

**Wednesday
2 April 2025**

**Volume 765
No. 119**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 2 April 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

UK Industrial Strategy

1. **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the development of a new UK industrial strategy.

[903482]

4. **Adam Thompson** (Erewhash) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the development of a new UK industrial strategy. [903485]

8. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the development of a new UK industrial strategy. [903489]

9. **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the development of a new UK industrial strategy.

[903490]

14. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the development of a new UK industrial strategy. [903495]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): Economic growth is the priority for this Government, and our industrial strategy is central to achieving it. Last week I co-hosted a roundtable with the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland, Caoimhe Archibald, and business organisations to discuss how we can work together to ensure that the industrial strategy benefits Northern Ireland.

Adam Jogee: Northern Ireland, like Newcastle-under-Lyme, has a proud industrial heritage. Can the Secretary of State expand on his answer and give us a flavour of the specific discussions he has had with industry, higher education institutions and the Executive on ensuring that Northern Ireland is right alongside Newcastle-under-Lyme at the heart of the Government's new industrial strategy?

Hilary Benn: Northern Ireland does indeed have a great industrial heritage. Titanic Studios, for example, had been the paint shed for Harland and Wolff, and now it hosts a lot of film making. Another example is the revival of Harland and Wolff, which, thanks to the takeover by Navantia, will now be building the Navy's three new fleet solid support ships. Those are two good examples of Northern Ireland's strength.

Adam Thompson: Does the Secretary of State agree that the UK industrial strategy is of deep importance to residents of Northern Ireland, as it is to residents of Erewhash, where we are currently in the process of redeveloping New Stanton Park to form a new industrial future from the rubble of our famous former ironworks?

Hilary Benn: I do indeed, and I wish my hon. Friend every success with the New Stanton Park redevelopment. At the roundtable that I co-chaired last week, we had representatives from manufacturing, from cyber, from small businesses such as Alchemy, and from the chambers of commerce for Derry/Londonderry and for Causeway Coast. Those businesses can see the industrial strategy resulting in great opportunities for the people and businesses of Northern Ireland.

Chris Vince: A core objective of the Government's modern industrial strategy is to unleash the full potential of our cities and regions, which is as true in Northern as it is in my constituency of Harlow. Does the Secretary of State agree that Northern Ireland's four city growth deals, which the Government committed to at the Budget, can play a vital role in this?

Hilary Benn: I wish Harlow every success as well. The city and growth deals are really important to Northern Ireland's economic future. The Government are investing a considerable amount of money, together with the Executive, private sector partners and businesses. Among the projects that the city and growth deals will support are those relating to digital innovation, decarbonisation and digital health—yet another example of the great strength of the Northern Ireland economy.

Josh Dean: If we are to boost productivity, drive clean, green power and build a resilient economy across the UK, collaboration will be essential. Will the Secretary of State set out what political engagement he has had with business leaders and politicians on working together to deliver the best for Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom?

Hilary Benn: Last Thursday I visited Foyle port and its innovation park. A new data centre will be built there to tap into the renewable energy that is available alongside it. That is a really good example of the port thinking about its economic future and how we will get new businesses in, drawing on the great strength that Northern Ireland has in renewable energy. I hope we see more such developments.

Euan Stainbank: My constituents in Falkirk saw at first hand the failure of Governments to collaborate in the previous Parliament. What engagement has the Secretary of State had with political leaders and business and sector leaders, such as those in bus manufacturing, to work together to deliver the best for Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend gives me the chance to talk about the great success of Wrightbus, based in Ballymena, which has won a huge new order from Go-Ahead. It is making the electric and hydrogen buses of the future, and is taking on more staff. I would encourage anyone across the United Kingdom who is thinking of buying buses for their fleet to see what is available at Wrightbus.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Secretary of State further outline what representations he has made to Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the UK industrial strategy pays more than lip service to the position of Northern Ireland's manufacturing industry, as seen in aerospace, shipbuilding and defence, which has a global reputation for being top-class? How will he advocate for our own Government to invest in those sectors even further and even better?

Hilary Benn: I have already pointed out examples of that investment. To Harland and Wolff, I would add the order that is going to Thales to make more missiles for Ukraine, which will create an additional 200 jobs. As the answers that I have given demonstrate, Northern Ireland has enormous strengths, and the task of the strategy, and for all of us, is to build on them.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Can the Secretary of State give safeguards for the benefits of the UK industrial strategy, such as economic growth, innovation, and research and development, against the adverse effects of the Windsor framework?

Hilary Benn: The Windsor framework is a necessity arising from our departure from the European Union, because we have got two trading entities with different rules and an open border, and some arrangement had to be put in place to manage that. But the goods are continuing to flow both ways across the Irish sea. I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the growth rate in Northern Ireland is higher than in the UK as a whole. Northern Ireland also has the lowest unemployment in the UK.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): With regard to international trade, as mentioned by the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton), what assessment has been made of the UK industrial strategy and the impact of US tariffs that may come on goods manufactured in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: We will discover more later today about the decision that we are told the US Administration are about to make. Tariffs are not good for any country, and they are not good for the global trading system, but we will have to see what the consequences are. Any tariffs that the United States of America puts on the United Kingdom will be felt equally in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain. We will not hesitate to take the action that is necessary to respond, but we are not going to make snap decisions, because we are also trying to negotiate an economic agreement with the United States of America.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): An industrial strategy would be very welcome, but is not the reality that any assistance under an industrial strategy in Northern Ireland would be subject to EU state aid rules, that any raw materials for industry in Northern Ireland that come from GB would have to pass through the international EU customs border, and that many goods would have to be made to EU, not UK, standards? Unless or until we get rid of those hindrances, how do we liberate such a strategy?

Hilary Benn: As I pointed out in my previous answer, the Windsor framework, which was negotiated by the previous Government and was a huge improvement on

the Northern Ireland protocol, is the only available means of managing the challenge of having two systems, with two different sets of rules, and an open border. Not all Members of the House may want to recognise that fact, but it is a fact, and we have to deal with it.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): The Secretary of State will be aware that over the past couple of decades investment from US companies in Northern Ireland has been important for economic growth and for cementing the peace process. As we all await the announcement from the President of the United States later today, will the Secretary of State give some thought to supporting businesses that could be detrimentally affected by any potential tariffs in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: We are going to have to wait and see what the US Administration decide. As I have already indicated, the Government will take the steps that are necessary in the national interest, but we are seeking to negotiate an agreement, and that work is continuing, notwithstanding what is announced later today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): As the House has heard, we are expecting Washington later today to announce the biggest changes to its tariff regime in a generation. That may cause huge disruption to industry and business throughout the United Kingdom, and that disruption may be particularly felt in Northern Ireland. What guidance have the Government provided to businesses in Northern Ireland to help them prepare for different scenarios?

Hilary Benn: We do not yet know, apart from the tariffs on cars and on steel and aluminium, what else the US Administration may announce later today. But the effects of any tariffs, if imposed, will be felt equally in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the United Kingdom. We will have to deal with the consequences when we know what the US Administration have decided.

Alex Burghart: I am afraid that reveals that the Government have provided businesses with no information to help them prepare for the different scenarios that may emerge. The Secretary of State will be aware that in some scenarios Northern Ireland, because of its unique arrangements, may be particularly disadvantaged in a trade war. Will he confirm to the House that, if that happens, the Government will be prepared to use article 16 of the Windsor framework to take unilateral safeguarding measures to protect businesses in GB and Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: In respect of tariffs that affect the whole of the United Kingdom, as I have already said to the hon. Gentleman, we will have to see what they are and take the appropriate action in response. If the EU retaliates, then there will be an issue in respect of Northern Ireland, as he will be well aware. However, there is the tariff reimbursement scheme, of which he will also be aware, and that means that, provided those businesses can demonstrate that the goods they have bought from the United States of America are not leaving the United Kingdom, they can get that tariff reimbursed.

Defence Expenditure: Supply Chain

2. **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the potential impact of defence expenditure in Northern Ireland on defence supply chain companies in the rest of the UK. [903483]

10. **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the potential impact of defence expenditure in Northern Ireland on defence supply chain companies in the rest of the UK. [903491]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The Government's commitment to increasing defence expenditure to 2.5% of GDP from April 2027 will provide an opportunity for defence companies in Northern Ireland to secure investment and create jobs.

Luke Myer: Teesside has strong and enduring ties with Northern Ireland: we remember the contribution of the late Mo Mowlam and her legacy, as well as the economic ties. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government's historic uplift in defence spending can deepen those ties and ensure jobs and growth across the UK?

Hilary Benn: I do indeed agree, because it is an opportunity for UK defence businesses, including in Northern Ireland, to take advantage of the increased defence expenditure. I have already indicated to the House two examples, in Thales and in Harland and Wolff, where the Government are investing in Northern Ireland already.

Johanna Baxter: The UK defence industry supports hundreds of thousands of good jobs and represents UK manufacturing at its best. Will the Secretary of State outline what the Government are doing to support the defence sector in Scotland and in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: The most important thing that we are doing is increasing defence expenditure, which will provide the opportunities to which I referred a moment ago. I also very much welcome the Ministry of Defence's announcement of a new hub for small and medium-sized enterprises to allow them better access to the defence supply chain. The MOD has also committed to setting a target by July this year for spending on SMEs.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State might recall that two years ago I launched a report that highlighted that Northern Ireland receives one fifth of the UK average spend on defence. That incorporates the commitment for Harland and Wolff, which I worked on and greatly welcome. I also welcome the announcement of a £1.6 billion contract for Thales. However, does he accept that the previous Government committed to a thorough and thoughtful publication of how they would support continued growth in Northern Ireland's defence sector? Will he similarly commit to doing so?

Hilary Benn: The Ministry of Defence has agreed to deliver precisely that "Safeguarding the Union" commitment through its defence industrial strategy,

which will look at how the UK's defence, technological and industrial base can contribute to the Government's growth mission, including in Northern Ireland.

Gavin Robinson: The House of Commons will this afternoon recognise 125 years of the Irish Guards as a British regiment. When we consider the capacity to arm those who defend us, should we not also continue in our resolve to defend those who stand up for the values of this nation? In terms of legacy, will the Secretary of State commit to defending those who defended us?

Hilary Benn: I certainly will. Those who served in Operation Banner were protecting the people of Northern Ireland and standing up for the values of our country. We have discussed that a great deal recently, and since I last had the opportunity to address the House, the right hon. Gentleman will have seen the decision the Ministry of Defence has taken to judicially review the Clonoe inquest verdict—a decision that I support.

Great British Energy

3. **Mary Glindon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Great British Energy funding on Northern Ireland. [903484]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): Great British Energy will operate across the whole of the United Kingdom, helping to reduce our reliance on imported gas and bring down energy bills. UK Ministers and GB Energy will work with Northern Ireland's Department for the Economy to explore opportunities to increase clean energy deployment by 2030, starting with £1.6 million of funding to the Executive for sustainable energy.

Mary Glindon: Abandoning the 2050 net zero target shows that the Tory leader has learned nothing from her party's historic election defeat. Does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland has a huge amount to gain from this Labour Government, working together with the Northern Ireland Executive on the transition to clean power? Will she update us on any recent discussions she has had with the Executive?

Fleur Anderson: The Conservatives' energy policy now, as over the past 14 years, fails to bring down bills, still relies on expensive oil and gas, fails to invest in green jobs, and fails future generations on climate change. This Government are investing in the new technologies we need. Two weeks ago I was delighted to join the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), at Ulster University to see its cutting-edge renewable energy and solar panel development and the benefits that the clean energy transition can bring to Northern Ireland. I am also working with the Executive on this.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): In pursuit of their unrealistic and costly net zero policies, this Government have committed billions of pounds to carbon capture; guaranteed long-term prices to renewable energy sources, which has added to consumer Bills; and set up GB Energy, a costly quango. One project that is likely to apply to

GB Energy is the proposal for a massive wind farm off the coast of Northern Ireland and adjacent to the Giant's Causeway, a world heritage site and major tourist attraction. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that GB Energy does not support a project that would have a detrimental effect on our tourism industry?

Fleur Anderson: Where the wind farms are positioned will be subject to the normal planning processes, but wind farms and solar power offer huge opportunities to Northern Ireland. Net zero is the future; reliance on expensive oil and gas is the past. Bills will come down and jobs will grow with the new technologies that we can bring forward.

Autumn Budget 2024

5. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on Northern Ireland. [903486]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The record £18.2 billion funding settlement for 2025-26 will provide Northern Ireland with funding in line with its independently assessed level of need, and it is now for the Executive to decide how that funding is spent.

Sarah Bool: The Royal College of General Practitioners in Northern Ireland has said that the hike in national insurance contributions will be catastrophic for GP surgeries. With many practices teetering on the edge, why are Ministers not doing more to talk to their colleagues in the Treasury?

Hilary Benn: I would point out to the hon. Member that the previous Government left—[*Interruption.*] However much they may deny it, the previous Government left a fiscal black hole that had to be filled. The increase in expenditure resulting from the autumn Budget is helping to fund, in part, the record settlement that the Northern Ireland Executive have got for 2025-26.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Committee will soon publish our first report to the House on the funding of public services, and the issue of revenue raising by the Executive continues to be highlighted. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with the Executive to help deliver longer-term financial sustainability in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: I have regular discussions with the Executive about the financial situation and about their plans. The truth is very simple: all Governments around the world, including the Northern Ireland Executive, have choices to make, with the resources available, as to whether they seek to raise revenue to fund more things, including further investment in health. Those are choices for the Executive to make, but if they do not make those choices, they will have less funds than would otherwise be available to them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Yesterday, Belfast Chamber, which represents 600 businesses, warned that many Northern Irish businesses are being forced to freeze growth plans, halt recruitment and, in some cases, cut jobs to absorb rising costs as a consequence of the rising employer national insurance contributions due to take effect in just four days. What assessment has the Northern Ireland Office made of the impact of those tax rises on small and medium-sized enterprises, and what practical discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Northern Ireland Executive to support SMEs, which are the future of Northern Ireland's growth?

Hilary Benn: Of course the increase in employer's national insurance will be difficult for some firms—that is clearly the case—but, as I said, the North Ireland economy is growing faster than the rest of the United Kingdom and has low unemployment. The rest of today's questions time has highlighted the huge areas of potential that the Northern Ireland economy has to continue to grow and create new jobs and businesses.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Northern Ireland Farming Minister estimates that three quarters of dairy farms in Northern Ireland could be hit by inheritance tax following the Chancellor's disastrous changes. Given the particularly high cost of agricultural land compared with farming incomes in Northern Ireland, does the Secretary of State recognise that the Budget is a direct threat to family farms and thousands of livelihoods across Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: The figures the hon. Gentleman just referred to do not reflect the Treasury's assessment of the number of farms that will be affected, which is based on claims submitted in the past. I understand the farming industry's concerns, but the Treasury is clear that, first, it will not hit the majority of farms and, secondly, we have to do something about very big landowners who buy a lot of land to avoid inheritance tax.

Public Sector Reform

6. **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on best practice for public sector reform. [903487]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): Public sector reform is a priority for this Government, and I regularly meet with Northern Ireland Executive Ministers, unions and public service providers. Most recently, the Government and Executive agreed £129 million of funding for public service transformation for health, special educational needs, justice and waste water.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I welcome what the Minister said about public service reform being a shared challenge. Does she agree that it is in the interests of patients and people in Northern Ireland and England for the Executive and the Government to share knowledge and best practice?

Fleur Anderson: I absolutely agree. Public service transformation is not just about funding; it is about how to spend the money that the Northern Ireland

Executive has with the record £18.2 billion settlement. Health is devolved, but we work together to share best practice and expertise, as well as recently agreeing £61 million of funding for multidisciplinary teams in GP surgeries. We will work together to create an NHS fit for the future, and I will be meeting the Health Minister again in Northern Ireland this week.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister ensure that any future discussions with Northern Ireland Ministers about public sector reform include the need for employment practices and procedures in many parts of the public sector to result in workforces that are more broadly representative of the working-age population? The Unionist community has been under-represented in many sectors, including for many years in the public sector.

Fleur Anderson: Workforce challenges are a huge part of public service transformation. Workers across Northern Ireland do fantastic work in health, education and justice, and they need to be supported to do that and to be representative of the community. Workforce issues are devolved, but they are important, and supporting our workforce, and working with unions to do so, is an important part of our working together in an active partnership with the Executive.

Speaker's Statement

11.59 am

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I wish to inform the House about my recent trip to Ukraine. It was at the invitation of Mr Ruslan Stefanchuk, Chairman of the Rada of Ukraine. I joined Speakers from across Europe in a memorial service to mark the third anniversary of the Bucha massacre and to hear the important testimony of the survivors of that terrible atrocity. I also delivered a speech at the Bucha summit, which was opened by the President of Ukraine. I took with me specific cross-party messages of solidarity from the House of Commons, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal Democrats. The appreciation felt by the people of Ukraine for the support offered by this House and the people of the United Kingdom should not be underestimated. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Indeed, in his nightly address on Monday, President Zelensky explicitly expressed his thanks to the United Kingdom for the support provided to Ukraine.

Oral Answers to Questions

PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—
Engagements*

Q1. [903567] **John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 2 April.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): To pick up on your comments, Mr Speaker, on Monday night I spoke to President Zelensky. He wanted me to pass on his

thanks to you for attending in Ukraine, particularly on the third anniversary of the massacre at Bucha. I have been to Bucha, and this is a terrible, terrible third anniversary.

We have been preparing for all eventualities ahead of the confirmation of US tariffs later today. Let me be clear with the House: a trade war is in nobody's interests. The country deserves, and we will take, a calm and pragmatic approach. That is why constructive talks are progressing to agree a wider economic prosperity deal with the US. It is why we are working with all industries and sectors likely to be impacted. Our decisions will always be guided by our national interest. That is why we have prepared for all eventualities and will rule nothing out.

Our deepest sympathies are with the people of Myanmar and Thailand. We are sending immediate lifesaving support to assist their efforts.

May I also extend my personal condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Christina McKelvie? She was much loved and will be sorely missed, especially by our Scottish National party colleagues here and in Scotland.

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

John Grady: This week, the full state pension will rise by £472 a year, putting money in the pockets of pensioners in Glasgow and across the United Kingdom. Does the Prime Minister agree that this rise is possible only because of Labour's plan for change and our commitment to the triple lock?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We can commit to the triple lock because we have restored stability after the Conservatives crashed the economy. That means that, next week, 12 million pensioners will receive up to £470 more—that is an extra £1,900 over this Parliament—including 1 million pensioners in Scotland. The contrast could not be clearer. The shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), called the triple lock "unsustainable", and the Leader of the Opposition wants to means-test the state pension so that she can cut it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): The triple lock was a Conservative policy—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Badenoch: Rather than the Prime Minister congratulating himself on what we did, why don't we talk about what he is doing? From Sunday, Labour's job tax will mean that many British businesses face a terrible choice: cut wages, put up prices or sack their staff. What is his advice to those businesses?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady says that the triple lock "was" a Conservative policy. The Conservatives were once thought to be the party of sound finances, but they blew all of that. She asked what we are doing. We are clearing up the mess that they left, we are dealing with global instability, and we

recognise the pressures that are bearing down on businesses, individuals, and working people. That is why we are rolling up our sleeves. Yesterday, I was pleased to announce the national living wage increasing by £1,400. That is a pay rise for millions of workers. We have announced £150 for the warm home discount, now extended to 6 million households, which is one in five families. Wages are going up faster than prices. Never forget: under the Conservative party there were the worst living standards on record, inflation up to 11%, and public services left on their knees.

Mrs Badenoch: The only mess is the one that the Prime Minister made with his Budget. They had an emergency Budget last week that fixed nothing. He says that he is bringing stability, but all we see is fragility. During the election, the Prime Minister also promised that he would not increase taxes on working people, but even the Office for Budget Responsibility says that the jobs tax will be passed on to workers. On average, families will be £3,500 poorer. Why should anyone trust him again?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady's fantasy figure is about as much use as Liz Truss's economic planning. She turns up every week to carp from the sidelines about decisions that we made in the Budget. Yesterday, she held a press conference and could not say whether she would reverse the decisions that we made at the Budget. I understand, because she cannot bring herself to say that she does not want the investment of an extra £26 billion in our NHS. I am not surprised at that, as that is 2 million extra appointments, 1,000 more GPs, a pay rise for nurses, and so on. Let me get her position right, if I can follow it: she wants the extra £26 billion in the NHS, which was paid for by the national insurance rise—she wants that—but she does not want to reverse the national insurance rises. She is now reduced to this absurd position of voting against a Budget—carping against a Budget—that she actually agrees with.

Mrs Badenoch: I do not agree with making people poorer. I do not agree with pensioner poverty. I do not agree—[*Interruption.*] Out there they are calling it “Awful April”, and that is because of decisions the Prime Minister has made, because he made promises, and broke them. His promises are worthless. People are getting poorer. Before the election he pledged to freeze council tax. Instead, it is going up everywhere, even in Birmingham, where 17,000 tonnes of rubbish goes uncollected on the streets. Does the Prime Minister regret promising the British people that he would freeze their council tax, when he has so obviously failed?

The Prime Minister: I have to ask the right hon. Lady this: if she does not want people to be poorer, why did she not resign when she was in government? The last Government put up council tax for 12 years in a row. She, I think, was actually the Minister responsible for council tax and, in that year, what did she do? She put it up. Even now the Local Government Association Conservative Group manifesto states, on page 9, its current position:

“We ask that that the Government removes the caps on Council Tax”.

Who is leading the charge? Hampshire county council wanted a 15% hike; we said no. Slough council wanted a hike; we said no. Windsor and Maidenhead council—was Tory, now Lib Dem—wanted a hike, and we said no. It is no surprise that council tax is £300 cheaper under Labour councils than under Tory councils.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister does not want to talk about Birmingham, and that is because he knows the situation. I will say it again: 17,000 tonnes of rubbish on Birmingham's streets. Normally, a state of emergency is called for natural disasters, not Labour ones. His policies have left our economy dangerously fragile. The Chancellor, once again, left herself no room for manoeuvre. Economic experts, real economists, say that she will either have to break her fiscal rules or put up taxes—which will it be?

The Prime Minister: I think the right hon. Lady must have picked up the script she was using a few weeks ago, because only then she was saying that we were going to put up taxes in the spring statement. The situation in Birmingham is completely unacceptable, and I fully support the council in declaring it a major incident to resolve the situation. We will put in whatever additional support is needed. When the Conservatives were in government, we lost more days to strike action than in any year since the 1980s. NHS workers were on the picket line, not on the frontline, and that sent waiting lists through the roof, so we will take no lectures on industrial harmony from the Conservatives.

Mrs Badenoch: The whole House would have heard that the Prime Minister did not say whether he could keep to his fiscal rules. That means it is either change that or put up taxes. Nine months ago, we left Labour the fastest-growing economy in the G7. [*Interruption.*] We did. I remember watching his MPs laughing at their first destructive Budget. They have had another one that has made our economy dangerously vulnerable. The Bank of England says that his policies have pushed up the cost of living for families. Does he disagree with the Bank, or does he accept his policies mean higher bills?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady must be the only person left in the country who actually thinks the Tories did well on the economy when they were in power. That was what was tested at the last election. Living standards were the worst on record, and inflation soared up to 11%. The NHS was on its knees. She is so obsessed with talking down the country that she has not read the OBR forecast properly. Growth is up in 2026, in 2027, in 2028 and in 2029. That is thanks to our planning reforms, the largest growth measure the OBR has ever costed. What did the Tories do when that Bill came before Parliament? They abstained. We do not grow the economy or build houses by abstaining. They are the same old party. They have not changed. Nothing's new.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister talks about inflation. We left it at 2%. It is now twice what the OBR forecast when we were in government. The fact is that his decisions have made our economy fragile, just as we face global trade wars. In November, I urged him to seize the draft US trade deal that the Conservatives negotiated. Instead, he lost our most experienced trade

negotiator. It is no wonder he cannot get a tariff deal for British cars. The Conservatives secured investments for that industry, with £600 million from BMW, £2 billion from Nissan and £4 billion from Jaguar Land Rover. Labour's record is a car industry in crisis, even before tariffs, with 25,000 more jobs now at risk. He says he is preparing for all eventualities. Can the Prime Minister tell us exactly what he is doing to protect the British car industry from his failure to negotiate?

The Prime Minister: We are taking a calm, pragmatic approach and keeping our feet on the ground. Constructive talks are ongoing on a wider economic prosperity deal with the US. That is really important at this moment. We are working with all sectors that are likely to be impacted, and we are guided by our national interest at all times, and that is why we have said we will not rule anything out, but it is important at a moment like this that we do not have knee-jerk reactions and that we are cool-headed about this. That is why we will not rule anything out. The right hon. Lady was the Trade Secretary who failed to get a trade deal with the US.

Q2. [903569] **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): Today, the Trump Administration will announce new tariffs that will hurt working people in the US and around the world. Does the Prime Minister agree that, at a time when big tech has grown fat by corrupting our politics and preying on young people, the wrong approach would be to pander to his bullying tactics and the tech billionaires in his imperial court by cutting the digital services tax? Can he assure the public that the poorest will not get cuts, while the richest get a free ride?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this important issue. There are issues in relation to Northern Ireland in particular that we have to deal with very carefully. We will always put the national interest first, and that is why I am pleased that talks are ongoing, and they are constructive talks. I believe that a trade war is in nobody's interest, and all of the sectors and industries impacted are of the same view, so we will continue to make that progress in the national interest.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself with the Prime Minister's earlier remarks, particularly about Myanmar and Thailand. I support the aid; despite the budget cuts, I hope we can be as generous as possible because of the humanitarian crisis there.

The Prime Minister has shown commendable leadership over Ukraine, with his plan for a military coalition of the willing against Putin. Will he now provide similar leadership with an economic coalition of the willing against Trump's tariffs and for free trade, so we can avoid a global trade war and a global recession?

The Prime Minister: Every week the right hon. Gentleman tries to tempt me to make what I think is a false choice between our relationship with the US and our relationships with other countries, particularly in Europe. I think that is the wrong choice on defence, on security and on intelligence, for reasons that we have rehearsed across this Chamber. I also think it is wrong on trade and on the economy. We have a good deal of

trade—a balanced trade relationship—with the US, and I believe that our interests are best served by calmly trying to secure a deal that is in our national interest, while at the same time preparing and leaving all options on the table.

Ed Davey: I hope the Prime Minister is able to cut a deal, but I increasingly fear that the deal will not be good enough to avoid a global trade war. That is why one of the options must be to work with our European allies, our Commonwealth allies and others, because if we do not tackle Trump's tariffs we could be saying goodbye to free trade for a generation.

Turning to a domestic matter, three years ago the American private equity firm KKR bought a 25% stake in Northumbrian Water. Since then, people across the north-east have seen their water bills soar, while in the last year alone Northumbrian Water has dumped nearly 1 million tonnes of raw sewage into Durham's Whitburn coast conservation area. KKR is now poised to buy into Thames Water, because Ministers have ruled out a special administration regime. Will the Prime Minister guarantee that Thames Water will not be allowed to repeat the same trick of putting up bills and dumping raw sewage at the same time? The Conservatives allowed it; he should not.

The Prime Minister: In relation to the beginning of the right hon. Gentleman's comments, I really do not think it is sensible to say that the first response should be to jump into a trade war with the US. That cannot be the first response of the United Kingdom, and I will resist his urgings to do that.

In relation to water, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the Conservative party's appalling record on water, just like its record on everything. That is why I am pleased that we have already passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 to take the necessary measures, but we will go further.

Q4. [903571] **Damien Egan** (Bristol North East) (Lab): Yesterday, the Work and Pensions Committee visited Manchester, where we saw the power of devolution in action, in this case helping people to find work. With just 5 percentage points separating Labour and Conservative candidates at the last mayoral election, does the Prime Minister agree that to get the maximum advantage from Labour's devolution offer, the west of England needs an ambitious Labour mayor in Helen Godwin, for more jobs, to fix our buses and to get the homes we need built?

