness they deserve. We are all well aware of the many different parts of the NHS that require additional funding, but I have simply heard far too many harrowing stories about delays to treatment, inadequate care and premature inpatient discharge. Now is the time for change.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency of Horsham, we had a particularly upsetting case of a constituent whose daughter had significant mental health and behavioural issues that were very difficult to deal with and, as a consequence of those not being dealt with, she also developed an eating disorder. The only place they could send her to that could cope with that combination of factors was in Yorkshire—my constituency is in West Sussex. That was an extraordinary burden on the family. We need provision across the country to deal with the cases that present.

Wera Hobhouse: I totally agree. Unfortunately, there is a massive postcode lottery. Services need to improve across the country so that everybody, like my hon. Friend’s constituent, can get the treatment they need as close to home as possible, because carers are so important, and so that families can see their loved ones.

In the last year alone, more than 30,000 acute admissions for eating disorders were recorded—that is a vast number. What was already an overstretched and under-resourced support system for those affected by eating disorders has now become a national emergency. Our APPG report sadly proved these systemic failures are costing lives. It is clear we need an urgent and comprehensive overhaul of eating disorder care and treatment in this country to ensure that we do not lose our important inpatient care, and to massively improve community and day treatments. I add to what my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) said, that if eating disorders, or the underlying mental health disorders, are not prevented or cared for early enough, everything becomes so much worse further down the line.

I repeat that we must address the role social media plays in promoting eating disorders and harmful content, especially to young people. We also cannot even begin to understand the depth of this crisis without accurate data regarding eating disorder-related deaths. I hope the Government have heard what I said today, and will act fast and decisively to ensure that eating disorder sufferers finally receive the treatment and care they all deserve. I have been chair and vice-chair of the APPG on eating disorders for the last six years. That is a long, frustrating time to see get worse something that one wants to get better, so I hope that today may be the start of us turning a corner.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to speak in the debate. I will bring in an informal guide for Members: if everyone speaks for about four minutes, we can hopefully get everybody in.

9.45 am

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for her

fantastic, articulate and passionate speech, and for the work she has done, along with the rest of the all-party parliamentary group, on this very important issue.

According to Beat, at least 1.25 million people in the UK—that is one in 50 people—are living with an eating disorder. As we know, eating disorders are complex health conditions that are often misunderstood or undiagnosed, which often prevents people from reaching out for help. Even when somebody is brave enough to reach out for help, or they reach a crisis point that requires intervention, they often struggle through a complex and underfunded system that does not provide the comprehensive help they need.

As we heard, in January the eating disorders all-party parliamentary group published a stark report that stated that NHS admissions for eating disorders exceeded 30,000 for the first time in 2023-24, that eating disorder services have become worse rather than better over the past few years, and that some NHS trusts are discharging patients with a body mass index of less than 15 and even as low as 11.1. The most recent report from Beat, “There’s No Place Like Home”, found that, worse still, only one in seven NHS areas in the UK provides the recommended level of intense community and day treatment for children, young people and adults, with 6% offering that for children and young people only and 10% offering it for adults only. Those are staggering statistics but, as we know, behind them lie the real human stories, which highlight the inadequacies of the system as it stands and the heartbreak that the individuals and their families go through.

Over the years I have dealt with a number of cases. A few years ago there was a particularly harrowing case of a teenage girl whose weight had dropped so low that she was in a life-threatening crisis a number of times, but nearly every time she needed hospital admission her family were informed that no specialist beds were available. In one instance, she was offered a bed on a general paediatric ward, where staff were not trained in dealing with eating disorders. She was put on a refeeding plan, but because there were no specialist staff, she did not eat anything significant and her weight dropped even further. In another instance she was offered a bed on an adult psychiatric ward, which is a frightening place for any teenager, and in another the family were told that there were simply no beds available and that if they were really worried about her, they should just go straight to A&E.

The situation has not improved in recent years. I have a story similar to the one we heard from the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne). A local resident in Greater Manchester is in a state of crisis, but the only available bed they have been offered is in Glasgow, away from their family support system, which is essential to their long-term recovery. The Royal College of Psychiatrists is clear on the causes of the crisis. It says:

“Services are struggling to manage demand partially due to chronic staff shortages, historic underfunding and a lack of resources. They must be provided with additional funding so that they can meet the needs of patients and carers both now and in the future.”

It is certainly welcome that the Government have recently responded positively to the reports by the APPG and Beat, but I would be grateful for more clarification from the Minister on a number of recommendations—namely, on implementing a national strategy, which we

heard about from the hon. Member for Bath; on additional funding for eating disorder services to address demand; on a confidential inquiry into all eating disorder deaths; and on non-executive director oversight for adult and children’s eating disorder services.

9.49 am

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I acknowledge and thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for her long campaign on this topic, for securing this debate and for all that she has done and will probably have to continue to do on this agenda for a while. I entirely endorse the campaign and the things that need to happen that she and the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) have outlined.

Eating disorders present an utter tragedy to families and to young people. Last week I met a family in my constituency whose daughter is in the grip of anorexia. We had a long conversation about both the services available and the nature of the illness itself. I asked the simple question, “What is anorexia and where does it come from?” Despite the extent of their experience and all the reading they have done, it was a very difficult question to answer. The answer included that it is like an addiction, or has the qualities of an addiction. There is apparently a genetic component, and a link with autism. As the hon. Member for Bath suggested, there is a clear element of social contagion—her points about social media are extremely important. It strikes me that in many ways anorexia is an illness of modernity. It is a consequence of the pressures that young people and, indeed, older people can face in this very difficult world we live in. That suggests that a multiplicity of responses are appropriate.

I pay tribute not just to colleagues here, on the APPG and across the House who campaign on this issue, but to campaigners from outside Parliament, including Chelsea Roff, Hope Virgo, Agnes Ayton and others, whom I have got to know in the last couple of years. I honour their expertise and commitment.

As the hon. Member for Bath said, and as cannot be pointed out too often, eating disorders, and anorexia in particular, are treatable illnesses. The services are in absolute crisis, as we have heard, but we should never lose sight of the fact that the illnesses are treatable. There is clearly desperate confusion in the NHS between the physical and mental dimensions, particularly when it comes to the extreme acute phase of anorexia. We know it is the most dangerous mental illness in terms of the tragedy of death. There is clearly a lot to do in reconciling the mental and physical sides of our health service.

The hon. Member for Bath and I are on different sides on this, and the Minister and I have been debating it over the last month or so, but I have to acknowledge my concern about the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. Currently, there are patients in our NHS who are diagnosed with eating disorders—anorexia in particular—who are categorised as terminally ill by the system and put on a palliative care pathway, because the system decides that their condition is not in fact treatable. It is scandalous and tragic that people who have a condition that is eminently treatable are categorised as terminally ill.

My great concern is that if we were to pass that Bill, we would end up with people being diagnosed as eligible for an assisted death. It is important to acknowledge

[*Danny Kruger*]

that in other countries that have assisted dying laws, our understanding is that, in all those jurisdictions, people with anorexia have qualified for and been given an assisted death. In 100% of the cases that we know about, they passed the capacity test that we would apply here in our country. That is my great concern.

Wera Hobhouse: It is important that we stress that an eating disorder is not a terminal illness and therefore should not fall under that legislation. I know that the hon. Gentleman and I agree on that; I think we disagree on his worries about how it would be treated, practically, in the future. An eating disorder is not a terminal illness.

Danny Kruger: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I entirely agree. It is vital to stress that point, and I am sure the Minister agrees.

I agree with the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Salford that we need a complete reformation of the system—I will not repeat the points of the campaign, which I endorse. I am deeply concerned about the prospect of cuts to eating disorder services. It is a great shame that the proportion of NHS spending on mental health is declining. That is very significant.

I pay tribute to the sufferers—these amazing people who battle through this awful illness. They are mostly girls but also young men—I know a young man who is still in the grip of the condition. And I pay tribute to their families. I emphasise, as I am sure the hon. Member for Bath would, given her experience, that there is hope. We must not give up on these young people. We must absolutely provide the services that are needed. We need to get our systems and our society right.

9.55 am

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Stuart. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). When I was elected last year, I cared about eating disorders, but through her work on the APPG I have really come to understand them much more.

I pay tribute to the secretariat, Hope Virgo—it is almost insulting to describe her as the secretariat, because she is such a powerhouse and really cares about this issue. I made the mistake of doubting the ambition of the APPG but, through the hon. Member for Bath and through Hope, we have made fantastic progress. Through them, I was shocked to find out that people are entering palliative care because of eating disorders. That is a disgrace and a sign that the whole system is failing the people—largely young people—facing this disease. I hope the Minister acknowledges that that is unacceptable.

I am a Scottish MP, so I want to talk a bit about Scotland, where the situation is just as stressed as it is in England, but I will end with a slight glimmer of hope. Since I was elected last July, I have met people in Edinburgh South West who face eating disorders. I met a parent whose daughter had waited months for a consultation. They were filled with hope as the date arrived, only to find out that it was just a triaging slot to decide whether she should be referred to formal treatment months later.

I met a parent whose daughter had been admitted to hospital and was released over a few days to see whether she could cope at home. She could not, but when she was taken back after the weekend, she was told that the bed space had gone, and that left the family in absolute crisis.

I am not surprised that there is pressure on admissions. The number of people admitted in Scotland has increased substantially since 2007, and almost doubled during covid, so the system in Scotland is under real pressure. I spoke to the chief executive of my local NHS board about that, and she described the state of eating disorder treatment in the Lothians as at the absolute minimum acceptable level. I think we know what that means for many families.

I then contacted the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care—Scotland's equivalent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), if Members can imagine that—and he replied with lots of talk about frameworks, strategies and something alarming called a flexible funding stream, which did not fill me with too much hope. He outlined that the Scottish Government commissioned a review in 2020, and in 2024 created a template for eating disorder treatment that they can roll out across the country. I am slightly wary about that, because in Scotland we have lots of fantastic policies but implementation is often the issue—[*Interruption.*] I see Members nodding; they are well aware of that. Just £5 million has been allocated to the implementation of the strategy; none the less, it fills me with hope.

The eating disorder strategy must build on mental health provision for young people that is fit for purpose. In Scotland, about 10% of young people wait more than 18 weeks after referral for their first mental health appointment. The number of young people treated for mental health issues in Scotland has dropped by 15%, so there are massive waiting lists but the treatment pace is dropping. Currently, about 4,000 people are waiting for treatment. This year, this Government set aside the biggest ever settlement for Scotland, and a large amount of that money has rightly been allocated to the NHS. I really hope that some of that money trickles down to mental health provision for young people, and specifically for eating disorders.

9.59 am

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this debate and for all her work. It is important that we keep bringing attention to this important issue, because eating disorders continue to claim far too many lives and undermine the wellbeing of countless people.

As we have heard, recent statistics show the severity of the challenge. The proportion of 11 to 16-year-olds with an eating disorder rose from one in 200 in 2017 to five in 200 in 2023. Hospital admissions have doubled in the past decade, and as we know, hospital is not always the most appropriate destination. More alarmingly still, rates among 17 to 19-year-olds surged from one in 100 in 2017 to more than 12 in 100 last year.

Despite those worrying statistics, eating disorders are often viewed through a narrow lens. Conditions such as muscle dysmorphia are increasingly affecting teenagers

and are challenging the stereotype of what an eating disorder is. Muscle dysmorphia is a dangerous condition that can lead not only to disordered eating, but in some cases to the use of anabolic steroids or other performance-enhancing substances, as we are increasingly seeing.

Social media platforms play an influential role in shaping perceptions of body image and can sometimes fuel these destructive conditions. We are continually exposed to curated images of supposedly perfect physiques, with posts and videos that can glamorise unhealthy behaviours. Although social media has the potential to serve as a space for positivity and connection, we must recognise that it can also intensify body-related anxieties and push vulnerable individuals towards extreme measures. Rather than letting this content spread unchecked, it is vital to ensure that any material glorifying unhealthy lifestyles, whether that means severe calorie restriction or steroid use, is firmly curtailed, while healthy evidence-based advice is made readily available.

We must address eating disorders by looking not just at the initial health impact, but at the wider environment, and taking a holistic, preventive approach. We should support educators and parents as well as healthcare professionals in understanding how to identify early warning signs. At the same time, those responsible for digital platforms must be held to account for the environment that they create and for the potentially harmful messages that they allow to be shared. Designing algorithms to highlight balanced, medically sound advice, rather than misleading or extreme content, would be a significant step in minimising the harm and in guiding young people towards healthy lifestyle choices.

In the light of the growing impact of eating disorders and related conditions such as body dysmorphia, I urge the Government to recognise the growing threat. By combining robust health education with online protections, we can take the first step towards safeguarding the next generation from an epidemic that has already caused so much damage. We owe it to our children and young people to ensure that they can learn, socialise, grow and celebrate difference. I absolutely support my hon. Friend's call for an eating disorder strategy as the first step.

10.3 am

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this extremely important debate and for the work that she and others have done with the eating disorders all-party parliamentary group.

I have come to this debate to speak up on behalf of the many people who have suffered from eating disorders, both past and present. I confess to having a personal interest, as one of those people is my mum. Like many people who suffer from anorexia, my mum developed the disorder as a teenager; as with many people, it came from being bullied by her peers at school. I do not want to give away my mum's age—that is something that she would never forgive me for—but hon. Members will appreciate that that was a little while ago, although I believe that it has a huge impact on her even today.

I can only begin to imagine the additional pressure that young people suffer now that abuse and bullying does not end at the school gate, but extends online, with negative comments, memes and unrealistic, sometimes AI-generated body images. It has worsened a great deal

since the pandemic. Approximately 1.25 million people have some sort of eating disorder. One in eight 17 to 19-year-olds in England were reported to have had an eating disorder in 2023. Having spoken to a resident in Harlow who wishes to remain anonymous, I know that this is as much an issue in my constituency as it is anywhere else. I urge anyone who is struggling with an eating disorder in Harlow to reach out.

The service lead for eating disorders at the Essex partnership university NHS foundation trust has described eating disorders as typically developing in adolescence and early adulthood, leading to changes in a person's brain, body and behaviour. He also says that early intervention is essential in reversing these changes and improves the likelihood of a full recovery. More recently, the Royal College of Psychiatrists said that services are struggling with demand. In February this year, the Government said that NHS England were processing an update to the commissioning guidance on eating disorders. Can the Minister tell us what the recent announcements on changes to NHS England will mean for the publication of that guidance?

Once again, I thank the APPG for its work on this important issue. I particularly thank Beat for publishing its report and for publishing some really important data on eating disorders. The hon. Member for Bath spoke about the lack of data and the lack of understanding about eating disorders; I have to say that when I was researching this debate, I found that the data for my constituency of Harlow was sorely lacking.

I rarely speak in a Westminster Hall debate without mentioning young carers. This issue has an impact on them as well. I echo the valid point from the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) that support for people with eating disorders is a postcode lottery. For families who have to travel long distances, such as to Glasgow, to care for a loved one with an eating disorder, there is a huge cost. There is a disproportionate impact on those who are living in poverty and on low-income families.

I will finish by saying a massive thank you to the hon. Member for Bath for bringing forward the issue. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

10.7 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I wish you well in your first debate in your new role as Chair, Mr Stuart? It is your first debate, and I am sure you will keep us all in order. You are always in order in the Chamber, so that sets an example. I jest, of course.

I commend the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for leading today's debate. She is greatly to be commended for having spoken about the issue in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber for so many years. I am grateful to be able to contribute to the debate; as the DUP health spokesperson, I have dealt with many issues on which people who have been suffering with eating disorders have sought help and support that will benefit them in the long term. As I always do in these debates, I will give some background on the situation in Northern Ireland, which replicates what other Members have said and will say.

Eating disorders present a significant health concern that affects all age groups back home. A study has found that some 16.2% of 11 to 19-year-olds in Northern Ireland met the criteria for a probable eating disorder.

[Jim Shannon]

We are quite worried about that in Northern Ireland; I certainly am in Strangford, because it is absolutely shocking.

Between April 2022 and March 2023, the charity Beat delivered 603 helpline sessions to individuals aged 18 to 22 in Northern Ireland—a massive 225% increase, which is very worrying. Action Mental Health has revealed that between 50 and 120 people in Northern Ireland develop anorexia every year, and around 107 develop bulimia, which are worrying figures. There are approximately 100 admissions to hospital for eating disorders every year. I know that the Minister does not have responsibility for Northern Ireland, but I add that information because it shows how things are back home. I will give an example of how we have managed to overcome the problem.

There are many risk factors for eating disorders, including genetics, psychology, trauma, abuse and—a large one for young people today—social media, to which the hon. Member for Bath referred. It is important to remember that eating disorders can affect anyone, not just young people and not just women. It has been said that early intervention is essential for improving outcomes and for reducing the duration of the disorder. There is commonly a stigma around eating disorders; more often than not, people suffering with an eating disorder feel extreme shame.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the shame that sufferers sometimes feel is an issue that wider society needs to grapple with? There is often self-denial about the problem, even when others can see it. As well as having data and support, we need to show empathy to overcome the problem.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his wise words, as always. He reminds us of the pressure that is on everyone.

It is important that our schools have the tools. They need to support young people who may be suffering or on the verge of suffering with a serious eating disorder. Beat's SPOT—school professionals online training—was introduced to enhance teachers' ability to identify and respond to potential signs. There is potential for further teaching within our local schools to promote awareness of the dangers of social media and of how it is often not a positive reflection of reality. Young people do not have to look a certain way and are often unaware of the health dangers of eating disorders, which are completely distorted by social media and the internet.

Back in 2012, a constituent came to see me. I know the mum and dad very well; they both served in the Police Service of Northern Ireland. They were extremely worried about their daughter. It would be no exaggeration to say that she was probably on the point of death. The mother went to the then Health Minister in Northern Ireland, Edwin Poots; they approached me and I spoke to the Minister over here. We were able to get her transferred from Northern Ireland to St Thomas' hospital, just across Westminster bridge. Today, that young lady has been cured; she is a mother to two children; she has a business. All those things happened because of the co-ordination between Northern Ireland and the Health Minister here, so there was good news at the end.

The funding for mental health and for the services that deal directly with eating disorders must be improved to ensure that people who need it have access to behavioural therapy, nutrition education, monitoring and, in some cases, in-patient care and hospitalisation. I look to the Minister for his commitment to ensuring that those are a priority and that he will engage further with the Education Minister and the devolved nations to ensure that schools are equipped to protect young people and have the knowledge of the early signs that they may require help.

10.11 am

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meuras, Mr Stuart; thank you for your chairship. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate. I declare an interest: I am also a member of the eating disorder APPG.

As has been mentioned, recent data suggests that one in eight 17 to 19-year-olds in England have an eating disorder—a massive increase from fewer than 1% in 2017. On average, young people are now waiting for almost three and a half years to get treatment.

My relationship with anorexia began nine years ago. It is a story that I am sure resonates with many thousands of other parents the length and breadth of Britain; frankly, it is a massive part of why I became an MP. My story began when I took a phone call from a teacher at my daughter's school. She asked me to come and collect her, as she had passed out, having not eaten breakfast or dinner.

Over the next few months and years, my daughter, whose relationship with food had already become terribly distorted, unbeknown to me, was clutched by anorexia. Its claws dug deeper and deeper into her as she slipped into a desperately poorly state. She became too unwell for school, and the pressure of her exams was like a ton of bricks on her as the anorexia gave her a cruel outlet for the control—something that sits behind so much of this—that she sought in her life.

As parents, our most solemn undertaking is to protect and nurture our children. Against this terrible illness, I was utterly useless. As my daughter's illness took hold, I became more and more angry: first with her, then with others, and then with the system. It was only years later that I had to have it explained to me that that anger was actually driven by fear. I was impotent to support my daughter. Worse still, I was incapable of finding anyone else who could provide her with the care that she so desperately needed.

Here is the killer blow. The only way she could qualify for lifesaving support was if she became critically ill—so ill that she was staring death in the face. Imagine sitting at the kitchen table for hours, watching your emaciated child looking terrified at a small plate of food in front of her and hoping that she does not eat it, so she becomes so ill that she qualifies for the support that she needs. Those truly shameful thoughts are etched on my conscience and visit me every single day. They have left an indelible stain on my soul. For having those terrible thoughts, to my daughter, wherever she is, if she sees this speech, I want to say, "I'm sorry, my lamb."

Wera Hobhouse: I congratulate the hon. Member on being so brave in talking about his own experience. I, too, have a daughter who suffered from an eating

disorder; she was not quite as ill as he describes his daughter being, but I am still visited by those hours—though they were many years ago—when I was gripped by fear and anxiety. It is only by sharing these stories that we can ultimately bring all this to light, so again I thank him for being brave enough to share that.

Perran Moon: I thank the hon. Member. How could a system be so warped as to make a parent feel that way about their own child—the thing they love most, more than anything else in the world? Measuring the criticality of eating disorders through BMI is a medieval evaluation, hopelessly inadequate to the needs of the sufferer. Proper psychological assessments must be undertaken at the earliest identification of a problem, with a package of appropriate measures applied thereafter, dependent on the severity of the case.

My daughter spent two periods of six months in hospital. She recovered her health and is today working in the NHS in mental health services as a senior assistant psychologist, using her own painful experience to offer others the care and support she never had. Underinvestment has left mental health services stretched beyond capacity, and young people like my daughter become desperately unwell while sitting on waiting lists, with the cost of their recovery, both emotionally and financially, spiralling by the day.

I know the Department of Health is taking the issue incredibly seriously, but we must prioritise a rapid overhaul of the system to offer hope to young people and their families. This Government must prioritise investment into mental health and eating disorder services. Today, I ask the Minister to say to all the families going through that hellish tornado of pain, to all those angry dads, tearful mums and terrified children, “Hang in there. We will come for you. We know your pain and we will act swiftly to help you to relieve it.”

10.17 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I do not know how to follow that speech. I just want to thank the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon). I can understand how tough it was. I also put on record that we all agree that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is a star, who has been working on this throughout, and so are Hope Virgo and Dr Agnes Ayton and all the others behind the scenes.

Just to give some hope to hon. Members, we now have a Minister in place with a record of understanding these issues, and with some of the sharpest elbows in Government to get the resources, so I am confident that there will be a move forward. He is aware of the strategy. It is straightforward. There must be input into training not only for health workers, but for teaching staff and education psychologists. We had school nurses come forward with a package that was incredibly effective in raising awareness on the issues, including online safety.

We need community level support services, specialist units and family support. One of the issues raised in the briefings we have circulated from the all-party parliamentary group is the lack of family support. As has been exemplified, when a family member becomes a sufferer of these conditions, the family feel completely isolated and lack support in some of the most challenging situations any

family can face. During the discussions around this strategy, there is a need to go into the detail of family support, including the professional advice and community support they can access, to ensure that they do not become isolated.

There is also the issue of financial support. I ask the Minister to look at the consultation on disability benefits and support for people with long-term sickness conditions that is taking place now. Again, it is important that we do everything we possibly can to ensure that sufferers do not lose their benefits as a result of this review. The Government are undertaking consultations, but not on the criteria for the personal independence payment, the points-awarded system. I would be grateful if the Minister could look at that and liaise with Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions, so that sufferers do not lose the benefits support that they have. Also, some families who are receiving carer’s allowance as a result of the award of PIP to an eating disorder sufferer may be at risk of losing that benefit, but they should not be. We are not even sure what the numbers are, so we would all be extremely grateful to the Minister if he could pay attention to that issue.

Finally, the principle of the all-party group’s work has been to seek a process in Government for co-production of the strategy, in a timetabled way and with funding allocated over the life of this Government. That way, by the time we get to the next election, we can be confident that the strategy has been implemented based on the expertise of those who really know what needs to be done—the sufferers themselves and the families who support them. That process of co-production is as important even as the scale of funding that we need to achieve. Otherwise we will be wasting resources, rather than investing them effectively on the basis of what will work.

10.20 am

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) for his deeply moving and courageous speech.

As with many mental illnesses, eating disorders often present first in children and young people. Like other hon. Members, I am alarmed by the NHS England statistics that show that in 2023, 12.5% of 17 to 19-year-olds in England were living with an eating disorder. According to YoungMinds,

“Young people can use their behaviour around food and eating to try to cope with...difficult thoughts, feelings and experiences.”

YoungMinds also states:

“Over time, these kinds of thoughts and behaviours around food become very fixed and difficult to change—and may start to take over daily life.”

Early intervention for a young person struggling with an eating disorder is clearly critical if we want to support them to live a healthy, fulfilling life.

I was politicised at school by the disparities in the mental health support received by my peers, and we know that young people today are at the sharp end of the mental health crisis. I, too, have had friends who struggled with eating disorders and disordered eating, and during the general election last year I was contacted by a young woman who had waited four years for her

[Josh Dean]

first child and adolescent mental health services appointment. Sadly, that has become the norm, rather than the exception, for young people with mental illnesses.