The Prime Minister: I believe it is best for communities when their leaders have skin in the game. Helen Godwin grew up in Stapleton, went to college in Filton and has a great record fighting for the community where she is raising her family. Our plan for change has delivered record funding for the west of England: more money for better buses, potholes and getting young people into work. That is the difference a Labour mayor working with a Labour Government delivers for the west of England.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Prime Minister will know that many in the House will be assuaged by his suggestion that he will act in the national interest in relation to tariffs, but most will not have considered that, in acting in the national interest, what

occurs in Northern Ireland is no longer solely in his control. He knows that exports from Northern Ireland are UK exports, and rightly so, yet imports to Northern Ireland could be affected as a consequence of EU retaliatory action. In keeping all his options open, now we have to live in a world of the consequences of the last Government with his support. Will he indicate whether he is prepared to take steps either to exempt Northern Ireland from EU action or to take retaliatory action if the EU does not do so?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which is of real importance to his constituents and to everybody in Northern Ireland. It is a very serious issue. That is why we need to be calm and pragmatic, and that is what workers and businesses in Northern Ireland would want to see from this Government at a time like this. We are, as he would expect, looking carefully at the details of any retaliatory tariffs announced by the EU, if they are announced, and what impact they might have on businesses. As he knows, where goods do not enter the EU, businesses can claim a full reimbursement of any EU duties paid, but I reassure him that the interests of Northern Ireland are at the forefront of our decisions. He may want to know that this morning the Business Secretary spoke to the Northern Ireland Executive, because this is a serious issue and we need to work together to resolve it in the interests of everybody in Northern Ireland.

Q5. [903572] **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): While the last Government resorted to damaging keyboard diplomacy, this Government are leading, bringing 14 nations together this week to tackle illegal immigration. Like the Prime Minister, I have seen at first hand how counter-terror powers can disrupt threats before lives are lost. That same approach is essential in dismantling the smuggling networks. Does he agree that it is time that the Conservatives and Reform dropped the posturing, put national security first and backed our borders Bill?

The Prime Minister: The Conservatives tried an open borders experiment; we are now tackling illegal migration. They talked about flights; we have already removed 24,000 people with no right to be here. Under their Rwanda scheme, which was only ever supposed to return, I think, 300 people a year, what we have achieved in nine months would have taken them 80 years. We have replaced a gimmick with a real deterrent.

Q3. [903570] **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Prime Minister has spoken very movingly, and with genuine sincerity and affection, about his time as a young man in the Langdale valley in the Lake district in my constituency and how that helped to shape him. I wonder whether he is aware that the hill farmers who maintain those stunning landscapes in the lakes and elsewhere will be earning on average significantly less than or barely half of the national minimum wage due to cuts in their income, despite the fact that they provide the backdrop to the remarkably important tourism economy. Will he agree to meet me and upland farmers in the lakes and the dales so that we can design a scheme together to end this poverty and equip our hill farmers to produce food and protect our epic landscapes for generations to come?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman and I share a love of the Lake district. We still go back there with our children. This is obviously a serious issue, which is why we put a record amount into farming at the Budget and also set out our road map. I will happily make sure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to go through that and to take on board any points he has to make in relation to it.

Q6. [903573] **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Hundreds of residents in my constituency at Union Park are facing massive £1 million charges to repair their heating system and for fire safety works that have not been put right by the developer, which has now declared bankruptcy and walked away. Their new freeholder has washed its hands of responsibility and is instead leveraging huge ground rent bills and fines against those residents. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is exactly why we have to move forward with our plan, much delayed by the Conservatives, to abolish the outdated leasehold system once and for all as part of our plan for change?

The Prime Minister: The Deputy Prime Minister is saying, “Absolutely”, in my ear. We will end the feudal leasehold system which has left millions of homeowners subject to unfair costs and unreasonable practices. Our reforms include clear standards for repairs and maintenance, and that will give homeowners a greater say in how their homes are managed. I know the Housing Minister will have heard what my hon. Friend said.

Q7. [903575] **Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): This Labour Government have failed the British public at every turn: they have abandoned the WASPI women, leaving them without the compensation they deserve; they have turned their backs on pensioners by failing to support the winter fuel allowance; they have let down children by keeping the two-child benefit cap in place; and they will inflict further hardship on the most vulnerable by slashing £5 billion from benefits.

Perhaps the most immediate and visible failure, which poses an immediate and direct health risk to the people of Birmingham, is the appalling financial mismanagement of Labour-run Birmingham city council. After more than a decade of Labour control, that council's incompetence has led to mountains of uncollected rubbish piling up on every street, so large that they can be seen by satellites orbiting in space. It is nothing short of a disgrace and a damning indictment of Labour's inability to govern. Will the Prime Minister take urgent action to protect public health and the people of Birmingham by immediately deploying the—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are meant to ask quick questions, otherwise nobody is going to get in.

The Prime Minister: I have said that the situation in Birmingham council is completely unacceptable, but the hon. Gentleman might want to tell his constituents that we have delivered 2 million extra appointments for the NHS, so waiting lists are coming down for them. We have delivered a £1,400 increase in the national living wage, including for his constituents, and we have got record investment into this country, growing the economy, including for his constituents.

Q9. [903577] **Mrs Elsie Blundell** (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): My constituents are grafters—they want to work, and they want to see opportunities created and the skills and investment in infrastructure that we need for the future. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to fix the transport system in the north of England, which has been holding us back, and I invite him to the Atom Valley development zone in my constituency to discuss how we can create skilled jobs in north Greater Manchester.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for my hon Friend's question. We will unlock growth across the country in partnership with local leaders, giving power to those with skin in the game, and we will fix the north's broken transport system—another thing that the Conservatives left in a complete mess—through nearly £1.7 billion for local buses, roads and trams, an additional £415 million to upgrade the trans-Pennine route, and fixing millions of potholes. Obviously, I will consider my hon. Friend's kind invitation.

Q8. [903576] **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): Since the Prime Minister and I last spoke, more than 6,000 people have signed an open letter to the Health Secretary in support of North Devon district hospital, which faces a 10-year wait for urgent repairs. Why is that hospital still being denied a ministerial visit, and will the Government consider the trust's emergency plans and meet me and the trust, so that we can discuss keeping the operating theatres open beyond 2027 to meet capacity?

The Prime Minister: As I said in our previous exchange, obviously the unfunded promises—the fantasy promises—of the Conservative party meant that the hon. Gentleman's hospital would never have been delivered. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members should not moan; they should apologise to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. We had to take tough decisions to make the programme deliverable, which is what we have done. We will continue to support the trust to maintain facilities in advance of the new hospital investment, and the Minister for Secondary Care will be visiting that hospital, which I hope will be an opportunity to have the necessary discussions.

Q10. [903578] **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): Stone Lodge academy, a special school in Ipswich, will be one of the first schools in the country to benefit from a new breakfast club this month. That is an important step in tackling Suffolk's decades-long special educational needs and disabilities crisis, as is the multimillion-pound funding settlement given to opening new specialist places across the county. Will the Prime Minister outline what steps he will be taking to break down the barriers to opportunity further for all children as part of our plan for change?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to say that the first 750 breakfast clubs will open this month. I am pleased that there is an early adopter in my hon. Friend's constituency, as well as in the constituency of the Leader of the Opposition—I am sure she will welcome that one of these weeks. That will put £450 a year back in the pockets of working people. Today, we have awarded £37 million to 300 primary schools to create up to 4,000 nursery places from September, making it easier for working families to access Government-funded childcare.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Some 2,700 workers at Scunthorpe steelworks are facing redundancy, plus many more in the supply chain, and many of those people are my constituents. It is welcome that negotiations are continuing, but whatever the outcome, the local economy is going to need significant support. All those affected would appreciate it and be reassured if the Prime Minister could give an indication that he was personally taking an interest in this matter, and if at some point in the not too distant future, he would meet me, neighbouring MPs and the council leader to discuss the way forward.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. I do take a personal interest. A short while ago, I went to Scunthorpe to talk to the management and workers to understand the challenges at first hand and how deeply worrying this will be for those working there, their families and the community as a whole, which is why negotiations are taking place. I call on the company to accept the offer of financial support that has been advanced, so that we can achieve a sustainable future for the workforce, the industry and the local community, because I believe that there is, and needs to be, a bright future for steel. As I have said, I do take a personal interest in this.

Q11. [903579] **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): Too many of my constituents are struggling to obtain an appointment with a GP. The GPs are trying their best, but they too are struggling, with capacity issues, outdated buildings and outdated technology, all because the Conservative party broke the front door to the national health service. Can the Prime Minister reassure my constituents that our plan for investment and reform will ensure that they can see a GP when they need one?

The Prime Minister: We are focused on delivering real results for patients by scrapping unnecessary targets, bringing back the family doctor, and requiring online bookings, which will help deal with the 8 am scramble. We are investing an additional £889 million to reinforce the front door of the NHS. That is the biggest increase for more than a decade, and it means that there will be hundreds more GPs since we came to power. This week, we have announced record investment to enable community pharmacies to deliver more services for patients, and to free up GP time.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): A recent NHS England report laid bare the catalogue of failures that left a patient with a history of violent aggression unconfined, untreated and completely unmedicated for nine months, until he killed Ian Coates and the young friends Grace O'Malley-Kumar and Barnaby Webber, from Taunton in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister join me and the people of Taunton in paying tribute to the families who have campaigned on this matter? Will he confirm that a public inquiry is to begin? Given the 50% cut to the cost of integrated care boards, will he also confirm that mental health services, both in the community and secure, will not suffer as a result of those cuts?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that tragic case, and I pay tribute to the families. When it comes to cases such as this, I often find it hard

to think how I would respond if I were a family member in such circumstances. I am not sure that I would have the courage that those families have to campaign in the way that they have done, and I pay tribute to them for it. We need to get to the bottom of all these issues, wherever they may lie, and that is what we will do.

Q12. [903581] **Imogen Walker** (Hamilton and Clyde Valley) (Lab): My constituents are struggling to gain access to the healthcare that they desperately need, and one in six Scots is on a waiting list. Meanwhile, in England, the waiting lists have been coming down for the last five months, and more than 2 million appointments have been made available. Does the Prime Minister agree that the SNP-led Government should stop blaming everyone else for their failures, when Scotland's broken public services are their responsibility?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. More than 60,000 Scots have been stuck waiting for tests or treatment for over a year. That is a 46% rise in one year. I had to check that figure because it is so staggering. Despite the backlog, nearly 50,000 fewer operations are being performed than were performed before the pandemic. Let us compare that with the situation in England, where we have driven down waiting lists with more than 2 million extra appointments, and have scrapped NHS England to cut bureaucracy. Scotland's NHS is in desperate need of reform, but the Scottish National party has no strategy, no plans and no ideas.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Earlier, the Prime Minister seemed reluctant to answer a direct question about his jobs tax. Next time he visits my constituency to enjoy the beautiful Buckinghamshire surroundings of Chequers, will he go five minutes up the road to Wendover, and explain to Kate Rumsey of Rumsey's Handmade Chocolates why his choices and those of his Chancellor have led to a 15% increase in costs for that business? As a result, it has already had to lay people off, and has had to reduce the hours of those whom it still employs. Is that what he meant by growth?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to tell anyone why: the Conservatives left a £22 billion black hole. They crashed the economy, they ruined our public services

and, as we mend and rebuild the country, they carp from the sidelines. Even now, they cannot bring themselves to say that they do not want the investment, or that they will reverse the decisions we have made. They actually agree with the decisions we have made, because we are clearing up the mess that they left.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): One year ago yesterday, my constituent James Henderson was killed with other aid workers from World Central Kitchen when taking humanitarian aid into Gaza. Jim's family have told me that he would want confirmation from our Government that we are taking all conceivable steps to make sure that aid, power and supplies are safely returned to Gaza. Could the PM confirm that he is doing all he can to ensure this? Could he also confirm that he will continue to push for a full investigation into the death of Jim and the other British WCK workers to be completed, and for appropriate action to be taken?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this appalling incident, and our thoughts remain with the families of Jim, John Chapman and James Kirby. Attacks on aid workers are never justified. The families deserve justice, and we are pressing the Israeli Government to accelerate their investigation, including into whether criminal proceedings should be initiated. Israel must stop blocking aid to Gaza, the hostages must be released, and we must have an urgent resumption of the ceasefire.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Double child rapist and murderer Colin Pitchfork is up for parole for the fifth time. I know the Prime Minister does not have direct control—nor should he—over the Parole Board, but he does have a view. I have asked this of all his predecessors, and I will now put the question to him: does he agree that men who brutally rape and strangle to death young women should, as a matter of a principle, spend most of their natural life in prison?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this appalling case, and I absolutely agree with him that there must be maximum penalties for anyone falling into that category. I saw many of these cases for myself, at first hand, when I was a prosecutor for five years, and worked with the police on really terrible cases, and I know the impact that such crime has on victims. I thank him for raising this.

British Indian Ocean Territory

12.38 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the status of the negotiations surrounding the future sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. 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. We are now working with Mauritius to finalise the agreement, and although it is in everybody's interest to progress the deal quickly, we have never put an exact date on it, and we do not intend to do so now. Following signature, the Government will bring forward a Bill to enable the implementation of the treaty, and Parliament will of course have the opportunity to scrutinise the treaty in the usual way before ratification.

I repeat that the Government inherited a situation in which the long-term future of the military base was under threat. This deal is rooted in a rational and hard-headed determination to protect UK security and that of our allies. It will protect the base on Diego Garcia, and cement the UK and US presence in the Indo-Pacific for generations to come.

Priti Patel: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. It is incredibly disappointing that, only a day after Foreign Office oral questions, Ministers have had to be hauled back to the House to explain what is going on. Yesterday at lunch time, Downing Street briefed that the agreement between the UK and Mauritius, under which the UK would give away the Chagos islands and pay for the privilege, has been finalised. That was not said in this House yesterday. The Prime Minister of Mauritius has also issued a public statement confirming that. Despite being interrogated on this botched deal in the Chamber yesterday, Ministers gave no indication of this very significant development.

We are still completely in the dark about fundamental questions of enormous importance. How many billions of pounds of hard-pressed British taxpayers' money will we be expected to fork out to lease back territory that we already own? This comes as vulnerable pensioners are having their winter fuel payments ripped away, and family farms and businesses are being punished with new taxes by this Labour Government. What safeguards will be in place to protect the military base on Diego Garcia from other states that may try to establish a foothold on the archipelago? Ministers have so far refused to publish even a map of the buffer zone. What happens to the vital military base on Diego Garcia at the end of the treaty, and what kind of sovereign rights, if any, will we be able to exercise over Diego Garcia in the meantime?

The Prime Minister of Mauritius says that he forced changes to the arrangements on the exercise of sovereign rights and the lease extension. Will the Minister finally

confirm that the account given by the Prime Minister of Mauritius is correct? He cannot simply stand here and avoid these questions. The House does deserve answers; so do the British public—the taxpayers. Put simply, the British Indian Ocean Territory should remain British, but Labour has prioritised appeasing the whims of left-wing lawyers and activists, rather than standing up for our national interests. It is high time this deal was ditched.

Finally, there have been reports of implied military threats to the Chagos islands, a British sovereign territory—Labour Members may laugh, but this issue is fundamental to the security of our country—from the regime in Tehran. The Iranian regime has threatened this space. These purported military threats are important. We understand that, in response to such reports, there has been an unusual build-up of American bomber aircraft and equipment-carrying aircraft at the joint UK-US military base on Diego Garcia. This is very serious, and we clearly need to take these threats seriously. We would welcome clarity about the Foreign Office's diplomatic response on this issue.

Stephen Doughty: On parliamentary accountability for this issue, I have answered no fewer than five urgent questions on the subject in the last six months, and I have answered 130 written questions from her and her colleagues. We discussed this twice at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions yesterday. As I have repeatedly said, when the details of the treaty are finalised, it will be presented to this House, and there will be full scrutiny in the usual way. I have explained that a Bill will be brought in to put into force the important aspects of the treaty that require legislative change, and there will of course be full debates, as there should be, in this House.

I simply reject the basis of much of the right hon. Lady's question. As I have said repeatedly, if there was not a problem, why did the Government of whom she was a part start negotiations, and go through 11 rounds of them? There is a significant challenge, and this deal is paramount for our national security. We will not scrimp on our security, and it is important that the deal is put in place, as has been recognised by all the parties.

We will only agree a deal that is in the UK's best interests and protects our national security. Importantly, the right hon. Lady asked about the security provisions to protect the base. These will include full UK control over Diego Garcia, including control of the electromagnetic spectrum, and unrestricted access to and use of the base, as well as a buffer zone around Diego Garcia in which nothing can be built or put in place without our consent. There will be a robust mechanism and review process to ensure that no activity on the outer islands can impinge on the base's operations. Indeed, there will be a prohibition on the presence of foreign security forces, either civilian or military, on the outer islands. As the Prime Minister has said, the full details will of course be set out when the treaty is laid before Parliament, and that will include costs. We will not scrimp on security.

The right hon. Lady asked an important question in relation to Iran. She will understand that for operational reasons and as a matter of policy, we do not offer comment or information relating to foreign nations' military aircraft movements or operations. The UK, in

[Stephen Doughty]

close co-operation with our allies in the United States, closely monitors the security environment in the Indian ocean region to identify and mitigate any potential threats to the base on Diego Garcia.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I share the Minister's bafflement at the Opposition's utter obsession with this issue. Can he confirm that under the agreement, the vital US-UK military base and its operations will be completely unaltered?

Stephen Doughty: I share my hon. Friend's bafflement. With so many issues going on in the world, I do question the number of times this one has been raised. We have answered all the questions before. We welcome the fact that the United States recognises the strength of the deal. It is rooted in a rational and hard-headed determination to protect UK security and that of our allies. Once signed, it will protect the base on Diego Garcia, which was under threat, and cement the presence of the UK and the US in the Indo-Pacific.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Following yesterday's intervention by President Trump, it appears that the White House has the final say on the future of sovereign British territory. Meanwhile, the Chagossians continue to be ignored. The process of securing the deal has been shambolic. Chagossians have been denied their right to a say, and it is shameful how they have been treated. Will the Minister confirm whether there are any plans to ensure that the Chagossians are finally included in discussions at this eleventh hour of the negotiations?

Hard-working families around the country will rightly be questioning why the Government seem to be willing, reportedly, to negotiate such significant payments to Mauritius at a time when winter fuel payments have been scrapped.

The confected consternation of the Conservatives is also bemusing, given that it was their Foreign Secretary who first signalled the UK's intention to secure an agreement. As the Minister confirmed, the treaty must come before the House for scrutiny, especially given its importance to our national security. Can he confirm when that will happen and that this House will have a vote on any final deal?

Stephen Doughty: It was absolutely right, as I have said on many occasions, that the new United States Administration had a chance to consider the agreement. We welcome the fact that the United States recognises the strength of the deal—we heard the comments that have been made—and that is because it will fundamentally protect UK and US security interests. I remind the hon. Lady that we have legal obligations with the United States in relation to the operation of the base and it was only right that it was consulted, with full engagement in the process.

The hon. Lady asks about the Chagossians. We deeply regret, as I have said many times, the way Chagossians were removed from the islands, but the negotiations were between the UK and Mauritius, with our priority being to secure the full operation of the base on Diego Garcia. However, we have worked hard to ensure that

the agreement reflects the importance of the islands to Chagossians. I have set out to the House a number of times the mechanisms and systems that will be in place to do that. It is really important to respect the many different views within the Chagossian community. There is not one settled view. For example, the Chagos Refugees Group, one of the largest Chagossian groups, has in fact welcomed the agreement.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the confirmation of the legal status of the base on Diego Garcia will strengthen our influence in the Asia-Pacific and put us in a strong position to counter the influence of China?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely can. Our national security, and that of our allies, has been at the heart of the agreement. There was a significant problem. The former Government knew that, which is why they started negotiating. We have completed the deal, with the full involvement of the United States and with consideration of all the important measures, which I have set out on many occasions, to keep the base safe.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The Minister knows the regard I have for him, but when he says he has appeared at the Dispatch Box many times with this information, he knows that it has had nothing to do with giving us information—it means he was dragged here. The question I want to ask—the No. 1 question, which was not covered in the detail he set out today—is how much will taxpayers pay for this settlement, and out of which budget will it come? Can he guarantee that at no stage will it come from the defence budget increase?

Stephen Doughty: As I said yesterday, a financial element over 99 years was crucial to protect the operation of such a vital base—we will not scrimp on our security. Once the treaty is signed, it will be put before the House for scrutiny before ratification in the usual way, and that will include the costs. The right hon. Gentleman asks where the budgets are coming from. The terms of the treaty and the associated funding arrangements are still being finalised. Financial obligations, including departmental budgetary responsibilities, will, of course, be managed responsibly within the Government's fiscal framework.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it is vital the UK Government fulfil their obligations under international law? Does he recognise that the January 2021 binding judgment of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea—[*Interruption*—]—which was handed down under the Conservative Government, found that the UK's current administration of the archipelago

“constitutes a wrongful act...and...must be brought to an end as rapidly as possible”?

Stephen Doughty: There does appear to be some confusion about the different legal judgments among the Opposition, as I can hear from the chuntering. There are a number of ways in which the operation of the base was not sustainable. We are very clear that without a deal—as the previous Government recognised—we would face serious, real-world operational

impacts on the base that would erode our ability to operate key frequencies vital for our own communications and to counter hostile states, affecting everything from overflight clearances to securing contractors, with consequential rocketing costs, declining investment and a degraded facility. We were not willing to take that risk, and have therefore secured this base for our security and that of our allies.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The United States is busy increasing its presence on Diego Garcia, most recently with its B-2 Spirit aircraft, probably facing towards Iran. Given that, how much will the Trump White House be contributing to the endowment that the Minister proposes we hand to Mauritius?

Stephen Doughty: As I have set out on a number of occasions, and again today, when we present the treaty, we will present the costs and the arrangements, and the House will have the chance to scrutinise them. We welcome the fact that the United States recognises the strength of this deal, which is because it is rooted in a rational and hard-headed determination to protect our security and that of the United States, and our presence in the Indo-Pacific. As I said before, I am not going to get into operational discussions about matters at the base in relation to the presence of aircraft.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister and his team for their tireless efforts to secure the future of this vital base, which is exactly the right thing to do. Will he assure me that no less than the most robust of security provisions will be in place?

Stephen Doughty: I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend of that fact; it has been at the core of the detail of this arrangement. We will retain full control over Diego Garcia and have robust provisions to keep adversaries out, including unrestricted access to and use of the base for the United Kingdom and the United States, the buffer zone I mentioned, the comprehensive mechanism to prevent activity on the other islands threatening the base operations, and a ban on the presence of foreign security forces.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): In all inhabited British overseas territories, British sovereignty flows, in my opinion, from the self-determination of the islanders and residents, and that is exactly the same with the British Indian Ocean Territory. Even though the population is displaced, British sovereignty flows from Chagossians and their right to self-determination. I ask the Minister again what efforts he has made to engage with the widest possible constituency of Chagossians, and whether he will give them a veto over this deal if it is not acceptable to them.

Stephen Doughty: The islands are not permanently inhabited, and that is one of the fundamental issues in this situation. As I have said repeatedly, we are doing many things that will be supportive of the Chagossian community, including engaging with a number of different groups. There are a range of opinions, and I think it is important that we recognise that—there are, of course, some who support this deal. We continue to put the interests of the Chagossians at the heart of this agreement. Again, full details of that will be available in due course.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Yet again, the Opposition are attempting to sow division between the UK and its allies, and indeed to share our allies' sensitive operational information. If they succeed, it will have impacts on our strategically vital relationships with the US and India. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Opposition should consider waiting until the treaty is ready for scrutiny, rather than damaging our vital national interests in this way?

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree—I think some of the speculation has been hugely unhelpful. We have been hugely grateful for the close co-operation between the United Kingdom and the United States throughout the negotiations, and to the Administration for their extensive and detailed engagement, which has helped us to make progress on this deal. As my hon. Friend rightly points out, this agreement has been welcomed by other important partners, including India. China has not welcomed it, of course, because it knows that the agreement will strengthen the presence of the United Kingdom and the United States in the region.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Today marks the 43rd anniversary of the start of the war in the Falklands—another key overseas territory. Government Members keep referring to the non-binding advisory judgment as the basis of the Chagos deal. If the Argentinians were to seek a similar judgment against the Falklands, would the Minister cede control?

Stephen Doughty: I have to say, as I have said on a number of occasions in this House, that such attempts to make a false comparison are extremely unhelpful, and would not be welcomed by the residents of the Falkland Islands. I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that our support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Falkland Islands is absolute and iron-clad. I have made that clear on many occasions, as have the Minister for the Armed Forces and the Government as a whole.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm once again that any agreement that is made will return to this House for scrutiny?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend asks a very important question. As I have set out, there will be multiple opportunities for this House and the other place to consider this matter, not only through the normal Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process, but through the Bill that will be brought forward to make the necessary provisions under the treaty, which will go through the normal process. Full scrutiny will be afforded to Members of this House.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The President and Vice-President of the United States have made clear their detestation of countries freeloading on defence and security matters. We are not asking for the detail, we are not even asking for the quantum, but we do deserve to know in this House today whether the Government have asked the US to contribute to the base on Diego Garcia that is so vital to it—yes or no?

Stephen Doughty: As I have said on a number of occasions, we welcome the US endorsement of the deal and of its strength, and we are grateful for the close

[Stephen Doughty]

co-operation between the United Kingdom and the United States. The full details will be provided when the treaty is presented to the House.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank my hon. and gallant Friends the Members for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) and for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) for their questions. Can the Minister confirm that this agreement will close potentially dangerous routes for irregular migration? Is that possibly one of the reasons the Conservatives opened and presided over 10 rounds of negotiations on it?

Stephen Doughty: I can absolutely confirm that. That is also why we agreed an important arrangement as an interim with St Helena, which I have spoken to the House about. That has absolutely been at the heart of it, but our primary objective has been to protect the national security of the United Kingdom, our ally the United States and our partners.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I want to go back to the questions from the right hon. Members for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), and indeed the question I asked the Minister the last time this issue was raised in the House. The Minister is well aware that what we are talking about is primarily a US base. Surely he can at least tell the House today that conversations have been held with the US, and that it fully understands that a compensatory package will be made and that there is a question over who will primarily contribute to that package. Can he make that clear to the House today?

Stephen Doughty: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a moment ago. We are absolutely clear that the United States recognises the strength of this deal. We have had excellent co-operation with the US throughout. The full details will be provided in due course.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Not only are the Government preparing to give away sovereign British territory, but they are preparing to pay for the privilege of doing so by handing over billions to Mauritius. The Minister cannot say where the money is coming from, but can he at least agree that that money would be better spent restoring the winter fuel payment to pensioners in need and relieving social care providers, hospices and charities from their national insurance increases here in the UK, rather than being handed over to Mauritius?

Stephen Doughty: Quite frankly, the hon. Member neglects to mention the shocking mess that his former Government left us to inherit. I have been clear in this House on many occasions that we will not scrimp when it comes to the national security of this country, whether that is in relation to Diego Garcia or investment in defence and our armed forces. That is exactly what my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces and the Defence Secretary have been setting out on our wider defence spending. What we are doing in this deal is protecting our national security and defence and that of our ally the United States.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The Minister will have heard the feelings of the House, so can he provide us with the specific guarantees that the Foreign Secretary has secured in relation to preventing hostile states such as China from increasing their influence in the Chagos islands while we as a nation are still paying for them?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member has asked an important question, and I have answered it a number of times. To reiterate, there will be robust security provisions in that regard. That is why China has not welcomed this deal. We will have full UK control with the United States over Diego Garcia. We will have a buffer zone around Diego Garcia, and we will have a robust mechanism to ensure that no activity in the outer islands can impinge on the base's operations. Crucially, there will be a prohibition on the presence of foreign security forces on the outer islands, either civilian or military.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What a disgrace this shabby Chagos deal is turning out to be. Labour are not just giving away our national security; they are going to pay billions to Mauritius for the pleasure. Instead of raising taxes on people and businesses in this country, why does the Minister not stand up for Britain and stop this deal?

Stephen Doughty: We are standing up for Britain, by defending our security and that of our allies, and we will not scrimp on that. It is critical to secure the operation of this base. It is crucial to our interest and that of our allies. As I have asked many times, if there was no problem, why did the hon. Member's former Government start negotiating over this?

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): This is perhaps a question for the Minister for the Armed Forces, who I notice is also on the Front Bench. On the buffer zone, can the Minister state categorically that it will be sufficiently wide to protect all the capabilities on the base?

Stephen Doughty: Yes.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): Surrendering sovereign territory based on a non-binding legal judgment and forking out taxpayer money for the privilege—what kind of deal is that? It is one done behind closed doors, evading the scrutiny of this House. Does the Minister agree that this deal is a prime example of what happens when we have a Government of lawyers, for lawyers, rather than a Government for the British people?

Stephen Doughty: I simply reject the premise of the hon. Member's question. The Government inherited a situation where the effective operation of the base was under threat. Claims that we negotiated this deal simply because of the 2019 International Court of Justice advisory opinion are wrong. That is not the only challenge that we faced, as the previous Government knew. Without a deal, Mauritius would have inevitably pursued a legally binding judgment, and there would be huge implications from that. Not having a deal would affect the real-world operational functionality of the base, which is so crucial to our national security and that of our allies.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister made reference to the UK having full control over Diego Garcia, but earlier this month I received this response from him:

“The right to operate and maintain the naval support facility Diego Garcia is held by the Government of the United States. This includes functions as are necessary for the development, use, maintenance, operation and security of the facility.”

Will he explain what control we would have over Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia in the event that US and UK defence priorities do not align, and at what level the control over the base lies?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member asks an important question. The US operates its naval support facility, and although I will not get into the operational details of that for obvious reasons, the full details will be provided. I can absolutely assure him that we will have control over Diego Garcia and will be working closely with the United States over it.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): As we come to the end of this urgent question, I am still no clearer on the substance of this disastrous deal, so the House must now make assumptions. Given that the Minister is sat next to the Minister for the Armed Forces, can we assume that this deal will be coming out from the Ministry of Defence?

Stephen Doughty: Naturally, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence work closely together on this matter, as indeed Departments do across all Government. I have been very clear that the terms of the treaty and the associated funding arrangements are still being finalised. The responsibilities will be managed responsibly within the Government’s fiscal framework. As for understanding the reasons for this deal and why it is necessary, I suggest that the hon. Member asks some of his formerly ministerial colleagues on the Conservative Benches.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is an incredibly honourable man, and he is much liked in this House, so I say this with all gentleness. My constituents are telling me that the deal with the Indian ocean territory is overwhelming and that the cost factor is

something that they cannot quite understand—and neither can I. Does the Minister understand why pensioners in my constituency and across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are wondering why, at a time of reduced help and aid, the Government are handing over sovereignty of land and then renting it back at a cost to the public purse? Will the Minister outline where the money will come from, when it has been decided that pensioners and ill people on personal independence payments cannot have the support they deserve due to the lack of money within Government?

Stephen Doughty: I know that the hon. Gentleman asks his question with sincerity, and he is much liked in this place too. I suggest that he makes it clear to his constituents that a financial element to this deal was crucial to protect operations. It is crucial for the security of his citizens in Strangford and the citizens of the United Kingdom and of the United States, and our interests overseas. Some of the figures that have been quoted in the media are simply inaccurate, and of course, this will happen over a 99-year period. We will not scrimp when it comes to our security. It is important that we invest in it, and that is exactly what this Government are doing.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it relevant to the questions we have just had?

Amanda Martin: It is linked to the comments of the Liberal spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire). In her question to the Minister, she noted that the winter fuel payment had been scrapped. This is simply not true. The winter fuel payment has not been scrapped, it has been means-tested, and to say otherwise is misleading. It is similar to when the Liberal Democrat-Tory coalition Government means-tested child benefit—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we have got the gist; it is a point of clarification rather than a point of order, and the hon. Lady has got it on the record. Let us move on.

Gaza: Israeli Military Operations

1.7 pm

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement about the Israeli Government's announcement that they are expanding their military operations in Gaza.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): We are deeply concerned about the resumption of hostilities in Gaza. The UK does not support an expansion of Israel's military operations. Continued fighting and more bloodshed is in nobody's interest. All parties, including Israel, must observe international humanitarian law. We urge all parties to return to dialogue and ceasefire negotiations, ensuring the return of all who have endured unimaginable suffering. It is clear that this conflict cannot be won by bombs and bullets, but by diplomacy.

Aid should never be used as a political tool. Israel must restart the flow of aid immediately. Blocking goods supplies and power from entering Gaza risks breaching international humanitarian law, and it should not be happening. We are doing everything we can to alleviate that situation. Gaza is also the most dangerous place in the world to be an aid worker. Over 400 aid workers have been killed since the start of the conflict. Despite renewed fighting, the United Nations and humanitarian organisations must be able to deliver their vital work.

A year on from the appalling attack on World Central Kitchen aid workers, lessons have not been learned. We are appalled at recent attacks on aid workers, which include the attack on a United Nations Office for Project Services guest house and the killing of at least eight Palestinian Red Crescent medics. Our thoughts are with the victims and their families. Those responsible must be held accountable. The Government of Israel must urgently ensure that there are effective deconfliction mechanisms in place to enable agencies to deliver their impartial mandates safely.

On 28 March, the UK and France called an urgent UN Security Council meeting to discuss the risks facing humanitarian aid workers in Gaza. Since the hostilities resumed, the Foreign Secretary has spoken to Secretary Rubio, special envoy Steve Witkoff, the Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, the Israeli Minister for Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer, the EU high representative Kallas and the UN emergency relief co-ordinator Tom Fletcher.

A return to a ceasefire is the only way we will bring the conflict to an end and return to negotiations for a lasting peace in the region. That is the only way to deliver the two-state solution that we all want to see. Both Israelis and Palestinians have the right to live in peace and security.

Carla Denyer: The Israeli Government's brutal decision to expand their military operations in Gaza is not about security; it is about domination and erasure. It comes on top of 18 months of collective punishment, including, since 2 March, the longest aid blockade since the war began. I welcome the Minister's confirmation that the UK does not support the Israeli Government's expanded military operation in Gaza. Will he now finally name

what is happening as genocide and undertake a structural investigation into genocide and other crimes under international law committed in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

To ensure that the UK is not complicit in Israel's ongoing genocide, illegal occupation and system of apartheid, will the Minister immediately suspend the direct and indirect supply, sale or transfer—including transit and trans-shipment—to Israel of all weapons, munitions and other military and security equipment? Will he immediately suspend the provision of training and other military and security assistance and recognise that, otherwise, there is a clear risk of contributing to the commission of serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including crimes under international law?

As the Minister mentioned, the UK is a significant provider of humanitarian aid to the region. What assessment has he made of the impact of today's reports on the humanitarian crisis? Although he touched on this lightly, given the UK's level of influence with Israeli authorities, will he confirm that he will use his position to actively oppose current and planned attempts by Israel to establish a permanent military presence in Gaza, and to oppose moves to alter Gaza's borders and demographic make-up or to shrink its territory, including through any expanded buffer zones and construction of permanent checkpoints?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Lady asked a series of important questions. As I have said to the House on a number of occasions, determinations of breaches of international law are for competent courts and we support those courts in their work.

On weapons, I want to be clear that we continue to stand by the assessments that we made soberly in September and the suspension of licenses that that involved. The hon. Lady asked about the UK's view on a permanent presence in Gaza. I am happy to restate our policy now. We welcome the proposal by Arab nations, called the Arab initiative, which would allow for a reconstruction of Gaza, the safe return of Palestinians who have been displaced, and for those remaining in Gaza to rebuild their lives without forced displacement, which we oppose.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): We have had several urgent questions and statements on Gaza over the last few months. Each time, I have come to the Chamber and asked the Government: what is plan B? What is plan B when Israel ends the ceasefire, which is what has happened? What is plan B when Israel's far-right Government choose their survival over the lives of the remaining hostages, which is what seems to have happened? What is plan B when annexation of either the west bank or Gaza is not just threatened but actually happens, which is what is happening now? My question is this: what are the Government doing to turn our allies' heads from American trade wars and towards the tragedy unfolding in the middle east, to do whatever they can to restore a ceasefire and the road to peace?

Mr Falconer: My right hon. Friend, who has been pressing on these issues for some time, is right to raise those questions. She asks whether there is a plan B. In

all of my experience, there can be no plan B in Israel-Palestine; there is only one route, which is widely understood by our allies in the region and beyond, and it must be a two-state solution. The route to a two-state solution must involve compliance with international humanitarian law.

It is clear even from the short exchange that we have already had in the Chamber that the British Government's policy and the Israeli Government's policy differ. They will continue to differ until we return to a pathway to a two-state solution. There is no plan B. Our plan A is for a two-state solution, and we will work with our allies in the region, on the Security Council—as we did on Friday—and closer to home in order to pursue those arguments.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker. This is clearly a difficult and dangerous moment for the middle east. A way must be found through the dreadful impasse that has led to the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement.

As has been said time and again, the key to a sustainable end to the conflict is the release of the remaining 59 hostages so cruelly held by Hamas terrorists since the atrocities of 7 October. Their continued captivity is intolerable. The British Government should be able to bring their influence to bear, and the Foreign Secretary should be directly involved in all efforts to find a way through, working with Israeli counterparts, the US and key regional players and mediator countries. We said that in the Chamber yesterday.

The Minister stated yesterday, as he has today, that the Government are

“in regular contact with all those involved in negotiations.”—[*Official Report*, 1 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 147.]

That includes the Foreign Secretary, who spoke to his Israeli counterpart last week. Will the Minister inform the House what direct Minister-to-Minister discussions have taken place about the current military operations? Were Ministers informed in advance, and have they been given any information about the objectives that Israel is seeking?

Every week we come here to ask questions of Ministers, and it is unclear exactly what level of influence the Government have. What is the Government's plan? What is their vision of a way through? What discussions have they had in recent days with vital interlocutors?

On humanitarian aid, does the Minister feel that he has made any progress in his efforts to try to unblock the current aid access situation? We have spoken about this many times. Will he update the House on what has been happening to British aid while the restrictions remain? Where is that aid?

It was the Conservatives' position when in government, as indeed it is now the position of the Labour Government, that there can be no role for Iranian-backed Hamas terrorists in Gaza's future. Will the Minister be proposing to our critical partners a road map for how this will end and how that future will become a reality?

Mr Falconer: These are important questions that the right hon. Lady has asked. The Foreign Secretary has been directly involved in Minister-to-Minister contact. I, too, have been talking with all those affected. I very

much welcome her comments about the hostages. Of course, the whole House wants to see them all released, and I am sure that many of us will be thinking of Avinatan Or—he has a British mother—who has been held, almost certainly in terrible conditions, ever since 7 October. I know that the whole House will continue to think of those hostage victims.

The right hon. Lady rightly asked about humanitarian aid. I accept that our efforts in recent days to try to prevent the blockade from continuing in Gaza have not been effective. In the first part of this year, we saw a very welcome increase in aid going into Gaza, including UK aid. Even during that greater flow, there were still unwelcome restrictions on the nature of the aid going in, which made reconstruction, shelter, tents and sleeping bags hard to get into Gaza when they were desperately needed. So there were improvements, and we can see a route by which we might see a significant increase in the amount of aid getting into the Gaza strip, which is desperately needed. But at the current time the reports are extremely depressing; we discussed some of them yesterday.

The right hon. Lady asked about our plan for reconstruction and what discussions we are having with others. We have discussed the Arab initiative with those involved closely. We think it is a plan with real merit. It must not allow Hamas to have a role in government—we are absolutely clear on that point, and I think Arab partners are very much of the same view. That is the basic idea from which we must work.

Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On 30 March, the first day of Eid, Israeli attacks on Gaza killed dozens of Palestinians, adding to the death toll since Israel breached the ceasefire agreement. Israel is now in the process of enacting the largest forced displacement, ordering hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Rafah. How will this end? Israel cannot and will not stop. Is the goal ethnic cleansing? We are witnessing that. Is the goal the complete destruction of Gaza? We are now witnessing that. Is the goal the permanent occupation of Gaza and the west bank? We continue to witness that. Is the goal a complete end to the two-state solution? Israeli Ministers have made their intentions clear. Will the Minister unequivocally condemn their actions for what they are: war crimes and crimes against humanity?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has been fearless and persistent on those questions. I do condemn the comments of Israeli Ministers which amount to forced displacement or the annexation of Palestinian territories. We recognise international humanitarian law and call on all our allies, including Israel, also to abide by it. The scenes in Gaza in recent days have been hard to watch, and we will continue to make those points to the Israelis with all the force that my hon. Friend would expect.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Israel's expansion of military activity in Gaza, including a strike on UN medical facilities, displacement of civilians and the Defence Minister's new proposal to seize large swathes of territory is gravely disturbing. It seems that international humanitarian law is being violated. This week's reports that the Israel Defence Forces killed and buried 15 humanitarian workers in a mass grave is also

[*Monica Harding*]

appalling. The ceasefire must be restored. Israel must immediately end its illegal blockade of humanitarian aid into Gaza to bring desperately needed relief to 2 million people who have suffered enormously. Hamas must also release the remaining hostages immediately and unconditionally.

Will the Minister update the House on the conversations he is having with Israeli, American and middle eastern partners regarding the restoration of the ceasefire? All sides must recommit to a political process. He says that there is only one route, so I ask him once again: will this Government now recognise a Palestinian state, giving hope to millions of Palestinians? Will he also outline what the UK is doing to hold those who attack aid workers in violation of international humanitarian law accountable and to protect those aid workers who remain in Gaza?

Mr Falconer: Those are important questions. Let me start with humanitarian aid workers. The whole House will have heard the Prime Minister respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham). We of course want to see accountability when humanitarian workers are struck. We particularly expect accountability when British nationals are affected. My thoughts are with the families of all those affected by the World Central Kitchen incident. What do we want to see next by way of accountability? We want to see the Israeli Military Advocate General going through the investigation at a proper speed—it has been a year—coming to proper findings and answering the question of whether criminal charges should now be laid.

This House has discussed questions on the recognition of a Palestinian state many times. We will recognise a Palestinian state as part of a contribution to a two-state solution. We are all watching the events in the Occupied Palestinian Territories at the moment and seeing how distant a functional Palestinian state looks under these circumstances. Our first efforts must be to restore the basic functioning of Palestinian life, in both Gaza and the west bank, where it is also under threat.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I recently visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories with the Foreign Affairs Committee. I travelled to Area C in west bank and saw at first hand the settler violence that Palestinian men, women and children are facing day in, day out. They are living their lives in constant fear. In this House we all support a two-state solution, but that is being undermined daily by the actions of the Israeli Government, especially in the west bank; we are seeing it being annexed in real time. The Minister says that we will recognise the state of Palestine when the time is right, but I fear there may be no state left to recognise. Will the Government look again at stopping all settlement goods coming into the UK?

Mr Falconer: Those are important questions. The UK considers settlements illegal under international law. We are clear that settlement goods must be properly labelled and they do not benefit from the trading regimes that would otherwise apply to both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. My hon. Friend's question is the right one. We need to ensure that there remains a

viable path to a two-state solution. There is no other path to peace in the region, and all our efforts are focused on that outcome.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I was the Minister responsible, the current Minister was then an outstanding official in the Department. He will therefore know that when I presented an egregious list of complaints to the Deputy Prime Minister of Israel, as well as to the chief negotiator, he simply stormed out of the meeting, leaving the ambassador with his head in his hands. I therefore ask: what leverage do we actually have?

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Gentleman is kind about my service. I know that he raised some of the issues with some force, as he says, during his time in this ministerial role. That underlines the hard truth here, which is that the Israelis must be persuaded to relent from a course of action that both the Conservative and Labour parties, as well as the other parties in this Chamber, have seen is totally undermining the long-term stability of the region, which is important not just for Israel and for Palestine, but for the UK and our friends and allies in the middle east.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): The poor people of Gaza are trapped between Hamas, who refuse to release the 59 hostages, and Defence Minister Katz, who is now threatening the “total destruction” of Gaza. Does the Minister share my despair at the lack of leadership committed to peace? Will he also talk about what diplomatic efforts we are making, as well as through aid spending, to try to create moderate leadership in the region that can establish the long-term circumstances for peace and reconciliation?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has done much work over the years on questions of peacebuilding. We, too, are committed to playing our part in trying to build up the connections between the two societies that could allow for the kind of moderate leadership at the most local level that is so necessary for making peace—we saw that in our own experience of Northern Ireland. Many in this Chamber have rightly pressed us on the proposals from the Alliance for Middle East Peace, and we look forward in the coming period to setting out what we will do to support peacebuilding efforts. I watch with dismay, as does the Foreign Secretary, the many civilians asking for peace on both sides; the many civilians protesting both in Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories for a return to a ceasefire. That is what we want to see.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): We have heard Ministers refer many times to the risk of breaches of international humanitarian law. On the one occasion, on 17 March, when the Foreign Secretary admitted that withholding aid to Gaza was “a breach of international law”—[*Official Report*, 17 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 41.],

he had to retract the admission and refer again to a risk of breaches. If the recent attacks on aid workers constitute a further risk of breaches, will the Minister outline what would constitute an actual breach?

Mr Falconer: The Foreign Secretary has clarified his comments on the occasion to which the hon. Gentleman refers, and he will know well from his own background

that a long-standing policy of Governments of all kinds is that it is not for Ministers to act as courts. There are competent international courts that make such determinations.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): The resumption of the conflict in Gaza is incredibly tragic, and it is especially heartbreaking for the hostage families and all those brave people we have seen protesting in Israel against their Government and in Gaza against the death cult that is Hamas. Does the Minister agree that the conflict today could end if Hamas released the 59 hostages and left Gazans to live in peace and security? Will he update us on plans for the international plan for peace for Israelis and Palestinians?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is right: the hostages must be released, and Hamas can play no role in the future of governance of Gaza. Their role, which was correctly described by the shadow Foreign Secretary as being supported by Iran, has been malign. It has been malign for the Palestinians, for the Israelis, for the UK and for the region.

On my hon. Friend's question about the proposal for the international peace building fund, we will come back to the House with further details of our approach. As the situation continues to evolve, we want to carefully consider how best we can contribute to peace building, in the way that I described in answer to a previous question.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I thank the Minister for raising, in his answer to the shadow Foreign Secretary, the plight of Avinatan Or, who I am proud to be twinned with. He was brutally captured by Hamas terrorists 544 days ago. In March, his family received a sign of life for the first time, and in that same month a number of colleagues heard in Parliament from his mother—Ditza, a British citizen—her moving story in Parliament about her continued fight for her son's release. Does the Minister agree that Hamas could end the war now by releasing Avinatan and all the remaining hostages, and will he assure Ditza that all avenues are being pursued by this Government to make that a reality?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning Ditza. I too met her, and Avinatan's sister, recently. Those two incredibly strong women are doing absolutely everything that they can for their loved one, and I can assure them from this Dispatch Box that we are doing everything we can to secure his release.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I associate myself with the Minister's remarks about the killings of the British World Central Kitchen workers by Israel in Gaza, and I extend this sentiment to Palestinian aid workers too. It is almost a year since I was last in Gaza, and not a day goes by when I do not think about what I saw. Does the Minister agree that what Israel is doing in Gaza is reaching new and uncharted territory, in its level of danger both to Palestinians and to the prospects of a two-state solution ever being realised? Does he further agree that it is past time for fresh, co-ordinated international action to stop this? When will he be able to come to the House to outline what this action will be?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has seen events in Gaza with her own eyes, and I know from all her work before she came to this place how committed an advocate and an actor she has been for those suffering some of the most unimaginable pressures and horrors. I agree that they continue to suffer those pressures and see those horrors. We took the step of calling the UN Security Council to session on these questions on Friday solemnly and soberly. We will work with our international partners on these questions because they are an egregious threat to the life of Palestinians, to a two-state solution and to the stability of the region. I will come back to the House to give her further updates, as my hon. Friend would expect.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): We need a ceasefire now—again—because the situation on the ground is as bad as it has ever been, if not worse. I spoke to my friend whose family are in Gaza and he told me that last week their home was bombed multiple times while they were sheltering in the basement with no food or water. They are now barely surviving, surrounded by destruction, terrified and without aid for over a month. He said:

“This is not self-defence. This is the destruction of families like mine.”

If this Government do not support this escalation, where are the consequences? We do have leverage. Why have they not suspended all arms sales to the IDF—not because of a risk of it hitting civilians, but because we have principles and will show intent?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for sharing that story in the Chamber. I know that many Members of this House have received similar stories over the last few days, and indeed have been doing so for the 18 months that this conflict has been running. I have set out our position on arms a number of times in this House, and I would like to say that the decisions taken in September were decisions of principle and they remain decisions of principle. The two principles that underline our position in relation to arms licences for sales to Israel are that we are concerned about risks of international humanitarian law and that we will continue to defend Israel against threats to its security and safety, including from Iran. We have suspended weapons that could be sold to Israel, and we have flown the RAF in its defence when Iran threatened to strike it with missiles. The world is incredibly complicated, things are moving very quickly, and I recognise the strength of feeling in this House on the question of arms. Our position remains the same, and it is one of principle.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What we are witnessing in Gaza is the weaponisation of starvation. With the ongoing blockade of food, water, medicines and shelter now in its second month, there is also the heart-wrenching, despicable discovery of the killing of a further 15 aid workers found in a mass grave, and large-scale hostilities have now restarted. This must stop. Given that it is clear that the Netanyahu regime is not listening to the UK Government and will only listen to President Trump, what pressure are our Government putting on the US to ensure that the Israeli Government finally end their aid blockade?

Mr Falconer: As you would expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will confine my comments to the discussions that we have, rather than the policy of other allies. But my hon. Friend, who has raised these issues many times, is right. I have said it at this Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister said it at Prime Minister's questions earlier and the Foreign Secretary reiterated it yesterday: we want the aid blockade to end immediately. It should not have been put in place. Palestinian civilians are suffering, and we expect urgent action. We of course discuss these issues with Secretary Rubio, with Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and with a whole range of our counterparts in the US system. We work closely with our American colleagues on the middle east and in a whole range of national security fields, and we are clear about our policy with them, as we are with the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Can I ask the Minister to bring a sense of urgency to this? The people of Gaza are starving. Every bakery is closed. There is insufficient water. There is no power. No schools are open. No hospitals are fully functioning. It is an utterly desperate situation, yet I believe we are still allowing RAF Akrotiri to be used as a staging point for Israel and still supplying parts for F-35 jets, which are bombing the people of Gaza and bombing the rubble there. What are the Government doing to ensure that Israel stops the bombing and that food aid gets through very, very urgently for the people of Gaza, merely to help them survive?

Mr Falconer: I hope the House is under no doubt about the urgency with which myself, the Foreign Secretary and the whole ministerial team treat these issues. I think I have already answered the question in relation to arms in this session. The humanitarian need has been on terrible and vivid display over the last few days. We are aware of the reports to which the right hon. Gentleman refers, and we raise these issues with the urgency they demand.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The Hostages and Missing Families Forum in Israel said this morning that it was horrified to wake up to the news of the expanded military operation, and that is because it knows the risk that this poses to its loved ones. But it is the loved ones of Palestinians who have already suffered so much that are most relevant today. They themselves know that the annexation and the forced displacement of men, women and children is simply unacceptable, so can the Minister tell me exactly what he and this UK Government have done to make representations to Israel, both about that Israeli aggression and about the 13 new expanded settlements in the west bank, which are deliberately designed to suffocate any future state of Palestine?

Mr Falconer: I can assure my hon. Friend, who has been a doughty campaigner on these issues, that we have raised both the risks of returning to war and indeed the settlements he refers to directly with the Israeli Government, and we will continue to do so.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the Minister's reply to the urgent question, but I am sure he will forgive me when I say that we have heard all this before. There is a sense of hopelessness in this place

at the downward spiral we seem to be on, but it must be nothing compared with the hopelessness being felt by the Gazans and also the Israeli population. The Israeli regime is not listening to us or to its own population, who are protesting and simply want the hostages home. The region needs some hope, and it has already been suggested that if we are to go down the route to a two-state solution, we need a breakthrough. That breakthrough might come if this Government recognise Palestine as a state.

Mr Falconer: I recognise the hon. Lady's remarks. The sense of hopelessness must be acute in Gaza, and I say to all those watching in the region that the UK will continue to do everything it can, no matter how hard it is, to try to return to a ceasefire. I have addressed the question about the recognition of a Palestinian state. There must be a breakthrough. We need to get back on the path that both sides were on before if stability is to return to the region.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Many right hon. and hon. Members still want to get in, and there is an important statement to come, so could questions be a little briefer, please?

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming to the House and the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) for raising the matter. I concur with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) in that we have been here before. We keep getting the same responses. Our constituents continue to write to us about this—they want hope. The reality is that over a thousand Palestinians have been killed within the last fortnight. Today marks a month since Israel broke that ceasefire, blocking critical aid into Gaza in defiance of international law. I ask the Minister—I know he and the Foreign Secretary are working hard—what more it will take before we as a UK Government take a different course of action, because Israel is not listening to warm words any longer.

Mr Falconer: My constituents in Lincoln have strong views about the horrors they see, and I know many constituents right across the country are writing to their Members and strongly expressing their views. I would not describe our policy as “warm words” and I think many of our friends in the region would not describe it as such either. We have taken concrete action since becoming the Government. We have restored aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. We have taken the arms suspension measures that have been discussed. We have sanctioned settlers. We have continued to use our position at the UN Security Council to try to bring attention and action to some of the most egregious areas of concern, and we will continue to do so. I cannot promise this House that I will be able to return next time with something different to say. The fact that my remarks may seem repetitive indicates that the problem is difficult and the solution feels distant, but we must continue to work on the path that this whole House knows we must get back to, which is towards a two-state solution.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Last week, the Foreign Secretary was unequivocal in saying that both sides— Hamas and Israel— were guilty of committing atrocities. Does the Minister agree with the Foreign Secretary that that is the case?

Mr Falconer: I think the hon. Gentleman is trying to return to the question asked by the Liberal Democrat Member. To be clear, on the determination of crimes, we leave that to courts. On the determination of risk, we take action.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): As affirmed by the International Court of Justice in its advisory opinion, Israel is violating the peremptory norms of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, the prohibition against racial discrimination and apartheid, and the prohibition against unlawful use of force. Its occupation of Palestine is illegal and must end as soon as possible. Will the Minister acknowledge that the UK has a duty to suspend all military co-operation and trade with Israel—a duty that stems from a wide range of intersecting international obligations—in the face of grave illegalities committed by the state of Israel?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks me about the advisory opinion of the ICJ. We accept that the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are illegal and have been clear about that policy position. I am afraid that we will take some time yet to return to this House with a full response to the ICJ's advisory opinion, which has a number of novel elements of international jurisprudence, and we are considering it with the seriousness and soberness that it requires. We agree on the fundamentals: the settlements are illegal and must be brought to an end.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Recent polling suggests that over 60% of Israelis will support any deal that brings the remaining hostages home. If that can be achieved, the likelihood is that peace and rebuilding can be achieved, especially if Egypt can be involved, along with finance from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Will the Government please push for that?

Mr Falconer: I can confirm that we want to see all the hostages returned and a reconstruction plan for Gaza based on the Arab initiative, with the full involvement of the region—a reconstruction plan that can allow Palestinians to remain in their homes.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I was devastated to hear of the expansion of military operations in Gaza this week, alongside the aid blockade in the region. That is a clear breach of international humanitarian law. The Minister has said that he urges Israel to respect IHL. If Israel continues to ignore the international community on that, what concrete steps will we take to hold it accountable?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has served both in our military and as an aid worker. He knows well and feels strongly, as do many in this House, the agonies of what we are seeing. We have determined that there is a serious risk of breaches of international humanitarian law by the Israeli Government. We will continue to press them on those points. I will not issue further comment on sanctions, which I think was underlying some of his question, as to do so could reduce their impact.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): While no one wants to see the continuation of war in Gaza, under the terms of the ceasefire agreement Israel has the right to take action where there is an immediate threat. We have seen that Hamas have refused to release hostages and are now firing rockets into Israel. They are planning further attacks and, indeed, attacking and murdering their own citizens who protest against them. Is it not reasonable in those circumstances for Israel to take action to defend its own country? Should it not be the priority of this Government to ensure that Hamas release the hostages whom they are cruelly and cynically holding, and to ensure that UK aid is not used to prop up Hamas and help them to reassert their authority?