I welcome this Government's commitment to cutting NHS waiting lists and investing in talking therapies. I also welcome the commitment this Government have made to getting mental health support into our schools and delivering a network of Young Futures hubs with trained youth workers and drop-in mental health support, so that we can address eating disorders and mental health conditions early, and support our young people.

I have a few specific questions for the Minister, and I would be grateful if he could address them in his response. First, could he set out what the Government are doing to improve the early identification of eating disorders? For example, in 2023, Place2Be called for every professional working with children and young people, including in the healthcare workforce, to be trained to identify young people with potentially impairing eating behaviours. Has the Department had considered that?

Given the huge impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of young people, could the Minister further set out what action the Government are taking to specifically support individuals who developed an eating disorder or mental health condition during that time? Finally, could the Minister set out what cross-departmental work the Government are undertaking to ensure a joined-up approach to supporting young people with eating disorders?

Those struggling with eating disorders deserve support and they need action, and we must treat eating disorders as the emergency that they represent. I was particularly moved by the words of the hon. Member for Bath, given her important work on the issue over a number of years, about the frustration of seeing things get worse, not better. I reflect on my experience as a young person going through school and watching my peers struggle with eating disorders and mental health conditions. Now I come into this place to represent my community, knowing that young people today are struggling so much more. That makes the urgency of the task even greater, so I thank the hon. Member for her work and for securing the debate.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Last but not least on the Back Benches, I call Luke Charters.

10.24 am

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this debate, and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon); he is an inspirational dad with an inspirational daughter, and we all wish his family well.

I will speak about eating disorders affecting young men and boys. We need to focus on online influencers and the impact they can have on eating disorders, so of course I must mention the TV show "Adolescence". An under-discussed theme of the series was the 13-year-old boy's concern about his own body image, driven by social media. Recent research shows that eating disorders are growing at a faster rate in young men—a concerning trend.

Over the last few years we have seen toxic influencers drive false expectations about what young men should look like, and some young boys are being diagnosed with a lesser condition called bigorexia or muscle dysmorphia. Bigorexia drives boys to engage in extreme behaviours such as excessive weightlifting for their age, steroid use and excessive dieting and supplement intakes, all in pursuit of a totally unattainable ideal.

"Gym bros" and fitness influencers are giving impressionable young men and boys a false sense of security about many products. Paediatric science is uncertain about the effects of the intake of those products in children, and there are dangerous mental health scenarios as children clamour for them. Such products are often marketed with cheap deals and attractive flavours, such as blazing berry or creatine candy.

Another issue is the lack of advertising regulation. Ever-younger children are having that content pushed their way, resulting in a detrimental impact on their lives as they chase an unrealistic body type. This week I am writing to Ofcom and the Advertising Standards Authority, requesting that they review the current guidelines for advertising creatine supplements, low-carb diets and more, all of which I believe are harmful for children.

However, we also need positive role models and influencers, particularly in those sport, who can reach the young male demographics most at risk. There should be more airtime for Gareth Southgate than for Andrew Tate.

As my son grows up, I say to him, "Being a man in modern Britain is about how you behave, not how you're built; how you express yourself, not what you eat, and how you support others, not how you suppress your emotions." Whether we are grandparents, parents, aunties, uncles or anything else, we all want to see the next generation make misogyny extinct, so I make one final request today: it would be fantastic if the Minister could meet me to discuss my campaign to stop the selling of supplements and creatine to children.

I have a second son on the way this summer, and I want my boys to grow up to be respectful of women and confident and comfortable in themselves.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): The winding-up speeches begin with Jess Brown-Fuller.

10.27 am

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing today's important debate and for her tireless work over six years as chair of the all-party group on eating disorders. She has been a consistent and compassionate advocate for better awareness, better services and better outcomes for those affected. I am also pleased to see the Minister's sharp elbows here in Westminster Hall today, as described by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

Eating disorders are among the most serious and complex mental health illnesses. As the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) pointed out, it is estimated that more than 1.2 million people across the UK are living with an eating disorder, and, tragically, eating disorders carry the highest mortality rate of any mental health condition. Instead of stepping up to meet the scale of the crisis, however, services are being cut.

The statistics are shocking: in 2023 the proportion of 11 to 16-year-olds with an eating disorder had risen fivefold from 2017, and among 17 to 19-year-olds the rate had surged from 1.8% to 12.5% over the same period.

Girls are disproportionately affected, with rates four times higher than boys, although we are seeing a concerning trend of more males suffering with eating disorders, as highlighted by the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters). As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) said, numbers across the UK have risen dramatically since the pandemic, but behind each of those numbers are young people whose lives, education and futures are being taken away from them by this illness.

Hospital admissions for eating disorders have doubled over the past decade, yet the national treatment targets set under the previous Conservative Government in 2019—for 95% of urgent cases to be seen within one week and 95% of routine cases within four—were dropped by that same Administration under the 2024-25 mental health national priorities, or success measures, and have not been reintroduced by the current Labour Government. That is a moral failure and it must be reversed. Instead, most areas in England are planning real-term cuts in eating disorder provision. As many Members have highlighted, 24 of the 42 integrated care boards across the NHS in England are projected to reduce their spending for under-18s in 2024-25 once inflation is factored in. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has warned that even current levels of funding are too low to cope with the rising demand. Cutting further will only make the crisis worse.

We must understand the true cost of inaction. Eating disorders strip people of their health, their relationships, their adolescence and, in too many cases, their lives. Still, many people are being told they are not thin enough to receive care. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) for his speech reflecting his experience, and that of parents across the UK, of waiting for a child to hit an arbitrary target on a scale that suggests that their mental health is bad enough to get the help that they so desperately need. We know that early intervention is effective. If people are not believed or not seen as ill enough, they are left to deteriorate until a crisis becomes a tragedy.

The crisis is being compounded by the influence of social media and online platforms. As the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) told us, it is a “crisis of modernity” and of the increased societal pressures on our young people. Recent research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that algorithms on platforms such as YouTube are actively recommending harmful eating disorder-related content to young users. These are not passive platforms. They are powerful tools that are shaping the mental health of our children, and they must be held to account. I do not identify as a young person any more—my children definitely do not identify me as a young person—but I see it on my algorithms. I actively seek out body-positive profiles and yet what appears on my feed is people telling me that I can lose weight in 28 days, or shape myself for summer. Our young people see this all too often and think it is the norm.

We as Liberal Democrats believe that addressing the crisis requires a bold and evidence-led strategy. That means building specialist support into the NHS, not as a niche service but as a fundamental part of mental

health care. It means embedding early intervention through mental health hubs in every community, so that young people can access help long before they reach crisis point. We are calling for mental health check-ups or a mental health MOT at key points in people’s lives, when they are most vulnerable to developing serious illnesses. We believe every school should have a dedicated mental health professional so that children can get support early and in a familiar environment, without stigma or delay.

Lastly, we must also recognise the crucial role of families. Unpaid carers, parents, siblings, partners and children are often left to navigate a fragmented and under-resourced system alone. As the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) mentioned, the Government must work with and not against carers to expand the support they need and deserve. No parent should have to fight for their child to be taken seriously. I saw that fight in my own patch of Chichester, where a mother had to leave work for two hours every day to go to her child’s school to sit in a room with them so that they were supported to eat their lunch. The school could not facilitate a member of staff to sit with that child, who was tackling a very serious eating disorder but who was desperate to stay in school.

Campaigners like Hope Virgo have done an extraordinary job of raising awareness, but it should not always fall to campaigners and grieving families to fill the gaps left by Government inaction. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Bath in calling for the exploration of an eating disorder national strategy.

This is a national crisis and it is costing lives. The Government must listen to those on the frontlines—patients, carers, clinicians and campaigners. They are not calling for sympathy. They just want action, and we owe it to them to respond.

10.34 am

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart, for your maiden appearance as Westminster Hall Chair. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate. She and I share many opinions on body image, algorithms, social media, steroid use and eating disorders. Although I am responding to the debate as spokesperson for His Majesty’s official Opposition, I am pleased to have the chance to build on the work that the hon. Member and I have enjoyed bringing forward together.

The hon. Member for Bath was right to point out that one in 50 people will suffer with an eating disorder or disordered eating. That means that we likely all know someone who suffers. It is true for people close to me, too, and I have seen what can happen both personally and professionally. It is therefore timely that the theme of Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2025 was “Eating disorders can affect anyone”. That is an important fact to recognise. Why? Because we know that eating disorders have some of the worst outcomes of any mental health diagnosis. Early intervention is key to break the cycle. Without doing so, it is devastating not only for the patient but for families and friends, the health service and, ultimately, society.

Disordered eating can take a variety of forms, from limiting the amount of food eaten, eating very large quantities of food at once, getting rid of that food

[Dr Luke Evans]

through unhealthy means—through purging, laxative misuse, fasting or excessive exercise—or a combination of all of those. That can be one reason why it is so damaging. With other medical issues such as alcohol, drugs or gambling, the aim is abstinence, but of course that simply cannot be the case in this instance: we all need to eat.

Disordered eating is not just about the compulsive element. It is far more complex than that. Drivers of control and shame are so powerful. A sufferer told me:

“Eating disorders are not about food. At least they didn’t start that way. We, the eating disordered, started by using dysfunctional eating habits and starvation to control our feelings and gain a sense of control of the world around us. This soon spiralled into a dangerous daily obsession of reaching our ultimate unattainable goal; being thin enough. For us, to be thin enough is finally to be good enough.

Every room entered, every street walked involved detailed analysis of the physiques of others, feeling pride and superiority if I was the thinnest, and earth shattering shame and disgust if I was not. Both galvanised my resolve.”

Worse still, many people who suffer with eating disorders simply do not want to get better. The disease does not want to let them get better. The quote goes on:

“My eating disorder gradually robbed me of my happiness, my relationships, my health and my sanity. The insanity is that despite all this I could not stop. I did not want to stop. I was petrified to change. Thinness had become my identity, and starved detachment was my way to cope with my feelings and my life.”

My experience is that sufferers of depression and addiction would bite your hand off for a magic bullet. Alas, the same is not the case for eating disorders, and that is the barbarity of the disease. Yet we know that catching an eating disorder earlier can make all the difference, and debates like this one can dramatically help with awareness and prevention.

Beat’s survey from December and January gathered findings on lived experience of eating disorders from 1,900 people, which showed that four in five people thought that greater public awareness would make them feel more comfortable to talk about their eating disorder, two in three would not feel comfortable talking to their teacher about the issue, two in three would not feel comfortable talking with their line manager, and two in three would not feel comfortable talking with a colleague. More needs to be done to make it feel acceptable to do so.

The covid-19 pandemic, and lockdown specifically, contributed to a surge in demand for children and young people’s eating disorder treatment. That is no surprise, given the lack of control in a lockdown. In Q1 of 2021-2022, 3,400 people were treated, compared with 1,900 people in Q1 of 2019-2020. We have seen some recent glimmers of hope from the data on waiting times for children and young people in eating disorder services. Recent data showed that between October and December 2024, 80% of urgent referrals—350 out of 433—to children’s eating disorder services were seen within one week. During the same time period, 81% of routine referrals—2,064 out of 2,251—were seen within four weeks. But more still needs to be done.

I believe that we are starting to see the fruit of the last Government’s investment, as investment in children and young people’s eating disorder services consistently rose each year from 2016, reaching £54 million in 2023-2024. This helped to expand the community eating disorder teams across the country. That was in addition to the

£79 million invested through the covid-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan to expand young people’s mental health services, which has enabled 2,000 more children to access eating disorder services.

Furthermore, I remember the Westminster Hall debate the hon. Member for Bath brought to mark Eating Disorders Awareness Week last year. I was pleased to hear the then Conservative Minister, the former Member for Pendle, Andrew Stephenson, announce an additional £3 million funding so that 24 hubs received a share of £8 million in 2024-25. That is more than double the original target of funding 10 hubs, with organisations across England benefiting.

Those were positive steps but the new Government should accelerate that momentum. In October last year, before I was a shadow Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care, I called on the then Minister, the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), to convene an expert roundtable to discuss eating disorders, given the challenges faced by Governments in tackling the issue. Although the Minister at that time did not commit to it, he stated the following:

“When we were in opposition we gave support to the then Government, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will do everything we can to support people who have eating disorders and to get the right provision and support at the right time for those people who need it.”—[*Official Report*, 10 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 191WH.]

I renew the question to the Minister today. Will he convene a cross-party roundtable of experts and campaigners? Will he also commit to a national eating disorder strategy, as requested by the APPG report?

Since taking office, the Government have consistently reaffirmed their commitment to children’s and young people’s mental health. However, progress is unclear. I would like an update from the Minister on a couple of key tangible commitments made in the Labour manifesto. First, Labour promised to recruit 8,500 new mental health staff. Will the Minister tell us how many extra mental health staff have been recruited since the Government took office, and how many will be targeted for eating disorders?

Labour’s manifesto also promised

“access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, so every young person has access to early support to address problems before they escalate.”

That builds on work by the Conservative Government to have mental health support teams in 35% of schools by the end of 2023, which was achieved, and to be across all schools by 2024. Of course, the election punctuated that. Will the Minister update us on what progress has been made on that commitment? What assurances can he provide to eating disorder services, given that spending on mental health is projected to reduce as a proportion of overall spending in 2025-26, which was announced in last week’s written statement?

Finally, I want to repeat the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, asked the Health Secretary at oral questions in February:

“Will he back Beat’s call for broader access to intensive community and day treatment for those with eating disorders—there are limited places currently—and set out a timetable in which that will be delivered?”—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 165.]

Although I was pleased to hear the Health Secretary recognise the importance of the issues, further details from the Minister would be helpful. To conclude, although there is a long road to go in preventing eating disorders and supporting those who suffer, I live in hope that

“Healing doesn’t mean the damage never existed. It means the damage no longer controls your life.”

10.43 am

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a pleasure to serve under your maiden chairship today, Mr Stuart. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate and raising this important topic. I know that, as a Member of this House and chair of the APPG on eating disorders, she has been a doughty champion for those living with eating disorders, their families and supporters. I am also grateful to other hon. Members for their valuable contributions, many of which were deeply personal and profoundly moving. I pay tribute to hon. Members for making those contributions.

I share the desire of the hon. Member for Bath to improve the lives of people affected by an eating disorder. Raising awareness of eating disorders and improving treatment services is a key priority for the Government, and a vital part of our work to improve mental health services. We know that living with an eating disorder can be utterly devastating, not just for those battling the condition but their loved ones and those who witness their struggle. We know that eating disorders can affect people of any age, gender, ethnicity or background. However, we also know that recovery is possible, and access to the right treatment and support can be lifechanging, as we have heard today.

Although record investment and progress has improved access to eating disorder services, the reality is clear: demand has surged, especially since the pandemic, outpacing the growth in capacity. We must do more to ensure that everyone who needs support can get it without delay.

Wera Hobhouse: The Minister is making a powerful point. Demand is surging, yet it seems that investment from ICBs is going to fall. How can that be possible, and how is it morally acceptable?

Stephen Kinnock: National funding has increased over the years, as the hon. Lady will know. The question is whether that funding channels through to ICBs. The Government’s view is that ICBs are best placed to make decisions as close as possible to the communities that they serve and to target and, if necessary, reallocate funding accordingly. As a Government, we are constantly trying to get the balance right between setting frameworks and targets and ensuring that those are being met, while also ensuring that ICBs are not being micromanaged from the centre. We do not think it is right that people sitting in Whitehall or Westminster micromanage what is going on at a local level. We are absolutely clear that every ICB must meet its targets, while also being clear that it is up to the ICB to take decisions as close as possible to the communities that they serve.

Sadly, we have seen the prevalence of eating disorders in children and young people sharply increase since 2017. In 2023, NHS England published follow-up results to its survey on the mental health of children and young

people. The report found that the prevalence of eating disorders in 17 to 19-year-olds rose from 0.8% in 2017 to 12.5% in 2023. Unfortunately, we are also seeing the prevalence of eating disorders rising among adults. The 2019 health survey for England showed that 16% of adults over 16 screened positive for a possible eating disorder. The figures do not mean that the individual had a confirmed eating disorder, but they present a worrying situation that we must address by continuing to promote both awareness and early intervention.

The surge in demand has inevitably made meeting our waiting time targets more challenging. However, our services and clinicians, backed by new funding, are supporting more people than ever before. These services are changing and saving lives. As hon. Members will know, we have kept in place the access and waiting time standard for children and young people who are referred with eating disorder issues. This sets a 95% target for children with urgent cases to begin treatment within one week, and for children with routine cases to start treatment within four weeks.

Figures released last month show that although the number of referrals and demand for services has begun to stabilise during the past year, the number of children entering treatment reached a record high of 2,954 last quarter. This shows that the extra funding is enabling services to begin to meet the extra pressures caused by the pandemic. Similarly, the number of children entering treatment within the target time has reached a record high. Of the 2,954 children entering treatment last quarter, 2,414 were able to access that treatment within the one-week urgent target or the four-week routine target—a rate 81.7%. That is the highest figure recorded since NHS England began collecting that data in 2021.

However, we recognise that there is still far more to be done to ensure that patients with eating disorders can access treatment at the right time. The hon. Member for Bath rightly focused the debate on the importance of awareness. Raising awareness of eating disorders is the first step towards early intervention to prevent the devastating impacts that eating disorders can have on people’s lives. To support this, NHS England is currently refreshing guidance on children and young people’s eating disorders.

The refreshed guidance will highlight the importance of awareness and early recognition of eating disorders in schools, colleges, primary care and broader children and young people’s mental health services. A number of colleagues asked when that guidance will be published; my officials are working hard with specialists on that, and it will be published later this year.

The existing mental health support teams, supplemented by the specialist mental health professionals that we will be providing access to in every school in England, will support school staff to raise awareness and identify children and young people showing potential early signs of an eating disorder. Through these interventions, children and young people can be given early support and help to address problems before they escalate.

Community-based early support hubs for children and young people aged 11 to 25 also play a key role in providing early support for young people’s mental health and wellbeing. Early support hubs provide open-access drop-in mental health services that assist children and young people with a range of issues, such as eating disorders, at an early stage without the need for a referral or doctor’s appointment.

[Stephen Kinnock]

I am pleased to say that this year, thousands more young people will receive support with their mental health, thanks to £7 million of new funding for 24 existing community-based early support hubs to expand their current offer. That funding will deliver 10,000 more interventions such as group sessions, counselling therapies and specialist support over the next 12 months. Looking forward, we are also committed to rolling out open-access young futures hubs in communities. This national network is expected to bring local services together and deliver support for young people facing mental health challenges, including support for those with eating disorders.

We should also be concerned about the widespread availability of harmful online material that promotes eating disorders, suicide and self-harm, which can easily be accessed by people who may be vulnerable. We have been clear that the Government's priority is the effective implementation of the Online Safety Act, so that those who use social media, especially children, can benefit from its wide-reaching protections as soon as possible. Our focus is on keeping young people safe while they benefit from the latest technology. By the summer, robust new protections for children will be enforced through the Act to protect them from harmful content and ensure that they have an age-appropriate experience online.

It is right to focus on awareness and early intervention, but we know that some people simply need access to high-quality treatment in order to get better. A key priority of this Government is therefore to expand community-based services to treat eating disorders, so that people can be treated earlier and closer to home. NHS England is working to increase the capacity of community-based eating disorder services. By improving care in the community, the NHS can improve outcomes and recovery, reduce rates of relapse, prevent children's eating disorders continuing into adulthood and, if admission is required as a last resort, reduce the length of time that people have to stay in hospital.

I am pleased to say that funding for children and young people's eating disorder services has increased, rising from £46.7 million in 2017-18 to a planned £101 million in 2024-25. With this extra funding, we can focus on enhancing the capacity of community eating disorder teams across the country. We are also committed to providing an extra 8,500 new mental health workers across child and adult mental health services to cut waiting times and ensure that people can access treatment and support earlier. Through the 10-year health plan, this Government will overhaul the NHS and ensure that those with mental health needs, including those living with eating disorders, are given the support that they need.

I share the concern of the hon. Member for Bath about accurate recording of deaths to understand the extent to which eating disorders and other factors have caused or contributed to deaths. This matter is being explored with the national medical examiner for England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics and the Coroners' Society of England and Wales.

Hon. Members also raised concerns about BMI. It is not right that any individual is being refused treatment based on their weight or BMI alone. National guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

is clear that single measures such as BMI or duration of illness should not be used to determine whether to offer treatment for an eating disorder. I am ready to receive any representations from colleagues who have evidence that that is happening, and I would be happy to raise that with the appropriate channels.

John McDonnell: I raised with the Minister the reform of disability benefits, which will have implications for sufferers and their carers. My understanding is that the universal credit health element is to be denied to those under the age of 22. In addition, it will be halved and then frozen, and the PIP criteria are changing. As I said, I simply want the Minister to check with his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions what the implications are for sufferers of these conditions and their carers. We need specific action to protect them in the consultation; otherwise, people who are already suffering financially as a result of such conditions—particularly when the whole family supports the sufferer—will be further harmed.

Stephen Kinnock: I will follow up on those points and write to the right hon. Gentleman. As he knows, the Green Paper is out for consultation. Although the Government have made decisions about some measures, we are consulting and engaging on a number of others. It is very important that we see all the issues that he raises in the round, and I will follow them up with colleagues, particularly in the DWP, and write to him.

I again thank the hon. Member for Bath for raising this important issue and for her tireless efforts in this House to raise awareness of eating disorders. I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful and moving contributions on behalf of their constituents and, in some cases, their loved ones. One person afflicted by an eating disorder is one too many, so the Government will strain every sinew to combat this profoundly debilitating condition.

10.56 am

Wera Hobhouse: First, thank you Mr Stuart for chairing your first Westminster Hall debate so well; you kept us in order and on time. I thank all Members for their wide-ranging, thoughtful and moving contributions. Sharing our stories can raise awareness, but it takes a lot of courage. As we have heard, eating disorders do not discriminate on the basis of age, gender or background. Although they disproportionately affect young women, it is important that we keep an eye on young men—we heard very good contributions on that.

Eating disorders are a national emergency—I reiterate that even after hearing the Minister's response. Although some things might be improving, as I said at the beginning, I have been here for six years and, on the whole, things have got worse, not better.

We have heard about the Minister's sharp elbows, and we have heard that there is hope. This debate is an annual event, and I hope that next year I am able to come here and say that the situation has got better, not worse. We owe it to all sufferers. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) said, it is a moral outrage that we have continued to let the situation deteriorate. It has to get better. Next year, I want to be able to say that we have made real progress. The APPG and I want to work with the Government to make the

situation better. Campaigners are there to help; we need to work together. I hope that it does not get worse for another year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered eating disorder awareness.

Access to Dentistry: Somerset

11 am

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I will call Anna Sabine to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister—that is often forgotten. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to dentistry in Somerset.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. My grandfather might not have been a toolmaker, but he was dentist. He worked near Slough, and as a child I loved visits to the dentist because we got to play in the electric chair and dissolve bright pink mouthwash tablets in plastic cups, and we always got a Lambrusco and lemonade afterwards, which was of course entirely appropriate.

That regularity of dental treatment means that, at 45, I am lucky enough to have no fillings at all, and I am not particularly scared of dentists. Many children growing up today in my constituency of Frome and East Somerset are not so lucky: one in five children in Somerset has tooth decay by the time they are five. Although we know that difficulty in accessing an NHS dentist is a nationwide challenge, data reveals that the south-west is particularly neglected. The most recent Office for National Statistics data shows that it has the worst access problems of all regions in England, with 99% of people without a dentist failing to secure the NHS treatment they needed in the last month.

Furthermore, only 32% of adults in Somerset saw an NHS dentist in the two years to June 2024, which is much lower than the national average of 40%. The picture for children in Somerset is equally shocking: only 42% were seen by a dentist in the year to June 2024, well below the national average of 55%, and way below pre-covid averages.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): My hon. Friend's point about the south-west is absolutely right. Some 217 visits per 100,000 to accident and emergency are for dental-related issues, compared with 154 for the next highest region. So the south-west is a real outlier, and not in a good way. Does my hon. Friend think that that is having a detrimental effect on hospitals and A&E?

Anna Sabine: Yes, I absolutely agree, and I will talk later about how poor access to dentistry impacts other parts of the health sector.