Mr Falconer: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman: of course Israel has the right to legitimate self-defence consistent with international humanitarian law. Concerns about the risk of a breach of international humanitarian law underpin our concerns. He is absolutely right that Hamas are a threat not just to Israel but to their own people, and I have been absolutely clear on that question on numerous occasions at this Dispatch Box. Where there are any reports that Hamas are benefiting from aid going into the Gaza strip or anywhere else, we take serious action in response.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): If the rule of international law is to mean anything, we must uphold it, so just as we recognise that taking hostages is a breach of international law, we must recognise that killing aid workers is a breach of international law. My constituents will be listening to the Minister, recognising the work being done but completely perplexed as to why we are not doing more to uphold international law in practice. He is right to argue that the courts need to be involved. He said that he wanted this issue to be dealt with by the relevant competent court and talks about novel elements of jurisprudence delaying our ability to do that. Can he explain to my constituents what more it would take for the United Kingdom, through the auspices of the UN Security Council, to make a referral to the International Criminal Court given what we are seeing and to uphold international human rights law directly?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks an important question. I recognise that, for constituents in Walthamstow and elsewhere, questions of international law may seem very arcane when we are faced with the kinds of images that we are all seeing this morning and have been seeing for months, so let me clarify. She refers to the ICJ advisory opinion. That advisory opinion, long in gestation, refers to the presence of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It pre-dates the 7 October attacks. She also refers to the ICC, which has heard referrals in relation to conduct on both sides of the conflict since the 7 October attacks. We respond in the fullness of time, as required by the ICJ, which has taken some time in its complex determinations about the status of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We have responded on the ICC to the timelines required—we did so late last year.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): We can all see the discomfort of the Minister in having to embroider language, referring merely to the risk of the breach of international law and not speaking as plainly on behalf of our country as many Members would wish him to

[Andrew George]

speak. Of course, we all want the hostages to be freed, just as we want the 2 million hostages in Gaza being held hostage by the murderous IDF, which is treating them with disdain and starving them, to be freed. If the Minister is not prepared to make the statement that many of us wish for him to make, will he at least admit that the actions of the far-right Israeli Government can no longer be described as self-defence?

Mr Falconer: I have been accused of many things, but not of embroidering, so if there is any doubt, let me be clear: the position to which I stick at the Dispatch Box on the determinations of law is one that has been held consistently by both parties in government for a long time. There is a good reason why we would not want people to stand at the Dispatch Box making determinations of law, and it is why we have courts and an international legal order that this country has a proud history of establishing and maintaining. We have determined that there is a risk of those breaches. We are not making a determination; we are looking to our own laws—passed, in fact, by those now on the Opposition Benches—and following them through thoroughly and vigorously. In the discharge of our duties, we have said that we think there is a serious risk of breaches of international humanitarian law. That is the same as saying that we think there is a serious risk that Israel is not simply acting in its own legitimate self-defence. That is why we have taken the steps that we have.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): Last year, I raised the concerns of a constituent whose family member was stuck in Gaza without food and water. The situation has worsened since the aid blockade. I am particularly worried about the escalation of hostilities impacting most on women and girls. Supplies of female hygiene products are at critical lows, women are giving birth on hospital floors, and doctors are performing C-sections without adequate medical supplies. May I ask the Minister, on behalf of the hundreds of constituents who have written to me, what the UK Government are doing to end the aid blockade? Will he reassure me that the Government have communicated the sheer urgency on the ground to the Israeli Government?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on particular cases involving constituents in Gaza. My hon. Friend works incredibly hard for her constituents, as do many other Members. Where I am in direct correspondence with Members about the fate of constituents and their relatives in Gaza, I will not provide a running commentary from the Dispatch Box, but the Foreign Office will do everything it can to ensure that British nationals in distress, and their loved ones, including in Gaza, are able to get to safety. I can confirm to her that we have raised the urgency of these matters with the Israeli Government.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Another day, another statement, another day of predictable and depressing answers. Nothing is more predictable and depressing than the statement, “We are doing everything we can.” Are we really doing everything we can when we do not call out genocide and ethnic cleansing as we see it happening in real time? Are we doing everything we can when we have not imposed bilateral economic sanctions?

Are we doing everything we can when we have not even called in the ambassador to express our concerns? If we are indeed doing everything we can, why have the Government just sold £9 million-worth of technology for Israeli submarines that are being built to house nuclear weapons?

Mr Falconer: We are doing everything we can. I recognise from the commentary of many Members how unbearably frustrating they and their constituents find this situation. I have been calling for a ceasefire ever since I have been a Minister. It is also deeply depressing for me to be in this situation today, as I have been so many times in the House. We will continue to do everything, in accordance with the measures I have laid out this afternoon, to bring the conflict back to a ceasefire.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): The Minister has been generous with his time, not just today but over the past few months, both in the House and in private meetings, but every time we meet, the situation is bad and getting worse. As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said, it is now as bad as it has ever been. Does the Minister agree that unless we in the international community take firmer immediate action to force change as a matter of urgency, nothing will be different and there will be no point talking about peace or a two-state solution, because those opportunities will be lost not just for now but for the foreseeable future, and the consequences for those in the region, particularly the people of Gaza, will be unimaginable?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. In the time that we have been in government, we have seen the situation deteriorate, but we have also seen it improve. I hope to be able to return to the House with the news that we are back at a ceasefire. I recognise how distant that feels at this moment, but a ceasefire would be not just a vital step towards a two-state solution and an enormous contribution towards getting aid into Gaza, but the step change required for international diplomacy to bring stability to the region.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Some 400 aid workers have been killed in Gaza over the past 500 days, and we are now a year and a day on from the awful attack on the World Central Kitchen. How many British aid workers are in Gaza, and what tangible action will the Government ask Israel to take to guarantee their safety?

Mr Falconer: I do not believe that I am in a position to confirm the current number of British nationals in Gaza as aid workers, but if I am, I will write to the hon. Member.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): Those at the Hostage and Missing Families Forum, which represents most of the captives’ families, said that they were horrified to wake up this morning to the Israeli Defence Minister’s announcement about expanding military operations in Gaza. They also said that the Israeli Government have an obligation to free all 59 hostages from Hamas captivity, and to pursue every possible channel to advance a deal for their release. Hostages have been released only when there has been a ceasefire, so a ceasefire is paramount for the release of hostages. If we believe that

Israel should stop bombing Gaza, we need to stop supplying it with parts for bombs. If we believe in a two-state solution, it is about time that we recognised Palestine.

Mr Falconer: I have already commented on the question of recognition. I assure my hon. Friend that we are not providing parts for bombs. We have set out the provisions on arms suspension. There is a question about the global supply chain for F-35 parts where those parts are going indirectly to Israel, on which I have elaborated in the House on a number of occasions. That remains our position.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Nearly 24,000 women and children have been killed in Gaza since 7 October 2023. In the light of evidence submitted to the UN Human Rights Council showing Israel's use of starvation as a method of war, the denial of human rights and humanitarian assistance, and a concerted policy of destroying Gaza's healthcare system, will the Government take immediate and tangible steps to demonstrate the UK's commitment to upholding international law by ceasing provision of military support to Israel, suspending all export licences and imposing a two-way arms embargo?

Mr Falconer: I set out our position on arms suspensions earlier in this urgent question.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let me try to approach this in another way. It is obvious that Israel has been emboldened by the explicit and implicit support of the US Government for what it is doing—that has been a fundamental change. The US Government have ruled out a two-state solution, as I understand. What has the Minister been doing, or what can he do, to work with our colleagues in the European Union, and with the Arab states, to develop a clear plan for a two-state solution, and a clear timeframe for all countries recognising a Palestinian state?

Mr Falconer: As you would expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will not seek to characterise the foreign policy of others; they can set out their policy themselves. On co-operation and co-ordination, we have been in extensive dialogue with those involved in the Arab initiative, and we have worked with Germany, France and Italy, and made joint statements on this and wider issues recently. I expect that in June we will join an important international conference about a two-state solution, where we will discuss that with our partners.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Time and again we have heard Ministers at the Dispatch Box say that they are doing everything they can, and talking about the diplomatic levers that they are trying to pull. We all know that since the ceasefire was broken because of the Israelis not complying, 1,100 people have been killed, mainly women and children, and 15 aid workers assassinated—we know they were assassinated because some of them had their hands tied behind their back. The Minister knows that there are only three actions we can take: stop trade; sanctions; and recognising Palestine. Those are the only actions that this Government can take to prevent Israelis causing more damage. Which one will he take?

Mr Falconer: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I was a diplomat before, and ultimately it is diplomacy that will resolve this conflict. That is the lever to which we must most vigorously apply ourselves.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Just suppose that we closed our airbase in Cyprus. Just suppose that we applied greater sanctions, and withdrew export licences. Just suppose that we recognised the state of Palestine. Would the Minister be making the same statement? What analysis has he made of that?

Mr Falconer: It is hard enough to respond to the facts as they are. I will not be drawn by my hon. Friend into such a complex chain of hypotheticals.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers, and for his understanding and honesty. Hamas are terrorists, murderers, rapists, and child killers. They hide their AK47s and their weaponry in children's beds. They hide their missiles in their schools, hospitals and houses. What steps have the Minister and the Government taken with the UN to bring all the kidnapped hostages home alive, rather than in the coffins that were paraded around by Hamas terrorists—murderers—at the last hostage handover? What steps are they taking to underline the point that the Israelis would not be intensifying their plans to strike were the murderous Hamas not content to hold hostages and fire rockets into Israel daily?

Mr Falconer: We have worked with our partners in the region, the Israeli Government, the US, and many others to try to secure the safe release of all those with UK links who have been held hostage. Of course we want to see all hostages released, but it is on British nationals and those with links to the UK that we have turned the focus of our efforts. This has been heartbreaking for me, and for so many in this House. It has been so joyful to see British nationals escape from the clutches of Hamas alive, and a heartbreak when British-linked nationals have returned deceased. I know that the whole House will be hoping for Avinatan Or, and all others who are being held, to be returned alive and well soon.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): The killing of innocent Palestinian civilians, many of them women and children, by Israeli forces is simply heartbreaking. The Minister knows that I have been raising my concerns, and those of my constituents, with him since I was elected to this House last July. I am grateful for and appreciate the steps that he and the Government are taking on aid and arms, yet here we are. What more can the Government do to stop the killing of innocent Palestinian civilians, ensure the release of all remaining hostages, and ensure that aid gets to those who so desperately need it in Gaza?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his persistence on these issues. So many colleagues on the Labour and Opposition Benches have raised the plight of Palestinian civilians and of hostages with real force and urgency, ever since we came into government, and I am sure they will continue to. We will continue to take the steps I have outlined to try to effect a change, and we recognise the greater urgency for us all as military activity intensifies. I hope to return to this House in due course with updates on our diplomatic efforts.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Under the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide, to which the UK is a signatory, states have an obligation to prevent and punish genocide. That obligation to prevent involves acting immediately, so will the Minister outline what the Government are doing, and say what steps they are taking to ensure that genocide is prevented in Gaza?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Member will have heard my previous comments about determinations. I will answer the question that I think he is asking, which is about what we have done since we came into government to try to reduce the suffering in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and indeed in Israel. We have taken firm and far-reaching steps—on the suspension of arms, on the restoration of funding to UNRWA, by using our role on the Security Council, and by raising these questions forcefully with the Israeli Government and all relevant regional partners. We are working night and day to try to ensure that those in harm's way are no longer at risk. I recognise today, as we have done almost every day since we came to government, that there is yet more to do.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Since Hamas's war crimes of 7 October, we have seen multiple flagrant breaches of the rules of the international order. This week, 15 Palestinian paramedic Red Crescent workers were found in a mass grave alongside their abandoned emergency vehicle. That comes on top of a four-week total aid blockade. What are our red lines about how this war without end, in which ceasefires and signed agreements can be tossed aside, is being conducted?

Mr Falconer: Our position on the conduct of war is that taken by international humanitarian law. We have set out the risks and our concerns about breaches, and we continue to take actions that are in line with our assessment.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): More than 300 Palestinian children have been killed since Israel's new offensive began. What worries me about the Government is that they do not seem to have any red lines that Israel must not cross. We need robust action, not words. The two-state solution, which is on its knees, is not a by-product of peace; it is the route to peace. If the time for recognition is not now, then when is it? What will the Government's response be when Israel permanently occupies part of Gaza, as its Defence Minister seems to be insinuating it will?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has a long commitment to these issues, and I know that she has travelled to the region. She is right to say that the two-state solution must be central to this. She asks about annexation; I can be clear once again from the Dispatch Box that we want a resolution that provides for the Occupied Palestinian Territories to be Palestinian, as is consistent with relevant Security Council resolutions.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I commend the Minister for the care and concern with which he updates this House, but we keep coming back to the same point and situation. This morning's announcement by the Israeli Government about more incursions is condemnable.

We all know where this leads. Over the past year and a half, we have seen mass displacement. It leads to suffering, and to hostages not being released, and it takes us close to the abyss. Will the Minister join me in making it clear that any forceful transfer of Palestinian civilians, and any annexation of Palestinian territory, is unacceptable and would be a breach of international law?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend remains deeply committed to these issues, and I am pleased to reassure him that we do not support the expansion of military operations by Israel announced this morning. We continue to oppose forced displacement of the Palestinians. Palestinian territory must not be reduced in the conduct of this war.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): In the past few days, the worst extremist, Ben-Gvir, has rejoined the Israeli Government; Red Crescent medics have been killed by Israeli forces; and Israel has started a fresh ground invasion, killing hundreds of women and children, with the specific intention of annexing Palestinian territory. After every atrocity and illegal act, the Foreign Office expresses its concern, and then things get worse. Has the Minister considered what steps the Government should take to make things better on the ground for Palestinians and Israelis?

Mr Falconer: Of course. That is the thought in our mind every day as we see the imagery, and are sent it by our colleagues and our constituents. Every day, this Government see with our own eyes the horror in Gaza, and every day we ask ourselves what we can do to try to ensure that this goes in the direction of our policy, and not in the direction that it has done—the direction of the end of the ceasefire. That led to far too many hostages continuing to be detained, and aid restrictions have continued long after I and others have called for them to end. As my hon. Friend would expect, every day these questions haunt us.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): We are back here again—aid workers shot dead and dumped in a shallow grave; hunger used as a weapon of war; hospitals bombed. Now there are new plans to seize large areas of Gaza. All that has come in the past few days. Israel is carrying out war crime after war crime. On 29 December, the Foreign Office issued a press release rightly referring to Russian war crimes, so I do not see why there is reticence here. I am afraid that expressions of concern are not enough. When will the Government act, treat Israel as they have rightly treated Russia, and impose serious sanctions?

Mr Falconer: I have set out the steps we have taken and the sanctions we have issued, and I will continue to return to this House with further updates.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I recognise what the Minister has said about what has been done, but given the desperate situation, what more could be done through diplomatic efforts to ensure that Israel allows in humanitarian aid at speed and at scale, and to support the Arab initiative, so that Gaza is rebuilt as part of a recognised, viable Palestinian state?

Mr Falconer: We will continue to work with our partners who are party to the Arab initiative, and indeed our partners in the United Nations Security

Council, where we have called sessions and issued statements. We will continue to work along those lines in the way that my hon. Friend would expect.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I have a simple question, and am looking for a very simple answer. Do the Government recognise Israel's plan for large-scale forced evacuations in Gaza as ethnic cleansing? If not, why not?

Mr Falconer: We continue to oppose forced displacement in Gaza.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I put on record my sincere desire to see the Israeli hostages returned as soon as possible. The International Development Committee recently spent time in Geneva as part of its inquiry on international humanitarian law. We discussed at length the way that countries increasingly conflate the legality of resorting to war with the legality of conduct in war. We see aid being blocked and land being annexed without, it seems, legitimate justification, or even significant condemnation. Will the Minister please explain what the Government are doing to ensure that international humanitarian law stops being openly broken, and is given the respect it deserves?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend and east midlands colleague is right to raise the issue of the deterioration of the application of international humanitarian law. There are too many places in conflict where there is a very serious risk of breaches of IHL in the conduct of hostilities. We are doing all we can in Geneva and New York, and on the ground in places including Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, to ensure that the risk of breaches of IHL does not continue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to respond to questions.

School-based Nursery Capital Grants

2.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): With permission, I will make a statement to update the House on the roll-out of nurseries in our primary schools.

This Labour Government are bringing the change that families deserve. We made promises to the parents and children of this country and, not nine months in, we are acting to deliver on them. Free breakfast clubs are already being rolled out, the curriculum and assessment review is in full swing, and children's social care is seeing the biggest overhaul in a generation. We have funding for 10,000 new places for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, backing for up to 10,000 more apprentices to qualify, new improvement teams for our schools and a new allowance for our kinship carers—promises made, promises kept. Here, today, we go further.

This £37 million in funding for 300 primary schools to open and expand nurseries is a big step towards delivering 3,000 nurseries for schools, a big step towards delivering childcare for parents and a big step towards delivering the best start in life for all our children. I want that best start in life for every child, because I want opportunity for every child. I want every child in every village, town and city across our country to grow up knowing that success belongs to them. That is the kind of country I want to live in—the country that this Labour Government want to build, with opportunity not just for some, but for all our children.

To achieve that, we need to start early, before university or college, and even before school—in the earliest years of our children's lives. Those years are fundamental to opportunity. That is where gaps in learning and development first appear, and the longer we wait, the wider they grow and the harder they are to close. That is why, when I am in schools, colleges and universities—even in those places—they agree that the biggest chance to make an impact on our children's lives sits in those crucial early years. That is why this is my No. 1 priority.

If we get this right, and we set all children on the track to success, that is where they will stay. That is why, despite the huge fiscal challenges that we inherited from the Conservatives, we chose to invest more than £8 billion in the early years at the last Budget. It is why the early years are a central part of the Prime Minister's plan for change, setting the target of a record share of children starting school ready to learn. That is why I am today announcing the 300 schools that will be delivering our first wave of new and expanded school-based nurseries. Many of these school-based nurseries will serve communities facing big challenges, where there is strong evidence of need. Overall, it means up to 6,000 more nursery places for young children where they will have the biggest impact, with most of them starting in September this year. That is vital, because that is when the final stage of the 30 hours a week childcare entitlement will kick in. When that is joined up with the offer for three and four-year-olds, working parents of children from nine months right up to the beginning of school will get 30 Government-funded hours of childcare a week.

The 300 schools are just the start. It is 300 on the road to 3,000 school-based nurseries. We will work with schools, voluntary and private providers, teachers and local partners to find and spread what works. By

[Bridget Phillipson]

the end, it will mean that tens of thousands more parents have the power to choose the hours they want to work.

What a contrast with the Conservatives, because what we inherited was not just an offer that they had not bothered to fund, but a pledge without a plan, with places, promises and provision missing. Parents made decisions on the back of those promises. Again and again, I hear from parents how much they have been relying on the promises that the previous Government scattered about like confetti. Across our country, this Government are delivering change in months, when the last Government waited 13 years before signing a post-dated cheque.

The changes that we are making will give parents more control over their lives, time to choose their working hours and money back in their pockets. The last Coram report showed that the effects are starting to flow through. Childcare costs for under-threes in England have halved since the expansion, but ultimately childcare and early years education is about children. It is about launching a lifetime of learning and starting as we mean to go on, so as we roll out these school-based nurseries, we are also adding the biggest ever uplift to the early years pupil premium, closing the attainment gap and giving every child the support that they need to learn and grow, and we are supporting early years educators to build their expertise.

It is not just what is taught in those nurseries that counts, but where they are located: they are in primary schools, which is no accident. We are centring schools in their communities, starting early, working with the voluntary sector and private providers too, so that the move from nursery to school is a natural step, from one room to another, sometimes even in the same building, as is the case at St Anne's church academy in Weston-super-Mare. Having a nursery on site means that stronger, longer lasting relationships with families can be built. Parents feel that they are part of the community, so they engage more when their child starts nursery and then moves into school. When their child starts reception, there are no big, scary changes, building the sense that school is where they are meant to be.

I saw that powerfully this week when I went to Peterborough to visit Fulbridge academy. Little Oak nursery sits at the heart of the school. While I was there, I spoke to Hannah, a working mum whose little boy, Nile, goes to the nursery. She told me all about the difference that Little Oak was making to her family, and about how her son is making friends and taking big strides in his learning, ready to join his two older siblings at school in September. The nursery plays a big part in making Fulbridge academy the centre of that community.

It is the same for free breakfast clubs, which is why we announced the 750 early adopters this year. Schools are the beating hearts of their communities, where children come together to eat, learn and grow. It is good for attendance and achievement, for behaviour and belonging, and for children and their life chances. That is the point: this is action for them, to give them the start that they deserve, because that is my No. 1 priority, built on a

deep and fierce commitment to the children of this country in the first years of their lives, taking their first steps into the world.

In our youngest children's faces and in the faces of all who work with them, we see something that for so long has been missing from our country: hope. We see the hope of a brighter and better future, the hope of a secure and prosperous world, the hope that tomorrow can be better than today and the hope that this is a Government that are on their side. That is the future that we shape together, not face alone. That is the hope that so many people in our country have—that our best days lie ahead of us. That is what the people of this country chose in the general election last July, when they chose hope over fear, and chose a brighter tomorrow, not a bitter yesterday.

And that is why I am so focused on getting on and delivering change, because it matters so much for lives now, not in some distant future. Early years are where futures are made, where life chances are won and where healthier societies are built. That is the prize on offer. Our youngest generation is the first generation for whom opportunity is open to all, right from the start, and I know that Members from across the House will agree that that is a prize worth fighting for. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.23 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): We welcome the Education Secretary's announcement, but let us be absolutely clear: the policies that she is talking about represent investment of £37 million, but the Government are taking away half a billion pounds from nurseries by failing to compensate them for the national insurance increase. That will have a catastrophic effect on nurseries up and down the country, which will be forced either to close or to put their prices up. "Catastrophic" is not my word, but that of the Early Years Alliance, following Labour's national insurance bombshell on the childcare sector.

In her statement, the Education Secretary said that she inherited a "pledge without a plan"—what a load of nonsense! It is our plan that is delivering the expansion of funded childcare this autumn, and our plan that she today confirmed has already halved costs for under-threes, according to independent research. That is our plan, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it is her plan that is shutting nurseries up and down the country, and that will put up costs for parents.

Just last week, I hosted a roundtable with some of the unsung heroes of the sector—nursery owners. Many were in tears, struggling with very real decisions about whether they can keep their doors open. One of the owners shared with me that she is stopping her own salary so that she can continue to pay her staff the amount they deserve. Another owner was having sleepless nights worrying about how she would provide proper care for the children now that she can no longer afford the staffing costs, thanks to this Government's decisions.

It is clearly absurd for the Government to ask the sector to absorb the increases in national insurance while keeping fees the same. The consequences of that are entirely predictable: nurseries will have to either close or put up their prices. A recent survey by the Early Years Alliance

said that, sadly, around 400 nurseries that it spoke to may have to close because of this Government's jobs tax. That is what the Education Secretary's No. 1 priority looks like. Parents will lose out too. According to the National Day Nurseries Association, increases to national insurance contributions will force nurseries to raise their fees by 10%. Those are the obvious consequences of this Government's decisions.

Will the Education Secretary finally admit today how much the jobs tax is costing the childcare sector? Will she monitor the impact of closures that happen thanks to her jobs tax on childcare availability? On the specifics in her announcement today, will she confirm the locations of the school-based nurseries and how they were chosen? Were they chosen on the basis of surplus primary places or are they in areas where we need more childcare provision? If it is the latter, how were they identified?

Those nurseries will be based in schools, so is it her intention that they will mimic the school timetable, or will there be year-round provision and will their hours be longer than the school day? Will school-based nurseries be compensated for the impact of the jobs tax? If so, what will she do to address the inequity that that will cause with other providers?

As the Early Years Alliance has said today

"if the government is truly serious about breaking down barriers to opportunity, it must come to the realisation that increasing school-based provision can only ever be one piece of the puzzle. Failing to recognise this will simply mean that more families lose out."

It is right: under this Government, more families will lose out.

While I welcome the Education Secretary's announcement, the reality is that Labour's decisions are making childcare more expensive and harder to find—*[Interruption.]* Hard-working families will bear the brunt of this Government's failure. It is time for the Education Secretary to stop making broken promises and actually make early years her No. 1 priority.

Bridget Phillipson: It must be profoundly draining for the right hon. Lady to come to the Chamber when faced with such good news and to bring such studied, forced negativity every single time. Six weeks ago, I was in the House delivering the news that we are supporting hundreds of schools across our country to open free breakfast clubs, and we got much of the same studied, forced negativity then. Today, not nine months into this Government, we are beginning the roll-out of school-based nurseries, as we have promised to the people of this country—*[Interruption.]*

I spoke about visits, and the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) should go and visit the school-based nursery that will shortly be opening in his constituency. I never hear from Conservative Members that they will be visiting those nurseries or breakfast clubs, so maybe they could take time out of their busy schedules to go and do precisely that. The only priority that they have is to bring back tax breaks for private schools, taking away resources from our state schools. That is the one idea that they have. Their idea of fresh thinking is to spend money they did not raise on plans they did not make.

On the questions asked by the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), we are investing £8 billion in expanding early years entitlements, alongside doubling

the early years pupil premium, a £75 million expansion grant and compensation for school-based nurseries. The contrast between this Government and the Conservatives is like night and day. I am proud that at the Department for Education, under a Labour Government, it is week in, week out the Department for hope—the hope of a brighter and better future for our children and our country.

We have free breakfast clubs, a cutting-edge curriculum for all our children, the biggest overhaul of children's social care for a generation, funding for up to 10,000 new school places for children with special educational needs and disabilities, backing for up to 10,000 more apprentices to qualify, new improvement teams in our schools, a new allowance for kinship carers and new support for expanding foster care. That is the difference between this Labour Government and the Conservatives. We are the party of hope. If the Conservatives' recent leadership contest was anything to go by, they cannot decide if they are the party of fear or the party of despair.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Early years is another strand of education that was decimated by the last Government. Although those on the Conservative Benches have not valued this sector, as a former teacher, a mum and now an MP, I know its value for children and families in our communities. Although in Portsmouth we do not have one of the 300 nurseries announced in today's first wave, I commend the Government on this initiative. I take this opportunity to commend and praise all those who work in the sector, providing opportunities for the young people in my city. I thank them for their fantastic work. I also take this opportunity to ask the Secretary of State to update the House on delivery of the planned September 2025 childcare expansion, and to explain how she expects parents to benefit from the 30-hours roll-out across the fabulous nurseries in my city.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who brings real expertise to this place, through her background and wealth of experience in education. Through the expansion that we are rolling out this year, parents will see considerable savings, but crucially it will ensure that all our children get the best possible start in life. While I recognise her disappointment that her own constituency did not benefit this time around, I note that Portsmouth South secured a school-based nursery this time around. Of course, this is only phase 1 of what will be a wider roll-out as time progresses.

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

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Access to flexible, high-quality early years provision gives children the start they deserve and parents the choice they need to live their lives, and it is one of the best possible investments we can make in the future of our country. For those families living in childcare deserts left by the previous Conservative Government, today's announcement will be welcome news.

I welcome the sorely needed uplift in the early years pupil premium, but school-based nurseries can only ever be part of the puzzle. We will never fix the crisis in early years without fixing the deep problems facing private and charitable providers. They deliver the vast bulk of the Government's free entitlement, yet they face

[Munira Wilson]

some of the toughest challenges in making ends meet. The Government's national insurance hike, the failure to ensure that rates actually cover delivery costs and damaging guidance to local authorities on funding agreements, which came into effect this week, mean that many are struggling to stay afloat. We have already heard that the Early Years Alliance survey found that four in 10 said they would reduce their number of funded places for three-year-olds and four-year-olds in the next year. Some 94% said they would be forced to raise their fees for parents for non-funded hours, and almost a third said they were likely to permanently close. Can the Secretary of State tell me how that is extending choice for parents? Building Blocks nursery in Teddington in my constituency is now operating at a loss and faces some incredibly painful decisions that will hurt parents, children and staff.

While I welcome today's announcement, will the Secretary of State commit to an urgent review of the rates paid for free entitlements to ensure that they cover delivery costs? Will she finally take this opportunity to recognise the deep damage that the national insurance hike is doing and ensure that early years providers are exempted? Finally, will she look again at the damaging guidance issued by her Department on charging and funding agreements?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Like her, I pay tribute to the big range of providers that play a crucial role in supporting our children's early education. That extends to private voluntary providers and childminders, who are a crucial part of the sector. The announcement we are making today on school-based nurseries is designed to deal with many of the challenges that she identifies arising from the childcare deserts left behind by the Conservatives. We also know that school-based providers have a greater share of the market in more deprived areas, and 34% of those announced today will serve disadvantaged communities.¹ Alongside that, I note that the hon. Lady welcomes the biggest ever uplift that we have secured in the early years pupil premium, which will make a big difference to the life chances of children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. When it comes to the rates, we will always continue to keep those under review.

The hon. Lady asks about the charging guidance that has been issued. I believe it is important that parents have greater transparency when it comes to charging and fees, and where they are able to exercise greater choice in what is being offered to them. I believe that is the right approach, not least as we move towards a system in which the vast bulk of childcare is backed by Government.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I have seen more Tory MPs changing a lightbulb than there are in the Chamber today. I welcome the statement from the Secretary of State—as does Thomas Gray primary school, a very good school in my constituency; the parents and children do a fantastic job there—and I thank her for it. Does she agree that, quite simply, actions speak louder than the many words the Opposition say?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend. Like him, I pay tribute to the amazing staff working right across education in our schools and nurseries for the vital work they do.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I like the right hon. Lady, and I really enjoyed her sunlit-uplands speech—anyone would think there was a leadership contest on in the Labour party. I did not quite hear the answer to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) about the way in which the increase in national insurance contributions will hit all nurseries at once, whereas at the moment we are getting an initial tranche of 300 out of an intended 3,000 new arrangements for her announcement to be fulfilled. Over how long a period does she expect to get from 300 to 3,000?

Bridget Phillipson: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman likes a bit of hope and optimism; I think we could all do with a bit of hope and optimism in the current world. The leadership contest I am really looking forward to is the one that we are going to see very soon in his own party. It will be a treat for all of us in this House, although I hope it does not happen, because I would much prefer for things to carry on just as they are.

I note the questions that the right hon. Gentleman asks. We have secured an extra £2 billion in the Budget, taking the total to £8 billion for early years entitlements. In addition, we have a £75 million expansion grant, compensation for public sector employers and, alongside that, the biggest ever uplift in the early years pupil premium. We are working very closely with the sector to deliver the places and the staff required, and we will continue to do so in the months ahead.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Answer the question!

Bridget Phillipson: In answer to the question, this is the first phase, and we will roll out the 3,000 over the course of this Parliament.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): I warmly welcome the refocusing on early years by this Government, and I also welcome the school-based nursery announcements today; I am particularly excited about the one at Tranmere Park primary school in Guiseley in my constituency. How many children do we think will be affected by this announcement, and how many parents will benefit from it?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I look forward to the extra places that will be available in her constituency to serve local families. What we are setting out today will create 6,000 new childcare places, most of which we expect to be available from September 2025. We are moving rapidly to support schools to put in place the spaces for children that we know are required.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Behind capital funding, what gives children the best start in life is the people, such as early years practitioners, teachers and teaching assistants. The early years sector is struggling with a crisis in recruitment and retention, especially in rural areas such as my constituency. That leads to fewer places for children and higher costs for families. What steps are the Government taking to address the lack of resources, skills and experience in schools and other early years sectors for delivering high-quality education to under-threes?

1. [Official Report, 23 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 9WC.] (Correction)

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with the hon. Lady that it is the brilliant people working in early years education who make the biggest difference to our children's life chances. Of course, we need to put the capital in place to create the physical provision, but it is the people who deliver it who matter the most—I know that the hon. Lady brings expertise in that area to this House. I agree that there is more to do to support the workforce, but we have already taken important steps to support the sector to recruit and retain more staff ahead of the final phase of the roll-out. We have also recently introduced an experience-based route to working in the sector at level 3 and have published the early years teacher degree apprenticeship standard, a new undergraduate route to early years teacher status. Later this year, we will set out more details on wider reform, including looking at the questions about workforce that the hon. Lady has raised.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I warmly welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend and neighbour. I particularly welcome the fact that Yohden primary school in my constituency—one of the most deprived and disadvantaged communities not just in the county, but in the country—will benefit. That is tremendous news, but can my right hon. Friend outline the Government's timetable and commit to expanding the scheme still further, so that parents across my constituency and others can look forward to an improvement in childcare provision?

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend in sending my best wishes to the staff at Yohden primary school, and I recognise the important work that they do to support families and children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. This announcement is an important first step in the Government's ambitious plan for change, breaking the link between background and success, and making sure that a record proportion of children start school ready to learn. This is the first phase of what we intend to do, but there is more to come right throughout this Parliament.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): On Friday, I met 20 incredible women running nurseries and pre-schools in Havering. They contacted me because they are in utter crisis. Business rates, national insurance and wage bills are all rising, while the Government cap what they are allowed to charge and then do not cover the cost of the free childcare hours being offered. Fees are going up, and nurseries are now at risk of mass closure. The Education Secretary is driving private nurseries to the brink while not providing enough school-based ones to fill the gap, and I am afraid that her talk of hope is absolutely delusional. As a parent with two small children who speaks regularly to the women running those nurseries, watching Labour Back Benchers jeering the shadow Secretary of State for asking questions is absolutely disgusting. What urgent action is the Education Secretary taking to prevent a meltdown in childcare that is going to affect working families across this country?

Bridget Phillipson: I, too, speak to early years providers, schools, nurseries and childminders right across our country on a regular basis, unlike Conservative Front Benchers, who seem to spend most of their time complaining about announcements that this Labour Government are making. I also pay tribute to the early

years workforce and the staff in the hon. Lady's constituency for the important work that they are doing. As I have said in a number of answers, we have set out £8 billion in funding, alongside the biggest ever uplift to the early years pupil premium and a £75 million expansion grant to create the places that are required, and that is on top of the £37 million of capital funding that I have announced today.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I welcome this Government's continued commitment to breaking down barriers to opportunity, and I welcome the investment in the nurseries at Monks Orchard primary school and Fairchildes primary school in my constituency—I visited Fairchildes earlier in the year, and I know that that money will go to very good use. Does the Secretary of State agree that accessible childcare is essential support for all families, and can she outline how today's announcement will help to boost household incomes?

Bridget Phillipson: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has been able to see at first hand in her Croydon constituency the impact that this funding will have on families. It will support us in ensuring that a record proportion of children arrive at school ready to learn, and will make a significant difference in supporting families and child development. Critically, as my hon. Friend identifies, it will also put more money directly back into parents' pockets—the figure is £7,500.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I welcome the Government's announcement today, but not every parent needs a full childcare place; many just need somewhere to go with their child, especially in the early months, as parenting can be an isolating and overwhelming experience. What are the Government doing to support community-based options such as one o'clock clubs and the Sure Start centres, which provide vital spaces for parents and children alike?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree about the importance of family support services, especially for our youngest children. The hon. Lady mentioned Sure Start; that was a proud achievement of the last Labour Government, and when her party was in coalition with the Conservatives, we saw Sure Start centres close right across the country. However, she makes a fair point about the support that is required in the early years, which is why we are doing more, and will do more in the months ahead. While access to early education is a critical part of what many families want, alongside access to high-quality health visiting and speech and language support, community provision is also critical. That is why I am working very closely with the Health Secretary to ensure that all families have good access to both education services and health and care services.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): I would like to express my gratitude and welcome this news today. Two new nurseries will be opening in Bristol North East, the Tynings school in Staple Hill and Avanti Gardens in Fishponds, both areas that have lots of young families but not enough nursery provision. Can the Secretary of State reassure other families in Bristol North East and across the country that this announcement is just the start, and that under a Labour Government, we will see lots more nursery places opening?

Bridget Phillipson: Parents in my hon. Friend's constituency will be able to benefit now from the expansion of school-based nurseries, but this is just the start. Alongside the expansion in primary schools that I have set out, we are working very closely with private and voluntary providers and with childminders to deliver the places that families in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country were promised by the Conservative party, but that this Labour Government will deliver.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Emma, who runs a nursery in the small village of Sayers Common in my constituency, wrote to me recently about the impact of national insurance rises. I recognise that today's announcement is focused on really deprived areas, and I can see that two primary schools in Crawley in West Sussex that will benefit. That is a town with proper deprivation, but deprivation also exists in rural areas, and I am worried that today's announcement is giving with one hand to deprived urban areas, but taking away with the other by hammering nurseries in our rural villages with increased national insurance contributions.

Bridget Phillipson: I can assure the hon. Lady that the list of schools announced today covers constituencies the length and breadth of our country, serving constituencies both urban and rural. I recognise her point about ensuring that there is good, adequate provision in our rural communities as well, and if she wants to share Emma's letter and experiences with me, I would be happy to respond.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for investing in Battle Hill primary school in the ward in which I live, where I was proud to be a school governor for 20 years. Does she agree that investing in nurseries in deprived areas such as Battle Hill is essential in order to give very young children a good start to their education journey?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend—that is where we will make the biggest difference to children's life chances. All the evidence is clear that where gaps open up early, they endure into the long run, which has a lasting impact on children's ability to do well at school and get good GCSEs and on their earnings potential into the future. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work she has done over many years to support her community, including as a school governor.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): While I, too, am excited about the opportunities for some communities, I am really concerned about the growing gap between school-based nurseries and community-based ones—settings in my constituency such as Cuddles, Trailway Tots, and nature nurseries. When those nurseries have written to Ministers to express their concerns, they have often been encouraged to apply for small business rate relief, but given the space standards, that relief simply does not apply. In 2023-24, the average early years setting paid £21,000 in business rates, so those nurseries cannot apply because of the standards required by the education service. In Wales and Scotland, nurseries are exempt from business rates, and schools have them factored into their funding formula. How are we going to make sure that community settings benefit and that we are not just seeing toddlers transferring into school settings, with other settings closing?

Bridget Phillipson: I am sure that if the hon. Lady writes with further information, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), will be happy to respond to her questions, but I hope I can give her some reassurance by saying that 27 of the schools that will receive funding will be in a partnership with a private or voluntary early years provider on the school site. Moreover, many of the providers that will deliver the service I have announced will do so around the school day: many schools will ensure that there is provision throughout the year, but also at the start and the end of school days, often delivered in partnership with private or voluntary providers.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Four schools in Suffolk will benefit from today's announcement, and two of them are in my constituency. I am delighted that Reydon and Waldringfield primary schools will benefit. Does the Minister agree that this new scheme will directly benefit rural constituencies such as mine at a time when access to nursery provision is even more challenging for families, including working families, than it is for their urban neighbours?

Bridget Phillipson: I am delighted to hear about the impact that this will have on my hon. Friend's constituency and throughout Suffolk. We believe that in rural communities there is an important role for school-based provision and expanding early years opportunities. Where schools are already at the heart of our communities, what I have announced will allow further provision, creating early years places that will support children and their families, and, crucially, it also represents an important step in supporting child development.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I welcome the announcement. Curry Mallet Church of England school in my constituency was successful in this funding round, and can expand its early years provision. However, many early years providers, such as Hassockmoor Childcare in Barrington, face significant funding challenges. Given that more than three quarters of entitlement places are provided by private voluntary or independent nurseries, why are those not more central to expansion plans as they continue to experience the nightmare of increased employer NICs, price rises and, sadly, the risk of closure?

Bridget Phillipson: They are central to our plans, and they have a critical role to play in support for children and families and delivery of the roll-out, but school-based nurseries also have an important role in supporting children from more disadvantaged communities where they already have a higher proportion of the market share. We think that that can be expanded further to provide high-quality early years provision, which will involve working with private, voluntary and independent providers.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I pay tribute to the early years workforce, and I strongly support the Secretary of State's announcement, which builds on other announcements made recently by her and others in her Department. Will she say a little more about the benefits for, in particular, the most disadvantaged children, including those who may have English as a second language?

Bridget Phillipson: We know from all the evidence that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have the most to gain from high-quality early years education. Today's announcement will allow us to provide more places for them, alongside the expansion and the big uplift in the early years pupil premium. When it comes to childcare, we are determined to enable children from more disadvantaged backgrounds to take up places.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I welcome the announcement and, in particular, the increased funding, but the Government also need to address the problems of funding nursery provision in the private sector. The Castle Kindergarten in my constituency has written to me saying that new restrictions on what nurseries can charge parents to bridge the gap between Government funding and the actual costs of childcare services are putting most private providers in a precarious position. According to a recent article in *The Times*, nearly 60% of childcare providers plan to limit the number of Government-funded places owing to those restrictions. Will the Secretary of State meet me, along with my constituents, to discuss this issue?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that further. In respect of charging and guidance, I think it an important principle that parents should have transparency on what they are being charged and what they are being charged for, especially when it comes to access to Government-backed provision. As for funding, I have already told the House that we have increased the early years pupil premium by 45%, and alongside that is the £75 million expansion grant. This year, the rate for under-twos has increased by, on average, 3.4%.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the announcement of capital funding, which will benefit Armthorpe's Shaw Wood academy in my constituency, but what revenue funding nurseries will receive?

Bridget Phillipson: The investment in my hon. Friend's constituency will allow parents to take up the offer of expanded childcare and entitlements, and we will ensure that the places are available to them. Eligible parents will have access to the entitlements that we are expanding and rolling out with the £8 billion of investment that was announced in the Budget.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and warmly welcome the inclusion of Great Horwood Church of England school in the first round of funding. Like every school leader in Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes and the country as a whole, the school's headteacher, Paula Shaw, is working tirelessly to ensure that all children and their families have the opportunity to thrive. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital to ensure that parents in both urban and rural communities never have to choose between their families and their jobs?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to Paula Shaw and the team for all their work to support children and families. We were delighted that so many schools came forward to apply to take

part in this first phase. Demand far outstripped supply, so we will be returning to this. However, I am also delighted that Paula and her team felt able to take part and to see the benefits that the extra places will bring to my hon. Friend's constituents.

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): This has been a game-changing announcement for my community. Not only has Runshaw college in Leyland been awarded £1.8 million as part of the higher education capital improvement funds, but Northbrook primary academy, also in Leyland, and Longton primary school have been included in the school-based nursery provision. I am delighted about that, and I thank the Ministers. Does the Secretary of State agree that this offers a huge opportunity for the development of young children, as well as putting large sums back in the pockets of working people? We promised and we delivered, and that is why the Conservative Benches are empty.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for the people of South Ribble, and it is a testament to his hard work that he continues to make the case for investment. As well as putting more money back into parents' pockets through our breakfast clubs and by rolling out primary-based nurseries, we are enabling all our children to have a brilliant start in life. I know that my hon. Friend is as passionate as I am about ensuring that we break the link between background and success, so that where a child is from does not determine what that child can go on to achieve.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I am delighted that the fantastic Ringway primary school in Stakeford, in my constituency, will be among the first in the country to host a school-based nursery. That, combined with the much-needed—and long in the planning—rebuilding of the school facilities will have an immeasurable impact on the life chances of young people in my area. Does my right hon. Friend agree that investments of this nature, mainly in socially deprived areas, will be of huge importance, and will she commit herself to rolling out further such schemes on my patch as soon as possible?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend can be assured that the early adopters breakfast clubs programme, for instance, was just the start of a national roll-out. I, too, am delighted that Ringway is part of the first phase of our school-based nurseries programme, and we are determined to ensure that there is more provision throughout the country. Of those that I have announced today, 34% will serve communities that experience disadvantage. It is important for us to ensure that all families can take up childcare and early years provision, and it is critical that we deliver those places.¹ Today's announcement of £37 million of capital investment, including investment in my hon. Friend's constituency, will be a crucial part of that.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I had the opportunity only last week to visit Jerounds primary school in my constituency, and saw the incredible work that it was doing in supporting young people and showing them the value of community pride and the importance of oracy. I have to say that they gave their local MP a very good grilling. I am delighted that Jerounds will be one

1. [Official Report, 23 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 10WC.] (Correction)

[Chris Vince]

of the 300 schools to deliver on our pledge of a new school-based surgery. May I ask how this will benefit children and parents in my constituency, and, like others, ask for more provision in Harlow?

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the team at Jerounds for their amazing work in giving our children the best start in life. I am delighted that they were able to take part in the scheme. My announcement and those made by others across Government mean putting more money back into parents' pockets, but also ensuring that all our children have a brilliant start in life and parents are given extra choices when it comes to the working hours that best fit their family circumstances.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement that seven new school-based nurseries will be established in County Durham, including one at Bloemfontein primary school in my constituency. The headteacher has said that this will transform unused space at the school and help address the current shortage of nursery spaces in our area. Does the Secretary of State agree that parents in Craghead and beyond in North Durham will benefit from cheaper childcare through these new school-based nurseries?

Bridget Phillipson: As my hon. Friend sets out, parents right across County Durham will be able to benefit from higher-quality, more affordable childcare that is more available. We are putting money back into parents' pockets, but we are also providing the places that are required across our country, including in communities that have the most to gain from high-quality early years provision. We know that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds gain the most when they can access early years education, and that is the difference that this Labour Government are making.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for today's announcement, which includes funding for more nursery places at Allenby primary school in Ealing Southall, saving local families an average of £7,500 a year in childcare costs. Does she agree that taken together with yesterday's increase to the national living wage, which will see £1,400 added to 3 million people's pay packets, this is clear evidence of Labour delivering on our promise to make work pay?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I join her in sending my best wishes to Allenby, which is taking part in our first phase. She is right to say that this is the difference that a Labour Government are making. We are supporting working families and putting more money back into their pockets, and we delivered a record pay rise yesterday. Alongside that, we have a crucial focus on making sure that, in the early years, our children get all the support that they deserve to break the link between background and success.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): Swaffham is a small market town in my rural constituency. It has seen significant house building over the last few years, so every time I go there people are keen to talk about the impact of childcare and the lack of spaces, which is why I am so pleased that Swaffham Church of England

primary academy is being funded as part of this scheme. May I warmly invite the Secretary of State to Swaffham to see the positive impact that this policy is having on rural communities such as mine?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend raises an important point: where we see housing development and changes taking place, we must ensure that we have high-quality childcare and early years provision running alongside that. Through the bidding that schools were able to take part in, we considered questions about local need, and I am delighted that Swaffham will be taking part. Either I or my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be happy to visit the area to see the provision, perhaps when it is up and running.

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): I could not be more pleased to welcome today's news. As a former nursery manager, I understand the need to ensure that all children have the very best start. I remember the sense of abandonment when Sure Start, health visitors and school nurses were retracted from our community provision. Like many others, I had to face salary cuts and salary sacrifices to keep our nursery doors open over the last eight years under the previous Government. On Friday, I visited Stockingsford academy, one of the schools benefiting from the today's announcement, and heard from its dedicated team about the challenges they face. This year, only 7% of the 75 children are on track. Does the Secretary of State agree that the new provision will transform high-deprivation places, where 46% of the population already have high levels of debt?

Bridget Phillipson: That takes me back to June last year, when my hon. Friend, who was at that point Labour's parliamentary candidate, and I launched Labour's plan to deliver more school-based nurseries. Today, coming out of that plan, we have announced the action that parents in this country voted for.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Long questions are just going to prevent others from getting in, so I ask Members please to keep them short.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), I actually think there are fewer Conservative Members present than there are pages in the book "The Very Hungry Caterpillar", which says everything about where they are coming from.

I am really grateful to the Secretary of State for her statement and for the fact that the town of Chipping Norton in my constituency will get one of the first 300 school-based nurseries announced today. Does she find it hard, as I do, to take lectures from the Conservative party when it comes to the provision of childcare?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes. It is this Labour Government who are getting on and delivering the childcare places that parents across our country want to see, including in my hon. Friend's constituency of Banbury. I know how hard he works for his constituents to make sure that their voices are heard in this place. He is a real champion for local families, and I want to make sure that, by working together with him and colleagues from right across the House, we deliver better life chances for all our children.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies' small business report, early years education is vital for children's development, so I welcome today's announcement that school-based nurseries will be created at Horsted infant school and two other schools in Medway, and at five others in Kent. Does the Minister agree that this investment, coupled with that given by Labour councils across the country through school streets programmes, will create a true learning environment that is fit for purpose?

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the important contribution that Horsted, in his constituency, will make as part of this scheme. I agree that we have to do a lot more as a country to make sure that all our children get a brilliant range of experiences, including in their early years, with the highest-quality provision. Today's announcement takes us a step further towards that reality.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): The Secretary of State said in her announcement that many of these school-based nurseries will be in places with the greatest need. That is certainly the case in my constituency, and I am very grateful that Portway primary in West Ham has been included. I have said in this House before that my constituents do not lack ambition; they lack opportunity, and education is the golden ticket to that opportunity. Does the Secretary of State agree that nurseries provide opportunities not only for children but for adults, and can she assure us that, as the programme is rolled out, the focus will remain on areas that have not only educational needs but economic needs and other forms of deprivation?

Bridget Phillipson: As my hon. Friend says, the expanded provision at Portway in his constituency will make a big difference by supporting parents to take on work opportunities, to have more money in their pockets, and to take on the hours that suit them. Critically, it will allow us to provide more support for children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, right across his constituency.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Treleigh primary school sits at the heart of my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency. It is surrounded by an area that suffers from profound levels of poverty and deprivation. If ever there was an area that needed some good news on early years, it is mine, following the shameful neglect by the previous Government. Does the Minister agree that new childcare places in new and expanded nurseries, including at Treleigh primary school, will help children from the most deprived backgrounds have the best start in life, after the life chances of children from deprived backgrounds were ignored by the Conservative party for years?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the impact that this policy will have. On average, 40% of the overall gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers has already emerged by the age of five. That is why it is critical that we invest in the early years to give more children the best possible start in life, and today's announcement will create much needed high-quality early years provision and places, including in his constituency.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I enormously welcome the Government's decision to introduce 300 new Government-funded school-based nurseries. I am particularly delighted that one of them will be in the Hampton Vale primary academy in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that these new nurseries will make a real difference to families in my constituency and across the country by saving them up to £7,500?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes. Today's announcement will support parents to save up to £7,500 a year, putting more money back into their pockets. Taken together with our commitment to roll out 750 free breakfast clubs from later on this month, it is clear that this Labour Government are on the side of working parents.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): The announcement of a new school-based nursery at the Heath Hayes primary academy in my Cannock Chase constituency is very welcome, and shows that this Labour Government are keeping their promises and delivering for parents and children. As capacity is very stretched at Heath Hayes, this capital investment is very welcome. I am the parent of a child who benefited hugely from a school nursery. Does my right hon. Friend agree that school-based nurseries set children up perfectly for going into reception?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend. I have seen for myself the impact that this policy has, particularly for parents who already have older children at school. It eases the transition from nursery to reception and sets up children to succeed. Importantly, it allows staff to build relationships with parents and families, and to identify whether problems are developing in areas such as SEND, where the earlier we spot problems, the earlier we can intervene and put in place the support that is required.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, because this is an investment in early years, which is an investment in the future of our communities. In my constituency, there is an investment of hundreds of thousands of pounds at Springhill primary academy in Burntwood, Boney Hay primary academy in Burntwood and St Stephen's primary in Fradley. These schools do amazing work in supporting the next generation, and this money will be used to renovate facilities, give children a better environment in which to start their learning, expand the number of places and help provide the 30 hours of free childcare that working parents so desperately need. Can I put on record my thanks to these schools, and can I ask if the Secretary of State will join me in visiting schools and celebrating the work they do?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Just say yes, Secretary of State. [*Laughter.*]

Bridget Phillipson: I will do my very best to visit Lichfield to see the fantastic provision and, critically, to see the brilliant work my hon. Friend is doing to champion local schools and nurseries in his constituency.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): We on these Benches recognise that school-based childcare offers some of the best childcare. I welcome the statement from the Secretary of State, which means that the

[Markus Campbell-Savours]

Government will be supporting the expansion of the rural nursery at Paddle school near Cockermouth. Could the Secretary of State share with the House how these plans will help parents get into work?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend knows better than most the importance of high-quality provision, including in rural communities, allowing parents to avoid having to travel considerable distances. This announcement will make a big difference in his constituency and in constituencies across the country. From the applications to the scheme, we saw real demand. More than 640 schools applied to take part, so there is a big demand, which we want to take forward in future phases, including in rural communities.

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): After a night of little sleep, I am feeling something that many have said in this Chamber before: being a parent in this country is too exhausting and too expensive. That is why on Friday I am hosting a coffee morning targeted at dads, with former Wigan Warriors players and Andy's Man Club. It is also why I am so delighted that, down the road, Hindley Green community primary and Hindley St Peter's will benefit from this Government's investments in new nurseries. This Labour Government are investing in the working families I represent. Can I thank the Secretary of State for that, and ask her about the timeline for rolling out the scheme to further schools that I represent in my constituency?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work that he is doing to support local families and also dads. Becoming a parent for the first time can be a daunting experience for mothers, but it can also be daunting for fathers, and they need support as well, so I pay tribute to him.

This is the first phase of our announcement. We will draw on the experience of the schools that take part in the first phase as we take forward future phases. The majority of the 6,000 new places created will be available from September 2025. That is the difference that a Labour Government are making.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): I am so excited to hear about the nursery at St Anne's church academy in Weston-super-Mare, especially from the Dispatch Box today. People such as Julie McCallum at Play and Learn pre-school in Worle have shouldered the burdens of the previous Government's evisceration of early years and of their lack of strategy. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking so many early years practitioners across my constituency and the UK for their tireless work to give our children the best start possible?

Bridget Phillipson: I congratulate the amazing early years workforce and our education workforce in Weston-super-Mare and across our country. They are the people who make the biggest difference for children in such settings. Important as capital is to creating the places, it is the people who deliver for our children and support them in their earliest years who make the biggest difference, and for that they deserve our praise.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): We started out with six Conservative Members, which we can divide by two to get the number now left on their Benches. Given their track record in this field, perhaps the rest have been put in detention for the rest of the day.

I am so proud to see that Smallthorne primary academy in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove has been selected for a new school-based nursery. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that these nurseries are vital in places such as Smallthorne, not only for the childcare they provide, but for helping with school-readiness, closing the developmental gap early on and giving every single child the best start in life?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the difference that early years provision makes, not just in those crucial early years but right throughout children's lives. The evidence could not be clearer. I am delighted that, in Smallthorne and in many communities across our country, more children will have the opportunity to benefit from high-quality early years provision, which is critical to their life chances and also really important for parents in his constituency.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I am sure that the children of Pondhu primary school and their families are delighted to welcome the investment in the nursery announced by the Secretary of State, not least because St Austell Central has sadly become the second most deprived ward in the whole of Cornwall. What impact does the Secretary of State expect the investment to have on the life chances of children living in deprived families?

Bridget Phillipson: We know that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds will have the most benefit from high-quality early years education, and they benefit the most when that starts earlier. So much of the overall gap will have opened up by that age; 40% of the overall gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers has already emerged by the age of five. That is why it is essential that we do more to support children and families when children are younger. That is right for those children and their families, and it is also an investment in our country's future.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Looking at the Conservative Benches, I am sure that those on the Conservative Front Bench are glad that this statement is about nurseries, rather than school attendance—or truancy.

I thank the Secretary of State for joining me in Peterborough earlier this week to meet the fantastic pupils, parents and staff at Fulbridge academy, which excels in giving great education to students in my constituency. Will she join me in congratulating and paying tribute to Ben Erskine and the brilliant staff team at the school? Does she agree that with leadership, a relentless focus on standards and the resources in today's announcement, absolutely nothing can hold back the ambition of working-class communities like mine?

Bridget Phillipson: I was delighted to join my hon. Friend in visiting Fulbridge and to meet the brilliant staff team, who are doing so much to support all children in that community, so that they can achieve all they are capable of. There should be no ceiling on

children's ambition and aspiration, including in working-class communities. I know he will continue to champion his constituency and community, and ensure that, alongside our plan for change, we deliver a country in which background is no barrier to getting on in life, and in which we have broken the link between background and success.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I warmly welcome the news that Uplands primary school in Sandhurst has been awarded funding to expand its school-based nursery. Will the Secretary of State set out what this means for Labour's commitment to delivering top-quality childcare for families across my constituency and the country?

Bridget Phillipson: This Labour Government want to make sure that families can access childcare support. That is important for families' work choices and, critically, for children's development. That is why we have set ourselves an ambitious target of ensuring that a record number of children are school-ready when they start school, and high-quality early years provision, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, is a critical part of that. Alongside that, this announcement will put more money back into parents' pockets.

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): I feel as though I should declare an interest, as I am the proud dad of a little boy who is literally taking his first steps as our Government take these important steps in a critical area.