Yesterday, I was lucky enough to visit a local primary school in Frome, along with a friend who is a dentist. We started with an assembly about the many superpowers the mouth has, in which I was delighted to be given the leading role of saliva. Then we moved on to taking two reception classes through a supervised toothbrushing session. The school is part of the Government's supervised toothbrushing scheme, an initiative I welcome. Sadly, of the 30 children in the room, 10 did not have consent for the toothbrushing—some because forms had not been

[Anna Sabine]

returned, and some because there was a parental objection to the activity or to the use of fluoride. To ensure that they did not feel left out, my dentist friend played a game where they counted their teeth instead. She said that, based on what she could see from that game, that group of 10 children had 50 obviously decayed teeth, and one child had at least 10 teeth that would need to be removed under general anaesthetic. Those children were four and five years old. Although the scheme overall is to be welcomed, I hope consideration will be given to having an opt-out rather than an opt-in, to ensure that the children who most need the scheme are actually benefiting.

Somerset used to be well above the national average on access to dentistry. As recently as 2018, 55% of adults were seen by an NHS dentist in a two-year period, compared with 50% nationally.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate, and she is right to highlight the issue affecting children but also adults. Does she agree that the news that some pensioners are carrying out their own barbaric dentistry should send shockwaves about the affordability and accessibility of NHS dentistry? Does she also agree that there is a need for immediate intervention in each trust area, whether in Somerset, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland?

Anna Sabine: Yes, there are certainly some horror stories about tooth removal. It does beg the question as to why NHS dental services in Somerset and the wider south-west have deteriorated in the last seven years. It seems to me that that is symptomatic of a lack of investment in the region, in terms of not only health and social care but withdrawn levelling-up funding and diverted rural England prosperity funding.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): My hon. Friend talks about the need for investment, and much of that will be in training new dentists. Does she therefore agree that it is baffling that a brand-new dental school at the University of East Anglia could be delayed by a full year because the Treasury refuses to release funding until a month after the deadline for UCAS course listings, and that another year's delay is unacceptable for her constituents in Somerset and mine in North Norfolk?

Anna Sabine: That sounds very frustrating, particularly when, as we are seeing, there are so many crises in our dental services.

A constituent emailed me in February to say that four weeks previously her husband, who is in his late forties, had had a massive stroke. He collapsed into the sink in the kitchen and hit his face on the taps, breaking his teeth. He was discharged from hospital on 14 February, but cannot speak, is partially paralysed, needs continuing care, rehabilitation and adjustment, and is suffering dental pain. He is not registered with an NHS dentist and cannot afford private dental care, so they called 111 and, after four calls, drove to an appointment where the dentist was given just 30 minutes to treat only one tooth, which he had to remove. My constituents will have to call 111 again to get treatment for the next tooth. The husband needs dentures, is on soft foods and is still in pain. As that case shows, and as my hon.

Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) pointed out, a failure to invest now in dentistry not only causes more pain for the individual, but gets more expensive and adds to pressure on other areas of the NHS in the longer term.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): A constituent in Mansfield, who works in a local NHS practice, wrote to me to suggest that dental therapists, hygienists and other professionals could be utilised a lot more effectively to deal with capacity. Does the hon. Member agree that to free up more appointments, such as those her constituent needs, and to ensure that people get better and more timely care overall, it would be better to utilise the skills of other people in the dental profession, in the south-west and throughout the UK?

Anna Sabine: Yes. That is one of the things I have talked about extensively—or rather I have been talked at extensively by my dentist friend about the way in which we manage staff and who does which bits of work in dentistry. It is really important that the Government engage with the British Dental Association about that to understand some of the complexity of how the contracts are working at the moment and what could be improved.

If we do not deal with people's dental pain, we get more pressure on the NHS in the long term: cancers go undiagnosed, and people are forced to use 111 or A&E. It cannot make sense that people have to use 111 to organise their dentistry if they do not have an NHS dentist. People are simply being pushed around the system instead of being treated and instead of illness being prevented. I absolutely understand and appreciate the financial situation the Government inherited from the Conservative Administration, but I am concerned that not enough is happening fast enough on dentistry.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The previous Government tried to tackle this problem by offering golden hellos to dentists in rural areas to encourage the uptake of NHS dentistry, but in reality that did not work. What we really need the new Government to do is to advance at pace with renegotiating the dental contract. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the new Government can get on with that rapidly, we might see an improvement in rural areas and, indeed, the whole UK?

Anna Sabine: I do agree. Golden hellos are all very well, but the challenge—as I hear from dentists in my constituency—is that once dentists leave NHS dentistry and go into the private sector, which more and more are doing, nothing will ever get them back again. That is a loss that we do not recover from.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine) for securing this important debate. Does she agree that Somerset benefits enormously from Bridgwater & Taunton College, where nurses and midwives are trained? Will she join me in asking the Minister whether dental hygienists, and in due course dental students from the University of Bristol Dental Hospital, might also train there and provide a service to the whole of Somerset?

Anna Sabine: I was not actually aware that we had those facilities there, and I am happy to know more about them. Yes, I would certainly join any call for more dentistry skills to be brought into the Somerset area.

The Health Secretary made a point of meeting the British Dental Association on his first day in office, but the BDA tells me that there has been little follow-up. Could the Minister confirm whether the Government have now entered into formal negotiations to reform the dental contract? If they have not, when do they expect to do so? I am sure the Minister will rightly highlight in his reply the roll-out of the 700,000 extra urgent appointments.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): The 700,000 new urgent dental appointments cover only a third of the need for urgent care, and are being funded by simply recycling underspends in an already stretched budget. Does my hon. Friend agree that what we actually need in Somerset is new money to invest in NHS dentistry, as promised at the election?

Anna Sabine: I totally agree. I was coming on to say something similar: the roll-out of the 700,000 extra urgent appointments is a positive start, but it covers less than a third of the need for urgent care appointments. The Government must put more money into dentistry so that people can get the help they need.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): The area around Minehead, in my constituency, has the smallest number of dentists in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that the area is both rural and coastal presents a unique set of problems because of deprivation and neglect, which means that the dental desert there is felt very acutely indeed?

Anna Sabine: I absolutely agree. Given the time limitations, I have not come on to discuss the challenges that places such as Somerset face due to their rurality, including the difficulties in getting to services, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The BDA's asks and policy proposals are clear: the Government must invest in dental services and secure a long-term funding settlement for NHS dentistry that keeps pace with demand, and budgets allocated to NHS dentistry must be ringfenced. The BDA also agrees with the Liberal Democrats that NHS dental practices must be offered relief on the national insurance contributions rise announced in the most recent Budget. The Lib Dems believe that such relief should be extended to the wider health and social care sector, including GP surgeries, care homes, hospitals and pharmacies.

Parents and families across Somerset are crying out for extra support with accessing affordable and reliable dentistry, and access to an NHS dentist should be guaranteed to everyone needing urgent and emergency care. To catch up with the national average, Somerset needs extra investment, and it needs it quickly.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the dental desert that is Somerset and to how keenly it is felt. Does she agree that many families have to choose between putting food on the table and paying to take their child to the dentist? We can expose the reality of the dental desert through more research, which I will be carrying out in Taunton and Wellington very soon.

Anna Sabine: We can absolutely carry out more research, and I urge Members to go and talk to their local school teachers. Yesterday, I found that teachers in Frome have a very clear understanding of why certain children are not going to the dentist. Sometimes that might be down to parental choice, and it is really important that we understand why that is happening as well as why there is not sufficient access to dentistry.

To catch up with the national average, Somerset needs extra investment, and it needs it quickly. We need more NHS practices that are financially viable and exempt from the NICs rise, and we need more dentists who are remunerated and well treated in their work. We cannot let Somerset slip further and further away from the national average, which is already a low bar, and create more pain, misery and costs for generations to come.

11.13 am

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship again this morning, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine) for securing this important debate on access to dentistry in Somerset.

We know that there are challenges in accessing NHS dentistry across the country, with some areas facing acute challenges. Put simply, too many people are struggling to find an NHS appointment. In the two years up to June 2024, just 31% of adults were seen by an NHS dentist in Somerset's integrated care board, which covers the hon. Lady's constituency, compared with 40% across England. In the year to June 2024, only 42% of children in Somerset ICB were seen by an NHS dentist, compared with 56% across England. The fact that the number of adults and children in Somerset ICB accessing an NHS dentist is even lower than the already struggling rate across England is concerning.

Somerset is facing significant workforce pressures, and there are not enough NHS dentists available to do the job. As of March 2024, there were 334 vacancies in the south-west for full-time equivalent NHS general dentists. The 29% vacancy rate is the highest of any English region.

It is a shocking fact that the No. 1 reason for children aged five to nine being admitted to hospital in our country is to have their teeth removed, with a primary diagnosis of tooth decay. It is a truly Dickensian state of affairs.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): We have heard about the dental desert in Somerset. Stockton in my constituency has also been branded a dental desert. I welcome the 4,000 new appointments that the Government have granted for Stockton North and the surrounding area. However, given the urgency that he has described, particularly for children's health, I ask the Minister whether the Government are taking any measures to accelerate the roll-out of those appointments.

Stephen Kinnock: We will absolutely ensure that integrated care boards are delivering to the target they have been set. If we see any evidence of slowing down or backsliding, we will certainly intervene to ensure that appointments are accelerated. I would also be more than happy to receive representations from my hon. Friend if he feels that performance in his ICB is not delivering.

[Stephen Kinnock]

The state of NHS dentistry in Somerset, and the nation as a whole, is simply unacceptable and it has to change.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I welcome the action that the Government are taking to fix our dentistry crisis. In my constituency, only two dental practices accept adult patients, and vast swathes of the rural areas have no practice at all. Will the Minister set out how the Government's plans will support my constituents to access the dental care that they need?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend puts her finger on the fundamental problem, which is that the NHS dental contract simply does not incentivise dentists to do NHS work. That is the fundamental reason why we are in this bizarre situation where demand for NHS dentistry is going through the roof, yet there is a consistent underspend in the NHS contract. It is a classic example of a false economy. The Conservatives thought they were being terribly clever by structuring a contract in a way they thought would deliver value for money, but in fact, it simply failed to incentivise dentists to do NHS work and they drifted more and more into purely private sector work. That is the very definition of a false economy.

Anna Sabine: I just draw the Minister back to my specific point about whether he can confirm that he is having discussions with the British Dental Association. The association agrees that the contract is wrong, and it wants to speak urgently to the Government about how it can be amended.

Stephen Kinnock: I am pleased to confirm that I am meeting the BDA in the coming days. The negotiations are moving forward. There is no perfect payment system, and there is a need to get the balance right between ensuring that we have a viable system that does not deliver underspends in the NHS contract, which is absurd, and that we deliver as much NHS dentistry as possible to the communities and people who need it. That is a complex process and it will take some time. The Government have taken intermediate measures, such as the 700,000 urgent appointments and supervised toothbrushing, which we will work on at pace over the course of the coming financial year while also working on a radical overhaul of the contract.

By the time I came into government, the Nuffield Trust was describing the state of NHS dentistry as "at its most perilous point in its 75-year history."

As of March 2024, there are over 36,000 dentists registered with the General Dental Council in England, yet there are fewer than 11,000 full-time equivalent dentists working in the NHS.

Sir Ashley Fox: I understand that at least 100 Ukrainian dentists in this country are unable to practise with the NHS because they are waiting to take examinations. Can the Minister do anything to expedite their ability to practise in this country?

Stephen Kinnock: I absolutely agree. Two big things need to happen. First, the General Dental Council needs to do more to get more exams in place for those very well-qualified dentists. Of course, they have to pass the British exam. We cannot have people practising in

Britain who have not passed that exam, but the availability of the exam has been too limited and that needs to change. The other thing is provisional registration. Some work can be done to expedite the registration of an international dentist, but more needs to be done on that as well. I will meet the head of the General Dental Council shortly, and I will convey those messages to him.

Recruitment and retention issues are not limited to dentists; there are difficulties across the whole dental team, including dental nurses, hygienists, therapists and technicians. In the past five years, there has been a 15% reduction in courses of dental treatment being delivered across England, and 28% of adults in England—a staggering 13 million people—have an unmet need for NHS dentistry. As a result, we hear too many stories about people who are unable to access the care they need, and some horrific accounts of DIY dentistry that nobody should have to resort to.

Dentistry rightly receives a lot of attention because of its dismal state, and I am grateful to the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee for their interest in the previous Government's dentistry recovery plan. It is evident that the plan did not go far enough.

Richard Foord: The Minister talks about the previous Government's dental recovery plan, and part of that was to impose a firmer ringfence on dentistry spending so that there was not an underspend that was reallocated elsewhere. The previous Government tasked NHS England with collecting monthly returns from ICBs to establish spending as against the allocation. Now that NHS England is being scrapped, will we still see that monitoring of ICBs to ensure that the spending matches the allocation?

Stephen Kinnock: I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the ringfence, but in a way, ringfencing addresses the symptoms, rather than the cause, of the problem. The fundamental cause of the problem is the amateurish way in which the previous Government set up the NHS dentistry contract so that it does not incentivise dentists to do NHS work. That is what leads them to drift off. In a sense, we can do all the ringfencing we like, but if the workforce that we need is not incentivised to do the work that we need them to do, we are going to have that problem, because they vote with their feet. That is why the radical overhaul of the dentistry contract is the key point. However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that once we have got a contract that works, we must ensure that every penny that is committed to NHS dentistry is spent on NHS dentistry, rather than the absurd situation that we have now, in which we constantly have underspends in the NHS dentistry contract while demand for NHS dentistry goes through the roof. It is a truly bizarre situation.

I return to the subject of the dentistry recovery plan. The new patient premium, introduced by the previous Government, aimed to increase the number of new patients seen, but that has not happened. In reality, since the introduction of the previous Government's plan, there has been a 3% reduction in the number of treatments delivered to new patients. It is clear to this Government that stronger action is needed, and we are prepared to act to stop the decay.

Rachel Gilmour: In Minehead, in my constituency, a dental surgery responded to the ICB in October and said that it would provide 12 NHS appointments a week

for people who currently do not have a dentist. I have chased that ICB on five occasions, but we still do not have a result. That is 48 appointments a month that my constituents are missing out on. Would the Minister please agree to write a letter, on my constituents' behalf, to the Somerset ICB?

Stephen Kinnock: We are very keen to ensure that targets are being met, and the ICB clearly needs to ensure that that is happening, so I would be happy to do that. Perhaps the hon. Lady could write to me so that we can get all the facts on the table, then we can take action accordingly.

We will make the difficult decisions necessary to restore NHS dentistry to ensure that patients can access the care that they need, at the best value for taxpayers. Since coming into office, we have focused on implementing new initiatives and stopping the things that are not working. From today, 1 April 2025, the public will see 700,000 additional urgent dental appointments being delivered every year, as we promised in our manifesto. The urgent appointments will be available to NHS patients who are experiencing painful oral health issues, such as infections, abscesses, or cracked or broken teeth. Somerset integrated care board has been asked to deliver 13,498 of those appointments. That is 13,498 more chances for the hon. Lady's constituents to get the urgent dental support that they need, every single year.

Across the south-west region, there will be 106,776 extra appointments—that is more chances for patients in urgent need of care. However, to have a truly effective dental system, we cannot focus just on those who are already in pain; we must have a system that prioritises prevention. A cornerstone of the Government's mission to prevent ill health is supporting children to live healthier lives. We want to ease the strain on the NHS and create the healthiest generation of children ever. As colleagues will be aware, too many children are growing up with tooth decay, which is largely preventable. That is why we have invested £11.4 million to roll out a national supervised toothbrushing programme for three to five-year-olds that will reach up to 600,000 children a year in the most deprived areas of England.

The latest data shows that the rate of tooth decay for five-year-olds in Somerset is 20.2%, which is lower than the 22.4% for England but still far too high. We are taking a targeted approach to support those in the most deprived areas, which is why we have been able to allocate £50,000 of funding to Somerset to support around 2,000 three to five-year-olds. Our additional funding will help to secure and expand supervised toothbrushing based on local needs. This is extra resourcing to support targeted work by the local authority and its partners.

I am determined that we will reduce inequalities faced by children living in the most deprived areas, helping them to brush their teeth daily in the nurseries and schools that they attend. Alongside this, we have launched an innovative partnership with Colgate-Palmolive, which is donating more than 23 million toothbrushes and toothpastes over the next five years. This is of incredible value for the taxpayer, and a fantastic example of how business and Government can work in partnership for the public good.

A strong dentistry system needs a strong workforce. We recognise the incredible work that dentists and dental professionals do, and we know that the current

NHS dentistry contract is not fit for purpose. We need to build an NHS system that works for patients and their dentists. A central part of our 10-year plan will be workforce, and we will ensure that we train and provide the staff, technology and infrastructure that the NHS needs to care for patients across our communities. We will publish a refreshed long-term workforce plan to deliver the transformed health service that we will build over the next decade, and to treat patients on time again.

We know that some areas face challenges in recruiting and retaining the dental workforce they need. The golden hello scheme offers 240 dentists a £20,000 joining bonus to work in underserved areas of the country for three years. The recruitment process is well under way, with posts being filled by dentists in these areas as we speak.

Sir Ashley Fox: I ask the Minister to reply to my suggestion that students from the University of Bristol Dental Hospital do some part of their training in Somerset, where they can benefit the population.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. It is an excellent idea, and it is something that we have seen in other parts of the country. If he would care to write to me about that, I would be more than happy to take that issue up.

In the south-west, the golden hello scheme has already led to seven new dentists on the ground delivering NHS dentistry to patients, and a further six have been recruited and are waiting to start their roles. With 64 live adverts across the region, we are confident that the numbers will grow. And, for the first time in more than a decade, we have increased payments for practices training a foundation dentist. We will not stand idly by while the fundamental reforms to the contract are developed. Where we identify opportunities, we will make improvements to the current system when those can increase access and incentivise the workforce to deliver more NHS care.

I am pleased that work to improve access has also been taking place at the local level, and that Somerset ICB is opening three new practices in Wellington, Crewkerne and Chard. Those services will provide much-needed additional capacity in Somerset. The ICB is committed to delivering additional urgent dental appointments and increasing access for residents facing the greatest health inequalities—although I do recognise what the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) said about the concerns that she raised.

Fixing our broken dentistry system will not be easy, but I want to reaffirm our commitment to making bold changes and tough decisions to stop the decay and to rebuild the foundations of NHS dentistry. This is an immense challenge—there are no quick fixes and no easy answers—but people in Somerset and across the country deserve better access to dental care, and we are determined to make that a reality. We are committed to rebuilding a system that puts patients first, ensuring that no one is left without the dental care that they need.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Royal British Legion

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Before I call Dr Luke Evans to move the motion, it will be apparent to everyone that a good number of speakers want to participate. To give fair warning to all Back-Bench speakers, I am afraid we will have to limit you to about two and a half minutes. We will start doing so informally, and if everyone can keep to that, we should be able to get everyone in. If not, we will have to impose a formal time limit.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of the Royal British Legion.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy.

The poppy stands tall, with bended head—the perfect personification of honouring our dead. Every year, one of the most iconic flowers is seen and respected across this nation, and it is down to the work of the Royal British Legion. Today, I am honoured and humbled to mark the contributions of the RBL to this country in Parliament. Looking at *Hansard* for the last time the Royal British Legion was a topic of debate, I had to scroll back to 2013, so it is a pleasure to bring this debate to the House ahead of the 80th anniversary of VE Day, which is just around the corner. I will talk about the role of the RBL nationally, but I particularly want to reflect on my local branch, as its story exemplifies and typifies what is happening up and down the nation to support our veterans and influence people's heads and hearts. It was Thornton Wilder who said:

“The greatest tribute to the dead is not grief, but gratitude”, and the RBL embodies that sentiment perfectly.

At this point, I must declare an interest: I have the great privilege to be the president of the Hinckley branch of the Royal British Legion. That is particularly fitting, as I took up the role in 2023, which was the centenary of the formation of Hinckley and district's Royal British Legion. Who was the first president in 1923? It was the then Conservative and Unionist Member for Bosworth and my predecessor but three, Major Thomas Guy Paget.

In 2023, I talked in the main Chamber about the RBL and the work of local volunteers around Remembrance Sunday, and highlighted the particular work of Elaine Ward, who received a medal from the RBL to commemorate her five decades of service in fundraising for the poppy appeal. I asked the then Leader of the House if we could have a debate on the volunteers who support the RBL. It took some time, but I am pleased to say that we finally secured today's debate.

I know that Members present will be aware of the fantastic contributions that the RBL makes to all our communities nationally, but it would be remiss of me not to talk about some of its great work and the history behind it. The Royal British Legion is the largest armed forces charity in the UK. It was formed in May 1921 to care for those who were suffering as a result of their service during the first world war, and brought together

four national organisations for ex-servicemen. Of those who came back from the first world war, 1.75 million suffered some form of disability, and half of them were permanently disabled, so the legion had important work to do right from its beginning. The first ever poppy appeal was held in 1921 and raised over £106,000, and it is a proud tradition that carries on 100 years later.

In 1971, the Queen declared that the organisation would be granted royal status and become the Royal British Legion, and the charity now has 180,000 members and 110,000 volunteers. In the past year alone, the RBL has awarded over £18 million-worth of grants, helping thousands of veterans and families through the cost of living crisis. It has provided expert financial guidance, legal representation and essential aid during hardship, securing £39 million in war pension awards.

Beyond financial support, the RBL is a lifeline for wellbeing. The Battle Back Centre in Shropshire has empowered hundreds of veterans through recovery programmes, and its six homes, including specialist dementia services, ensure dignity and comfort for those who have served. Community is at the heart of the RBL's mission. Whether it is through independent living services, telephone buddies for the lonely or the 96 global branches that support service personnel worldwide, the RBL is always there.

The RBL's unwavering commitment reminds us that we owe our veterans more than gratitude; we owe them action. Possibly the greatest action that the RBL facilitates is that of a nation remembering. Remembrance is the active process of keeping the past alive in our present. It is so important, now more than ever, that we continue to educate the next generation about the first and second world wars, and the incredible sacrifices made by so many to ensure our freedoms today. Why? As the last surviving veterans of the second world war become fewer and fewer—only a few weeks ago the last surviving battle of Britain pilot, John “Paddy” Hemingway, passed away—we must not let that knowledge of the impacts of war fade away. Future generations must be reminded; as the famous quote says, “Lest we forget.”

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate. Does he agree that it is imperative at this stage, as that generation is unfortunately dying off, that the younger generation, particularly in schools, are told of the immense sacrifice that that previous generation made and the freedoms that we all owe to people like them?

Dr Evans: The hon. Member is spot-on; it is pivotal to ensure that the story is continued all the way through, not only in our nation but across the world. He leads me nicely on to my next point, because the Royal British Legion education programme, which will bring stories from the second world war into classrooms using educational resources and digital capsules of VE Day stories, is under creation. The RBL is honouring the sacrifices of those who came before us while ensuring that their legacy shapes our future. Of course, it is not just world wars that we need to continue to remember but more recent conflicts, too: Korea; the Falklands; Northern Ireland; Bosnia and Kosovo; and the Gulf deployments in place like Iraq and, of course, Afghanistan.

Nationally, the RBL's impact is undeniable—distinct, poignant, respectful and powerful—but an organisation is only as strong as the sum of its parts, so I turn to the Royal British Legion branches in Hinckley and Bosworth. I am privileged to have the following RBL branches in my constituency: Barwell and Earl Shilton; Burbage; Market Bosworth; Ashby-de-la-Zouch; and Ibstock.

The Hinckley branch is branch No. 96, being the 96th legion to be created since the Royal British Legion was formed in 1921. I know that it is continually active and proactive today, and is managed by some fantastic volunteers, not least the chairman, Lloyd Bagshaw, who is sitting in the Public Gallery today. He is ably supported by Lee Bushill, the vice chair; Mick Nolan, the treasurer; Kiah Brown, the secretary; Ian Walker and Troy Phillips, who are both standard bearers; Dave England, the parade marshal; Lew Snooks, the deputy parade marshal; and the aforementioned Elaine Ward, who is the poppy appeal organiser.

The Hinckley branch has organised numerous public events to commemorate key anniversaries from the Falklands to Korea and D-day. A key focus of the branch's three-year plan is tackling social isolation, which affects veterans of all ages and is often linked to mental health concerns. The branch's initiatives include visiting care homes to run accessible activities, participation in coffee mornings and breakfasts for veterans, teaching in schools, and providing support to bereaved families. Families may also request the branch's standard bearers to attend services and pay homage to the fallen and to veterans. I can only imagine what that must mean to the families affected; it is a powerful demonstration of the community spirit that exists among the armed forces. Fundraising remains vital and the branch's poppy appeal consistently raises over £40,000 annually. That is a significant total, which shows the perpetual gratitude and benevolent support of the district's community.

In summing up the contributions of my local RBL branch, I will quote Lloyd Bagshaw himself:

"The fundamental keystone to the foundation of these success falls at the feet of the small cohort of passionate volunteers that assist the Branch in all its activities; primarily during the Poppy Appeal period each year. Many of these volunteer fund raisers are not even Legion Members, they merely have the desire and wish to support the appeal. Without such support and enthusiasm from the community, the Branch and indeed the Legion as an organisation, could not survive. The breadth of my gratitude and sincere thanks to these men and women have no limit."

Lloyd asked me to single out one particular member of the branch, Mr Ian Walker, who he described as having: "a passion and commitment to the branch that goes above and beyond."

Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to do exactly that.

Now, it is said that

"A superior man is modest in his speech, but exceeds in his actions"—

and none more so than the current chairman of Hinckley branch, Lloyd Bagshaw. Other members of the branch tell me that

"typically, of Lloyd, he has omitted, what we all consider to be, a primary nomination—himself."

Several years ago, the branch was facing an uncertain future. Membership had dwindled, activities were scarce and survival was in doubt. Seven years ago, Lloyd joined and saw not the challenges but potential, and without

hesitation he took action. With more than 40 years of service in the Royal British Legion, Lloyd was elected chairman unopposed—a testament to the trust placed in him. From day one, he worked tirelessly to restore connections, rebuild relationships and revitalise the branch. His efforts strengthened ties with the Royal Naval Association, St Mary's church and the local council, creating a support network that transformed the organisation.

Today, the branch is thriving. Events are planned, awareness is high and the community presence is firmly established—all thanks to Lloyd's leadership. His dedication even uncovered a forgotten milestone, the branch's centenary, in 2023. Most telling of all, membership has more than doubled under his stewardship, now proudly standing at 87. In the words of one branch member,

"Simply put, we are only here today due to his hard work, selflessness, commitment and enthusiasm."

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this debate. He is absolutely right that branches are at the heart of the Royal British Legion, but so are the clubs. A number of clubs in my constituency, especially the Hindhead club in Beacon Hill, are under significant financial pressure due to increasing costs—not least, I am afraid, because the Royal British Legion is the landlord and is trying to put up the rent. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be great if the Royal British Legion nationally and the Government came together to preserve the clubs as well as the branches?

Dr Evans: The service contribution in the community is really important. The role an MP can play, as my hon. Friend no doubt does, is to pull everyone together to have these discussions and see whether a solution can be found. That veteran support is what we all crave in our constituencies, and I am pleased to see him championing his club today.

Turning to the national future and support for our veterans, I was pleased and proud of the last Government's support for veterans. To give a brief overview, the Office for Veterans' Affairs was set up in 2019 and the former Prime Minister appointed a Minister for Veterans' Affairs to his Cabinet to report to him directly, with the aim of taking on the challenges faced by our nation's veterans. Further work by the previous Government included a veterans' strategy action plan, trauma network and health innovation fund. Therefore, it would be great to hear from the Minister today what steps the current Government are taking to build on the progress made by the previous Government to support the legion's current priorities.

Those include: strengthening the armed forces covenant duty to include UK and devolved Governments and to cover all policy matters; ensuring that all public bodies ask individuals whether they or immediate family members have served in HM armed forces; ensuring that military compensation is never treated as an income source by means tests for welfare benefit; introducing a national protocol to provide consistent access to public services for armed forces' families, including increased special educational needs and disabilities support for service children; and removing barriers for families of non-UK service personnel to stay in the UK, waiving fees for indefinite leave to remain and the minimum income requirement. Perhaps the Minister could supply reflections on those issues, as the RBL has raised them specifically.

[Dr Luke Evans]

Time is short; this speech is long. I thought it apt to close this speech simply by reflecting on what happens on the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour. There are times when no words can do justice; silence is the only response that speaks the loudest—felt, felt but not forgotten.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I am very grateful to the hon. Member. I remind everyone to continue to stand if they wish to contribute and that, if they stick to two and half minutes, we will try to get everybody in.

2.44 pm

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for his thoughtful contribution. I put on the record my thanks to my local Royal British Legion branch in Lower Stratton, and to Pallbearer Jeff, who is an amazing guy.

I want to talk about why the Royal British Legion is important, as opposed to what it does. I am a proud veteran, as an ex-member of the armed forces in 1st Battalion the Rifles. One of the things that comes to mind when I think about what the Royal British Legion does is building a sense of community. I am not saying that people do not understand unless they have been in the military, but it is a job like no other, and it really becomes part of you. One of the saddest days of my life was when I was leaving, driving out of Beachley barracks, and knowing that I was not going to have that sense of community and belonging again. It was really quite emotional.

Until I visited my local branch, I did not really pick up on the fact that people do not necessarily have that community and that outreach in a place where they can go and talk to other veterans. The Royal British Legion does that fantastically. We see people leave the armed forces and lose their sense of purpose, their ability, their person and their identity. It is so important that they have a place where they can gather together.

I am short on time, so I will have to cut down my speech. I thank all the people out there who are putting this together. Day in, day out they are out there looking after the veterans, raising money, offering support with housing and being a friendly ear for people to talk to. I thank everyone in the Royal British Legion for all that they do. I am really looking forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, because I know he is working so hard on championing veterans. I cannot think of anyone better placed to be doing that, to be honest, because he gets it. I thank all Members for being here and I look forward to hearing their contributions.

2.46 pm

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. We gather today to recognise an organisation that exemplifies the values of service, sacrifice and solidarity—principles that are timeless yet often overlooked in our fast-paced world. The Royal British Legion stands as a testimony to those principles, and I wholeheartedly endorse its mission and work.

We owe a profound debt of gratitude to the men and women of our British armed forces, who courageously step towards danger while others step away. Providing them with essential assistance is not merely our duty: it should be our priority. The transition to civilian life poses significant challenges that affect their physical health, mental wellbeing and career prospects. The Royal British Legion offers critical support to address these challenges, honouring the dignity and respect that our British heroes rightfully deserve.

Sadly, too many families face the void left by the ultimate sacrifice, and many support loved ones dealing with lifelong physical and mental health traumas. It is our solemn duty to remember, and the Royal British Legion ensures that that duty is fulfilled. From poppy appeals to war memorials and remembrance events, it safeguards our promise that these sacrifices will not be forgotten.

Yet there is more we can do. It is imperative that we strengthen the armed forces covenant, to ensure that all devolved Governments of the United Kingdom are united in support. Public bodies must maintain comprehensive records of those who have served, and their families, to adequately address their needs. Military compensation should rightly be exempt from means-testing for welfare benefits. We need a UK-wide protocol to ensure that veterans have proper access to public services, and that their children receive appropriate special needs and disability support. Additionally, all obstacles to non-UK service personnel staying in the UK should be removed, including by waiving fees for indefinite leave to remain and minimum income requirements. These things should be entitlements, not merely goals. We stand with the Royal British Legion in striving for this.

It is with a bit of sadness that I say that the Royal British Legion hall in Bangor, which is now a city, is set to close due to financial pressures. Will the Government look into how they could help Royal British Legion halls in future?

2.48 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing the debate, and pay tribute to the RBL volunteers and staff across the country: they offer help and support wherever and whenever it is needed, including in my South West Norfolk constituency. Every year we see them in our supermarkets and on our streets, selling millions of poppies not only to raise money but also to provide an opportunity for us all to come together and pay tribute to those who fought for our freedoms and in many cases made the ultimate sacrifice.

I was very proud last October to join the collection in my local supermarket, and I look forward to doing so again later this year. What struck me last year was how many people were coming up and speaking to me and the team about their family member, their friend or their neighbour. They wanted to talk about their service and in many cases their loss, and the RBL gave them that opportunity. I have taken part in numerous charity collections in the past, but never have I experienced so many people not only give money but linger and want to talk and engage. It was a wonderful experience not only talking about loss and grief but very much talking about pride. I encourage anyone who has not done so to take part in an RBL collection. It is a wonderful experience.

The Thetford branch of the RBL in my constituency was one of the first in the whole of the UK to be constituted, back in 1921, and as Mayor of Thetford in 2016 I was very proud to oversee the rededication of the standards and support other local RBL activities. Sadly, like so many organisations, our local RBL in Thetford has fallen on tougher times, and has a limited number of volunteers, but the support is as crucial now as it ever was. I look forward to continuing to support the RBL in my new role as a Member of Parliament. That is necessary because in South West Norfolk, as in other constituencies, we have many military families, including those based at RAF Marham and RAF Feltwell, but also nearby at Honington, Mildenhall and Lakenheath. I look forward to supporting the RBL in the years to come so that it can continue its crucial work.

2.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for his commitment to our veterans and the armed forces. It is a real pleasure to see the Minister in his place: the hon. and gallant Member is well known for his service in uniform, but also for his commitment to veterans. We thank him for that and look forward to hearing his contribution later.

The Royal British Legion in Northern Ireland may be small, given its population of 1.9 million, but the heart of the veterans and the fundraisers is massive. That is why the small membership in Northern Ireland raises more than its share of the funds raised in the United Kingdom by the British Legion. Some £40 million was raised and Northern Ireland raised £1.3 million, so in proportion to our size we give, by a large percentage, more to the British Army, the Navy and the Royal Air Force through the British Legion and through the poppy appeal than most other areas of the United Kingdom.

The Royal British Legion describes itself as being “at the heart of a national network looking after our Armed Forces community.”

It provides recovery and rehabilitation services, and expert advice and guidance, to service personnel and their families, as well as campaigning

“to improve the lives of everyone in the Armed Forces community and make sure their voice is heard.”

I should have declared an interest: I am a member of the Royal British Legion Millisle branch, and I served in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Artillery for some 14.5 years as a part-time member. The Royal British Legion clubs in Comber, Newtownards, Ballywalter and Millisle are greatly used by society and community groups and residents associations to carry out training and host events. The legion is a place of solace and of understanding, and a place where people can be signposted to help and support.

It is essential that the Royal British Legion continues to operate in communities throughout this United Kingdom, and to do so it needs more than Government thanks: it needs support. The Royal British Legion issued in a statement in Belfast saying that it is under immense pressure to help veterans with their mental health. It cited the statistic that over the past three years the legion has seen a 44% increase in veterans presenting with complex and mental health needs. I know for a fact that that is a real and valid concern.

Although we have few world war veterans—in the Greyabbey branch that I was in, they are all away now; there was only me left, and I have transferred to the Millisle branch—we have veterans from the Falklands, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq and Northern Ireland, after a 30-year terrorist campaign. They all deserve our thanks and our respect. More importantly, all are deserving of our support, which must begin with an enhancement of help from the Government, as we acknowledge the proven toll of service on mental health. It is no longer a taboo subject, and if we are happy to talk about it, it follows that we are happy to act on it. I know that when the Minister responds, none of us here will be found wanting. I congratulate him.

2.54 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, as always. I commend the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing this incredibly important debate. I will keep my remarks fairly short as I know that many Members want to speak.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the local RBL branches in my constituency that do such great work, including the Wark and district branch, the Corbridge and Dinnington branches, and the Ponteland and district branch. As a young member of the Cubs, I was privileged to carry the banner at the memorial service in Hexham on Remembrance Day. It is one of those moments that has stuck with me. The contribution of all the organisations that take part in commemoration of those who serve really does define constituencies across this country, and particularly many in the north-east.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): As my hon. Friend mentioned standard bearers, I want to take a moment to recognise Fergus Osborne of Guisborough RBL. He has carried the standard in Guisborough and the surrounding areas for over 30 years, so I thank him for his work. Does my hon. Friend agree that those who have served across our region deserve that kind of recognition?

Joe Morris: I am sure he did far better at carrying than I did when I was a slightly incompetent child. [Laughter.]

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is another organisation that does really important work to commemorate those who died in service to country. I visited St Andrew’s cemetery in the west of Hexham, and was really privileged to see the graves and hear the stories not only of those who had grown up in Hexham and sadly passed away, but of some members of the Free Polish forces who were treated at Hexham hospital during the second world war, as they aided the fight against fascism.

I will bring my remarks to a swift and doubtless welcome end, but before I finish I want to put on the record my thanks to the Prudhoe Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club, the Hexham Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club, Northumberland SSAFA and to Forward Assist and many other local groups throughout the community. I know that many Members present with a military background will be familiar with the Otterburn ranges in my constituency, not just, I am told, for the stellar weather and the beautiful surroundings, but for the place it will hold in many of their hearts.

2.56 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a privilege to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing this important debate.

In my constituency, the local Royal British Legion branches of Camberley, Chobham, Normandy, Pirbright and Windlesham have long played a critical role in supporting our community, which has a deep-rooted historical connection to our armed forces. I have personally had the privilege of visiting local RBL branches and taking part in some wonderful events they have organised, including remembrance services, members' receptions and poppy appeal concerts. I pay particular tribute to some of the people who make all that work possible: Rhona and Michael McCauliffe, Mike Sheard, Tim Beck, Pat Tedder, Patrick Mathé, and Peter Welford are just a handful of the dedicated individuals across the branches in my constituency who have made a remarkable difference to people's lives.

The Royal British Legion's legacy is defined not just by events and by charity efforts but by the lives it transforms. One of my constituents, whom I will refer to as Tim—that is not his real name—served multiple tours of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as undertaking numerous overseas training exercises with the British Army. Much of his service was spent in Germany, where he supported personnel and their families. Like so many who served, Tim's challenges did not end when he left the military. He was physically injured during his service in Iraq and was later diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thanks to the Royal British Legion, Tim did not have to face those physical or mental challenges alone. Through the personnel recovery centre in Sennelager in Germany and the Battle Back Centre in Shropshire, both sponsored by the Royal British Legion, Tim was given the support he needed to start rebuilding his life. Today Tim is a key member of the recently reestablished Camberley branch of the Royal British Legion, paying forward the help that he once received. He is one of many millions whose lives have been changed and saved by the RBL.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a strong speech. I am proud to represent Glastonbury and Somerton, where RNAS Yeovilton is based. The constituency is home to many veterans and serving personnel, with 11% of households being home to at least one veteran. We have many charities that support our veterans, like RBL Martock, which was formed in 1921, and we also have Service Dogs UK and organisations such as Got Your Six, all of which work to support our veterans. Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be closer collaboration between the Government and the charities that support our veterans, to ensure that no veteran is left behind?

Dr Pinkerton: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case for more closely co-ordinating the different organisations and establishing connections with the Government. Everybody would benefit as a consequence.

The RBL's work extends far beyond the bespoke care and support that it provides to wounded servicemen and women. As we have heard, its advocacy work supports an extraordinary number of military families and ensures

that their needs—from access to GP services to supporting children with special educational needs—are properly met. The RBL has a proud history and legacy spanning 104 years, and it is as relevant today as it was in 1921. With the tragic spectre of war and conflict on the horizon again, I hope it has a long and prosperous future.

3pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy.

It is our sacred duty to make sure that we never forget the brave men and women who served and gave their lives for our freedom. For over 100 years, the Royal British Legion has done fantastic work not just to continue bearing the torch of remembrance, but to ensure that our veterans and their families are given the support they need. The RBL is the beating heart of the network that looks after our armed forces community.

We all have contact with the Royal British Legion each year when we buy and proudly wear our poppies, but many people might not realise that this is just a fraction of the services it provides. It is the UK's largest armed forces charity, with 180,000 members, 110,000 volunteers and a network of partners and charities. It provides recovery and rehabilitation services, and expert advice and guidance, to service personnel and their families, as well as campaigning day in, day out to improve the lives of everyone in the armed forces community and make sure that their voice is heard.

In my community, I have repeatedly had the great honour of joining the volunteers from the Edgware branch of the Royal British Legion. All visitors to the Broadwalk shopping centre know about the hard work that such volunteers do when they give up their free time to support our servicemen and women. These volunteers represent the spirit of selflessness to which we should all aspire, and which the Royal British Legion embodies. We all share an obligation to members of our armed forces, who sacrifice so much for us.

The work that the RBL does to support veterans and their families in my constituency cannot be underestimated. There are so many amazing local volunteers who deserve our recognition—unfortunately, too many to name today—but I want to recognise one person: our local branch chair, Maxine Webber, who does so much for our community. She is the living embodiment of the sense of duty, community spirit, energy and pride that the Royal British Legion stands for.

It is right that we have taken time in our parliamentary schedule to give our thanks to the Royal British Legion and everyone who volunteers for it. In fact, it is especially fitting that we are doing so on a warm spring afternoon, when the prospect of buying our poppies in November and joining the Remembrance Day commemorations on a cold winter's morning feel so far away, because the Royal British Legion works hard all year round. It represents all that is great about our armed forces and Britain. Its work neither stops nor ends on 11 November, so it is right that we should think about the RBL, pay our thanks and support it as best we can all year round.

3.3 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy.

Mid and east Devon has a very strong veteran community. Although the national average for people who have served is 3.8%, there are 4,616 households in Honiton and Sidmouth with at least one veteran—6.3% of the population. It speaks volumes about Devon's connections to the armed forces and the duty we all feel to support not just those who have served, but their families. Often it is the family who bring a serviceperson out of the armed forces, but the family are then supported by the Royal British Legion when the veteran is looking for a place in society where they can belong.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): The duty of service is often earned by the whole family of service personnel—parents, partners and children who make sacrifices in supporting those who serve their country, who are fearful for them, and who miss time and memories. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the work of the Royal British Legion in supporting families is so vital and needs to be recognised?

Richard Foord: Absolutely. I would add that the Royal British Legion is fantastic at bringing in volunteers—people who have not served, but on whom the RBL depends. We have some really strong local branches in Cullompton, Honiton, Kilminster, Sidmouth, Sidbury and Sidford, Beer and Seaton. They are all fantastic examples of commitment from not just veterans but people who have not served. The Axminster branch, for example, has won significant awards, including the Crediton cup and the national RBL award of the Lister trophy. On 11 November last year, it was striking to see how the branch encourages veterans' stories to be passed on to children in the town and the community, which would not otherwise happen.

David Rickard of the Honiton branch was the winner of the prestigious RBL 75th anniversary cup in February, and all of Honiton was very proud. The Kilminster branch has 120 members, despite the village having only 1,000 residents. We have a thriving RBL community in Devon. I am massively grateful for all that its members do, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth for giving me the opportunity to thank them.

3.5 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in the debate with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing it.

I rise to celebrate the impact of the Royal British Legion in my constituency, which is primarily through the National Memorial Arboretum. It is a genuinely wonderful place with 150 acres of woodland and over 420 memorials. As I walk around this place, I speak to so many people who say that they have been meaning to visit some day. I cannot stress how much I advise people to make "some day" today.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I was invited to the National Memorial Arboretum for Remembrance Day. I proudly watched my hon. Friend lay a wreath, just as I was proud to lay a wreath on behalf of fallen men and women in my neighbouring constituency. As I am serving on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I am growing in awe for the men and women who serve in the forces, including those I get to meet through the Royal British Legion. Members of the Swadlincote

district branch raised over £52,000 for the poppy appeal, and they helped to commemorate the 80th anniversary of D-day. They play a huge role in the local community. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Royal British Legion plays a significant role in ensuring that we never forget the sacrifices made by those who have served?

Dave Robertson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Royal British Legion does so much through its branches and clubs. I am privileged to have a number of branches and two clubs in my constituency, and I will support them for as long as I can.

I will return to the National Memorial Arboretum, which is the country's centre of remembrance. It is a wonderful place, and I repeat that people should make "some day" today and get up there if possible. I had the opportunity a couple of weeks ago to show some of my fellow MPs around the site. Every time I go, it reminds me that remembrance is not just for November. It is so much more than wearing our poppies. It is about celebrating and reflecting on the service and sacrifice of so many who have helped to make our country what it is today.

Last week, I also hosted an event in Parliament with the UK Police Memorial Trust. The arboretum not only celebrates our armed services, but is a home to memorials to our emergency service workers, and indeed anybody who has given that service and sacrifice. The police memorial, which opened almost four years ago, pays tribute to officers who have laid down their lives keeping their communities safe. The trust has just launched a new education programme. I invite all Members to flag that to their schools, as I have, because remembrance is not just for that one month. It is for all year round, and it should be for anybody who has given that service and sacrifice.

Finally, we are about to come to the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe and victory over Japan. I particularly thank the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for supporting the Royal British Legion in leading services at the arboretum to mark those dates. Britain's victory in the second world war secured peace on our shores, but in an ever-more dangerous world, we should never take peace for granted. In ever-more dangerous times, we have much to learn from our second world war veterans. I would be delighted to join them to mark VJ Day at the National Memorial Arboretum. I wonder whether the Minister will be able to confirm which Minister will be joining us for the day.

3.9 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing this debate.

In my constituency of Spelthorne, we have 2,500 veterans, and I want to talk about one of them—Alderman Robin Sider, who was awarded the British Empire Medal. He joined the Army as a private soldier and left 40 years later as a major. Like so many military veterans, he still felt imbued with the desire to do public service and he became Spelthorne's longest serving councillor and twice its mayor. Given the reorganisation of local government, that record will never be beaten. It was the honour of my life last Friday to be a pallbearer at his funeral, and I remembered a particular story about Robin. Last November, I joined him for his stint collecting for

[Lincoln Jopp]

the Royal British Legion outside Sainsbury's in Shepperton High Street. Last year, there had been an innovation, which was the presence of a QR code. Robin was old school if nothing else and he rather liked the bragging rights that came with having collected up to £400 in his bucket. He did not know, if people used the QR reader, how much money they gave and therefore he could not brag about it. I had to rush away and run an errand for about 20 minutes. I came back and saw that the QR code had mysteriously had a poppy wreath placed over it, and as a result his bucket overflowed.

I pay tribute to the work of the Royal British Legion and all its volunteers. I am absolutely inundated with choices as to where to enjoy Remembrance Sunday. Equally, I am impressed by all the schools in Spelthorne and the way in which they keep the flame alive with our children.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the VE Day celebrations on 8 May, because I know that the Royal British Legion is still out there trying to find every last veteran who was around on VE Day to join it for those celebrations, and I urge anyone watching this debate so to do.

3.11 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I, too, begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing this important debate. Representing a Scottish constituency, I will focus my remarks on the work of Poppyscotland, which is vital for 4,000 veterans living in Glenrothes and Mid Fife. The sizeable veterans community in Fife is testament to the strong and proud connections that the kingdom has to the famous Black Watch regiment. Fife is home to nearly 10% of Scotland's 175,000-strong veterans population. We know how many veterans there are in Scotland and the distinct needs of that group in our society thanks to Poppyscotland and its successful Count Them In campaign ahead of the Scottish census in 2022. That is just one example of Poppyscotland's effective advocacy and support for the veterans community.

I was privileged to work alongside colleagues in Poppyscotland when I worked for the charity Sight Scotland Veterans, which supports veterans who are blind and partially sighted. From that experience, I learned just how invaluable the work of Poppyscotland is for our veterans. It ranges from advice services, support for veterans facing financial difficulties and advice and aids for those with mobility problems, to housing and mental health support. Poppyscotland also led the Unforgotten Forces consortium in Scotland. That brought together veterans charities, which were successfully collaborating to tackle the loneliness and isolation too often experienced by our veterans.

Every day, the Royal British Legion, Poppyscotland and so many other veterans charities throughout the United Kingdom provide fantastic support to our veterans community, but they have rightly challenged us as a country to do better by our responsibility to our armed forces and veterans communities. Therefore I very much support the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill. It has been an important and successful role in Scotland, and I think there is much to learn from the work of the commissioner there, but we can go further.

I agree very much with what the Royal British Legion has said about ensuring that the armed forces covenant is a duty not just for local authorities, but for central Government and for the devolved Administrations. Also, we could do more to provide guidance for local authorities to ensure that they know what in practice it looks like to work alongside our veterans charities to ensure that our veterans are properly supported and fully included in our communities, and that we as a nation live up to our duties and our role to ensure that we meet our responsibilities as a nation to our armed forces personnel and to our veterans.

3.14 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing the debate.

I have no doubt that the Royal British Legion is one of the most nationally significant charities in Britain today. That is not solely because of the legion's poppy appeal, which has raised millions upon millions of pounds to support the armed forces communities since 1921, nor because it leads our nation in remembrance each year, in a moment of national unity, with deeply shared gratitude, sorrow and loss that each generation continues; it is also because of its invaluable and irreplaceable support for British servicemen and women, veterans and their families.

Established in the aftermath of the first world war, the legion helped returning soldiers to find housing and work. In the century since, the legion's services to veterans have been a lifeline, and it has grown to support the entire armed forces community. Though I only served briefly, I know from friends who continued in the armed forces and from veterans in my community that the legion has made an enormous difference in their lives. As we all know, however, the Royal British Legion is more than a national charity; it is also local, and long embedded in communities across the country, including in my Bromley and Biggin Hill constituency.

The Hayes Royal British Legion branch was established over 90 years ago and is a cornerstone of the local community. While many membership organisations struggle, it boasts 900 members, who together raise thousands of pounds to support serving and ex-serving members of the British armed forces and their families. I commend the work of their president, Jo Charstone, and all the wonderful volunteers, such as Olly Pereira and Dennis Burroughs. Although the Hayes branch, like others, has grown to include those who have not served, it still provides a crucial social hub for Bromley's veterans. More than 6,600 veterans live in the London borough of Bromley—more than in any other corner of London—and the Hayes Royal British Legion branch offers Bromley's veterans a place of camaraderie every month.