I welcome the statement and all the Secretary of State's work in this area. I particularly welcome the fact that St Stephen's in my constituency of Worsley and Eccles will be home to one of these nurseries. As the Secretary of State well knows, I have long been a champion of available, affordable and accessible childcare, especially for working parents. Does she agree that delivering on these aims is a real sign that our Government are delivering for children and their parents?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For many years, when our party was in opposition, I campaigned alongside him to make sure that working parents get the support that they need to get on at work, have good working standards and conditions and, critically, can access high-quality early years provision and childcare. This announcement of about £37 million of extra capital investment, including at St Stephen's in his constituency, will make a big difference to working parents in his constituency and across our country, but it is also an important part of this Government's plan for change, which breaks the link between background and success.

Points of Order

3.19 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am looking for guidance on how I can raise a breach of the behaviour code by the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). He was galivanting around my constituency yesterday, and I thought it a real shame that he did not tell me about his visit in advance, as the behaviour code requires him to; I could have taken him around all the communities that would be impacted by his party's plan to privatise the NHS. This follows an incident in February, when the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), also visited my constituency without telling me in advance. How can I ensure that section 43 of the behaviour code is upheld in future?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. I take it that he has notified the Members concerned that he intended to refer to them.

Sam Carling *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind all hon. Members that they must inform colleagues in advance whenever they intend to visit another colleague's constituency, unless the visit is made for private purposes. That is now most definitely on the record.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on this important matter. Two weeks ago, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) came to my constituency campaigning, and did not inform me that he was visiting. I would very much welcome it if you perhaps took this opportunity to remind him of the behaviour code, too.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member, if he was following procedure, should have informed me or the Clerks that he intended to raise that point of order. Maybe his point is a matter for next time. It has been raised and recorded.

Sam Carling *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: We do not need continued points of order on this issue, thank you so much. We will proceed.

BILL PRESENTED

GROCERIES LABELLING (SIZE REDUCTION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Blair McDougall presented a Bill to make provision about labelling requirements for certain groceries products where the manufacturer has reduced the size of the product; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July, and to be printed (Bill 218).

Co-operative Housing Tenure

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

3.21 pm

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision that occupiers of dwellings owned by certain forms of co-operatives shall occupy those dwellings by virtue of their membership of the co-operative and not as tenants or under any other type of property interest; to make provision for co-operative tenure and for the rights and obligations of the co-operative and its members; and for connected purposes.

It is my privilege and my pleasure to introduce the Bill. I have always had co-operative values. They are in my bones. It is not far from the mark to say that I was born in the Co-op. It certainly fed, clothed and provided essential goods to me in my early years, and I have taken those values with me throughout my life. For six years, I served as a director of the Co-operative Development Society, supporting community housing projects and co-operatives across the country. Co-operative housing is more than just an idea. Despite the significant barriers they face, there are hundreds of co-operative housing projects across the country, and the number is growing.

Just last week, I was lucky enough to visit Coin Street, just over the river in Waterloo. Forty years ago, the Coin Street Community Builders came together to fight against the rapid development of unaffordable commercial housing in London, which was leading to the total collapse of the community around them; shops, schools and community spaces were all closing. They fought hard to buy the land and build a new housing co-operative on the banks of the Thames. Today, there are four housing co-operatives on Coin Street, all managed by their residents, many of whom have lived there for decades. These are more than just homes. For the people who live there, they are routes to training, education, decision-making and genuine power. This is housing done differently.

For too many people, housing is something they have little control over. Working people have faced a housing sector that is broken, and have little opportunity to change that. For too long, when it comes to housing, power has felt very distant from communities, but for co-operative housing projects, power has always sat directly with residents. When decisions are made, residents are in the driving seat. They have an active stake and say in the places they call home. The power of that should not be underestimated. Crucially, co-operative housing projects provide an alternative to the spiralling rents and mortgage costs that too many Members will be familiar with, and which have plagued the housing sector for decades.

I want to place on record my thanks to Lucy Grove and Finn Byrne from the Coin Street team, and to Tom, a Coin Street resident, for all the work that they do to promote co-operative housing and its potential, and for showing me around last week. I pay tribute to David Rodgers, the long standing chief executive officer of CDS Housing, and his successor Linda Wallace, and to my great friend Laura Blake for all the work she did alongside me to promote co-operative housing.

Now is the moment to grasp the opportunity that co-operative housing offers. Just last week, the Government announced a new funding package for community-led housing, co-operatives and community land trusts, unlocking thousands more homes over the next decade. This Labour Government understand that community-led housing is about putting power into the hands of local people, who will take a lead in designing the homes they want to see in their communities. This is the first time the Government have supported this approach to financing house building on this scale, and it has rightly been warmly welcomed by the sector, and by communities who want to get involved in locally led community housing solutions.

Unlocking the power of co-operative housing will be possible only if it is given a foundation in law. Co-operative housing does exist in the UK, and in many cases it thrives, but local people seeking to form a housing co-operative face an uphill legal battle. Without co-operative housing tenure being set out in law, advisers, regulators, lawyers, banks and others who would normally be tasked with supporting people with their housing are not properly equipped to do so in the case of co-operative housing. The United Nations has declared this to be the International Year of Co-operatives, and has called on member states to create “enabling environments for co-operatives”. This Labour Government already have a bold commitment to doubling the size of the co-operative and mutual sector, and have been clear that co-operatives should play a vital role in driving inclusive growth that is felt by working people and communities. Now should be the moment to commit to a co-operative housing tenure, so that this part of our sector can grow and thrive as it has never been enabled to previously.

As is sadly often the case, the UK lags behind our neighbours around the world when it comes to co-operative housing and its position in law. Sweden has had co-operative housing law for more than a century, and Norway for almost 80 years. It is no surprise that in those two countries, and in many more, co-operative housing is far more prevalent and successful than it is here.

To close, I want to reflect briefly on the role that co-operative housing projects are playing in wider communities. I am proud and privileged to be a Labour and Co-operative MP, and to be part of the Co-operative party’s “Community Britain” campaign, which argues that work is already under way in so many of our communities to solve, in serious and innovative ways, the big challenges that our country faces. We see that in local community-owned energy projects, in which people come together not just to tackle climate change through clean energy, but to upskill local people. We see it in agriculture, in amazing initiatives such as the English Mustard Growers co-operative, which is keeping mustard alive in my constituency and across the east of England. We see it in local initiatives such as Men’s Sheds, which are fighting the loneliness epidemic, or community kitchens, which are bringing people from different cultures together.

What I learned at Coin Street is that it is more than just a housing development. The co-operative model has fostered a genuine community. Built on land owned by the co-operative are a community pub, a collection of small independent businesses, a multi-purpose neighbourhood centre including a nursery and a soon-to-be-developed community leisure centre. The co-operative even has a relationship with the renowned Rambert

ballet school nearby, which allows residents of all ages to access dance and culture at accessible and affordable prices.

Coin Street is a rich community, led by the needs and wants of local people. It all starts with the co-operative model—groups of people coming together to build something different and reap the benefits. At a time when shared spaces like community centres, pubs and leisure centres have disappeared across the country, there is surely a case for this model to come to the fore.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Andrew Pakes, Helena Dollimore, Dame Meg Hillier, Paul Waugh, Preet Kaur Gill, Ms Stella Creasy, Alice Macdonald, Gareth Snell, Florence Eshalomi, Sarah Hall, Alex Sobel and Rachel Blake present the Bill.

Andrew Pakes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 June, and to be printed (Bill 219).

Onshore Wind and Solar Generation

3.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I beg to move,

That the draft Infrastructure Planning (Onshore Wind and Solar Generation) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 10 March, be approved.

Good afternoon, Madam Deputy Speaker. This instrument is another important step in supporting the deployment of onshore wind and solar, which are critical to achieving the Government's mission for clean power by 2030. An effective planning system is key to unlocking the new infrastructure our country needs to deliver our energy security and resilience. It is important that planning applications are determined through an appropriate planning route that reflects a project's size, impact and complexity, where potential issues are identified and mitigated as necessary.

The nationally significant infrastructure project regime is governed by the Planning Act 2008, whereby decisions on development consent are made by the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. The NSIP regime applies to larger projects, with a megawatt threshold determining which energy generating projects are deemed nationally significant. Following submission into the NSIP process, an extensive examination period will commence, where interested parties—including local authorities, people of office and the general public—can make written or oral representations to the examination, ensuring that the voices of communities are heard during the decision-making process.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Rather than traducing what remains of our countryside, what assessment has the Minister made of the UK-Morocco power project run by Xlinks, which would deliver 11.5 GW of energy and power about 8% of our grid needs? It would seem that the block to this project is not the Moroccan Government, nor the Governments of countries through whose territorial seas the cable would pass, but resides instead in Whitehall. What is the Minister doing about it?

Michael Shanks: I give credit to the right hon. Gentleman for the ingenious way he brought that up in a debate on solar and wind in the UK. He raises a good point. We are looking at the detail of a proposal that has been put forward by a private company—I am not going to say anything more on the Floor of the House.

Dr Murrison *rose*—

Michael Shanks: I have given way already.

Turning back to the statutory instrument in front of us, until recently the de facto ban on onshore wind generation in England introduced by the Conservatives limited the deployment of onshore wind in England. Those changes to the planning legislation set an almost impossible bar to meet, resulting in the pipeline of projects shrinking by more than 90%, with less than 40 MW of onshore wind generation consented and becoming operational in the intervening period.

In July 2024, this Government disappplied those planning policy tests and committed to reintroducing onshore wind into the NSIP regime, reversing the damaging policies of the past 10 years and placing onshore wind

[Michael Shanks]

on the same footing as solar, offshore wind and nuclear power stations. As such, through this instrument, onshore wind projects with a generating capacity of more than 100 MW in England will be eligible to be consented under the NSIP regime.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): This legislation is crucial to achieving our net zero commitments. GE Vernova, a renewables company in Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, struggled with really long waiting times for an expansion of its site, but it has recently been approved, which means good new jobs for people who live in my constituency. That exemplifies the importance of streamlining the planning process, which will eventually lead to lower bills for people in my constituency and around the country. Does the Minister agree that this legislation is integral to developing the jobs we need across the country, and would he like to come and visit GE Vernova with me?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for that warm invitation; I will of course consider it, and I look forward to visiting her constituency at some point. She makes an extremely important point. We are reforming the planning system to deal with challenges that have meant that, for too long, infrastructure that is incredibly important for our energy security has been held back by dither and delays in the process. We want to sweep that away and move forward much more quickly. The prize is energy security, but as she rightly points out, this is also about jobs and investment in communities right across the country.

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

Michael Shanks: I will, then I need to make progress.

Lewis Cocking: The Minister talks about our energy security. What will increase our energy security is issuing new oil and gas licences so that we can have more home-grown energy. Why will the Minister not change his policy on that?

Michael Shanks: We really are stretching this debate, but I am very happy to discuss this matter. The point has been raised on a number of occasions, and the answer is always the same: it is not delivering energy security at the moment. We have said very clearly that oil and gas plays a crucial role in our energy mix now, and it will continue to play a role for decades to come, but the North sea is already in transition. The reality of the past 10 years under the Conservatives was that more than 70,000 jobs were lost, with no plan for how to deal with it. We are determined to deliver on the transition and on energy security, which will get us off the rollercoaster of fossil fuel prices that we are all still riding.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will make a little progress and come back to the right hon. Gentleman. Although we have 90 minutes, I am conscious of time.

This instrument is about making sure that onshore wind projects in England that offer capacity of over 100 MW will be eligible to be consented under the regime. It reflects advances in turbine technology over the last decade, with modern turbines being larger and more powerful. Reintroducing onshore wind into the NSIP regime will provide an appropriate route for nationally significant projects seeking planning consent where they are of a certain scale and complexity, so that local impacts can be carefully balanced against national benefits and the need to meet the UK's wider decarbonisation goals. This will provide greater confidence for developers and grow the pipeline of potential projects in England once again.

Kit Malthouse: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. He talks about national impact. I wonder what provision there is under this legislation for protected national landscapes. Many of the windiest places in the UK are among our most beautiful, whether it is the hills and mountains of our national parks or the downs of our national landscapes, like the North Wessex downs in my constituency, which was an area of outstanding national beauty but is now a national landscape. Many of my residents are concerned, because the Minister is quite right that the turbines that are now being developed are huge. It is likely to mean that for most of our lifetimes we will lose the landscape to these new developments. Will this system still encompass consideration of protected landscape and make sure that it stays as it is for future generations?

Michael Shanks: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. As I have always said from the Dispatch Box in this role, there is a balance to be struck here. We need to build nationally important infrastructure, and that does mean much more onshore wind in England to match the significant amount of onshore wind that has been built in Scotland over the past few years, including not far from my constituency. But the balance must be struck with protecting land as well. Even if we build the significant number of projects that are needed, there will still be protections for land in the areas he mentions. The planning system allows for those considerations to be taken into account.

The NSIP regime already includes nuclear and solar. We are saying that the ban on onshore wind introduced by the Conservatives was not a rational decision, so we are bringing it back into this process. [Interruption.] The shadow Minister says that it was absolutely rational, but his party's former Energy Minister, the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), said that it was "always mad". I think we should remember that not everybody in the Conservative party agreed with it, including, I suspect, the shadow Minister himself.

Let me come to the second part of the statutory instrument: the question of solar. Solar has been subject to a 50 MW NSIP threshold since it was originally set out in the Planning Act 2008. However, much like onshore wind, solar panel technology has seen significant advances in efficiency, enabling a greater megawatt yield per site. Evidence suggests that the 50 MW threshold is now causing a market distortion. With modern technology, mid-sized generating stations have a generating capacity greater than 50 MW and therefore fall within the NSIP regime. That is likely to be disproportionate to their

size, scale and impact. That has resulted in a large amount of ground-mounted solar projects entering the planning system artificially capping their capacity just below the 50 MW threshold, leading to a potentially inefficient use of sites and grid connections.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The approach set out in the order is a continuation of the Minister's work to build the clean energy infrastructure that the country needs. I agree that the capacity threshold and the reintroduction of onshore wind generation stations into the definition of nationally significant infrastructure projects will help deliver the triple benefits of decarbonisation, energy security and job creation. However, as the Minister knows, Cornwall is a leader in the roll-out of onshore wind and solar energy. Does he agree that the order will further opportunities for renewable energy growth across Cornwall that would have been ignored by the flat Earth climate change deniers in the Conservative party?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for the point, although I am disappointed, because while he normally invites me to visit Cornwall, he did not on this occasion. I will not take it personally. Since he was elected to this place, he has done a fantastic job in delivering jobs in his community on the clean power mission, most recently by looking at some of the raw materials that are so essential. He has made great progress on that, so I pay tribute to him.

My hon. Friend is of course right about the Conservative party's scepticism of a policy that it used to support so wholeheartedly, and one that has delivered economic growth right across the country. It has now turned its face against that; I am not sure whether that is flat Earth or not. I am sure that the shadow Minister will regale us with his long list of commitments in this space, but it is clear that the drive to net zero is delivering industrial opportunities, jobs, manufacturing and investment in communities that have suffered for so long under economic decline, as well as delivering on our climate ambitions and energy security. That is the right path for us to be on.

I will return to solar for a second. Raising the NSIP threshold to 100 MW for solar will ensure that mid-sized projects have access to a more proportionate planning route via local planning authorities. It should incentivise projects that would otherwise have capped their capacity to develop to a more optimal and efficient scale.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): We are talking about increasing the threshold from 50 MW to 100 MW. I wonder whether the Minister is aware of the average size of NSIP projects approved by the Government since last July. If so, why has the threshold been kept artificially low at 100 MW and not raised significantly higher? Otherwise, we will see huge numbers of smaller projects coming through and being classified as NSIPs, such as those approved by the Minister so far, rather than larger projects.

Michael Shanks: The hon. Gentleman has asked me a number of written questions on this topic to try to get to the heart of the matter, and he is now testing me on the number, which I think we did provide him with in response to one of those written questions. Since it is not on the tip of my tongue, I will write to him with the answer. On the general point, I do accept what he is

saying. Part of the reason for the instrument is to try to get to a more rational point where we do not have projects limiting themselves artificially to a level based on a figure.

We settled on 100 MW because we think it strikes the right balance by allowing larger projects that can deliver the outcomes we want in the energy system through the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, while limiting the number of projects coming into the national planning process. We think that balance is right, but we will continue to look at it. The hon. Gentleman has raised important points with me in in written questions that I am happy to discuss with him in more detail.

The Government are mindful that mid and large-scale solar and onshore wind projects that may be preparing to enter the planning system might have already invested and undertaken preparatory steps with the expectation of entering a particular planning regime. Therefore, changing the NSIP criteria at short notice could result in projects entering into a different regime from that which they expected, which could increase costs for developers and cause delays. Therefore, the instrument before us also makes transitional provisions for onshore wind and solar projects that are already in the planning process when the order comes into force. The provisions will therefore ensure that projects already progressing under one regime will not be required to move into a different one.

In conclusion, through consultation, we sought views and supporting evidence on reintroducing onshore wind into the NSIP regime. We received a range of responses from different groups of people. Most agreed with our approach and the majority agreed with the 100 MW threshold. Indeed, although we initially consulted on the idea of a higher threshold of 150 MW, based on the analysis of those consultation responses, we concluded that a 100 MW threshold would be more appropriate and would reflect modern technology.

This instrument is another important step forward in delivering our clean power mission, supporting the deployment of onshore wind and solar and establishing the UK as a clean energy superpower. It supports all our work as a Government on delivering an effective planning system—one that ensures that applications are processed efficiently through an appropriate regime and that avoids distortionary effects on deployment. The measures ultimately aim to support our future energy security and resilience, alongside our 2030 goals and wider decarbonisation targets. I commend the order to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

3.45 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): In just four short weeks, people across England will go to the polls to determine the future of their local communities. At that same time, the Labour party seeks to impose on those very same communities vast new energy infrastructure: huge solar farms and wind turbines with blade heights of 180 metres to 200 metres, destroying swathes of England's green and pleasant land and going against the wishes of local people. As ever, only the Conservative party is standing up for those communities, and only the Conservative party believes that people in those communities should have a say over their local area. Labour would silence those communities, choosing

[*Andrew Bowie*]

to impose rather than to seek consent. In four weeks' time, voters across this country will have that choice before them.

The order provides a route to approval for onshore wind that entirely bypasses the consent of local communities and empowers the zealotry of the Secretary of State to impose infrastructure irrespective of the concerns of local people.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): In my constituency of Gordon and Buchan, the Suie and Correen hills are subject to a planning application for a new onshore wind farm. There is also concern that, because of that, there will be new pop-up infrastructure next to it, whether substations or batteries and so on. One project leads to another and then to another—it overtakes local communities, it means that local landscapes and local businesses change, and there is an impact on farming, too. Does my hon. Friend agree that such projects cannot be looked at in isolation? This has to be about their holistic impact across the board, not just about the individual scheme, one at a time.

Andrew Bowie: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, living, as we do, in the north-east of Scotland and seeing around us the huge increase in energy infrastructure planned for rural communities over the next few years—it is quite daunting. It is therefore no surprise that there has been such vociferous campaigning against the plans, whether those for wind turbines, pylons, energy substations or battery storage facilities, all of which are in the pipeline for our communities. That is why there is such a pushback there and also such concern across many of the communities that will be affected by the change in England over the next few years. That is why we oppose the SI before us.

In their first week in office, the Government approved three solar farms across Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Rutland, against the wishes of the local communities. Today, the Minister seeks to go further still. In increasing the threshold for solar, he pushes for the development of giant solar farms. To be eligible for sign-off by the Secretary of State, solar farms have to be 100 MW in capacity. Currently, the largest—Shotwick solar park in Flintshire—is 72 MW. The change signals a free-for-all for giant-scale solar, and the instrument brings onshore wind over a 100 MW capacity into the NSIP scope. In Lancashire, that means Scout Moor II being in the Secretary of State's gift to approve. Calderdale wind farm, with 65 turbines covering 9 square miles, is planned for Yorkshire and will be built on grouse moorland and farmland. In Lincolnshire's prime agricultural land, the breadbasket of England, this means a potential onslaught of proposals, despite the county council's opposition to large-scale plans.

I know how much this means to local communities—my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) has also made this point. I represent a constituency that is being subjected to vast swathes of energy infrastructure, and over the next few years approval will be sought for a whole host of new plans that will indelibly change a landscape that people are proud and happy to live in right now.

Lewis Cocking: Does my hon. Friend agree that, rather than making it easier for large-scale solar and onshore wind applications, the Government should be focusing on “fabric first” and increasing the energy efficiency of our housing stock, thereby reducing energy demand rather than destroying our countryside?

Andrew Bowie: Absolutely. I would be keen to see exactly what the Government are proposing on that front. Their plans, which are stripping away the rights of local communities, are doing great damage to communities across this country with shocking disregard—

Perran Moon: If the shadow Minister is so confident about Conservative party policy, will he come back to the House after 1 May and tell us how the Conservatives have performed in those local elections?

Andrew Bowie: I would be delighted to come back and compare notes on how our respective parties have performed in the local elections on 1 May. The choice before the people of England who are going to the polls on 1 May is quite clear. Where they have a Conservative local authority, they get better services and better value for money, as is being demonstrated right now by the comparison between Birmingham and Bromsgrove. There could not be a better illustration of the difference between Conservative party local delivery and Labour party failure. That is what is on the ballot paper on 1 May, and I will debate the arguments around that with the hon. Member any day of the week.

The Labour Government have made no secret of their plans to double onshore wind and treble solar, to be achieved by empowering themselves while disenfranchising local communities. In Lincolnshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire, they are silencing local opposition. They risk alienating the British public in their costly rush to a renewables-based system without consultation and with no consent.

The race to Clean Power 2030 is being done at the expense of all else. It is being done at the expense of our energy security, our national security and our standards on ethical supply chains. Just last week in this very House, Labour whipped its MPs to vote in favour of allowing Great British Energy to invest in supply chains despite evidence of modern slavery—the Labour party! The week before, the Secretary of State was collaborating with the People's Republic of China, sacrificing our national security and tacitly admitting that his wrong-headed targets were unachievable without imports made with coal power. Perhaps the Government received advice on how to achieve community consent from President Xi Jinping.

Kit Malthouse: I understand that this particular sector is out of fashion with the Government, but one of the other sacrifices is likely to involve Scotland's, and indeed England's, precious raptor population. Raptors often suffer as a result of high-density wind farms and are effectively minced as they fly through the air. In California and elsewhere, we see high numbers of bird deaths, particularly birds of prey. Would the Government not be better off, in my hon. Friend's opinion, putting their time and investment into low-orbit solar, in which the UK, along with Japan, leads the world?

Andrew Bowie: I bow to my right hon. Friend's expertise on raptors and on British bird life in general. That sounds like an entirely sensible suggestion. The Minister is taking notes, and I very much hope that he will take that suggestion back to the Department in which he is lucky to serve.

The Minister has told us that onshore renewable infrastructure can unlock lower bills and that it is the cheapest energy source, but that is not the case. We have the second highest on-stream renewables in Europe, yet the UK's domestic energy bills are among the highest in Europe. We also know from the Office for Budget Responsibility that the cost to businesses and households of subsidising renewables will increase from £12 billion to £19 billion by 2030. That is the true cost of the Government's rush to net zero.

We are very proud of what we achieved during our years in government, building the first and fifth largest offshore wind farms in the world, which are generating power for Great Britain right now, and halving our emissions while growing the economy faster than any other developed economy. But this Government need to be honest with the British people about the cost of their arbitrary targets. The Labour party makes no attempt to account for the whole-systems cost associated with the renewables-dominated system. In fact, the Secretary of State cancelled the analysis commissioned by his predecessor. He does not want to know how much it costs, and it is clear that the Government do not want to know. It is wilful ignorance driven purely by ideology.

At the election, the Labour party promised us £300 off energy bills. Yesterday we saw the price cap and bills go up. On the Opposition side of the House, we stand with communities, seek to empower local people and understand their concerns. We oppose this instrument, which enables the Secretary of State to continue to ride roughshod over the concerns of local communities in vain pursuit of the Government's own legacy. Will the Minister re-commission the whole-systems cost analysis that his Government scrapped on day one, and look at the facts? Can he tell us the cost of running the gas-fired power station fleet for 5% of our power, in addition to the rising curtailment costs, paid to turn off the growing number of wind turbines? Can he confirm that his proposed community benefits package is significantly lower than the scheme considered by the previous Government? What is his message to the residents of Lincolnshire, Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cambridgeshire, Buckinghamshire and elsewhere, as they make their decisions on 1 May?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I will now announce the result of today's deferred Division on the draft Ecodesign for Energy-Related Products and Energy Information (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2025. The Ayes were 349 and the Noes were 14, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

We have four more speeches.

3.56 pm

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I thank the Minister for expediting this important legislation to transform the energy landscape in the UK. I have long campaigned

for renewable energy measures to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and to produce green power of our own. The UK has suffered significantly, like many other countries, from the cost of oil and gas skyrocketing due to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. The Conservatives did nothing to help the situation. They abandoned much of the country's energy storage, leaving us reliant on fossil fuels pumped in under the channel, and did not take energy security seriously. They further compounded the situation by scrapping their net zero targets and championing dirty, polluting gas and oil.

Last year, the UK hit a historic milestone, with 42% of energy coming from renewable sources, including 31% being generated by wind power. As energy bills rise yet again, it is clear that we need to break the shackles that hold us hostage to energy companies charging extortionate rates just to keep the lights on. British people simply cannot afford for the status quo to continue, financially and environmentally.

I am proud that this Government are leading the way by setting up Great British Energy to give us energy independence, security and longevity, but that needs to be backed up by planning infrastructure changes that support our aims. I understand concerns that our countryside and agricultural land could be at risk from the development of renewable power sources and upgrading the grid, but I am confident that this Government will ensure that infrastructure is always in the right place and done in the right way.

Creating the infrastructure is not the end of the story. Due to the lack of energy storage and grid capacity, around 8.3 terawatt-hours—about 10% of the wind power—is effectively lost. Even though National Grid is working at speed to upgrade the networks to ensure that not a single watt-hour is lost, we need to do more.

Two years ago, my husband and I retrofitted and upgraded our home by removing the gas, installing solar panels and an air-source heat pump, and fully insulating externally. But we quickly realised the battery was not big enough to store all the energy we were producing, and despite being able to sell some of it back to the grid, it would have been better to be able to store more of it for a rainy—or rather, snowy and icy—day. Scale that up, and it is the same for the whole country. We need to harness that additional energy to help to reduce the need for fossil fuels.

I hope this change will filter down into the house building industry. It has long been a bugbear of mine that developers are only required to install an electric vehicle charging point on new build homes. We need to mandate solar panels on every roof and proper insulation, so that heat does not escape through the walls, and ensure that homes across the UK are fit for the future. I also take this opportunity to welcome the fund made available by West Midlands Mayor Richard Parker to help small businesses to make the transition to renewable energy. Small and medium-sized enterprises have been hit hard by energy price rises, and uncapped tariffs have caused bills to spiral to unsustainable levels.

To drive growth, we need energy security to make bills affordable for residents and businesses alike. Breaking down the barriers to tackling climate change and the energy crisis will help us to meet the Government's ambitious targets for energy storage and grid reinforcement, but we must move at pace to match the growth of renewable generation. Streamlining planning processes

[Cat Eccles]

and investment in energy storage will help our country to transition to a low-cost, green and clean power grid by 2030.

4 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): We are living in the shadow of the former Conservative Government's failure to invest in renewable energy and insulate our homes. Those failures have contributed directly to an energy crisis that has left households struggling with soaring bills and businesses facing crippling costs. The majority of people polled in this country want to see more action on climate change and saving our planet, not less.

The Liberal Democrats are unwavering champions of renewable energy. Now more than ever, we need to strengthen our home-grown energy security and stop our dependency on despots such as Putin. We welcome the lifting of the effective moratorium on onshore wind, which we have long called for. That was an extremely short-sighted and irresponsible Conservative policy. The planning changes that they made in 2015 and 2016 introduced a de facto ban in England, resulting in a loss to our manufacturing and local economies. The project pipeline for onshore wind shrank by over 90%, and less than 40 MW was consented to and became operational in the intervening period.

Harriet Cross: The supply chain is important for the roll-out of onshore and offshore wind, and the oil and gas sector supply chain will be crucial, but it is being worn away by the rush to end our use of North sea oil and gas. Does the hon. Member agree that preserving that supply chain, and ensuring a managed transition from North sea oil and gas, will be vital to any roll-out of onshore and offshore wind?