I look forward to joining the branch next month for the beacon service, which they are organising to commemorate VE Day. It is a moment to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the second world war. In a powerful initiative, the Hayes branch will also ask residents living in a home that once belonged to a fallen hero to display a "Remembrance Tommy" sign in their garden bearing the name of the previous owner who never returned, so that we will always remember them.

3.17 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. As someone who has spoken many times in the House about the importance of supporting those who have served in our armed forces, I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing this important debate.

The Royal British Legion does so much behind the scenes to support our veterans. I am proud to say that we have a long-standing Mansfield branch of the Royal British Legion, established on 9 October 1921. As Mansfield's Member of Parliament, I do everything I can to support the work of the RBL locally. It is important that we all do everything we can to ensure that its activities continue in every one of our constituencies.

That is the reason I was very disappointed to hear recently that our Armed Forces Day commemorations, which that usually take place each year in Mansfield, have been cancelled. The commemoration is enjoyed by families from right across the constituency, including my own. Many have written to me to express their disappointment. I hope therefore that the local parties to this event, including Mansfield district council and the Mansfield business improvement district, will get together and resolve the matter without delay to the satisfaction of the RBL, which has written to me to express its disappointment—as, of course, have many of my constituents.

It is important that we all play our part to support our armed forces personnel, not just through the RBL, but through all the incredible charities and organisations that support our veteran communities.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): Members have rightly raised the invaluable work of their Royal British Legion local branches. I too would like to extol the virtues of RBL Cippenham in Slough and in particular the Berkshire poppy appeal, which does exceptional work in Slough. Most recently, I welcomed the RBL director general to give evidence to the Defence Committee so that we could learn more about the RBL's national work. Does my hon. Friend agree that the amazing work the RBL does makes it a lifeline for many of our serving members, veterans and their families, and it deserves our recognition and support?

Steve Yemm: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Certainly in my own constituency, I see many of those things the RBL does behind the scenes, such as helping those living at home, assisting with personal casework issues, providing grants, ensuring veterans are getting the appropriate war pensions they are entitled to, and so forth. I certainly agree it is a lifeline. Given that we all believe the RBL does great work in our communities, I certainly promise that, for as long as I am the Member of Parliament for Mansfield, I will do everything I can to ensure that in my constituency we support the RBL and we never forget.

3.21 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing this important debate, and for his work as president of the Hinckley branch of the Royal British Legion.

I too am a member of the Royal British Legion and have enjoyed many visits to local branches, including my local Brampton branch's monthly Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes break, but my constituency also hosts the Huntingdon, Sawtry, and Kimbolton district branches. Huntingdon is home to a higher proportion of veterans than most areas in the country, and therefore the work of the RBL is extremely valued—not just commemorating the service of those who have sacrificed their lives for this country, but the support it provides to our veterans every single day.

Every year, I take part in the London poppy appeal, which sees over 1,000 uniformed personnel from the Royal Navy, British Army and Royal Air Force, along with an additional 1,000 veterans, volunteers and supporters, raise over £1 million for the vital work of the Legion. Last November, it was an honour to stand next to my old regimental colleagues from the Duke of Wellington's Regiment and the Royal Yorkshire Regiment, selling poppies and reminiscing about our time served together, as well as those who did not return. As a veteran myself, I know only too well the support that is needed and the crucial role that the RBL plays. I know I speak on behalf of my fellow veterans, and indeed of those still serving, when I say this focus on our armed forces community makes us feel appreciated and valued.

However, it is important to reiterate that the work of the RBL is not limited to just selling poppies. The RBL offers lifelong support to both serving and ex-serving personnel and their families, starting from day one of service and continuing after they leave. Its assistance includes expert advice, recovery, rehabilitation and help with transitioning to civilian life. Where it cannot provide direct support, its extensive network ensures that veterans are connected with someone who can, meaning that every veteran is cared for.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank the hon. and gallant Member for giving way. Like his, my constituency has many members of the armed forces—one in 20 of my constituents have served. He talks about the services the RBL offers; does he agree that members of the armed forces develop very valuable skills, and join me in commending the Royal British Legion for the support it provides in helping members of the armed forces to move into employment in civilian life?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member. It is so important that those vital skills developed by armed forces personnel during their time in service are transitioned into the civilian workforce. I know there are many civilian employers that would welcome veterans for the skills they bring, their self-discipline and their self-starting motivation. When I transitioned from the armed forces, I had help from various organisations, and that wraparound care is very much needed.

Latterly, the RBL has also campaigned on behalf of veterans, successfully campaigning for the waiver of indefinite leave to remain fees for Commonwealth veterans. I gently nudge the Minister on expanding the scope to include their dependants, which I know is on his to-do list.

In closing, I thank all those who work tirelessly to keep the Royal British Legion in the forefront of our minds, commemorating those who have made the ultimate

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

sacrifice via the poppy appeal, advocating for our veterans and being the glue that binds together much of our veterans' community. Without them, being a veteran would be far more challenging.

3.24 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing this debate.

The financial, social and emotional support the Royal British Legion has provided veterans for over a century has been quite remarkable. Even though I have never served in the military, the camaraderie of veterans and their shared bond of looking after each other is something that I can recognise, admire and respect. As an MP, I see the same traits in organisations and charities in my constituency. Times have been incredibly hard this last decade and a half, and rallying around each other has kept people and communities going. The Wee County Veterans of Clackmannanshire is a group that show the very best of both the veterans and the wider local community. It has been my honour to attend their meetings, to share a Christmas dinner in their company and to represent them here in Parliament.

I would like to speak on a recent decision made by the RBL to withdraw the Armed Services Advice Project. ASAP was established in 2010 and has given assistance to more than 21,500 Scottish veterans. In its 14 years, the scheme helped veterans access over £20 million-worth of benefits and compensation. For many, ASAP's intervention alleviated poverty or stopped them descending into it.

As well as saving veterans from destitution, the services also saved lives. In collaboration with the Wee Country Veterans and RBLs Grangemouth, ASAP co-ordinators such as Ally Gemmell dealt with struggles that many veterans were wrestling with. Isolation, homelessness, adapting to civilian life, grinding penury and suicidal thoughts were commonplace in the daily conversations that Ally would have.

For RBL to axe the scheme was a mistake. ASAP, and the lifesaving individual relationships it created, have been replaced by a call centre service that will have to help veterans who are in extreme distress. RBL called it remodelling the service—but what that really meant was cuts. I would appreciate it if the Minister could engage with RBL regarding potential reinstatement of ASAP, because our veterans deserve much better than to be victims of decisions that leave them more vulnerable.

3.26 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for bringing forward this debate. It is an honour to speak about the invaluable contributions of the Royal British Legion—an organisation that has tirelessly supported veterans, serving personnel and their families for more than a century.

I want to highlight three specific areas where the Legion's impact has been profound. First, in Northern Ireland, the Royal British Legion has played a critical role in supporting veterans and their families, particularly

those affected by the troubles. Our region's unique history means that many veterans have faced significant challenges, including post-service adjustment, mental health struggles and financial hardship. Today's date is a poignant one: it is the anniversary of the formation of the Ulster Defence Regiment, on 1 April 1970, and of the Irish Guards, on 1 April 1900.

Secondly, the Royal British Legion Republic of Ireland, holds a special place in the history of the British Legion, despite historical complexities. Originally established in 1925 by Irish world war one veterans, it provides crucial assistance to Irish citizens who have served in our British armed forces. Its presence in the Republic ensures that veterans receive access to support and also to remembrance services. Indeed, the late Group Captain John "Paddy" Hemingway DFC, who passed away on St Patrick's day and was the last of "the few", was born in Dublin in 1919 and returned to live there in 1969. He was fondly remembered by his comrades in the Royal British Legion Republic of Ireland.

Finally, I pay tribute to, and highlight, the contribution of those branches in my constituency of South Antrim—the Antrim, Ballyclare, Carnmoney/Glengormley and Randalstown branches, and the Crumlin branch, which unfortunately closed recently. Those branches have not only provided welfare support to veterans and their families, but been instrumental in fostering that community spirit through remembrance events and fundraising activities. Their dedication to preserving the memory of those who have served, and ensuring that today's veterans receive the support that they deserve, is truly commendable. Those local branches continue to be a pillar of strength and unity, and our local Randalstown branch is due to celebrate its 100th anniversary on Sunday 22 June with a drumhead service.

The Royal British Legion's contribution extends far beyond financial aid. It offers dignity, recognition and unwavering support to those who have served, whether in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, or within their local branches across this country. Its work remains vital and I believe it is our duty to support and champion its efforts, ensuring that the sacrifices of our servicemen and women are never forgotten.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. We have three speakers left. I ask you to limit yourselves to three minutes each, and then, with the forbearance of the Front Bench speakers, we will get everybody in.

3.29 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing the debate. In Portsmouth, the home of the Royal Navy, we know all too well the sacrifices made by our service personnel past and present. Our city has been at the heart of British naval history for centuries, and with that comes a deep understanding of the cost of service and the importance of remembrance every day.

The Royal British Legion has been a steadfast supporter of the armed forces community, providing vital assistance to veterans, service personnel and their families. It has been a lifeline for thousands who have struggled with the physical, mental and financial burdens of service.

Whether through cost of living grants, debt advice or war pension support, the legion has ensured that those who have served our country are not left behind.

I take this opportunity to give a special shout-out to Terry and Denise Bryant, and all the poppy sellers in Pompey. I am honoured to have sold poppies alongside them, and I am pleased to have hosted a thank-you breakfast for them and veterans in December—I was honoured that the Defence Minister in the other place joined us.

Portsmouth is not just a city of naval history, but a city of service, with thousands of veterans and active personnel calling it home, and the work of the RBL is vital across our community. However, the Minister will be aware that challenges remain. The Government must uphold the principles of the armed forces covenant and ensure that it works in modern times. It has sat on a shelf for far too long, meaning that our service personnel and veterans have been let down for many years.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that all councils must follow the lead of Hertfordshire county council, which was one of the first to launch an armed forces covenant?

Amanda Martin: I agree 100%.

It is important that public bodies routinely identify veterans to ensure that they receive the support they need. Veterans deserve proper housing, adequate welfare support, and fair and timely treatment when it comes to military compensation. It is vital that, as Members of Parliament, our doors are always open to our veterans and service personnel. Our service families, including those of non-UK personnel who serve alongside our forces, should not face unnecessary barriers when settling in the UK.

In Portsmouth, we are proud of our naval heritage, but pride alone does not provide for our veterans. That is why we must continue to support the Royal British Legion in its mission. I urge the Government to continue listening to the voices of the armed service community, and to ensure that we follow through on the commitments we have made.

Finally, I thank those in Portsmouth who remember the sacrifices of those who serve and served—not just on Remembrance Day but every day—and the role that our Royal British Legion plays alongside our community.

3.32 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing the debate.

For over a century, the RBL has been a pillar of support for our armed forces community, serving those who have served us and ensuring that no one is left behind. The work of the RBL is deeply personal to my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter. Our Uttoxeter branch was established back in 1927, and has long been a source of camaraderie, support and remembrance in our local community. In Burton, veterans such as Carlton Wilkin, formerly of the Mercian Regiment, dress immaculately for every civic occasion and organise our poppy appeal. I look forward to joining them again in poppy selling later this year.

The poppy appeal is not just about raising funds—my constituents are always very generous—but about honouring those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. It is a testament to the unwavering commitment of RBL volunteers, who dedicate their time to making a real difference to other people's lives. I grew up in a generation that remembers the news showing Union flag-draped coffins being unloaded and paraded through Wootton Bassett every day. That always left a strong impression on me, and the RBL was always at the heart of giving our heroes the send-off they deserve.

Beyond the poppy appeal, I echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson). I have the honour of having the National Memorial Arboretum just outside my constituency. Every time I visit, I discover something new, whether a new memorial or a chance to reflect. I encourage everybody to take up my hon. Friend's offer.

I commend the Government for their recent commitment of £3.5 million to support military veterans who face homelessness. As many hon. Members have said, we must go further by ensuring that the armed forces covenant is enshrined in law. The Royal British Legion embodies the very best of our nation of service, sacrifice and solidarity. We owe it our gratitude, but most importantly we owe it our continued support and action. I will always wear my poppy with pride and honour the service of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom.

3.34 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The Royal British Legion has stood as a pillar of support for our armed forces community for over a century. I am proud to have two RBL branches in my constituency, and their local impact is deeply felt.

The Crowthorne branch, which celebrates its 103rd anniversary this year, continues to thrive with a 600-strong membership today. The branch and its club are an important pillar of the Crowthorne community, hosting dances, quizzes and special commemorations, as well as having an active women's section. It is also an incredible fundraiser for the poppy appeal. Last year alone, it raised almost £40,000. I was very pleased to visit the club on Remembrance Day last year.

Meanwhile, in Bracknell, we recently celebrated the return of our RBL branch to full status after years as a community-supported branch. I understand that is virtually unheard of and has not been achieved for many years. That rare success demonstrates the dedication of local members, who now have a permanent home at the Bracknell bowling and social club.

I recently joined the Bracknell branch for its regular breakfast club, and it was great to see members of all ages, including a former Gurkha and his young family. It also does critical work in supporting its members, particularly with mental health. One success story is that of Jack Baron, who agreed to my sharing his story today. Jack was an existing committee member who came to RBL Bracknell for assistance and was referred to Op Courage, a free NHS mental health service for the armed forces community, and I am delighted to say that it was able to support him.

The RBL is a national treasure, but it is our responsibility to ensure that it is supported in its mission to serve those who have served us. That is why I am so proud to stand here today and offer my support for my local RBL branches.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank all Members for their self-discipline and co-operation, which allowed me to call everyone who wanted to contribute. We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, and we begin with the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.36 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Thank you for your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing this debate. As defence spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, a veteran of the Royal Military Police and someone who has worked closely with the Royal British Legion in my community, I warmly welcome this discussion.

The Royal British Legion makes a significant contribution, both locally and nationally. Its crucial work supports veterans, advocates for their rights and promotes remembrance. I am proud that the RBL and the Liberal Democrats share many values, such as fair treatment for veterans, mental health support and ensuring that the armed forces covenant is properly upheld.

The work of the RBL is vital. Those who have served put their lives on the line to protect the freedoms and values we cherish, and their sacrifices do not end when they leave the forces. Many veterans and service families face ongoing challenges, from physical and mental health struggles to difficulties transitioning back into civilian life. As the UK's largest armed forces charity, the RBL has 180,000 members, 110,000 volunteers and a broad network of partners and charities. It is essential that, as MPs, we continue to support its work.

The RBL has played a fundamental role in fostering the UK's strong culture of remembrance. It launched the first poppy appeal in 1921, selling 9 million poppies and raising £106,000 to support veterans of the great war with health and housing. Over a century later, the poppy appeal remains a cornerstone of remembrance, raising funds for financial aid, healthcare support and transition services for veterans. The local footprint of the Royal British Legion across the country and overseas provides a tried and tested structure to help us all play our part in supporting the armed forces community every day. That is even more important now, as our serving personnel deploy on operations and prepare for an uncertain future. The RBL is both a pillar of support for the armed forces community and a guardian of our national memory.

On a personal note, I was proud to take part in the RBL's cycle challenge in November, in which I was the fastest female MP. I was happy to see the number of MPs who eagerly took part in that challenge to support the RBL, and many of them are here today. Perhaps less well known, but no less important, is the role that the RBL plays in our local communities. In my county of Surrey, I have seen just how well the RBL helps to mobilise support across the community.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): In my constituency of Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, the RBL's integration within the local authority is massively important because it is the voice of the people it represents, and their warmth, passion, consideration and expertise. Does the hon. Lady agree that co-operation with local authorities in providing services around housing and financial management, as well as emotional management, is massively important?

Helen Maguire: Yes. It is absolutely vital, and I will come on to that point in a moment.

As I was saying, the RBL does a lot, from sharing a moment of reflection while commemorating the 80th anniversary of VE Day on 8 May this year by lighting the beacon on Epsom Downs to organising the Remembrance Sunday parade each year.

My local Epsom and Ewell branch raised over £79,000 during the 2024 poppy appeal, the highest amount raised by any Surrey branch and the most the Epsom and Ewell branch has ever raised. I extend my thanks and gratitude to the organiser, Amy Johnson, and to all the amazing volunteers who stood for hours collecting donations—I was proud to be a volunteer myself. However, there is a national shortage of volunteers like Amy, so I encourage everyone to donate their time.

My local branch runs a monthly veterans community hub, offering ex-servicemen and women a place for community and companionship. This initiative has been a lifeline for over 30 veterans, many of whom had felt isolated before attending. I have been delighted to meet so many wonderful individuals and to hear stories about their time in the armed forces. One woman who stands out is Mildred, who is 101 and was in the Special Operations Executive in Italy, running messages to and from the resistance on her bike—she spent her 21st birthday in a cave with other resistance fighters. I was honoured to celebrate her 100th birthday with her at the veterans hub.

The group, which is led by the incredible Barb Warwick and so many volunteers, has also taken veterans on trips, including a visit to the D-Day Story Museum in Portsmouth, and it gets them to participate in activities such as archery and model-making. The group is extremely grateful to 135 Geographic Squadron Royal Engineers and Major Quintin Locke for allowing it to use the Army Reserve centre free of charge.

It is inspiring to see communities come together to support the RBL's work, but we must do more to ensure that veterans receive a fair deal. Branches such as Epsom and Ewell, which have worked closely with borough councils, are anxious about the transition to unitary local government. We must ensure that RBL branches continue to have opportunities to work with devolved Governments under the new system.

Branches also struggle with membership, despite the presence of many veterans, as many veterans are unaware of the support available to them. GPs are now pledged to support veterans in any way they can as part of the military covenant, and it is vital that they are equipped with the resources to connect veterans to the RBL and other resources.

Additionally, the RBL is keen to break the misconception that it primarily serves veterans from world war one and world war two. It actively supports veterans from conflicts such as those in the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I noted when I spent time with the RBL in Tunbridge Wells that there has been an age shift, and that it is the old and the bold who are manning the barricades, as I am sure that many of us have seen that in our local branches. Will my hon. Friend join me in urging the Minister and the Government to connect service leavers—people of our generation, as my hon. Friend and I served at the same time—and the RBL in the areas where they are going to live?

Helen Maguire: Absolutely. I totally agree with my hon. Friend, and his point could be considered in the resettlement schemes for people leaving the armed forces.

The RBL is involved in a number of campaigns to improve the lives of all members and veterans of the armed forces, but it needs our help here in Westminster. We can start by backing the RBL's "Credit Their Service" campaign to stop military compensation being treated as income in the means-testing of welfare benefits, which causes veterans and their families to lose out on thousands of pounds a year. Compensation awarded by the Government for service-related injuries should not be treated differently from civil compensation awarded by the courts. The current practice violates the armed forces covenant, and it is time for change.

Another pressing issue is the impact of welfare reforms on disabled veterans. With one in five working-age veterans living with a disability, the proposed welfare changes risk making it harder for them to claim essential support. And narrower eligibility criteria for personal independence payment and changes to universal credit could negatively affect veterans with service-related conditions.

Additionally, delaying access to incapacity benefit until the age of 22 could disproportionately harm young veterans, particularly early service leavers and those who are medically discharged. Upon leaving the armed forces, many veterans struggle with complex mental health issues. It is unacceptable that those who served our country and are left suffering with depression, anxiety or PTSD receive inadequate support. The new Government must do more to assist these brave men and women by providing regular mental health check-ups and ensuring timely access to professional help.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to improving the recording of veterans' physical and mental health outcomes, including waiting times for treatment. We must also continue to combat the stigma surrounding mental health, so that veterans feel able to seek the support they need.

For over a century, the RBL has supported serving and former service personnel and their families. However, despite these efforts, more than half of veterans have faced mental health challenges and 60% hesitate to seek support due to stigma. Organisations such as the RBL play a vital role in reducing such stigma by fostering connections between veterans of different generations who have shared experiences.

The failure to provide a fair deal for the armed forces is not just morally wrong; it also affects recruitment and retention, leaving our country less secure. At a time when our national security is increasingly under threat, we must remember the sacrifices made in military service. I am proud of the Royal British Legion's contributions, both in Epsom and Ewell and across the country. We must stand with the RBL as it continues to support those who have sacrificed so much for us, and I hope that all Members here today will join me in signing up to become a member of the Royal British Legion.

3.44 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. In a debate that is really in itself a tribute to the RBL, I begin with a number of tributes, in particular to all colleagues who have spoken today. We have seen the House at its best

with a strong cross-party consensus, commemorating our veterans as well as paying tribute to all those who work for the RBL for the brilliant work they do for our veterans.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans). He is a GP, an MP and, we have learnt today, the honorary president of the Royal British Legion Hinckley branch. He has done them proud. I think he has named all the key people and the key players; I am sure they will all be getting a hard copy of *Hansard* in the post to commemorate the debate. As he said, the RBL's local work is the manifestation of a brilliant effort, which our constituents feel at the coalface.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for mentioning the National Memorial Arboretum. It is an incredible place. He asked which Minister will be there this year. I cannot help him there, but I can tell him who it was last year: I had that great privilege. He may know that in the central area of commemoration there is an arrow slit that, should it be sunny in Staffordshire, the sun shines through at 11 am.

Dave Robertson: It is always sunny in Staffordshire!

James Cartlidge: I am pleased to say it was when I was there. It shone through at 11 am, and it was quite wonderful to behold—a very spiritual moment indeed, just as we said those magic words, so I am grateful to the hon. Member.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for mentioning Poppy Day. I very much enjoyed that day alongside the legion and our team, both as a Minister and a shadow Minister. I did not have the privilege of serving in the military, but I did run my own business, and I would like to think that the sales approach when I was there was quite robust and direct in approaching members of the public and that we achieved some pretty healthy sales outcomes.

On the matter of the competitive spirit, I, like the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), took part in the RBL static cycling challenge. It was the day I was renewed as shadow Defence Secretary, from interim to what one might call enduring—who knows? I did the challenge alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), and I am pleased to say I just pipped him to the post. It highlights what a key part of our lives in Parliament the RBL is.

As has been said, the RBL offers a wide range of services, both locally and nationally, from care homes to debt advice. In government, we did much to support veterans, and we are very proud of that. As has been said, we gave veterans a voice at the Cabinet table, which was particularly passionately embodied by Johnny Mercer. We also had Op Courage to support highly targeted mental health services for veterans. I remind colleagues that we also implemented an employer's national insurance cut for veterans, and I hope the Minister will confirm that that will remain in place. As I understand it, it has only been confirmed until 2026, so that would be good to know.

The most important point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth made—I hope he gets a couple of minutes at the end to respond—was

[James Cartlidge]

about how we continue this great festival of remembrance as the generation that served in the second world war passes from us. We have just mourned the passing of the last person who served in the battle of Britain—the last of “the Few”, as we say. We must keep that flame alive. I agree with the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), who said it was all about education. I hope the Minister will confirm that the attempt to keep the flame of remembrance alive will be at the heart of his work with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport when they bring forward the details of how we will mark VE Day and VJ Day.

As has been said, this is about recruitment and how the public are inculcated with a sense of belief in the armed forces, so that they support the taxpayers’ money that has to go to them. A lot more will have to be done because of the situation the world is in; there is huge consensus on that point. Finally, as I have not had a chance to do so to date, I thank the Minister for his letter on the Clonoe case. I hope we will continue to work together to stand up for our veterans.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Member will not mind me namechecking Portadown, Banbridge, Donaghcloney and Lurgan and Brownlow in my constituency, which are exemplary in how they support veterans and their families, particularly those from Northern Ireland who served during the IRA terror campaign and were a human shield between good and evil. Many of them lost their lives and were seriously injured. Does he agree that the RBL hierarchy in Great Britain needs to recognise the sacrifice and service of those in Northern Ireland, and to continue to build relationships, rather than pulling things away from Northern Ireland? It is so important that those veterans are supported for the service that they gave.

James Cartlidge: The key point we have heard today is how the work of the RBL goes across every region of England and every part of the Union, and of course that includes Northern Ireland. It is not just about the first and second world wars; it is about all those other campaigns, Operation Banner included. The hon. Lady makes a good point, and I am grateful for the chance to speak in the debate.

3.50 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing the debate, and for giving hon. Members the opportunity to highlight the fantastic work of the Royal British Legion and its thousands of volunteers. As the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, the number of hon. Members present today is a great reflection of British politics, as is the mix of political parties and the unity we have behind those who have served, their families and those who are still serving. It is important to champion them. They are what stands between us and tyranny, as they demonstrated many years ago, in 1939.