Pippa Heylings: We are absolutely and critically supportive of a just transition in the North sea, to move off fossil fuels alongside and parallel to our increased use of renewable energy.

It is therefore right to reintroduce onshore wind into the nationally significant investment regime, ensuring that there is a level playing field with other generating technologies such as solar, offshore wind and nuclear, which are already assessed under that regime. The motion also raises the threshold for solar projects deemed nationally significant from 50 MW to 100 MW. In one way, that increased threshold will help to prevent poor land use, given that the previous threshold incentivised developers to put in an artificial cap of 49.9 MW, which led to 40% of proposals coming in at that level. Increasing the threshold in local planning decisions also means that biodiversity net gain will be required of solar farms, ensuring that, where they are approved, they are nature-friendly. It will also give local voices a greater say in determining the location and suitability of large-scale solar projects up to 100 MW—that is important.

However, local decision making about large-scale solar cannot happen in a vacuum. We need a joined-up approach that balances the need for food security, energy infrastructure, new homes and nature recovery. That is why we welcome the Government's launching of consultations on both the land use framework and the strategic spatial energy plans, which together should

determine the most strategic energy mix, how much solar we need, at what scale and where best to locate it across the country.

Ben Obese-Jecty: The hon. Member is, like me, a Cambridgeshire MP. Cambridgeshire has already had Sunnica, one of the largest solar farms in the country at 2,400 acres, approved. We have another 1,900 acre project in my constituency, as she well knows, and others are in the planning process. Does she agree that Cambridgeshire residents should not have to bear the brunt of these projects? I know that she is a staunch advocate for the move towards solar, but would she, like me, stand up for her residents if someone was looking to build a nationally significant infrastructure project of that scale in her constituency?

Pippa Heylings: That is exactly the point I am making. I have been talking with my constituents, particularly about the controversial new large-scale Kingsway solar farm in my constituency. We need a land use framework and a strategic spatial energy plan that tells us and informs local planning and decision making about the scale of solar energy that we need across the whole country, where it is best located, where it can fit in and feed in, and the energy mix. We need to consider that mix and the balance of food security, energy infrastructure, homes and nature recovery.

Equally, we need genuinely significant community benefit schemes applied to large-scale generation schemes, similar to the community benefit approach applied in Scotland. We want to ensure that all national infrastructure projects and major energy generation infrastructure—not just transmission—provide minimum levels of community benefit, invested at ward and parish level into community benefit funds and determined by the local communities most affected. We must take communities with us and show that they are part of the energy transition, and that it is done with them, not to them.

We have deep reservations about the Government's approach overall to nationally significant infrastructure projects in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which appears to be a power-grab, stripping away local voice and letting developers off the hook for their impacts on nature and wildlife. Nature is not a blocker; it is an enabler of good growth and wellbeing, and while we climate-proof our energy system, we must also ensure that nature is part of future-proofing our economy. We will always speak up for a climate and nature combined approach.

Although we are supportive of the motion's ambition to streamline planning for major projects such as onshore wind, we register our concern about the Government's broader changes to NSIPs and planning, including the exemption of category 3 persons from compulsory purchase consultations, and the implementation of several Henry VIII clauses that hand sweeping powers to the Secretary of State and undermine local government and local voice. It is entirely possible to accelerate renewable energy deployment and uphold the community voice in planning decisions while protecting nature, and that is what we need to see.

4.6 pm

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): I thank the Minister for explaining why this motion is so important, and how it will unblock the system and

unlock potential. The move to cleaner home-grown energy demands nationwide delivery of our critical infrastructure, yet the current planning system is holding that back. Without home-grown energy we will not have control over energy prices in the UK, and we need the infrastructure to deliver that. There will always be a degree of opposition to the development of wind farms—that is democracy—but it is how we respond to local concerns that makes a difference. Burying our head in the sand, as the Conservatives chose to do for 14 years, is simply not an option.

It is important to share some experiences of the development of wind farms from my constituency, and to be clear that Scotland is on a different track, as wind farm developments fall under national planning framework 4. I want to share two lessons from my constituency. People across the country understand and see the natural benefits that the infrastructure covered by motion will unblock. Those include local employment opportunities through construction and maintenance, a boost to the local economy, increased local spending and, of course, a legacy of endless clean energy. However, experience from my area shows that those natural benefits should be topped up by community benefits.

Lesson No. 1 is that there is a need for community benefits and a fair and transparent model of distributing them. The Nine Community Council Group in my constituency represents nine Cumnock and Doon Valley communities, which manage and distribute community benefits from multiple wind farm developments across the area. They embody a collaborative community approach to wind farm benefit, and that must be the way forward for the country.

Lesson No. 2 is to consider the impact of building this crucial infrastructure on other crucial infrastructure, such as roads. By their very nature, wind farms are often in rural areas where transport links are already under-resourced. In rural areas people use roads more to go to work, to shop, and for basic living. Building wind farms is a great boost to the local economy, but it can take its toll on the roads. That means that we need to do more to support and invest in maintaining good road links in those communities.

Those lessons are about taking people with us when it comes to the transition to clean energy. Ayrshire's story is about making the move from coalfields to clean fields. It is one to be replicated, but we must ensure that our communities are onside in the process.

4.9 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I reiterate my opposition to the measures that this Government wish to impose. The slew of nationally significant infrastructure projects approved by this Government since July is the vanguard of many more. In Huntingdon, the proposed East Park solar farm is set to be bigger than Gatwick airport, at 1,900 acres spanning 6 miles. Nearly 75% of the agricultural land involved is graded as our best and most versatile land. Though the Energy Minister has previously stated to me that

“no nationally significant infrastructure projects have been consented which will use greater than 50% best and most versatile agricultural land”,

this Government's track record and ideological zealotry on this point strongly indicates that there is no upper limit on the quantity of agricultural land they are

willing to develop. Last week, during consideration of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, the Deputy Prime Minister said that she would protect our high-quality agricultural land. I would be interested to hear from the Government how exactly they plan to do that, given their track record of building on it.

I regularly speak to constituents who feel voiceless and ignored. The Secretary of State has shown himself to prioritise ideology over listening to valid concerns, let alone pragmatic details. The Government are willing to move the goalposts to reach their aims, and it is my constituents who are paying the price without being heard. They are receiving nothing in the way of direct compensation, and no firm commitment to cheaper energy bills or to ensuring that community benefit funds appropriately compensate local communities.

Clause 5 of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill even removes the requirement to consult category 3 people who can make a claim under the Compulsory Purchase Act 1965. Instead, they will be informed that their land will be taken only at the acceptance stage. My online petition of residents in the villages surrounding the solar farm received more than 1,100 signatures. That was the only time those residents feel they have been able to make their voices heard. I urge the Government to listen to these people and thousands of others like them across our rural heartlands.

The Government take pride in announcing with this statutory instrument that the solar NSIP threshold has been raised from 50 MW to 100 MW. The average megawatt output of a solar farm application in 2010 was 3.8 MW. The average solar NSIP application approved since this Government came to power is 488 MW, to refer to my previous question to the Minister. By keeping the threshold artificially low, the Government open the door to huge numbers of solar farms becoming NSIP by the back door. I would welcome a review on setting that NSIP threshold at a much higher level, given the scale of current nationally significant infrastructure projects.

I have previously asked the Minister about the quality of photovoltaic panels and the fact that they will create more and more energy going forwards. We must also look at where the panels will be sourced. The Energy Minister has previously confirmed to me that the Government are

“determined to eradicate forced labour in global supply chains, including in the manufacture of solar panels”,

yet they whipped Government Members against a Conservative motion that would have prevented Great British Energy from buying solar panels when there is evidence of modern slavery in the supply process. The Government are more interested in scoring political points than in taking the steps to eradicate forced labour.

The Government have repeatedly demonstrated that they are prepared to ride roughshod over local wishes in pursuit of their ideological goals. With their manipulation of the system to force through tens of thousands of acres of solar panels, much of them on our best and most versatile agricultural land, and by making rolling changes to national policy statements while keeping the solar NSIP threshold artificially low, the Government show once again their contempt for our embattled rural communities.

Kit Malthouse: As well as the contempt being shown for local communities and consultation, does my hon. Friend lament the lack of imagination? There are plenty of places where many people would welcome solar farms, such as on motorway and railway embankments. They could easily be delineated for such development, and it would not necessarily impact on our landscape. There is also the continuing lack of any compulsion for the inclusion of solar on warehouse roofs. We could probably create exactly the same amount of power as his constituency is likely to create by putting solar panels on the roof of every warehouse in Park Royal to the west of London. Again and again, we look to virgin land first, rather than being imaginative about better solutions.

Ben Obese-Jecty: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, with which I wholeheartedly agree. The Government have a target of building 1.5 million—sorry, that was downgraded in the spring statement to 1.3 million—new homes. It would be sensible for them to implement some sort of legislation that would mean that those 1.3 million new homes had solar panels on their roofs. I urge the Minister to ask what assessment has been done on how much energy could be generated were we to do that at full scale instead of building solar farms on our best rural heartlands.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Will the hon. Member support the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), aptly named the sunshine Bill, which would make solar panels mandatory on the roof of all new homes?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I will leave my decision until we have a vote on that Bill, but I will look at it in more detail.

4.14 pm

Michael Shanks: With your leave, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will respond briefly to some of the points raised in the debate, but I will not detain the House long, as I know we are keen to progress through the Order Paper.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions to this wide-ranging debate. The regulations lift the nonsensical ban on onshore wind in England that the Conservatives drove through. For 10 years, that ban has held back energy, security and economic development opportunities across the country. The measures before us come to a rational position on solar in the planning system.

I will respond briefly to the points raised about nature and other issues. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) put it particularly well: the public want us to take action on the climate crisis. The Conservative party might want to pretend that that does not exist any more, but it does. The greatest threat to nature in this country is climate change. We will tackle that, but in doing so, we will deliver energy security.

On the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), let me say that neither of us Scottish MPs will have a vote in the elections in four weeks' time, but people will have the choice between the Conservative party, which has still not owned up to any of the mistakes that it made in 14 years, and the party that is trying to fix the mess. They can choose between a party

that is moving forward to deliver economic growth and energy security, and a party that would rather hold us back and keep us on the rollercoaster of volatile fossil fuels. Today's vote is a chance for us to demonstrate that we want that economic opportunity, and want to deliver energy security and climate leadership. I urge hon. Members on all sides of the House to support us today.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 100.

Division No. 169]

[4.16 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Charters, Mr Luke
Abbott, Jack	Chownns, Ellie
Abrahams, Debbie	Clark, Feryal
Adam, Shockat	Coleman, Ben
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Collins, Tom
Akehurst, Luke	Coombes, Sarah
Aldridge, Dan	Cooper, Andrew
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Ali, Rushanara	Costigan, Deirdre
Ali, Tahir	Cox, Pam
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Coyle, Neil
Anderson, Callum	Craft, Jen
Anderson, Fleur	Creagh, Mary
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Creasy, Ms Stella
Arthur, Dr Scott	Crichton, Torcuil
Asser, James	Curtis, Chris
Athwal, Jas	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Atkinson, Catherine	Darlington, Emily
Atkinson, Lewis	Davies, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Davies, Paul
Bailey, Olivia	Davies-Jones, Alex
Baker, Alex	De Cordova, Marsha
Baker, Richard	Dean, Josh
Ballinger, Alex	Dearden, Kate
Bance, Antonia	Denyer, Carla
Barker, Paula	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Barron, Lee	Dickson, Jim
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Dixon, Anna
Baxter, Johanna	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Beales, Danny	Dollimore, Helena
Beavers, Lorraine	Doughty, Stephen
Bell, Torsten	Dowd, Peter
Berry, Siân	Downie, Graeme
Betts, Mr Clive	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Billington, Ms Polly	Eagle, Dame Angela
Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Eccles, Cat
Blake, Rachel	Efford, Clive
Bloore, Chris	Egan, Damien
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Elmore, Chris
Bonavia, Kevin	Entwistle, Kirith
Botterill, Jade	Eshalomi, Florence
Brickell, Phil	Esterson, Bill
Buckley, Julia	Evans, Chris
Burgon, Richard	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Burke, Maureen	Falconer, Mr Hamish
Burton-Sampson, David	Farnsworth, Linsey
Butler, Dawn	Ferguson, Mark
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Ferguson, Patricia
Campbell, Irene	Fleet, Natalie
Campbell, Juliet	Foody, Emma
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Fookes, Catherine
Carling, Sam	Foster, Mr Paul
Carns, Al	Foxcroft, Vicky
Champion, Sarah	Frith, Mr James
Charalambous, Bambos	Furniss, Gill
	Gardiner, Barry
	Gardner, Dr Allison
	Gelderder, Anna

Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Tom
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermey, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin

McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 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
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Prinsley, Peter
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip

Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)

Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Keir Mather and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 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
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Burghart, Alex
 Cartledge, James
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Costa, Alberto
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McMurdoch, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani
 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
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick

Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:

**James Wild and
 Ben Obese-Jecty**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Infrastructure Planning (Onshore Wind and Solar Generation) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 10 March, be approved .

Driving Licences: Zero Emission Vehicles

4.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): I beg to move,

That the draft Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 14 March, be approved.

The aim of the regulations is to support the transition to zero emission vehicles, to reduce the regulatory burden on business, and to drive economic growth on our journey to becoming a clean energy superpower.

Businesses and families are choosing to make the switch to cleaner, greener vehicles that are cheaper to run and reduce noise and air pollution on our streets. The UK was the largest electric car market in Europe in 2024, and so far this year demand is up 42%, according to industry figures. However, zero emission vehicles can be heavier than equivalent petrol and diesel vehicles because of the weight of their battery or power train, which can push them into a higher driving licence category than their petrol or diesel equivalents.

Regulations to partially solve the problem were passed in 2018, allowing category B licence holders to drive alternatively fuelled vehicles weighing up to 4.25 tonnes if they fulfilled additional requirements, including receiving five hours of additional training from an accredited instructor, driving only for the purpose of transporting goods, and having no ability to tow. However, following the rapid growth of zero emission technology since 2018, the existing regulations represent an unnecessary barrier to switching to zero emission vehicles. The cost of the training, and of taking drivers off the road to complete it, can be prohibitive and time-consuming for businesses. These regulations will therefore enable the holder of a standard category B licence to drive a fully electric or hydrogen-powered vehicle up to a maximum weight of 4.25 tonnes without those additional requirements. Existing category B rules on ages and passenger numbers will apply.

Category B licence holders can also usually drive minibuses weighing up to 3.5 tonnes if they fulfil additional requirements, including the requirement for the driver to be over the age of 21. The regulations apply the same additional requirements to zero emission minibuses weighing up to 4.25 tonnes. They also allow zero emission vehicles weighing up to 4.25 tonnes to tow a trailer, just as rules permit their petrol and diesel counterparts to, provided that the total combined vehicle and trailer weight does not exceed 7 tonnes.

It is important that people with disabilities should have equitable driving licence flexibilities. To ensure that they are not excluded from the benefits of these regulations, an eligible zero emission vehicle may weigh up to 5 tonnes if it is fitted with specialist equipment for the carriage of disabled passengers. That additional weight allowance also applies to minibuses.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Could the Minister elaborate on the types of vehicles that will be covered by the provision for additional weight for disabled users?

Mike Kane: The provisions apply to electric vehicles, not to gas or synthetically fuelled vehicles.

The fuel types in scope of these regulations are zero emission, rather than alternative fuels. The only vehicles not covered by these regulations, but that were in scope of the old ones, are gas-powered vehicles. The Government estimate that there are fewer than 30 on the road today, and their technology does not require an additional weight allowance.

A public consultation on these proposals was held in 2022 and received 89 responses, which were largely supportive of the changes, though some concerns were raised about safety. Following a detailed analysis, the Government are confident that these regulations pose an extremely low risk to road safety. Between 2020 and 2023, there were a total of nine collisions involving such vehicles, and six of them were minor collisions. However, we will closely monitor incident data as it becomes available, to protect the safety of all road users. In the unlikely event that a concerning trend emerges, swift action will be taken to protect the public. The Department will publish detailed safety guidance, which we are working with industry to disseminate.

In closing, these regulations are a common-sense measure to equalise the driving licence rules for zero-emission vehicles and their petrol and diesel counterparts. I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

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

4.36 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, particularly as it relates to the use of synthetic fuel donated for my summer surgery tour last August.

My concerns about this statutory instrument, unlike my concerns about other recent pieces of parliamentary business, are narrow, which means—this will be a relief to Members from across the House, I have no doubt—that my remarks will be brief. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I have never had such a big cheer.

I thank the Government for bringing forward sensible reforms, which will decrease the regulatory burden and provide more flexibility for category B licence holders. Many of the reforms are sensible steps that were widely supported in the consultation during the last Parliament. It is unfortunate, but unsurprising, that the Government's so-called plan for change did not involve scrapping the limitations in this statutory instrument. Narrowing the scope of eligible vehicles from alternatively fuelled vehicles to zero emission vehicles is a mistake that cannot be ignored. As we transition to new technologies, we as a country must be less prescriptive. Too often, Governments want to tell industry and innovators what to do, and I am afraid that the restrictive nature of this measure risks hampering our country's attempts to reduce emissions.

Let me be clear: my concerns are not a judgment on whether the Government are right or wrong to suggest that zero emission vehicles will be most effective. The issue is rather that limiting the measure's scope to a smaller subset of non-petrol and non-diesel fuels makes them far too narrow.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the regulations could be of serious detriment to the UK's synthetic

biology research community? Significant effort is going into the creation of engineered bugs that can turn renewable matter, such as sugar cane, into fuel for internal combustion engines. In a circular economy, that would represent a completely renewable source of energy that would be carbon neutral throughout its entire life cycle.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that point, which I have been making for many years. I certainly did so during my time on the Transport Committee in the previous Parliament, and outside this place, as I have engaged with the classic car sector and all parts of the industry. He is right that there is a big innovative drive for sustainable fuels, if I can call them that. Some of them derive from feedstocks, others from waste matter, and they work in the internal combustion engines that we already have—in jet engines as well as motor vehicle engines.

There are also entirely man-made synthetic fuels that require no such feedstocks. They do not require food to be grown in order to be burned. There are innovators on that in this country and all over the world. For example, Zero Petroleum, just next door to my constituency—just over the Oxfordshire border at Bicester Heritage—has developed a fuel that works in every jet engine and every internal combustion engine that we enjoy today. It is entirely man-made; it is literally made out of air and water. It is a mixture of green hydrogen with atmospheric carbon capture. However, the ZEV mandate and the approach that the Government are taking in this statutory instrument rule that technology out of order, because there is still carbon at the tailpipe. The regulations ignore the fact that the carbon at the tailpipe is the same volume of carbon that is captured out of the atmosphere to make the next lot of fuel. In fact, a whole-system analysis shows that technology to be carbon-neutral—one volume of carbon is in a perpetual cycle. However, no matter how much Ministers and the Government claim to be technologically neutral, the test at the tailpipe, and the test in this statutory instrument, which explicitly refers to zero emission vehicles, rather than alternatively fuelled vehicles, do in fact mean that the Government pick a technological winner at every step, rather than letting our great innovators innovate.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I am interested to hear about the hon. Gentleman's knowledge and experience of alternative fuels. He perhaps understands this statutory instrument better than I do, but I understood that it was about the weight of vehicles, and that an alternative fuel going through the internal combustion engine does not result in additional weight. Will any of the technologies that he is describing result in additional weight, and might they therefore fall foul of the limits in the regulations?

Greg Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right that this is fundamentally about weight, but on the point about synthetic fuel, which my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) drew me on to a moment ago—I rarely need asking twice, given the number of years I have spent talking about this—it is true that there would not be an addition of weight. However, there would be for some alternatively fuelled systems. For example, in the case of hydrogen, the fuel tanks have to be much more robust. They certainly are in a hydrogen combustion vehicle, of which there are very few. As far as I understand it, it is only JCB that

[Greg Smith]

has developed the technology for a construction plant, but there could be an application to road vehicles in the future. Hydrogen runs at about 700 bar in the fuel tank, so we obviously would not put it in an existing car's fuel tank; it simply could not take the pressure. There would be weight implications for such a system.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): It is interesting, when sitting in the Chamber, to hear colleagues' expertise on subjects that we did not know they had expertise in. I wish to draw my hon. Friend back to a slightly different subject, which he was beginning to touch on. Electric vehicles, which of course have batteries, tend to be far heavier than equivalent vehicles with an internal combustion engine. Some of the vehicle combinations that the Minister talked about—for example, he mentioned a vehicle and a trailer not exceeding 7 tonnes gross vehicle weight—would vary in weight depending on whether the car or van was electric. That might affect a person's decision to change from a vehicle with an internal combustion engine to an electric vehicle.

Greg Smith: My hon. Friend makes an accurate point. In some ways, the statutory instrument seeks to address that point. However, he is right that when real people out there in the country make choices on their vehicles, they will make practical decisions such as the one outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), rather than looking at some of the other things the Government from time to time wish they were thinking about when they make those choices.

To make rapid progress, Madam Deputy Speaker, when the consultation was conducted, 25% of respondents—I accept that that is only a quarter—favoured retaining alternatively fuelled vehicles on the basis of the extra flexibility offered by the current alternative fuels definition, particularly for hard-to-transition use cases. That is a small subset, but we risk limiting the capability of industry and technology if we close down the possibility of innovation. There may be occasions when the additional weight would be beneficial to those alternative fuels. However, without flexibility we will not know the answer. Those 25% will have to maintain the status quo. However, we believe we must let the technology decide, not the Government, to ensure that those hard use cases are not abandoned.

For those who may not be aware, the Government have already withdrawn this SI to correct a drafting error. All the Opposition are asking is for them to do exactly the same: amend the error, bring back the changes, and allow the reductions in regulation without the restrictions on alternative fuels. That is not only the right approach, but the fair one.

4.46 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I rise to make one very brief point. The regulations amend the Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) Regulations 1999. To get a driving licence, one has to pass a driving test. I have had lots of complaints from constituents, as I am sure have many right hon. and hon. Members, about the increasing wait times for driving tests. I have had extensive correspondence with Loveday Ryder, the chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, but some

of the replies have been very unsatisfactory. Will the Minister go back to the Department and look at what we can do to speed up driving tests, in particular by combating the bots that capture the tests and sell them on for profit?

4.46 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): We are pleased that the provision maintains the ability of those with category B driving licences to drive zero emission vehicles up to certain weight thresholds. As has been noted, the SI also reduces the scope of eligible vehicles, from alternatively fuelled to zero emission. Alternatively fuelled vehicles produce less carbon dioxide than petrol and diesel vehicles, but they still produce CO₂. As the vehicles do not, therefore, meet the cross-party consensus that all new cars and vans should be zero emission by 2035, we support the restriction to zero emission vehicles.

However, we again remind the Government that more needs to be done to ensure that EV charging infrastructure is in place. It is no good for people to be able to drive electric vehicles if they are unable to charge them. In addition to improving our EV charging infrastructure, we support other incentives such as restoring the plug-in grant. However, at this point we need convincing—not that we might not be convinced—that removing the five-hour training requirement, which is also contained within the SI, is a good idea. Incentives should not come at the cost of reduced safety and if a five-hour training requirement was thought necessary in 1999, I would like the Minister to explain why it is no longer required.

4.48 pm

Mike Kane: With the leave of the House, I will respond briefly to the points that have been raised. I thank hon. Members for their consideration.

The hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) said that he would be brief and got a cheer, but then went on for just a little while to talk about his favourite subject of synthetically fuelled cars. We know he has one.

Mr Francois: That was brief! [Laughter.]

Mike Kane: I think Churchill famously said from this Dispatch Box that a fanatic is someone who cannot change their mind and will not change the subject. I say that gently—[Laughter.] I really am being gentle there.

The intention of the SI is to support the transition to zero emission vehicles. The driving licence flexibility is therefore designed to account for the additional weight of heavier batteries in fully electric vehicles and some implementations of hydrogen fuel cell technology. Vehicles powered by natural gas or biogas are not net zero. I get what the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire is saying about the single life cycle of the carbon, but they are not subject to the standard category B licence requirements, meaning that they can be driven if they weigh up to 3.5 tonnes. The Government estimate that there are currently fewer than 30 such vehicles on the road.

E-fuels and synthetic fuels—which I know are the hon. Gentleman's area of expertise and interest—are not disadvantaged by the standard category B requirements, which apply to petrol and diesel vehicles, and are therefore

not included in the SI. As I have said, synthetic fuels are already treated no differently in the driving licence regulations to their petrol or diesel counterparts, and do not require the additional weight to achieve payload parity. The instrument seeks only to achieve parity with zero emission vehicles.

I am not sure about the issue with driving licences raised by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who is no longer in his place. I will undertake to write to him.

In closing, this instrument, while technical in nature, represents a common-sense step that will support industry to make the switch to zero emissions and decarbonise our road transport as we make progress to net zero. It will cut transport costs for business, reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and further accelerate our progress to becoming the clean energy superpower that we so hope to be. I trust that the House has found this debate informative and will join me in supporting the legislation. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 101.

Division No. 170]

[4.51 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Aldridge, Dan
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
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
Buckley, Julia

Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
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
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter

Downie, Graeme
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eccles, Cat
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glendon, Mary
Grady, John
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Tom
Hinchliff, Chris
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKenna, Kevin
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
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
Perkins, Mr Toby
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Prinsley, Peter
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve

Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reeves, Ellie
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogam, Michelle
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Swallow, Peter

Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Gerald Jones and
Keir Mather**

NOES

Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward

Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib

Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Burghart, Alex
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Costa, Alberto
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Jopp, Lincoln
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit

McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani
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
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
**Ben Obese-Jecty and
Jerome Mayhew**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Whiplash Injury Compensation

5.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): I beg to move,

That the draft Whiplash Injury (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved.

This draft instrument amends the fixed tariff for whiplash compensation set by the Whiplash Injury Regulations 2021 by applying an inflationary uplift to the tariff values. In doing so, the amendment gives effect to recommendations made by the Lord Chancellor on 21 November 2024 following the completion of her statutory review of the 2021 regulations. By adjusting the whiplash tariff values to account for inflation, the Government will ensure that claimants can continue to receive proportionate compensation until the next review in 2027.

The whiplash reform programme changed the way claimants are awarded damages for low-value whiplash injuries following road traffic accidents. The aim of the reforms was to ensure an efficient, proportionate and reliable system for both claimants and defendants involved in road traffic accident-related whiplash claims. At their core, the measures aim to reduce the number and cost of whiplash injuries and deliver savings to consumers via reduced motor insurance premiums. Elements of the reform programme were delivered by the Civil Liability Act 2018, which introduced several important changes to the civil claims process. Alongside measures that introduced a legal definition of what constitutes a whiplash injury and banned the settling of such claims without medical evidence, the 2018 Act empowers the Lord Chancellor to set a fixed tariff of damages for road traffic accident-related whiplash injuries lasting up to two years.

The 2018 Act measures were supported by additional secondary legislative changes to increase the small claims track for road traffic-related personal injury claims from £1,000 to £5,000, and the introduction of a new pre-action protocol for personal injury claims below the small claims limit in road traffic accidents. At the same time, the insurance industry-owned and developed Official Injury Claim portal was launched to assist claimants affected by the reforms.

The first whiplash tariff was set by the Whiplash Injury Regulations 2021, which came into force on 31 May 2021. The 2018 Act requires the Lord Chancellor to review the 2021 regulations, and thereby the whiplash tariff, within three years of its implementation and every three years thereafter. In fulfilment of that statutory obligation, the first review of the whiplash tariff was completed on 22 May 2024 and the Lord Chancellor published her report of the statutory review on 21 November 2024. Upon reviewing the 2021 regulations, the Lord Chancellor concluded that the structure and component parts of the whiplash tariff were effective. However, she recommended that the tariff amounts be uprated to account for consumer prices index inflation between 2021 and 2024, and to incorporate a three-year buffer to account for expected inflation until 2027. She did not consider that any other changes to the 2021 regulations were necessary.

In reaching her conclusions and recommendations, the Lord Chancellor took into consideration relevant industry and courts data, as well as information from a

Ministry of Justice call for evidence, which ran from 6 February to 2 April 2024. In accordance with the review, this statutory instrument increases the whiplash tariff damages values and, subject to approval by both Houses, the new tariff will apply to all road traffic accident-related personal injury claims in England and Wales from 31 May 2025.