I think it is worth while to recognise that the RBL does a fantastic job at three levels. First, it does an amazing job at the national level. It ties society and

defence back together. We have, perhaps, more of a societal and defence drift than ever before. For many of us, our grandfathers or grandmothers served, and we had an immediate connection to defence. That is not necessarily the case today. The RBL acts as a glue and a binding mechanism to pull us back together, and to help us remember why those who serve are so important to the nation.

Secondly, behind all the big events—whether that is Invictus, the D-day commemorations or VE Day, which is approaching—one organisation is always absolutely central, which is, of course, the RBL. It does so much of the heavy lifting. It is really impressive.

Thirdly, there is the local level. We have heard so many amazing stories today of individual RBL branches doing an amazing job not just to cohere councils and deliver support, but, importantly, at the personal level to change thousands of people’s lives. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those in the RBL.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I know he is aware that this summer, we will mark the centenary of the war memorial in Kirkcaldy, and that the Kirkcaldy branch of the Royal British Legion Scotland is doing a fine job of organising a ceremony and a significant tribute that is worthy of the cause. I know the Minister is aware that he has received an invitation from me to attend that event, and I wonder if he might consider it favourably.

Al Carns: If I can be there, I definitely will. It will be fantastic and I would not want to miss it.

It has been mentioned that the Royal British Legion was founded in 1921 from the merger, interestingly, of four ex-servicemen’s organisations. I think that that has not been mentioned in a debate since 2013, so I would like to reflect on that. The RBL established the two-minute silence and the poppy appeal—remembrance traditions that endure today and, importantly, unite the nation. It has expanded its support to all those who have served for at least seven days, adapting to each generation’s changing needs. I will, perhaps, talk about that shortly. It is now the UK’s largest military charity, with 180,000 members, 110,000 volunteers—an army in itself—and a network of partners and charities.

There is an important point, which was mentioned more than four times by various speakers in the debate, about schools and educating people about why remembrance is so important. As we approach VE Day, yes, it is important to remember the sacrifice of individuals, but it is also important to remember the cause of the collective. Why were those people called to the front in the first place? To protect the freedoms that we all enjoy. Again, the underlying message is that freedom is not necessarily free. We can reflect that idea into the geopolitical situation of today—with North Korean troops fighting on the very edge of Europe—which has probably never been so fractious. There is an important role for the RBL and other charities in enhancing the lessons of the past and ensuring that the youth of the nation remember that.

The RBL is an organisation that makes an immeasurable contribution, from remembrance and representation to service and support. Its iconic annual poppy appeal, which I collected for in London last year, has become woven into the very fabric of our national identity. It is

an organisation that also gives practical, life-changing support, day in and day out, seven days a week and 24 hours a day.

Luke Myer: I just want to inform my hon. Friend of a meeting that I had with my local RBL in Boosbeck last week. As a result of him coming to our constituency for a discussion on veteran mental health, a local developer, who saw the coverage of that visit, is now converting a former disused nursing home into a specialist veterans' supported-living community in our constituency. Will he take this moment to commend the Castle Court veterans village project? I wonder whether he would like to visit.

Al Carns: I absolutely support the Castle Court veterans village. I think it is a fantastic initiative, and I really enjoyed the visit—and all of the visits that I have been on. I just get that grassroots feel. When we combine that with some of the broader national priorities that we are pushing, we end up with the perfect mix of deliverables.

Perhaps that is a useful opportunity to come on to the Government partner: that is, the Royal British Legion. It is a key partner to the Government as we work to rewrite the contract between the state and those who serve, those who have served, and, of course, very importantly—as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer)—the families who also serve alongside them.

The Royal British Legion has been a steadfast partner to the armed forces covenant, throughout its creation and review and as the Government have worked to extend its scope and implementation. The Royal British Legion ensures that the voice of our armed forces community is heard at the highest level, helping to shape the policies that affect our service personnel. The Royal British Legion runs the vitally important Battle Back military rehabilitation centre at Lilleshall, which supports the physical and psychological recovery of service personnel and veterans. Finally, the Royal British Legion is, of course, our Invictus games delivery partner, and I look forward to inviting it to Birmingham in 2027.

The Royal British Legion not only partners with us, the Government, but pushes Government and local authorities to do better, and the manifesto that it published last year contained a wide range of useful recommendations to end the disadvantage faced by our armed forces community. Perhaps this is an opportunity to answer some of the questions that the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth raised earlier about building on what the previous Government have done. First, I would like to thank him for his push for my promotion into Cabinet, but I would argue that the Defence Secretary represents us in Cabinet.

Interestingly, by pooling the Office for Veterans' Affairs and the Veterans Minister in Defence, we have really tied the veterans space back into all the constituent parts in Defence that already deal with veterans activity. Individually, they were significant, but, collectively, it is really powerful. We have managed to really synthesise the support to veterans over time, and that is building and will come out in due course.

The Office for Veterans' Affairs, which was created by the previous Government, is a fantastic organisation and expanding, but, if we look below the Office for Veterans' Affairs, what sits between it and the charitable sector? As mentioned earlier, where can we help to cohere and co-ordinate the charitable sector, build data, push down strategy and enhance the services at not just the national level but the local level? I think that is where the sweet spot is. As we pull the covenant into law in 2026, and expand that duty, that will be really important, because there is a requirement for education and communication on what the covenant is, and, of course, what it is not.

As mentioned by the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth, Ops Courage, Fortitude, Restore and Ascend probably deal with in excess of 40,000 people across mental health, housing and musculoskeletal issues, all the way through to career-transition partnership. Interestingly, the statistics on career transition are that circa 86% of all veterans went straight into employment after the first year. I can happily say to the hon. Member for South Suffolk that the national insurance measure is still in place for the next 12 months, and I hope to extend that long into the future.

On indefinite leave to remain availability after five years of service, we have made the manifesto commitment to reduce that to four years, and, of course, to waive visa fees. I am happy to take that discussion offline if anyone would like to discuss that in more detail in due course.

I would like to give the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth a minute at the end, so I will wrap up very quickly. As a veteran, and as the Minister for veterans and people, I will do all I can to support the RBL's work, and to partner with them and work collaboratively. I trust that all hon. Members would like to join me in putting on the record our appreciation for all of its service, which is absolutely invaluable to not only the Government but the thousands of people who serve, their families, and the veterans themselves.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I call Luke Evans to wind up in less than 30 seconds.

3.59 pm

Dr Luke Evans: Let us reflect on the quiet, steadfast work of the Royal British Legion. It is a pillar of remembrance, a shield for those who served, and a voice for those who can no longer speak. In paying tribute to that, we affirm our collective duty to support it, just as it has supported so many. We will remember them.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I am very grateful to the hon. Member, and to all who have contributed to this understandably popular debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contribution of the Royal British Legion.

Rail Services: East Durham Coastline

4.1 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I will call Grahame Morris to move the motion; I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rail services on the east Durham coastline.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. Some hon. Members might be expecting me to start with an April fool's joke, but after hearing about the state of rail services in my constituency, they will agree that no joke or exaggeration could be more ridiculous than the reality that my constituents face every day.

The service is characterised by delays, no-notice cancellations and dangerously overcrowded trains, particularly during peak periods, which all too often leave passengers stranded on the platform. In London, where the next service may arrive in a matter of minutes, that might not be an issue, but at Seaham and Horden, one cancelled service means at least an hour's wait. Rail links should promote connectivity, providing opportunities to access education and employment. However, Northern's failing services mean that my constituents cannot depend on transport links to maintain their employment.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that what he has described not only affects his constituents in Easington, but extends down to my constituents in Billingham in Teesside and prevents our constituents from seeking employment and educational opportunities in the major conurbations of the north-east?

Grahame Morris: My hon. Friend's point is well made. I completely agree: the problem affects not just my Easington constituency, but Hartlepool, Billingham and the Tees valley. Not only does it undermine local opportunities, but it damages our local economy and takes wages out of our community as people are forced to move closer to work or to areas with more dependable transport links.

The community welcomed the reopening of Horden station in June 2020, after a prolonged battle to secure much-needed transport investment, but it was meant to unlock economic opportunities in Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle. Instead, its unreliability and the lack of additional services have only worsened the pre-existing problems further down the line at Seaham. As a frequent passenger myself, I experience the chaos caused by cancellations and insufficient capacity. My constituents and I simply cannot depend on Northern with its cancellations, delays and dangerous overcrowding, particularly when there are only two carriages at peak times.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. As well as affecting people's jobs and their ability to get to work, it has an impact on those in the countryside who need transport to get wherever they are going, whether that is for a doctor's appointment, for work or for a visit to relatives.

The impact is compounded for those who live in rural isolation. Given what the hon. Gentleman is outlining, does he feel that a commitment from the Government is needed to sort out the shortcomings of the rail line?

Grahame Morris: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct.

I welcome the Government's recent decision to publish train cancellation and delay data, including monthly figures on the worst-performing stations, via the Office of Rail and Road. Holding operators to account is essential if we want things to improve, but the data does not capture the passengers who are left on the platform. Whether it occurs through cancellation or through dangerous overcrowding, the outcome is the same: passengers scramble to find last-minute alternative means of travel. In the past 12 months, 6% of trains were cancelled at Seaham and Horden, including at least one train every day on average, and only two thirds have run to time. With one train per hour, the cancellations and delays have huge impacts.

Northern's performance is erratic. In September last year, there were 38 cancellations on the route. By October, the number had skyrocketed to 186, which is almost five times as many. By the end of 2024, the situation had further deteriorated, leaving residents with no reliable means of reaching work, school, health appointments or other vital appointments by train. Northern attributed that partially to staff sickness, with driver absences at 17.6% and conductor absences at 16.9%, but questions need to be asked about what is driving such high levels of sickness.

I have met the chief exec and senior officers on several occasions. Their proposed solution of relying on rest-day working is simply not sustainable, and I fear that it will increase staff sickness over the long term. This is a safety-critical industry. We need to ensure that staff are safely rested, not under pressure to work at unsustainable levels. The industry should not be running on voluntary overtime; it must employ enough staff to ensure resilience in the system.

A long-standing issue on the route is the lack of rolling stock. Until 2019, believe it or not, we were still served by the old Pacer trains from the 1970s. We now have second-hand ScotRail class 158s and 156s, which have been refurbished. In the north-east, we are more than willing to accept repurposed rolling stock, but only if the service is regular and reliable and if it meets our transport needs.

Another long-standing point of contention is the fact that Northern runs only two carriages, instead of four, during peak periods. The lack of carriages is not just inconvenient; it is a health and safety concern. In previous debates, I have raised the case of a young boy who fell unconscious on an overcrowded train. I cannot imagine the terror of someone watching their child going limp, with their eyes rolling back, and then collapsing, with no escape from an overcrowded carriage.

Overcrowding is still a concern. I happen to be a Sunderland supporter, but when Newcastle are playing, scores of people are left on the platform at Horden and Seaham because the once-an-hour two-carriage train is already crammed with people who got on at Stockton, Billingham and Hartlepool. My constituents are left feeling angry and frustrated.

The issue has been raised repeatedly since I became an MP in 2010, but very little has changed. I therefore welcome the new Government's commitment to the creation of Great British Railways, because we cannot promote economic growth with failing public transport. We can get our broken railway system finally back on track by ending decades of waste and starting to restore public trust, but there is a lot more to be done.

Northern Rail returned to public ownership in 2020, after the previous franchise had taken millions of pounds in dividends in return for substandard services. There may no longer be dividends rewarding failure, but the service remains substandard. I thank the Rail Minister for meeting me and other colleagues recently to discuss the Government's plan, which is fantastic, to procure 450 new trains for Northern. That is a very welcome step, but will the Minister confirm how many of those trains will be allocated to the east Durham coastline? Given the isolation that my constituents feel because of unreliable transport, will he prioritise east Durham for the delivery of newly procured trains?

The long-term investment in new rolling stock is essential and fantastic, but its impact will not be felt until at least 2030. Like many people, I believe that we need some interim solutions. In the time remaining, I will outline them, because I have been told time and again—not just by this Government, but by the previous one—to bring solutions as well as problems.

First, Grand Central, the open access operator, has submitted two applications to the Office of Rail and Road. One application seeks to extend its track access agreement beyond 2027, but the other proposes more services, including a new stop at Seaham station, which the current Grand Central service runs through without stopping. That would not only provide additional capacity to Sunderland and Hartlepool, where services are severely overcrowded, but create the first direct link from my constituency to York and London. As the Grand Central service already passes through Seaham, adding a stop would extend the journey by only a few minutes.

The benefits of that additional Seaham stop cannot be overstated. Grand Central is still awaiting a decision, so I ask the Minister kindly to provide an update from the ORR. I understand that the Government might be reluctant to expand contracts for open access operators, given the move towards public ownership and concerns about loss of revenue. To my constituents, however, Northern and Grand Central are not running in competition; they are simply providers of rail services that are desperately needed in my constituency.

My second suggestion is that we increase Northern services from east Durham to Middlesbrough and Newcastle. I was pleased to receive a positive response to my written question on the matter. The ministerial response confirmed that the Rail North Partnership, on behalf of the Department for Transport and Transport for the North, is examining a business case for increasing services at Horden and Seaham by December 2025. It also said:

“The analysis must balance the economic and social benefits of this enhancement with the performance of existing services and the financial impact on taxpayer subsidy.”

I gently remind the Minister that the economic and social benefits of this enhancement to my constituents must not be underestimated. We have very low car ownership in east Durham. For those without access to

cars, it is incredibly difficult to get to Newcastle, Sunderland or Middlesbrough without spending hours on buses. People turn down jobs and college places because they simply have no reliable way of getting to them. That is a major barrier to economic growth.

A small but significant improvement would be to amend the timetable of the semi-fast Northern service between Middlesbrough and Newcastle. Since 2023, that two-hourly service, which is often a four-carriage train, has skipped Seaham and Horden despite high demand. The time saved by bypassing those two stations is between four to six minutes, but adding those stops would provide immediate relief to my constituents, with an additional train every two hours. All three of those solutions—Grand Central's additional stop, increasing Northern services, and minor timetable adjustments—are needed while we await the arrival of new rolling stock beyond 2030.

If we are serious about local growth in east Durham, people must be able to travel out of their towns and villages to work, study and access local amenities—pubs, restaurants, cafés, medical facilities and shops. I wrote to the Secretary of State in January and February outlining these issues, and I would welcome the opportunity to meet Ministers to discuss them further.

The people of east Durham have waited far too long for a reliable rail service. They have endured overcrowding, cancellations and an outdated network that fails to meet their needs, and while I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to procuring new trains and increasing services, some short-term action is also required. Reliable transport is not a luxury; it is a necessity for jobs, education and economic growth. I urge the Minister to prioritise east Durham and to work with me and other colleagues to ensure that Seaham and Horden finally get the rail service they deserve.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on raising the important subject of rail services along the east Durham coastline. I also thank other Members for their contributions today.

The Government's mission for growth is our No. 1 priority. We are kick-starting economic growth across the country. This means more and better jobs and more money in people's pockets, but as I am sure my hon. Friend recognises, we cannot have good and stable growth without a rail network that performs for his constituents in Easington and everyone across the north-east and the country.

Let me be clear: I am as frustrated as my hon. Friend by the poor service his constituents have experienced using Northern. He mentions overcrowded services, and I fully understand that passengers get frustrated when they regularly have to stand on trains, but I assure him that the Department requires its operators to plan services and rail timetables to meet passenger demand. We issue operators with guidelines on loading, including on standing time, and for most of the north that is currently 20 minutes.

However, services need to be operationally resilient and to provide value for money for the taxpayer as well as a reliable service for passengers. That means that it is

[*Simon Lightwood*]

not possible to guarantee every passenger a seat on every service, as that would require operators to maintain significantly larger fleets to meet demand at peak times, with trains then standing idle for much of the time. That being said, Northern, like all operators, takes its safety obligations seriously, and if my hon. Friend sends me more details on the specific safety cases he mentioned, I will be happy to take them up with Northern and write back to him.

None the less, it has been made clear to Northern's management team that its current performance is not acceptable. That is why the Rail North Partnership, through which the Department for Transport and Transport for the North jointly manage Northern's contract, issued the operator with a notice of breach of contract. We have required Northern to produce a detailed plan to improve its services for passengers, including the constituents of Easington.

That plan will require Northern to follow the necessary steps to match the Government's ambition for transport across the north. Northern must resolve long-standing disputes with the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers conductors to deliver a passenger-focused railway that runs seven days a week, whether on a Monday morning or a Sunday afternoon. It must develop its fleet and train crews and strengthen resources across engineering, control and operations. I also agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of resilience when staff go off sick, which is in Northern's improvement plan.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to the Minister for seriously addressing the issues that I raised, and I hope that he will address my other two principal suggestions. It is all very well talking about resilience, but people's travel plans are formed by their experience. We are trying to grow the railway and the local economy, but when individuals go to the railway stations at Seaham or Horden with their families to go shopping in Newcastle or Middlesbrough and they cannot get on the train, that experience colours their judgment. The next time, instead of standing there in the rain for an hour, they will choose an alternative method; they will take the X10 or find some other means of getting there. We really need to up our game and provide frequent and regular services from these stations.

Simon Lightwood: I agree, which is why the Government are placing passengers at the heart of our plan for Great British Railways. I hear what my hon. Friend is saying very clearly.

The improvement plan aims to tackle the resilience issue by ensuring that the operator develops a structure, from governance to process, that enables the business to better manage staff sickness. I agree with my hon. Friend that the railway industry's reliance on rest-day working to operate services is not sustainable. That is why the Rail Minister in the other place has instructed Northern to ensure that it recruits and trains to its full complement so that overtime can be used for additional tasks, such as training, rather than running services.

I am ambitious for Northern to get back on the path to delivery by meeting the steps in its improvement plan, which will result in a more reliable service for passengers and my hon. Friend's constituents. Northern's

overall cancellations are at more than 8%. That is not acceptable, and I share Members' frustrations. That is why the improvement plan also sets a clear target for Northern: 90% of all its trains should arrive within three minutes of the time listed on the timetable, and cancellations should be below 3%.

I turn to services, because I note my hon. Friend's comments about the semi-fast Northern service between Middlesbrough and Newcastle. I assure him that the stops chosen reflect the aspirations for a semi-fast service between Middlesbrough and Newcastle, and were chosen in collaboration with Transport for the North and its members. I gently remind my hon. Friend that Transport for the North and its members have never requested additional stopping services on the Durham coastline. The current infrastructure could not support a two trains per hour stopping service as well as one train per hour on a semi-fast service. Given the line's capacity constraints, including freight traffic and shared use with the Tyne and Wear Metro, adding stops at Horden and Seaham would require remodelling to assess its operational viability.

Grahame Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I am going to make progress. My hon. Friend will forgive me.

I also note my hon. Friend's support for new proposed services from Grand Central, and I recognise the important role that Grand Central has played in improving connectivity and choice for passengers in the north-east. That is why the Department has provided support in principle to Network Rail's consultation on the application from Grand Central to extend its existing access rights for an additional 11 years. However, capacity constraints on the east coast main line mean that we cannot support Grand Central's separate application to operate additional services. That was set out in our letter to the regulator on 4 February. I note that some of those services would call at Seaham, which is in my hon. Friend's constituency.

I direct my hon. Friend to the improvements that the Government have already made to Northern connectivity and capacity. Although Northern's procurement of new trains is at an early stage, and at this point I cannot say in detail where any of them will be running, I assure my hon. Friend that the new trains will have greater capacity and, over time, they will replace almost the entire Northern fleet, including those on the Durham coastline.

In Sunderland—home to the best football team in the world, as I am sure my hon. Friend will agree—we are carrying out the biggest overhaul of the railways in a generation to put passengers first and to deliver punctual, high-quality services. Grand Central trains already run to London five times a day on weekdays and four on weekends. That will only improve from December this year, when Grand Central will run an extra service to replace the withdrawn service from London North Eastern Railway.

Meanwhile, a regular metro service also provides connectivity to Newcastle, where two LNER trains per hour go to London. That will increase to three per hour from December this year. LNER continues to operate one return service from Middlesbrough to London, and although additional services to Middlesbrough are heavily dependent on changes to local station infrastructure, I remain ambitious for improvement.

I assure my hon. Friend that the Department remains supportive of a role for open access services where they provide improved connectivity and choice for passengers. However, we must ensure that they are a good use of taxpayer money and do not negatively impact the operation of the network. It must be noted that although the Department reviews open access applications as part of a standard process, access to the rail network is a matter for the regulator, and no decision on the applications from Grand Central has yet been made.

As I mentioned the east coast main line, I will reassure my hon. Friend about the Government's commitment to invest in rail. The east coast main line will take advantage of a £4 billion investment when the timetable changes in December. That will mean 16,000 more seats daily between London and Newcastle, an hourly LNER service between both cities, more local trains north of Newcastle, new trains between Sheffield and Leeds, more services between Reading and York, and provision for additional services connecting Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle, and Nottingham and Lincoln. Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington for securing this important debate, and I thank hon. Members for their brief but important contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

4.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

Relationship Education in Schools

4.30 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered relationship education in schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again today, Sir Jeremy. Sadly, the relationship education that our young people currently receive does not address the realities of what it means to be a young person today. If we fail to urgently adapt and strengthen our approach to relationship education, we will fail to counter the inappropriate and often misogynistic ideas that our young people are exposed to, and we will therefore fail to protect women and girls from the violence that these ideas spur.

Prevention starts with education and the creation of a space for our young people to have conversations about relationships. As a mother of three teenagers—two boys and a girl—I have spent many years having open and honest conversations with them about relationships. I have done my best to ensure that they understand what a healthy relationship looks like and how to treat others with respect. However, as every parent knows, children do not always see their parents as the ultimate source of wisdom; they look to their peers, the internet and the world around them. That is why relationship education in schools is so vital. If we get it right, relationship education creates a safe space where young people can discuss these ideas openly with their peers, guided by teachers who are knowledgeable about the challenges that young people face.

The statistics paint a worrying picture: 41% of teachers have seen aggressive misogyny in classrooms, 51% have witnessed pupils advocating sexual violence, and only 43% of students feel personally represented and included by relationships and sex education. Young people are turning elsewhere to learn: 22% say online sources are their main source of information, while 15% say their primary source is pornography. The charity Let Me Know found that 60% of the young people polled did not know the signs of a healthy or unhealthy relationship. Those are shocking figures, which underline the urgency of getting this right.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for bringing such an important debate to the House, and I congratulate her for having three teenagers and still holding down this job—that is a remarkable achievement. Relationship education is very important for how young people relate to their peers, but one of the common complaints I hear from parents in my constituency is that a lot of people will learn about relationships from social media. The hon. Member has already touched on this, but will she say a bit more about the importance of looking at young people's access to social media and supporting teachers and headteachers who are looking at banning smartphones and social media in schools?

Helen Maguire: It is vital that we start to address what is going on with social media, as we have been calling for. The social media tech giants have to take on that responsibility.

[*Helen Maguire*]

One in four women and one in six men will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, and domestic abuse starts young: those aged 16 to 19 are the most likely to experience it. We need to focus on prevention to stop this at the root. Sadly, my Epsom and Ewell constituency has felt the devastating reality of violence against women and girls far too acutely in recent years, and the impact on families, friends, students and entire school communities has been profound.

Let us be clear, however, that violence against women and girls extends beyond my community; it is a national epidemic. In January, the National Audit Office reported that one in 12 women are victims of gender-based violence each year. Despite the increasing political attention, sexual assault rates among women aged 16 to 59 rose from 3.4% in 2009-10 to 4.3% in 2023-24. A key issue is that prevention has been an afterthought rather than a priority. That must change.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. I serve on the Public Accounts Committee, which looked at the NAO report on violence against women and girls. In West Yorkshire, the police have developed a brilliant prevention programme—the hon. Lady touched on the need for prevention—called Pol-Ed, which goes into schools and teaches young people, both boys and girls, about some of the danger signs around spiking and inappropriate imagery, as well as about consent. Does she agree that it is important to educate children, both on prevention—what the danger signs are and what an unhealthy relationship is—and on what a healthy relationship looks like?

Helen Maguire: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention; it is absolutely key to understand both, and to understand what the signs of an unhealthy relationship could be. We need to stop treating violence against women and girls as something that can be addressed only after the fact—after a woman has been assaulted, coerced, or has lost her life. We need to act before it happens, and that starts with education and empowering our young people with the knowledge of what a healthy relationship is.

The recent Netflix series, “Adolescence”, has brought national attention to the dangers facing young people today. It follows a 13-year-old boy accused of murdering a female classmate, sparking difficult but necessary conversations about online misogyny and extremist online communities. Teachers and parents are struggling to keep up with the ever-evolving nature of those threats. Teachers need greater support to tackle these issues in schools. Too often, they are simply ill-equipped and unprepared to teach relationships, sex and health education. Fifty per cent of pupils reported that power imbalances and pornography were not covered in their lessons, and 56% said that what a healthy relationship looks like was not covered either. Surely that should be absolutely key.

Incels, the red pill and the manosphere are relatively new terms, but the attitudes that they promote are not new. It is sexism and male chauvinism repackaged for the digital age, amplified and spread faster than ever before. That is why we must ensure that our education system evolves to counteract this harmful narrative before it takes root in young minds.

The Centre for Social Justice’s latest report, “Lost Boys”, highlights that boys in the UK are struggling in education, more likely to take their own lives, less likely to find stable employment and more susceptible to being drawn into crime. It also notes the increasing appeal of right-wing and regressive ideologies among young men. We must address the core challenges that our young men face and understand how misogyny is evolving, educating parents, teachers and, most importantly, young people themselves—we need to support them.

A whole-school approach is essential in addressing these issues effectively. This approach encourages schools to review their existing procedures and culture, to ensure that they model respectful relationships and gender equality practices across the entire school community. By embedding those values into the fabric of the school environment, we create a culture that actively challenges harmful stereotypes and promotes positive, healthy relationships. Yet last year, we saw the RSHE review become unnecessarily politicised and hijacked by sensationalist headlines and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, serving only to fuel division. We cannot afford to play politics with the health, safety and wellbeing of our children. The focus of any review of RSHE should be on how we can equip young people with the knowledge and tools that they need to navigate the modern world safely. It should address the urgent need to tackle the rise of online misogyny, the increasing prevalence of violence against women and girls, and the damaging impact of pornography and exploitative media on young people’s perceptions of relationships.

I recently heard from a young constituent, Maddie, who is here today. She was deeply affected by the loss of a teacher in our community and wrote to me expressing her frustration that while the conversation on violence against women and girls often focuses on policing and reporting, prevention is often overlooked. She told me how her cousin, a newly qualified teacher, was asked to deliver RSHE lessons despite feeling completely unprepared to do so. She is right to be frustrated. Young people overwhelmingly support strong education on relationships, with 87% saying that there should be more teaching about relationships, abuse and sexual health. We owe it to them to listen.

RSHE is often an afterthought, added in as an extra and delivered by teachers who are not specifically trained for it. Many are simply given a sheet of paper to read from and do not know how to answer the follow-up questions. That is why I am calling for urgent reforms to RSHE, including: updating the outdated 2019 guidance to reflect the realities of young people’s lives today; extending RSHE up to key stage 5 so that it reaches 16 to 18-year-olds; making RSHE a key component of initial teacher training, ensuring that new teachers are properly equipped to deliver it; and investing in training for school leaders, teachers and governors to understand the online spaces that young people navigate today.

We cannot afford to wait until another young woman becomes a statistic. We must act now to equip the next generation with the knowledge and resilience that they need to build safe, healthy relationships. Teaching children about harmful gender stereotypes, consent, respect and healthy peer relationships from the earliest stages is key to preventing violence against women and girls. I urge the Government to prioritise prevention, invest in education and listen to the voices of our young people who are asking us for change. The time for action is now.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I remind all hon. Members that they should continue to stand if they wish to contribute to the debate. Given the number of those who have indicated that they wish to contribute, I ask people to limit themselves to about four minutes, and I hope we will be able to get everybody in.

4.40 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, and I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this crucial debate.

I am sure we can all agree that every aspect of a child's education is important and plays a crucial role in shaping them into well-rounded members of society, but there is a strong argument that no lesson is more valuable in shaping our young people than relationship and sex education. From teaching the basics of puberty, reproduction and how to engage in an adult relationship, to understanding issues around consent, abuse and sexual and gender identity, good-quality relationship and sex education gives children a crucial basis for relationships. It will influence their interactions with others for the rest of their lives.

The reality is that in the UK, we are failing to provide our children with the quality relationship and sex education that they need. That is leading to a number of issues and gaps in their understanding of healthy relationships. Our children's RSE classes are grossly inadequate and severely outdated, and in some cases, are not taught at all. Despite RSE being compulsory for all primary school pupils, 50% of students reported receiving no RSE classes during the covid lockdown. We are talking, of course, about age-appropriate sex education, because the catch-all term and sensationalist headlines have led some parents to believe that their children are being taught things at certain ages when they are obviously not. That has only helped to fuel certain issues, which has been awful for promoting the healthy and proper teaching of relationship and sex education.

The latest Sex Education Forum report found that only 50% of the 16 to 17-year-olds surveyed rated their RSE classes as "good" or "very good". That is an improvement on the previous year's findings, but it still demonstrates that the relationship and sex education of our young people is simply not good enough.

Hopefully, everybody has by now heard about the truly gripping Netflix drama, "Adolescence". For any Members who have not yet seen it, I cannot recommend it strongly enough. It is a crucial watch for anyone who works with, or indeed, legislates for children, as we do. As we have heard, it touches on a number of issues relating to incel culture, the manosphere and the increasingly concerning attitude towards women and girls that is infecting our young boys.

We often talk about incel culture and toxic attitudes towards women, and indeed men, but we fail to properly come up with solutions on how to tackle them. We land on things such as limiting social media access for young people, placing more onus on social media sites to monitor online chatter and take down harmful posts and videos, or reducing the airtime given to toxic individuals who perpetuate this kind of nonsense. Those are all really useful options that we have to consider and take

action on, but they are far from the solution. We really ought to look at the role that education can play in combating misinformed views.

The core of relationship and sex education, beyond the basics of biology, is to teach children about healthy relationships. It is about teaching young girls and boys how to properly respect and interact with someone they are in a relationship with, whether that is romantic, sexual, platonic or familial. Their understanding of these relationships can be informed by good-quality education, and it goes without saying that the opposite is also true. Poor-quality RSE can drastically impact a child's understanding of relationships and cause untold damage.

We need comprehensive relationship and sex education that is age-appropriate and delivered by well-trained teachers, who could be crucial in combating toxic incel ideology, or who, at the very least, would provide students with correct information that counters the stuff they read on the internet or watch on YouTube. Effective classes can provide a safe, non-judgmental space for children to ask questions. If they do not have that, we risk either leaving their questions unanswered or leaving them to the mercy of some Andrew Tate-esque figures who will fill their heads with poison. Both options are cause for concern, but the latter is nearly unthinkable.

Like all forms of discrimination, misogyny is ignorance. Education is the best tool against ignorance, but it has to be properly funded and teachers have to be properly trained to deliver it. I sincerely hope to hear from the Minister about the concrete steps that the Government will take to invest in RSE. Making it compulsory is important, but proper funding and training mean, ultimately, that it will be done well. It being done badly is almost as bad as not teaching it at all.

4.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy, for the third time this afternoon—we are on a roll here. I commend the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate, on a subject that can be quite difficult—I think that is a fair way of putting it. I will give a parental perspective. The hon. Member and I are not in opposition to each other, but I want to put my view on record.

I am pleased to represent the case for Northern Ireland—I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) will do something similar—and parents who want to have a say on what their children are taught in school. My contribution will be about the importance of parental rights. Many Members will be aware that there has been a shift in the content that schools teach and that is approved by boards of governors, who should be allowed to ensure that RSE is taught in line with community values. There should be a commitment to best practice and good relations between parents and teachers. That always has to be there, and is a key issue in schools.

Such commitment is found at Victoria primary school in Newtownards, in my constituency of Strangford, where parents were brought to an open night, the evening before teaching was to take place with the children, to allow interested parents to know the way in which sensitive topics would be taught, and give them tools that could help them to follow up with their child afterwards. I felt that was a constructive and positive way forward.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. She always tries to reassure us, and I seek such reassurance in her response. The sensitive approach that I described was welcomed by parents, and speaks well of a school that looks at education holistically, including home life, which is part of who we are. There is no doubt that teachers play a central role in helping children to grow into successful adults who are equipped with the skills that they need to be safe in a fast-moving world. It is a much faster world than the one in which I was brought up, but I am of a certain age, so people will probably understand that.

Some of the most contentious issues will be taught in RSE. I believe that parents have every right to exercise their authority over what they deem safe and appropriate for their children to be taught. I am putting the marker down clearly for parents, on behalf of their children. There are issues of a personal nature and matters of morality, and it is best left to parents to decide how to raise their children. Their input into this process must be critical. It is not for the state to decide the morality and standards of each family in the United Kingdom. I say that with respect to people. I want to be quite clear: we understand that parents raise children differently. I may disagree with others about what they choose to teach their children, but this is a democratic society, where all values must be respected, no matter how much we disagree with them, in order to uphold freedom of conscience and religion.

There is a blurry line between relationships education and sex education but I will always be a voice for parents, and for them to deem what is appropriate for their child to be taught in school. There must be regulation to ensure that, should a school decide to implement changes to RSE, a parent has a right to withdraw their child, if it is going the wrong way and the parents do not like it. I put that marker down as well.

I urge the Government not to push forward any changes that would diminish parental authority and control. I ask the Minister to continue to speak with her counterparts in the devolved nations to ensure that parents who are genuinely seeking to safeguard their children are afforded respect, in terms of the classroom syllabus, and have their rights to reasonably held views protected. Parental rights, first and foremost.

4.48 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second time this afternoon, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this important debate. A couple of weeks ago, at Prime Minister's questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) noted the significance of "Adolescence", the series produced by Stephen Graham and starring Christine Tremarco that I think has touched all hon. Members. I strongly support my hon. Friend's call for screenings in schools. It is crucial to spark conversation, education and urgent change around online male radicalisation, and violence against women and girls. Like, I hope, everyone in this Chamber, I was assured and pleased by the Prime Minister's response.

I recognise that a real and abhorrent problem is being perpetuated in our society. We are experiencing an epidemic of gender-based violence. We have had a disjointed approach to tackling that epidemic, and that approach has failed. We have failed to protect women and girls from violence, failed to improve outcomes for victims and failed to combat deep-rooted sexism and misogyny across the UK. Instead, I see from my casework an increase in peer-on-peer abuse cases in primary and secondary schools.

Schools should be safe spaces and provide a secure environment for children to learn—places that parents should feel comfortable sending their children. We need to ensure that safeguarding is in place to ensure that protection. Children going to school and experiencing abuse is despicable and inexcusable. We need to urgently look at how we address these issues, and the curriculum must ensure that exposure to social media and online platforms providing violent, misogynistic, racist and homophobic content can be properly countered.

I want to briefly mention the family of Holly Newton—a constituent of mine who was tragically murdered by her former boyfriend—who campaign tirelessly to raise awareness around recognising signs of domestic abuse. I associate myself with the calls from Holly's mum for lowering the age that teenagers can be considered domestic abuse victims. When I look out my office window on Beaumont Street in Hexham, there is a wonderful installation of ribbons dedicated to victims of domestic abuse, with a single ribbon for Holly of a different colour, to emphasise that she is not counted in those statistics. It is something incredibly moving whenever I look at it.

Since I was elected I have worked with Northumberland domestic abuse services, which provide valuable support to some of the most vulnerable people across England's most sparsely populated county. I have spoken to many people in this Chamber about the rural issues we face with addressing those unique challenges. The staff and volunteers at NDAS are truly some of the most inspirational people I have met in my short time in this House.

When I go out and visit schools across the constituency, whether in the more urbanised parts of the Tyne valley belt, or in the far-flung north or south of the constituency, one of the things that teachers express to me is a concern that male students are being bombarded with this toxic view of the world. I was born in 1991, and I consider myself to be relatively young. I grew up when Facebook was still a new thing, and for someone to get their first Facebook account they almost had to have a chat with their mum and dad about it to get their sign-off.

I was exposed to what we thought was an online revolution, but it was a drip feed compared to the tsunami that this generation are exposed to. For this generation to have been through the pandemic, and now to go through this, is incredibly concerning and shocking. It makes me realise how much the world has shifted under our feet in the decade and a half since I was in the education system.

Anna Dixon: Did my hon. Friend hear Gareth Southgate talking in the Richard Dimbleby lecture about the fact that boys need positive male role models in the real world—people like football coaches, scout leaders, youth club leaders and more male teachers? I wondered if my

hon. Friend would agree that having real-world role models would help boys in the face of that tsunami of online abuse?

Joe Morris: It will probably not surprise my hon. Friend to know that I have seen everything that Gareth Southgate has said since he left being England manager. My fiancée had to talk me into taking down a mocked-up *Time* “Man of the Year” Gareth Southgate work of art, shortly after she moved in—I think I am getting dragged slightly off course.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I am going to save the hon. Gentleman from himself. I remind him that we need to proceed to other speakers, so I ask him to draw his remarks to a close.

Joe Morris: I will shortly wind up. I am pleased that progress is being made in putting specialist rape and sexual offences teams into every police force, and with improving how domestic abuse is processed in 999 handling. It is a matter of culture. I congratulate the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell again on bringing forward this important debate, and allowing all Members to discuss how we tackle this emerging, growing and potentially endemic problem.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I will try to call the Opposition Front Benchers, who will have five minutes each, from 5.08 pm, and then the Minister after that. I am afraid we can therefore no longer allow four minutes per speaker if everyone is to get in; speeches that last nearer to three minutes will help. I ask all colleagues to adhere to that.

4.54 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Thank you, Sir Jeremy, for calling me to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing this Westminster Hall debate.

The Government have set ambitious targets to tackle violence against women and girls, but those goals will not be achieved without addressing relationship education in our schools. Ending violence is first about prevention; teaching children from a young age what a healthy relationship looks like is key to achieving change. Children need to be taught about respect, consent and equality. We Liberal Democrats have long supported comprehensive, inclusive and evidence-based relationship education in our schools. It is crucial that these lessons also include information about inclusivity and the needs of LGBT students.

The well-documented Ofsted review in 2021 revealed shocking levels of sexual harassment in UK schools; indeed, it found that sexual harassment was so widespread that it must be addressed for all children and young people. The review highlighted several key issues. One of the biggest concerns was that students did not feel the need to report harassment because they saw it as normal. That shows how ingrained unhealthy behaviours can be in our schools. Even teachers were often unaware of the scale of the problem, not realising how serious it was.

I will quickly refer to the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019, which addressed upskirting. Years ago, young boys were doing it quite regularly and they just thought that

it was a laugh, not realising that there were victims nor how deeply hurt and victimised those who were targeted felt. That is exactly where relationship training starts: with someone understanding what they are actually doing to somebody else. That can only be done through good education in schools, where these things are openly discussed rather than just skirted around.

Relationship and sex education must teach what constitutes acceptable behaviour. Many teachers admitted that they were not properly prepared to teach these sensitive topics. When a maths or science teacher is asked to teach about consent, healthy relationships or the sharing of sexual images, it is no surprise that they feel underqualified. I was one of those teachers who tried to teach 14 or 15-year-old boys. Clearly, boys of that age already know quite a lot, so we cannot just talk to them about the bees and the butterflies. Sex and relationship education should start earlier than in secondary school, by which time young people have already acquired a lot of unhealthy information that we can only try to catch up with, if we know where they got that information from and the extent of it.

The Women and Equalities Committee published a report in 2023 that found that the delivery of relationship and sex education has been inconsistent; I think that was a polite way of saying “not good enough”. The report also suggested that the Government took further steps to ensure that teachers have the time and resources to learn how to deliver such lessons effectively. I hope that we do not have to wait for another report before we finally address these issues.

In the online world that we live in, algorithms often target young people with harmful content, whether it is misogynistic—such as the content of Andrew Tate, who spread toxic views on women—or influencers sharing dangerous content about eating disorders. Social media is full of risks. These platforms must take responsibility for the content that is shared on them. The Online Safety Act 2023 aimed to make the internet safer for children and young people. It holds social media platforms accountable for harmful content, but they alone cannot deliver change. If the Government are serious about ending violence against women and girls, they must take sex and relationship education seriously. As I said, I suggest that we start such education earlier than in secondary school.

Ultimately, teaching children from a young age what a healthy relationship looks like is the most important thing that we can teach our children. It is time that we empower young people with a range of knowledge about healthy relationships, consent, online safety and inclusivity.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): With apologies to all concerned, I am afraid that I now have to impose a two-minute time limit to get everybody in.

4.58 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy, and I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate on a subject that I know is very close to her heart. I do not need to declare an interest, but prior to being elected as an MP I worked with young women and girls in schools on this specific issue, so it is something that I really care about. Very quickly,

[Leigh Ingham]

I know how seriously this Government take this issue, and I will always be proud to stand under our commitment to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade.

Right now, however, the evidence speaks for itself. In 2022, *Revealing Reality* found that 60% of 15 to 18-year-old girls had been asked by someone to send a nude picture of themselves; anecdotally, I think that that proportion is much less than the actual reality. Nevertheless, that is a staggering statistic, highlighting the urgent need for robust and comprehensive relationship education.

Peer-on-peer sexual harassment is also a growing concern, exacerbated by the rapid rise of technology and social media, as others have mentioned. The work of organisations such as Girlguiding sheds light on the lived experiences of young people, particularly girls who face harassment, coercion and harmful social pressures. Its 2023 report found that only a quarter of young people felt that their questions about sex and relationships were not answered by RSHE lessons in schools. “We don’t tell our teachers,” a 2022 report by Estyn, the Welsh version of Ofsted, found that many young people do not disclose their experiences of harassment or abuse to teachers because they feel that they will not be taken seriously, or that nothing will change. Schools must be environments where students feel safe to speak up, and we need to start equipping teachers with the right training and support.

Some argue that relationship education should be left to parents. Although parents play a vital role in explaining healthy relationships, schools also play a central role in creating a safe, structured environment where young people can learn about healthy relationships in an evidence-based way. As I said, I am proud of this Government’s commitments to women and girls—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but we must move on.

5.1 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing this debate.

We have some fantastic statutory guidance from 2020 and draft guidance from 2024. I would love to hear from the Minister when the Government are likely to respond to that draft guidance, because quite a lot has already been done in this area and we must take account of that. I echo the words of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on the rights of parents. One of the safeguards included in previous guidance was to enable them to see curriculum materials and to have the option to opt out. It is vital that that is included in anything coming forward.

I want to touch on the Plymouth violence against women and girls commission, which I chaired, and was instituted as a result of two tragedies in the city in 2021 and 2022. One of the recommendations of our report was for a whole-school approach to tackling violence against women and girls—something that has been mentioned—and it would be very good to hear from the Minister on that. That is also highlighted in the End Violence Against Women Coalition’s report “It’s #AboutTime”.

Sex education is one thing and relationship education is another, but embedding healthy relationships and tackling misogyny and sexism right across the school community is vital. We need to look at that going forward.

The key issue is the inconsistency of what we are finding across schools locally. I was alarmed to receive an email from a young lesbian, who at 18 years old says that she only recently found out that sexually transmitted diseases could be contracted by young women who are same-sex attracted. That highlights the inconsistency in the delivery of the existing guidance—something we need to look at. If young women like her are experiencing that, what are they also not receiving? There is a huge amount to tackle: porn, VAWG and dealing with all of those sexist behaviours. I know that this will not be the last debate that we have on these issues, and I look forward to contributing in future.

5.3 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate.

When I became a new parent, I was shocked to my core to see in my communities, both in person and online, the extent to which relationships between new parents can suddenly descend into coercive control, gaslighting, financial abuse and, in the worst cases—still far too many—physical abuse. The For Baby’s Sake Trust found that 40% of parents who experienced domestic abuse said that it occurred during their baby’s first 1,001 days—from pregnancy until the baby’s second birthday. It is critical that we embed healthy relationships early on.

I am the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sexual and reproductive health in the UK, and I recently chaired a roundtable to celebrate 20 years since the teenage pregnancy prevention framework. The key asks were about focusing reforms on upstream prevention, rather than downstream crisis management. I would love to see more support for parents as their children receive relationship guidance in school. A huge number of young people will receive strong, progressive advice from schools about relationships, then go home to a place where those progressive relationships do not exist. If, via the information that a child brings home from school, a parent realises that they are in a relationship that is not okay—such as one that is financially abusive or controlling—so much the better.

Chloe Combi recently wrote a powerful piece in *The Independent* about the TV show “Adolescence”, in which she pointed out that very little commentary on the show has asked what young people themselves thought about it. Multiple organisations, including Brook, have highlighted the importance of including the student voice in RSHE curriculum design. In the 2009 guidance, schools were instructed to consult parents; however, for RSE to be relevant, the needs and preferences of pupils must also be reflected in the lessons taught in schools. I pay tribute to Chloe Combi and others such as Jo Davies at the WILD Young Parents Project, for being on the frontline of how we can instil great relationships among young people.

Finally, as a society, the reality is that we are often not great at relationships as adults. Therefore, as we protect and extend relationship advice to young people, I hope that we have the humility to learn alongside them, too.

5.5 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you as Chair, Sir Jeremy. We are living in a time marked by increasing polarisation. Teenage boys and girls are drifting apart, driven by an online culture that fills a void where important discussions should be happening. I have spoken to teachers across my constituency, and the picture that they paint is a troubling one. They have reported that the behaviour in schools, particularly from boys, is deteriorating, with a notable disparity in how male and female staff are treated. Teachers in North East Hampshire and across the country are working tirelessly, yet behavioural issues are worsening. Online sexist cultures are manifesting themselves in many ways, including in the form of persistent backchat towards female teachers.

High-profile online influencers have found their way to reach boys and young men who are struggling with their identities and masculinity. We must rethink our understanding of masculinity, and what it means to be a man. We must do so in a safe, supportive environment that nurtures healthy development and respect. Feminism is not a dirty word—it is as good for men and boys as it is for women and girls, but that part of the conversation is frequently missing. Worryingly, abusive behaviour within young relationships is increasingly common, and most incidences of online sexual abuse now involve children offending against other children. Some 61% of children and young people also reported that they were unsure and unaware of where to seek support if affected by domestic abuse.

Schools are hubs of learning and centres of influence. Children must be able to define their place in the world, understand their identity and feel empowered to be themselves within an environment of support and understanding. Only with that can we expect young people to have the tools to navigate the internet and their real life interactions positively and safely. We must create legislation, outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) in her excellent opening remarks that paves the way for a curriculum that prepares—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. Again, I apologise for interrupting.

5.7 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing such an important debate.

It is fair to say that the TV drama “Adolescence” has captured the imagination of the nation. It has shone a spotlight on our collective failure to ensure that we are keeping pace with the range of harmful content around sex, gender and relationships that young people are increasingly exposed to online. I know that for many parents, young people and those working in this profession, it just highlighted trends that have been all too apparent for quite some time. Some of the most heartbreaking moments that I have as an MP is when I speak to young people and their parents about the harms that they have been exposed to online, because we simply have not equipped them to be safe in experiencing them.

Whether from the Children’s Commissioner or from Ofsted, there are some damning statistics about the violent pornography and graphic sexual misogynistic content that young people are now exposed to, and the way in which that is bleeding into their attitudes towards women, sex and relationships in schools and later in life. There is no doubt that this has been exacerbated by a social media landscape that often atomises young people’s interactions with new ideas and narratives when it comes to sex and relationships, and whose algorithms can often prompt and reinforce harmful voices and content rather than promote critical reflection. It is little wonder that against such a backdrop, really toxic voices such as Andrew Tate, have started to take root. Although there was some good news in More in Common’s research into young people’s role models, it should scare a lot of us that 25% of 16 to 21-year-olds saw Andrew Tate as someone who young people are likely to look up to.

The solutions cut right across Government. I think it is safe to say that, judging from the debates I have shared with some colleagues in this room, many of us would like Ofcom to go much further in its implementation of children’s code to ensure that we are doing much more to protect young people from exposure to some of these harms. We owe it to the young people in school right now to ensure that the curriculum is setting them up the best that it can, leveraging the best practice resources that organisations such as Internet Watch Foundation have out there already, including helping young people challenge image sharing online and ensuring that, collectively, we do not lose the moment that—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. Again, I apologise. I call Carla Lockhart, if she can keep herself to one minute.

5.9 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for bringing this debate forward, although she and I will differ on some of the gender ideology.

I believe that when the Government introduce the RSHE regulations they need to be Cass-compliant. Dr Hilary Cass pointed out in her review that the importance of what happens in schools cannot be overestimated. Some schools have been guilty of engaging in the potentially dangerous process of socially transitioning children. They go along with the child’s wish to identify as a sex other than their birth sex. I encourage the Government, when introducing the regulations, to take up the helpful recommendation that schools should not teach about the broader concept of gender identity. Above all, they should take on board parental input and also school ethos; schools with a Christian ethos should be able to uphold that ethos when teaching relationship education.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Lady and all Members for their co-operation. We now move on to the Front-Bench speeches, beginning with the Liberal Democrats spokesperson.

5.10 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Jeremy, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing this incredibly important debate.

[*Munira Wilson*]

As we have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber today, it is vital that all children and young people are equipped to develop safe, healthy and happy relationships, and it is vital that they recognise what is inappropriate, unacceptable and abusive behaviour. Parents and carers, and wider family and friend networks, as well as schools, have an important role to play in developing this knowledge and understanding. However, we cannot take this knowledge for granted. As we have heard with the proliferation of harmful online content served up to our children and young people, they are at increased risk of encountering extreme and harmful content that distorts their understanding of how we should be interacting with each other.

According to Internet Matters, girls experience a disproportionate level of harm online, with three in four girls aged 13 to 16 reporting harmful online experiences. Sadly, this translates into inappropriate behaviour in real life. Despite some really excellent work that I have heard about from secondary schools in my constituency, worryingly, a survey by Kingston and Richmond Youth Council found that 40% of girls had been physically followed in a way that made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable and 50% had felt pressured into sending intimate pictures of themselves online, but 83% of those who experienced sexual harassment did not report it. The survey also found that over 20% of boys were not confident of knowing that exposure of body parts is a form of sexual harassment, and 69% were unsure whether they would intervene if they witnessed their friends sexually harassing someone.

The National Police Chiefs' Council warned last year that young boys were being radicalised by influencers such as Andrew Tate, and talked of epidemic levels of violence against women and girls, driven in part by extreme online misogyny. That is why I was so shocked to hear the Leader of the Opposition be so dismissive of the issue on LBC today, saying that there were bigger problems that we should be focused on. We need a culture change in all aspects of society, and we need to encourage the men in our lives—our brothers, fathers, friends, boyfriends, husbands and sons—to stand up against toxic masculinity, to demonstrate to the young men in their lives what it means to be compassionate and kind in all relationships, and that this is a strength, not a weakness.

That culture change must come in part from the education that we provide in the classroom. Age-appropriate relationships and sex education at school has a crucial role to play alongside the role of parents and carers. The Liberal Democrats believe that an age-appropriate RSE curriculum should be led by a qualified teacher and delivered in a safe, non-judgmental setting, and should include teaching about sexual consent, LGBTQ+ relationships and issues surrounding explicit images, because all young people deserve access to high quality education that empowers them to make safe and informed choices. In addition, ensuring children learn about consent, healthy relationships, and online risks such as pornography and sexting is essential for safeguarding.

Schools and teachers need proper funding, training and support as well as resources to deliver high quality RSHE. Therefore, we Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign for specialist RSE training to ensure that

teachers feel confident in delivering sensitive topics effectively. I hope the Minister will confirm when she plans to publish the updated RSHE guidance. She responded to a written question from me today, but again it did not set out the timelines; I do not know if she can fill us in when she gets up to speak.

Before I finish, I will touch on what we must press the social media giants to do; they need to be regulated much more toughly. Sir Jeremy, I know you were pretty active on the Online Safety Bill when it was going through Parliament, and have been active since. We must see it implemented vigorously. The Liberal Democrats want to see the digital age of consent raised, and will push for that change through the Data (Use and Access) Bill.

Seriously tackling violence against women and girls has to start with prevention. We have got to tackle the online giants, but schools must also play a key role in education. We must support an education system in which every child is free to be themselves and reach their full potential, unencumbered by fear and abuse, and receiving the support they need to thrive.

5.15 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this important debate on relationship education in schools, as well as for touching on the harrowing stories of violence against women and girls in her constituency. Before I proceed further, I offer my heartfelt condolences to the families, friends, colleagues and pupils of those impacted.

In the decade between 2008 to 2018, around three women a week were killed by men in the UK. Shockingly, around one in four women have been raped or sexually assaulted. This shows the gravity of the misogyny in our society faced by women and girls. Although relationship education can only go so far in addressing male violence against women and girls, it plays an important role in educating our young people on what positive and healthy relationships look like and the importance of putting in place clear boundaries. Those skills are vital in navigating relationships, recognising potential abuse, including that of coercive control, and knowing how and when to seek help.

Relationship education was made compulsory in all primary and secondary schools in 2020. Although schools are able to determine their own curriculum, they must have regard to the statutory guidance released in 2019. From my experience of looking at some of the school materials used, it seems that focus in relationship education has a tendency to gravitate towards other topics rather than spending the necessary amount of time on propagating positive and respectful relationships between boys and girls and addressing many of the issues raised today. That is something that schools and the Government need to reflect on.

An important part of relationship education is teaching young people about the risks and harms of the internet and social media. With damaging online porn available at the touch of a button on smartphones, young men are fed a constant stream of misogynistic content that will change how they view women and girls. While they are able to access hours of degrading and violent content directed at women whenever they like, the relatively small amount of time spent learning the opposite in a

classroom cannot hope to offset the harmful influence. That is why the Conservatives have called for a ban on smartphones in schools for under-16s, which would at least go part of the way in promoting children's wellbeing and protecting them from harmful content on social media during the school day.

It is also important to note that, for many young people, the distinction between the online and media world can be blurred, so they need the skills to navigate that safely. We all know that people feel more anonymous online, say things that they would never say face to face and may even present themselves as someone different to who they actually are. On top of this, they are fed a stream of factually incorrect information and unobtainable body images.

In accordance with Department for Education guidance, schools should be alive to issues such as everyday sexism, misogyny, homophobia and gender stereotypes, and take positive action to build a culture where those are not tolerated. In spite of this, sexual violence and harassment does, I am afraid to say, take place in schools. It is vital that such behaviours are not tolerated and are never acceptable. Any reports of sexual violence or harassment should be taken seriously, and it must be recognised that girls are much more likely to be victims, with boys the most likely perpetrator. With that being said, it is vital that our boys are not made to feel that this behaviour is inevitable as a result of them being male. Indeed, it is only a minority who behave in this way.

When it comes to our boys, we should value their unique attributes and not demonise them or make them feel bad for having masculine traits. These traits are not, in the great majority of cases, toxic. The requirement to deliver RHSE has led to a surge in outside providers making available their resources to schools. Some are good, and some are not so good. The guidance is clear that schools should not, under any circumstances, work with or use materials produced by external agencies that take or promote extreme political positions. Accordingly, schools are required to assess each resource to ensure it is age-appropriate and sensitive to their needs, and should provide examples to parents on request. Parents should be given every opportunity to understand the purpose and content of materials, and it is certainly not appropriate for such materials to be withheld under the guise of copyright restrictions.

All parents have a right to know what a school is teaching their child. It was confirmed by the previous Education Secretary in the Conservative Government that materials used in the classroom can be shared, irrespective of copyright restrictions. It should never be forgotten that parents and carers are ultimately responsible for the education of their children, so in most cases teaching in schools should be done with parents, not contrary to them, and in a way that is sympathetic to their values and beliefs. That starts with being transparent about what is being taught.

It is also important to note that schools have a legal obligation to be politically impartial when teaching, which means that children must be offered a balanced presentation of opposing views. It seems that many schools have struggled with the impartiality requirement on this specific topic, which drove additional guidance to be released in 2022. I note the reference to a backlash—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I know the hon. Lady will be swiftly coming to a conclusion so that we can get the Minister in.

Rebecca Paul: Thank you, Sir Jeremy.

I note the reference to a backlash against RHSE lessons due to anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, and I want to push back on that. It is not unreasonable for parents to raise their concerns about schools teaching factually incorrect, ideological and damaging content about gender identity. They are right to do so, and it is the responsible thing to do. I agree that the teaching of such harmful concepts as fact has done damage to the important subject of RHSE as a whole.

In closing—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but we really must move on to the Minister.

5.21 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):

It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing this debate on relationship education in school, and I thank her for highlighting the vital role that education plays in preventing violence, including violence against women and girls. I know that she has fought long and hard for justice for victims of violence and domestic abuse, and that she recently spoke about these issues in this main Chamber. She stood alongside members of her community after the tragic murder of her constituents Emma and Lettie Pattison, and I take this opportunity to offer my sincere condolences to everyone affected by that.

As a schools Minister and a mum, I know it is vital that we reach children early, before harmful attitudes take root. The classroom must be a place where they learn the values of respect, equality and consent from the very start, and the aim of relationship education is to support all young people to build positive relationships and to keep themselves and others safe. That education must equip them for adult life, and to make a positive contribution to society. It really is a top priority for the Government, and it is central to our mission to make the country's streets safer.

I want to get straight to the heart of the problem and acknowledge the important role of not only schools, but all services that support young people to thrive. The Government's opportunity mission is dedicated to setting up every child with the best start in life, helping all children to achieve and thrive in school, and building skills that will allow young people to forge happy, healthy and fulfilling lives. "Opportunity", "thriving", "belonging" and "purpose" are not just nice words; they are the foundations of healthy individuals and a healthy society, and they are the best tools we have for helping young people to build healthy relationships and for combating violence and prejudice, including misogyny.

Misogyny is not innate. It is learned behaviour, which is why I agree that we must not talk as if boys and young men are the problem. The rise of misogynistic influencers online is a symptom of a number of wider issues that we must address. As part of this mission, we will equip our young people and children with the skills they need to form strong, positive relationships. We will

[*Catherine McKinnell*]

support them to learn about kindness and respect. We will equip them to navigate a world in which 79% of young people have seen violent pornography before they turn 18, in which social media platforms routinely expose young people to misogynistic and violent content, and in which more and more of our social interactions are online. Our review of the statutory guidance for relationship, sex and health education has young people and their wellbeing at its heart, and we are working as quickly as we can to publish revised guidance as soon as possible this year.

We have spoken to teachers, experts and young people, and we are determined to harness their collective wisdom and change the conversation about relationships. Young people have told us that they want their relationship education to be interactive and participatory and to reflect the real complexities of building positive relationships. Experts have told us that they need support to help young people to develop the skills for healthy communication, empathy and emotional regulation. Telling young people about consent is not enough. Telling them about the law is not enough. Young people deserve better than that. They deserve to have teachers who will role-model honest and kind communication about sex, emotions, empathy and kindness.

Let us not pretend relationships are easy. Children need support, starting in early primary, to develop the skills they need for handling disappointment, for paying attention to the needs and boundaries of others and for understanding their own needs and feelings. In secondary schools, teachers must step up to the challenge of opening difficult conversations with their pupils. We know that many teachers already do that brilliantly.

Young people need to learn that romantic and sexual relationships are about care, kindness and generosity and about communication, listening and connection; they must also learn that pornography is not a true representation of sex. Our revised statutory guidance will ensure that relationships and sex education reflects the reality of young people today. Artificial intelligence, the dominance of social media, the availability of pornography and the rise in online misogyny—we cannot ignore the impacts of these trends on young people. Our revised statutory guidance for RSHE will be clear that teachers must be equipped to open conversations with boys and girls about what positive masculinity and femininity mean today and to help young people to develop positive role models that support their self-esteem and their sense of purpose.

Anna Dixon: Parents of LGBTQ+ children are concerned that the 2024 guidance that the previous Government consulted on is providing a hostile environment and preventing conversations about trans and non-binary children from happening. Would the Minister would consider reverting to the 2023 guidance?

Catherine McKinnell: We will publish our RSHE guidance as soon as possible, and it will be focused on keeping children's wellbeing at its heart.

Education can support young people to develop positive attitudes towards people who are different from them and to exercise critical thinking when they encounter situations involving harmful behaviour and harmful sexual violence. These are conversations that we need to have collectively; without stigmatising boys or treating them as the problem, we must recognise that good relationship skills benefit everybody—boys and girls, men and women.

Our intention is that the revised guidance will spark a culture change in the delivery of RSHE and that it will signal our high aspirations for RSHE. We recognise that schools and teachers need support to have these conversations with young people, and we are exploring how best to provide that support in the current tight financial circumstances. That work is a central part of the Government's ambition to halve violence against women and girls within a decade. We cannot achieve that without a significant culture change around equality and our conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Culture change goes beyond schools, but it can germinate from the ideas that children are exposed to in schools, the ways they learn to relate to those who are different from them and the sense of purpose and belonging that schools can provide.

I cannot emphasise how much I welcome the renewed focus on violence against women and girls following the release of the new Netflix drama "Adolescence", which many Members mentioned. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for providing the opportunity to continue that conversation in this debate.

It is not a new issue for any of us. In 2020, Everyone's Invited started to collect the testimonies of young people who had experienced sexual violence and sexual abuse, and in 2021, Ofsted published its review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. Everyone's Invited has shown us that rape culture and misogyny are increasingly appearing in primary schools, and we will publish a new tackling violence against women and girls strategy later this year, which will set out what further actions we will take as well as the progress that we have made so far.

Turning the tide on misogyny will not be a simple task, and we all need to keep talking about it. We need to keep learning, we need to keep challenging and we need to ensure that boys and young men remain part of that conversation.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): We do not have enough time for the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) to wind up the debate, I am afraid, but I will put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered relationship education in schools.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 1 April 2025

DEFENCE

Defence Reform

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): Today this Government are bringing in the deepest reforms in UK Defence for 50 years, which will fundamentally change the way defence operates.

Defence must change to make Britain secure at home and strong abroad. The Government's recent announcement of the largest sustained increase to defence spending since the cold war—rising to 2.5% of GDP in 2027, with an ambition to reach 3% in the next Parliament—is crucial for our national security. It is also a huge opportunity, and responsibility, for UK Defence.

Alongside this significant investment, must come serious reform: to speed up our decision making, focus on outcomes, secure faster delivery and achieve the best value for money for our troops and taxpayers.

Under the Secretary of State and Ministers, UK Defence will now be led by a strengthened Department of State, a fully-fledged Military Strategic Headquarters, a new National Armaments Director Group, and the Defence Nuclear Enterprise.

Our new leadership “Quad”—the Permanent Secretary, Chief of the Defence Staff, National Armaments Director, and Chief of Defence Nuclear—will drive a defence which is more concentrated on strengthening warfighting readiness and deterrence. They will shift an organisation which too often has been obsessed with process to one focused on outcomes—in which information flows quickly, individual accountabilities are clear, and results are demanded.

The key features of our new system will be:

The Permanent Secretary will lead a more agile Department of State. In line with wider civil service reform, this area will be lean and highly skilled, unleashing the exceptional capabilities within Defence by making the systems and processes around us more efficient and empowering. This area will be responsible for providing policy muscle and clear strategic direction to ensure that Defence is focused on outcomes and delivery. The Department of State will contain a streamlined set of four DG roles reporting to the Permanent Secretary, focused on strategy and transformation, people, policy and finance.

Our armed forces show great courage and collaboration in the work they do on operations to keep our country secure at home and strong abroad. The UK armed forces' most senior officer, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), will, for the first time since this role was created, now command the service chiefs and head a newly-established Military Strategic Headquarters as the single point of force design and delivery of the armed forces. The new MSHQ will support the journey from a “joint” to an “integrated” force that better harnesses all five domains of maritime, air, land, cyber and space. They will be supported by a small central team integrating across activity and force design, prioritising investment to improve warfighting readiness and lethality.

The National Armaments Director Group will fix the broken procurement system and make defence an engine for economic growth in every corner of the UK. It will bring together teams delivering the national “arsenal”, the Government's defence industrial strategy and end-to-end acquisition under one leader, the National Armaments Director. This new structure will enable collaboration

by bringing together Defence Equipment and Support, the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, Defence Digital and parts of Defence Support. The group will also include roles focused on international collaboration and exports, commercial and industry, options and commissioning, and corporate, with the Enterprise CIO moving to the group by 1 July 2025. These roles will work together, and with industry, academia, international partners and allies to develop and deliver innovative solutions to departmental problems.

The Chief of Defence Nuclear is responsible for cohering across the Defence Nuclear Enterprise (DNE), in addition to leading the Defence Nuclear Organisation (DNO) and its arm's length bodies. The DNE unites the Royal Navy, Strategic Command and DNO, with its ALBs including the Submarine Delivery Agency and AWE—the partnership of organisations that maintain, renew, and sustain the UK's nuclear deterrent which keeps us and our NATO allies safe 24/7. The financial nuclear ringfence ensures nuclear spending is prioritised and allows a focus on delivery and outcomes. Under Defence reform, CDN will act as the clear point of accountability for the ringfence, working closely with industry and the MSHQ finance teams to ensure effective management.

We will have four new budget holders, one for each of the Quad. Funding and spend will be categorised into invest, readiness and operate—with the NAD holding the invest budget and MSHQ responsible for the operate budget and the readiness budget of the frontline commands. Balance of investment decisions will be made across the whole Department, set against Ministers' strategic priorities to ensure resources match ambitions. The principal accounting officer will delegate multi-year budgets, in line with HM Treasury's departmental spending settlement, to each area. Financial year 2025-26 will be a transitional year, with quarterly reform programme milestones through the year and the bulk of the transformation complete by financial year 2026-27. The drive to reform Defence will continue throughout this Parliament.

The far-reaching changes in this Defence reform programme will help cut waste, boost British growth and jobs, and fast-track the technologies of the future into the hands of our frontline forces.

This is the start of a new era of UK Defence.

[HCWS 573]

EDUCATION

New Further Education College Condition Allocation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Skills (Jacqui Smith), has made the following statement:

The Government's first priority is economic growth, which requires a strong skills system, ensuring businesses have the expert workforces they need to grow. This Government are clear through their opportunity and growth missions that ensuring a consistent, skilled pipeline of workers is essential to the delivery of the plan for change. We need to ensure young people and adults have the opportunity to access pathways made available through education and learning. This will in turn help to drive productivity and economic growth—giving all people the opportunity to upskill and reskill to meet employer needs, fill skills shortage vacancies, and improve living standards.

Our ambition is a world class further education (FE) system that delivers for the whole nation and supports these missions. A key part of this is ensuring FE colleges are fit for the future—with better facilities and good quality sustainable buildings.

Following the autumn Budget, I am today announcing details of the investment of £302 million of capital funding to improve the condition of the further education college estate in England. An allocation of £302 million will be provided in financial year

2025-26 to all FE colleges and designated institutions in England. The aim of the investment is to ensure the FE estate is high quality and supports our skills pipeline. All FE colleges and designated institutions will receive a share of the £302 million, which will be directly allocated to them.

FE colleges are given the discretion to decide how to invest the funding in condition improvement priorities across their estates in line with guidance which the Department will publish here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-college-capital-allocation-2025-to-2026>.

This funding is part of the £6.7 billion capital allocation the Department for Education received at the autumn Budget. This is a 19% real-terms increase from 2024-25, demonstrating the Government's commitment to protecting education priorities against a tough fiscal context. Of this funding, £950 million is to support our skills system and provision across England in delivering the skills that will drive economic growth. As part of that investment, I am announcing today that further capital funding will be made available in 2025-26 to support capacity for rising numbers of 16 to 19 year olds in Greater Manchester combined authority and Leeds city council, which will each receive £10 million of post-16 capacity funding. This additional capacity will ensure young people continue in their education and training, spreading opportunities across the country.

[HCWS571]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Cyber-security and Resilience Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): Today the Government have published a policy statement on proposed legislative measures to bolster the UK's cyber-security and resilience.

Our digital economy and essential services are increasingly being attacked by cyber-criminals and state actors, threatening essential public services and infrastructure. This poses a serious risk not only to UK citizens, with core services like hospitals being targeted, but also to the performance of our economy. UK businesses lost around £87 billion from cyber-attacks between 2015 and 2019—that is £87 billion taken from our economy, much of which went into the hands of cyber-criminals.

Enhanced cyber-security is an essential pillar not only of our national security, but of the UK's economic growth. We cannot have economic growth without stability, and we cannot have stability without national security.

The UK's only existing cross-sector cyber legislation—the Network and Information Systems (NIS) Regulations—was introduced in 2018 when the UK was still an EU member state. The rapidly evolving threat landscape and changing nature of digital services mean that these regulations need to be updated, and we no longer have powers in primary legislation to make the amendments needed.

That is why we committed to introduce a cyber-security and resilience Bill in the King's Speech in July last year. As set out in the policy statement published today, the Bill will strengthen the UK's cyber-defences and make sure that the critical infrastructure and digital services UK citizens and business rely on are more secure. This will enhance the UK's level of cyber-security and resilience at a time when similar steps are being taken by our international counterparts, such as the EU, which has updated the NIS framework through its own updated directive.

The policy statement provides more detail to the Bill's measures announced in the King's Speech:

Expanding the scope of regulations to protect more digital services and supply chains. The Bill will bring managed IT service providers that provide digital services into the scope of the regulatory framework. The Bill will allow individual regulators to designate a small number of important suppliers to regulated entities as "critical suppliers", including those that would otherwise be exempted from regulation as SMEs. This, in addition to embedding supply chain security requirements directly into our regulatory framework, will address supply chain vulnerabilities and reduce the threat of significant disruptions to critical services. This will build a better picture of the threats facing our critical national infrastructure and protect a broader range of services from cyber-attacks.

Empowering regulators and enhancing oversight. Regulators will be better equipped with the tools they need to perform their duties effectively, including enhanced oversight of cyber-incidents affecting regulated entities and improved cost recovery powers. The Information Commissioner's information gathering powers will be strengthened, to improve its understanding of the landscape of cyber-security threats affecting the expanded portfolio of digital service providers that it will oversee.

Ensuring the regulatory framework can keep pace with the ever-changing cyber-landscape. The Bill will allow the Government to update the regulatory framework in the future via secondary legislation, if necessary. For example, the Government would be able to bring new sectors into scope of the regulations, if necessary to do so. The Bill will enable the Government to update the security requirements for regulated services in line with best practice, improving clarity for service providers in terms of what is expected of them.

In addition to the policy proposals outlined in the King's Speech for inclusion in the Bill, we have identified a number of additional cyber-security and resilience proposals, as set out in the policy statement. The appropriate legislative vehicle for these has yet to be determined.

The Government propose bringing data infrastructure into the scope of the regulatory framework, recognising their new status as critical national infrastructure and essential role in ensuring the stability and growth of our digital economy. Additionally, to ensure our regulatory framework is implemented with a consistent understanding of the Government's cyber-security and resilience objectives, we propose enabling the Secretary of State to publish a statement of strategic priorities. This will establish a unified set of objectives and expectations for regulators. Finally, we intend to provide new powers to the Secretary of State to direct a regulator, or regulated entities, to take action when it is necessary for national security. This will be invaluable in responding to the constant evolution of both the cyber-landscape and the changes in tactics used by cyber threat actors.

The Government have listened to the views expressed to the previous Government in the 2022 consultation on cyber-security to develop the Bill's measures. The measures set out in the policy statement build on what we have learned from our engagement with key international partners, including learnings from the European Union on the implementation of the NIS2 directive (Directive (EU) 2022-2555) and 2023 data infrastructure consultation. We will continue to engage with and learn from the actions taken by other nations to improve cyber-security.

These cyber-security and resilience measures represent a significant step forward in our efforts to protect the UK from the growing threats of cyber-attacks. Cyber-security is a critical enabler of economic growth, and

by protecting our digital assets and ensuring the resilience of our critical services we are creating a stable environment that fosters innovation and attracts investment.

My officials and I will engage with parliamentarians, regulators and industry groups to thoroughly test the proposals before the Bill is introduced to Parliament this year.

[HCWS572]

Petition

Tuesday 1 April 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Income threshold for partner and family visas

The petition of residents of the constituency of Bradford East,

Declares that everyone deserves the right to family life under Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights and therefore the minimum income threshold for partner/family visas should be withdrawn.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take a compassionate approach to partner/family visas, withdraw the previous Government's changes to the minimum income threshold, and ensure that any future threshold be accessible and no higher than the National Living Wage.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Imran Hussain, *Official Report*, 5 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 399.]

[P003049]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra):

British citizens and those settled in the UK are free to enter into a genuine relationship with whomever they choose. If they wish to establish their family life in the UK, it is appropriate they should do so on the basis they can support themselves financially without recourse to public funds.

The family immigration rules, including the minimum income requirement, need to balance respect for family life with ensuring the economic wellbeing of the UK is maintained. To help ensure we reach the right balance and have a solid evidence base for any change, the Government commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee in September to review the financial requirements in the family immigration rules.

Conducting a full review of the financial requirements across the family routes will ensure we have a clear and consistent system. There will be no changes to the current threshold of £29,000, until the MAC review is complete. The MAC is an independent body and any review it undertakes will be robust and transparent. The review, which was commissioned in September 2024, will take approximately nine months.

The MAC has already completed a call for evidence, which closed on 11 December, to gather the views of stakeholders and those affected by changes to the family rules. More than 2,000 people responded—a record for a MAC consultation.

The minimum income requirement is one of the “core” requirements of the family immigration rules. The rules contain provisions to ensure the Government meet our obligations under article 8 of the European convention on human rights even when the “core” requirements are not met. Where there are exceptional circumstances which would render refusal a breach of article 8 of the ECHR because it would result in unjustifiably harsh consequences for the applicant or their family, a person can still be granted permission. Where this is the case, an applicant will be placed on a 10-year route to settlement instead of the standard five-year route.

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