I believe that the House will find it helpful if I provide some additional explanation of the increase that will be applied to the whiplash tariff. By way of background, I should say that the whiplash tariff operates via a rising scale of fixed compensation payments determined by injury duration, up to a maximum of two years.

The payments in the original whiplash tariff set in 2021 range from £240 for whiplash injuries lasting three months or less to £4,215 for whiplash injuries lasting between 18 and 24 months. There is a separate, slightly higher, tariff for cases where any minor psychological injury, such as low-level travel anxiety, is incurred at the same time as the whiplash injury. Claims for whiplash injuries that last longer than two years fall outside the fixed tariff.

When the tariff was first implemented in 2021, the amounts were set to include a three-year buffer. The buffer was designed to account for expected inflation, according to the available forecasts at that time, and to ensure that claimants were not under-compensated in the years between the tariff's implementation and the first statutory review. In reviewing the 2021 regulations, the Lord Chancellor recognised the impact of inflation on the whiplash tariff amounts, noting that inflation over the first three-year period ran at a higher than expected rate, and, as most respondents to the 2024 call for evidence had noted, the real value of the tariff had fallen. In the light of this, she concluded that the tariff should be uprated by actual inflation between 2021 and 2024, and should again include a buffer to account for the expected inflation until the next review in 2027. The whiplash tariff will therefore be increased by around 15% for claims arising from road traffic accidents occurring on or after 31 May 2025.

As I have mentioned, this increase has been calculated using the consumer prices index inflationary measure. After careful consideration of the available data and evidence, the Lord Chancellor determined that CPI remains the most appropriate measure for uprating the tariff amounts by inflation. In contrast, she considered that the alternative retail prices index measure, if applied, would likely overstate inflation. It is worth noting that the use of CPI is in line with common practice across Government, as recommended by the Office for National Statistics.

In accounting for inflation, the Lord Chancellor also decided that the whiplash tariff should continue to be future-proofed by applying a CPI rounding over three years from 2024 to 2027. This approach is consistent with the method used to protect claimants from additional inflationary impacts when the first whiplash tariff was set in 2021. While this three-year buffer could lead to some over-compensation in the short term, not implementing it would allow the real value of claimants' damages to decrease and risk significant under-compensation in the long term. Therefore, this buffer protects access to justice and minimises the risk of claimants being under-compensated in the years leading up to 2027.

[*Sir Nicholas Dakin*]

I would, though, like to acknowledge that some respondents to the call for evidence expressed concern that the buffer would artificially increase the amount of compensation available and potentially undermine cost savings. However, the difference in the tariff levels using the buffer is not substantial enough to significantly impact on savings. The tariff amounts are only being adjusted to account for inflation and, as such, it is our view that this does not represent a real-terms increase in claim values.

Conversely, I am aware that other stakeholders suggested that the whiplash tariff should either be subject to an annual review or be index-linked to inflation to ensure annual increases. As the Lord Chancellor made clear in her report, these arguments are not compelling. A three-year review period, as anticipated by the 2018 Act, strikes the right balance between adequately compensating claimants and maintaining a stable system that is as simple to understand and administer as possible.

It is also worth noting that the recent high inflationary cycle was driven by a unique set of circumstances and is not a regularly occurring event. Therefore, while it is appropriate that the whiplash tariff is regularly reviewed against inflation, three years is the appropriate length of time to hold such reviews. Other than uprating the whiplash tariff to account for actual and expected inflation, as I have explained, no other amendments to the 2021 regulations are made by this instrument.

In accordance with her statutory obligation, the Lord Chancellor has consulted the Lady Chief Justice before making this instrument. The Master of the Rolls, acting on behalf of the Lady Chief Justice, expressed his endorsement of the proposal to uprate the whiplash tariff. He also noted that the judiciary would not welcome any further derogation from the principle that damages are assessed and awarded by the courts. As we have seen, in accordance with the powers conferred on the Lord Chancellor by the 2018 Act, the instrument only adjusts the level of damages for whiplash injuries lasting up to two years.

The amendments that this instrument will make to the 2021 regulations represent a balanced, proportionate and practical approach to uprating the whiplash tariff ahead of the next review.

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

5.14 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As the Minister explained, the Government have conducted their statutory review of the Whiplash Injury Regulations 2021 and determined that, while the existing tariff structure remains appropriate, an inflationary uplift is required. The proposed amendments will increase compensation for whiplash injuries occurring on or after 31 May 2025 by 14% to 15% across all tariff bands. That adjustment accounts for inflation since 2021 and provides an additional buffer for expected inflation until the next statutory review in 2027.

The framework of the tariff remains unchanged, including the two-tier structure for “whiplash only” and “whiplash with minor psychological injury”, the requirement for a single medical report to support a

claim, and the option for a discretionary uplift of up to 20% in exceptional cases. The review process highlighted challenges in determining prognosis due to inconsistencies in medical reporting. The Ministry of Justice has committed to working with the pre-action protocol medical report provider MedCo to improve the clarity and quality of medical reports, and we welcome that commitment.

I understand that the Treasury is due to report later this month on whether insurers have, in fact, passed savings from these reforms on to policyholders—the primary, or certainly an important, aim of the policy’s original intention. It is important that motorists receive the anticipated lower premiums. We look forward to the findings of the review, and it would be helpful if the Minister confirmed that it is on track.

Furthermore, while the statutory instrument is limited to amending tariff amounts, it forms part of a wider framework of reforms to be reviewed. A post-implementation review of the whiplash reform programme is due to take place in 2025-26, and we welcome the opportunity to assess its effectiveness in delivering fair compensation and maintaining access to justice.

We support the regulations and recognise their role in ensuring that claimants continue to receive fair and proportionate compensation. We look forward to the continued monitoring of the system to ensure that it remains balanced and effective. Given the extensive and thorough review of the regulations provided by the Minister, I do not seek to comment any further.

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

5.17 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The changes today are simple: the compensation tariffs for pain, suffering and loss of amenity in whiplash claims are being uplifted by approximately 15% to reflect inflation since the original 2021 figures were set, with a buffer to account for future inflation. These updates are welcome, but also present us with an opportunity to reflect on the broader balance we strike between tackling fraud and protecting the rights of those with legitimate injuries.

Whiplash has long been a contentious area of UK personal injury law. We have one of the highest rates of whiplash claims in the world, which has undoubtedly contributed to the rise in motor insurance costs, and whiplash claims have historically added billions of pounds to insurance costs.

In my constituency of Chichester, the picture is particularly concerning. According to a study by the Driving Instructors Association, Chichester is now the most accident-prone city in the UK, reporting 232 accidents per 100,000 residents, which is 54% higher than the national average. Even more alarmingly, Chichester has the highest fatality rate of any city, at 5.6 fatal accidents per 100,000 residents. These are not just statistics; they are lives lost and families changed forever. That underlines the real-world impact of road safety and why fair, accessible compensation for those injured on our roads is vital.

The 2021 reforms that introduced fixed tariffs and mandatory medical assessments have had an impact, and the number of whiplash claims has declined, but whiplash still accounts for a large share of personal

injury claims, and the need to ensure fairness in the system remains. We must remember that behind every claim is a person, often in pain, unable to work, potentially scared to go back out on the roads and navigating an unfamiliar legal system. For them, the process must be simple, fair and accessible. Victims should never be discouraged from seeking rightful compensation because of excessive bureaucracy or overly rigid procedures. That is why the Liberal Democrats have consistently advocated for a balanced approach.

During debate on the Civil Liability Act 2018, my colleagues in the other place, Lord Sharkey and Lord Marks of Henley-on-Thames, worked hard to push for stronger safeguards. They argued that the definition of “whiplash injury” should be written into primary legislation to allow full parliamentary scrutiny, and they pushed for compensation to be based on Judicial College guidelines, not simply on fixed tariffs, to preserve judicial discretion and to reflect the severity of injuries. They also urged the previous Government to ensure that any savings made from reducing fraudulent claims are passed on to consumers through lower insurance premiums—a promise that the insurance industry has been slow to honour and which is certainly not reflected in the consumer experience. We also look forward to the findings of the review on whether those savings have been delivered to customers.

We continue to support a system that is firm on fraud but fair to victims. Yes, we need robust safeguards, such as mandatory medical assessments and closer co-ordination between regulators, insurers and law enforcement to root out dishonest claims, but that must not come at the expense of those with genuine injuries. It is critical that review mechanisms are in place not just to track inflation, but to assess whether the tariff system continues to serve justice. We believe that the Government must do more to simplify the claims process, particularly for those who do not have or cannot access legal representation.

The updated tariff is a necessary correction for inflation, but it must not be seen as the end of the matter. The long-term success of the system depends on three things: maintaining fairness for claimants, preserving judicial discretion where needed and ensuring that promised savings are felt by customers. We must remain focused on people, not just on policy.

5.21 pm

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate and for the support of the Liberal Democrats and the official Opposition on the direction of travel.

I am grateful to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), for reminding us that behind every claim is a person, and that this is about helping real people and real lives. The official Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), rightly mentioned the report on reducing insurance costs for consumers. We share his and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson’s concern about that, which I think is felt across the House.

The report was published on 27 March and shows that the whiplash reforms have reduced insurance costs for customers. It was produced by His Majesty’s Treasury, which worked with the Financial Conduct Authority to fulfil its statutory obligation under section 11(7) of the Civil Liability Act 2018. Although it is a factual reporting

of the information from insurers provided to HMT through the Financial Conduct Authority, it does not represent the Government’s view, so it is right and proper that, separately from the report, the Ministry of Justice will undertake a post-implementation review of the whiplash reforms later this year. I thank hon. Members for their contributions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am sure I heard the Minister ask for the leave of the House at the beginning of his remarks.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Cornwall Council (Adult Education Functions) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 24 February, be approved.—(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft East Midlands Combined County Authority (Adult Education Functions) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 24 February, be approved.—(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 24 February, be approved.—(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Protection of the ceremonial county of Rutland

5.23 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Rutland is a proud and ancient county, recorded in the Domesday book and with a Lord Lieutenant since 1559. We have a strong connection to the monarchy, symbolised by the statue of Her late Majesty the Queen in Oakham, which was built last year—the first in Britain since her passing. However, without legislative changes to the Lieutenancies Act 1997, Rutland will lose its ceremonial county status. I do not believe that the Government intended to put our ceremonial county status at risk, but the consequences of their reforms to local government have done exactly that. No other county is in this position.

Despite our small size, 7,141 people have signed the petition in the last six weeks—that is over 17% of Rutland’s population, and more than one in six Rutlanders. It is one of the biggest wet petitions to be delivered to Parliament in the 21st century, and I hope that demonstrates to the Government how strong the feeling is in our community and county. Rutland’s motto is “Multum in Parvo”, much in little, and we are asking for just a little, which would mean so very much to us. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and protect Rutland’s status as a ceremonial county regardless of the outcome of Local Government Re-Organisation and Devolution.”

[Alicia Kearns]

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Rutland and Stamford]

Declares that the Government proposals for Local Government Re-Organisation and Devolution risk the status of Rutland as a ceremonial county; and further declares that the earliest record of a Lord Lieutenant in Rutland is 1559 and that, regardless of the outcome of Local Government Re-Organisation, the petitioners urge the Government to ensure the protection of Rutland's Ceremonial County status, with the continuation of Lord Lieutenants and High Sheriffs to serve as the Monarch's representative in Rutland exclusively, thereby protecting the identity and pride of our communities in our home.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and protect Rutland's status as a ceremonial county regardless of the outcome of Local Government Re-Organisation and Devolution.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003055]

Retrospective charges by Yorkshire Water

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): I rise to present a petition about a £47 retrospective charge that Yorkshire Water has unfairly given residents across my constituency, due to the water company's own mistake. That comes on top of rising bills, record profits, and excessive executive pay. I urge Yorkshire Water to think again, to be reasonable, and for once to put my constituents first. The petition has now received more than 1,000 signatures in little over a week, and the petitioners therefore request "that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of petitioners and take immediate action to stop Yorkshire Water retrospectively charging residents £46.65."

Following is the full text of the petition

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Rother Valley]

Declares that Yorkshire Water should cancel their retrospective charge to residents of £46.65 which was not included in their last Annual Bill for April 2024 – March 2025; further that in mistakenly not including this charge, Yorkshire Water has put residents under further stress during a cost-of-living crisis; further that such a mistake is particularly frustrating for residents given Yorkshire Water's failure to properly invest in upgrading infrastructure.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of petitioners and take immediate action to stop Yorkshire Water retrospectively charging residents £46.65.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003058]

Paignton Post Office

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I rise to present a petition from the residents of Torbay in respect of protecting and saving Paignton post office, which is a vital part of Paignton town centre. Residents across the whole of Torbay value this resource, and it has a massive impact on community engagement and through the simple face-to-face engagement that many people get when they use the services, but also as a financial hub in the busy small town of Paignton. The petitioners call on the House of Commons to reach out to the Government and the Post Office to do the right thing and withdraw the threatened closure.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Torbay,

Declares that Paignton Post Office has been threatened with closure, and further declares that Post Offices, and the services they provide, are vital parts of our community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government and the Post Office to reverse their decision to put Paignton Post Office at risk of closure.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003062]

Clonoe Inquest

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

5.28 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): May I start by thanking the Secretary of State? The public will not necessarily know that it is very unusual for the Secretary of State to respond to an Adjournment debate, and his presence here demonstrates how important this is and how seriously he takes the task. It also brings back fond memories for me, but that is another matter.

I hope that every Member of Parliament elected to this House believes that upholding justice should be our first priority as a Parliament. The right to life is the first among the rights we should uphold. That justice, and that right, should be even handed, and there should be no exception for agents of the state. I believe that, and accordingly I was a fierce critic of the state in, for example, the unlawful killing of Jean Charles de Menezes, the torture of Binyam Mohamed, and the failure to protect and provide justice for the six Catholics who were murdered at Loughinisland in 1994. There is no general exception when the state gets it wrong. Justice must, by definition, be fair and practical, and I am afraid the findings of the Northern Ireland coroner on the Clonoe incident were neither.

To understand the significance of this inquest ruling, we must consider the context. Operation Banner was the British Army's longest deployment, spanning from 1969 to 2007. More than 300,000 soldiers served sequentially in Northern Ireland, and despite immense challenges, the British Army performed admirably. They were not beyond reproach—Bloody Sunday is a striking example, I fear—but the massive majority of our soldiers acted with professionalism and restraint in the face of danger.

The troubles led to 3,500 deaths and 50,000 injuries. More than 90% of them were caused or brought about by paramilitaries. The British Army's rules of engagement were clear—governed by the yellow card, which soldiers carry at all times. Soldiers were required to issue a challenge before using force, unless doing so would put them or others in immediate danger. The intent was clear: to protect innocent lives, while allowing the use of lethal force when it was necessary and reasonable. Some 1,400 members of the security forces died in those troubles. They killed approximately 300 terrorists. Those figures, and that ratio reveal the discipline and restraint of our soldiers and our policemen acting under yellow card rules. They also reflect the personal risk to the soldiers and policemen of observing those rules.

Unsurprisingly, the IRA members never carried a yellow card. They targeted civilians and committed murder without warning. Their methods ranged from torture, followed by a bullet in the back of the head, through to the mass murder of innocent civilians in atrocities such as the Omagh, Claudy and Ballykelly bombings and the utterly cold-blooded Kingsmill executions. Incidentally, the IRA was responsible for more Catholic deaths during the troubles than any other group.

The IRA members were terrorists, but we should not forget that they were also criminals specialising in organised crime. They made £5 million or £6 million a year from protection rackets, smuggling, extortion, drugs, tax fraud, state benefit fraud, fraudulent front companies,

illegal gambling, theft and other crimes throughout the island of Ireland. If colleagues want evidence of that criminality, in 1990 I carried out an investigation of those activities, which was written up on 6 November of that year in the *Financial Times*. The point is that the IRA was both a criminal gang and a terrorist organisation. Now it is trying to rewrite history.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He has been a stalwart supporter of the armed forces on every occasion in the time that I have been in this House. He has been a supporter of what is right and of justice, and he sets a standard for us all to follow. I commend him for that, and I thank him. I also thank him for working alongside my party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) on these issues and for moving things forward with this Adjournment debate.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the message sent through this coroner's report is a massive overstepping of power? It will have security implications for every branch of policing and the armed forces in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and it must be struck down as not only ultra vires but factually incorrect. Those who carried out the attack on the Royal Ulster Constabulary station did so with the intent to take life, and they were rightly assessed as doing that and dealt with in an appropriate manner. This republican rewriting of the truth must end now in this Chamber.

David Davis: The hon. Member is exactly right, and he prefaces what I intend to say. He repeats the point that his party leader made in the urgent question, when he said that the judgment was ultra vires. I believe the right hon. Gentleman was right in that, although I leave that to the lawyers.

To answer the rest of the question from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), we have to return to the actual facts of the Clonoe incident. The self-styled East Tyrone brigade was one of the most active Provisional IRA units. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it undertook a surge of activity, pursuing a Maoist-style murder strategy. I think it was called Lynagh's strategy at the time.

In August 1988, eight soldiers were killed by a Provisional IRA bomb at Ballygawley. On 7 March 1989, two Protestants were shot dead at a garage in Coagh. A former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment, Derek Ferguson, was murdered in 1991, also at Coagh. An attack against Glenanne barracks on 31 May 1991 left three soldiers dead. It is also thought that some of their members were involved in the Derryard attack in 1989, notably using a heavy machine gun, probably the DShK we will see later in this story, to kill two British soldiers.

In February 1992, the RUC special branch found out that the IRA was planning a number of attacks on 15 and 16 February. It had information that an IRA team, armed with a 12.7 mm Soviet DShK heavy machine gun and three Kalashnikov rifles, would attack the Coalisland police station. The intelligence indicated that the attack would be mounted from the Clonoe chapel car park, so the SAS commander's plan was to arrest the terrorists as they formed up at the car park, preventing the attack on the police station altogether and seizing the heavy machine gun.

[David Davis]

The commander did not know how many terrorists, vehicles or weapons would be involved, but it was thought that as many as 20 IRA members could be involved. The troop sergeant assessed the rather straggly hedge line adjacent to the car park to be the only suitable position where partial concealment was possible, but it notably did not provide cover from gunfire. The SAS team carried the standard Heckler & Koch G3K rifle and one soldier had a general purpose machine gun. Perhaps more notably in this context, some had shotguns loaded with alternate rounds designed to smash windscreens and deliver tear gas to immobilise the drivers and stop the vehicles. The soldiers also carried caltrops to wreck the tyres of vehicles attempting to escape. The armour-piercing rounds that the judge referred to could penetrate body armour, but their primary purpose in this context was to penetrate the engine blocks of the vehicles and stop them.

The equipment was all designed to stop escape and allow arrest—that is the key point. The plan was to close in on the IRA operatives and to arrest them as they assembled and mounted the heavy machine gun on to the vehicle in the chapel car park. At 7.40 pm on that dark February night, 12 members of the SAS were in position on the boundary of the Clonoe chapel car park, behind the hedgerow. The soldiers observed the movements of five cars in and out of the car park. They were assumed to be reconnaissance vehicles scouting out the car park for the lorry to which the DShK was to be attached.

However, the intelligence briefing was wrong—an error that ended up creating chaos and extreme danger. Instead, at around 22:40 hours, the lorry-mounted DShK was used to attack the Coalisland police station. Sixty rounds were fired at close range from the DShK and from the Kalashnikovs. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the attackers' intent was clear: to kill police officers. They were all would-be murderers; of that, there can be no doubt. The gunfire could clearly be heard and the tracer bullets were observed by the SAS patrol in the car park at Clonoe.

After a minute or two, the soldiers heard another burst of gunfire. The soldiers, of course, did not know that that was simply bravado. For all they and their commander knew, hiding behind their hedge, the murder gang were engaging other soldiers or other policemen. Within a minute, the lorry appeared out of the darkness, driven at breakneck speed, lurching around corners and with its engine screaming in too low a gear. As it drove into the car park, the IRA truck's headlights illuminated the SAS position behind the hedgerow. At that point, the soldiers did not know whether they had been spotted. The soldiers then stood up, advanced on the occupants of the lorry and three other vehicles in the car park with the lorry, and opened fire. Four IRA members were shot dead, four were wounded, one of whom was arrested at the scene and, notably, given first aid by the soldiers, and others fled in cars.

Now we come forward to February 2025, when Mr Justice Michael Humphreys ruled that the use of lethal force by the SAS in this incident was unlawful. The ruling is demonstrably wrong and ignores the plain facts of the case. The SAS soldiers operated under the control of the police force, and the operation was carried out

with police officers in close proximity. They faced heavily armed terrorists who had just carried out an attack on a police station—lethally, for all they knew. They did not know how many terrorists there were, but they assumed that there could be up to 20. They did not know how many vehicles there were or how many weapons were in the other cars. That creates a number of problems for issuing a challenge, which is the first option under the yellow card system. While it may be reasonable to stand up and issue a challenge to either one terrorist or a small number of terrorists who could be seen and covered while they respond, the circumstance is completely different when there is an unknown number of antagonists in an unknown number of cars with an unknown number of weapons.

The probability of one of 20, let us say, deciding to fire on the soldiers is much higher, particularly when that individual may be out of sight of the patrol. That is doubly so when one remembers that this band of killers had just attempted to murder many policemen and had returned in a high state of excitement, pumped up with adrenalin and firing their weapons in the air. Secondly, the fact that the SAS commander did not know where they all were meant that his issuing a challenge could expose his entire troop to a lethal crossfire. Remember: this was happening on a dark February night at about 10.45 pm. Issuing a challenge under those circumstances could have amounted to collective suicide. Circumstances such as that are precisely why the yellow card rules allow a soldier to fire without challenge when the danger is too great.

I find it hard to imagine a more clearcut case that allows firing without challenge, but in his ruling the judge ignored several significant facts and appears to have been naive in his view of others. His selection of facts appears to be extremely partial. For example, the judge made much of the SAS's use of armour-piercing bullets, but he made no mention of the fact that the anti-aircraft gun the IRA was using fired armour-piercing incendiary rounds five times the size of any rifle bullets, or the fact that they could be fired at a rate of 600 to 1,200 rounds a minute. Those bullets can pierce concrete walls or shoot down aircraft at a mile range. The machine gun had just been deployed and could have eliminated the entire SAS patrol in a matter of seconds. It was a terrible weapon, and capturing it before it could be used to kill more people was an important part of the SAS tasking.

The judge accepted assertions that the IRA weapons all had their safety catches engaged. Frankly, if that were true, there was no way at all for the SAS commander or the troops to know that at the beginning of the fight. In fact, how likely was that? Let us take the DShK, which the forensic examiner said had its working parts forward, with no round in the chamber. The gun was mounted on a lorry that had just been driven back at breakneck speed from Coalisland in a few minutes. During the few minutes of that journey back, getting the gun into the state described would have required nine actions, some of which require two hands, while hanging on to the side of a lurching truck. I am afraid it all sounds just a bit improbable. The forensics specialist did not actually arrive until two hours and 45 minutes after the action, at a scene contaminated by firemen, police, soldiers and other staff—indeed, she complained about that very contamination.

Against the forensic specialist's views, we must take the observations of soldiers on the ground and other evidence. Four soldiers reported seeing flashes from the back of the lorry, which they interpreted as muzzle flashes. We are not talking about inexperienced soldiers: they would know what they were looking at. Two soldiers heard rounds striking the ground to their right, near the hedgerow where the SAS was hiding. The forensic examiner documented bullet strike marks on the hedgerow. One soldier received a bullet wound to the face that knocked him to the ground. Without any forensic evidence, it was attributed to a ricochet, which implausibly would have required the round to go through a 180° change of direction.

Soldier G heard the exchange of gunfire and saw a soldier go down, which

“confirmed my belief that the terrorists were shooting at us”.

There was also an interview taken by the Garda, in the Republic of Ireland, of one of the IRA drivers, who said he could not understand why his colleagues had opened fire. He had been in a position in which he was able to judge where the fire was coming from and obviously believed that it was from his own side. He refused to sign the interview notes, presumably when he considered the consequences for him back home of giving away such critical data.

All of this was countered by the claim that no bullet casings were found on the ground in the car park, but a number were found in the lorry, and one of the cars present appeared to have had a general-purpose machine gun and an AKM on board. If those weapons were fired from inside a car, there would of course have been no casings on the ground in the car park. Instead, GPMG live ammunition and disintegrating links were found in that car, as well as an AKM casing from a rifle other than those recovered, implying that a fourth AKM had been fired from the car. The car had all its seats other than the driver's laid flat, which was standard practice for the IRA when using a hatchback as a weapons platform. The car escaped and was then set on fire, and the fire services were kept away from it while it burned out—another standard IRA tactic to destroy forensic evidence. I am afraid that this ruling exposes the double standards that have plagued the legacy of the troubles.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is giving an important and telling speech on a very important topic. As he rightly says, these soldiers were subject to well-defined rules of engagement. He has described the IRA as a terrorist organisation, but what he has not said is that at the time, it was the most sophisticated terrorist organisation in the world. The soldiers he talks about were operating under orders, in a chain of command and on the Queen's business, and could not respond. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a grotesque double standard here, and that not only is this an injustice, but the Government's position is potentially deeply corrosive of morale, as well as deeply unjust to the veterans?

David Davis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. Of course, he is the Member for Hereford, so many of the people who have retired and will face these threats will be his constituents. He and I are long-standing supporters of human rights in this country, and have both defended article 2, for example, but this case is a misuse of article 2. The people who wrote the European

convention on human rights were recently out of the second world war—they did not write it to be interpreted in this way. He has made a double point.

Returning to my right hon. Friend's point about the IRA, since the events in question, the Good Friday agreement has allowed for the release of convicted terrorists in order to achieve an end to the bloodshed. I guess we all agree with that, yet we continue to persecute those who fought against the terrorists. These persecutions are conducted decades after the fact, without any new evidence being presented to give reason for the reopening of cases. After the action, everybody involved was questioned thoroughly to establish the facts—what the intelligence was, what the arrest plans were, and what happened. On the basis of that questioning, on 15 October 1992—with the evidence close to hand and the events fresh in the witnesses' minds, and when investigation of everything was possible—the police and the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland concluded that there should be no prosecution of the soldiers. There was no case to answer.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for bringing this debate before the House, and for the quality of his exposition. Does he agree that this case highlights the single biggest problem that we face, which is that the IRA kept no records at all, and if it did have any, it destroyed them? Many IRA members got letters of comfort from the then Government, quietly and secretly, which ended up killing any chance of prosecution. Soldiers who served have none of that; they are left out in the open, and can be prosecuted, while many IRA members have disappeared and can live a life without further charge.

David Davis: My right hon. and gallant Friend makes the central point of the argument perfectly. Here we are, 33 years later, with a Northern Ireland coroner judging events in retrospect, without any new evidence, and finding that soldiers acted unlawfully. That is entirely at odds with the result of the legal investigation immediately after the operation in 1992. I believe in a process of peace and reconciliation that allows closure for all the relatives of the dead, but he makes a good point: there are no records, and that goes for the vast majority of the people who died in the troubles. That makes this a process not of peace and reconciliation, but of vindictiveness and vengeance. It is an attempt to rewrite history, not find the truth.

There have been countless attempts to take British soldiers to court for their actions during the troubles, but how many ex-IRA combatants have faced the same thing? Not one. Not a single IRA member has been pursued over the 2,000 deaths—all murders—for which the IRA were responsible. Our veterans are being punished in their retirement years for decisions they made when serving their country. The psychological impact on them, and on soldiers serving today, is enormous. The ruling also undermines the integrity of present and future operations. We cannot send soldiers into high-risk environments, ask them to undertake brutal training, and expect them to operate with confidence if they fear being condemned decades later.

The ruling on the Clonoe incident risks further persecution of the British soldiers who served during the troubles. The Government must ensure that those who serve our country today are protected from such partisan

[David Davis]

distortions of justice. Our soldiers deserve better. What we are seeing with the Clonoe ruling is historical revisionism that seeks to punish those who served our country in the most difficult and dangerous circumstances. The law must be applied fairly, and we must not allow politics to undermine the legacy of those who fought to protect our freedoms.

The Government—I say this directly to the Secretary of State—gave notice at the time of the election that they intended to remove the element of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 that protects soldiers and police who served during the troubles from prosecution. The judgment from the Northern Ireland coroner on the Clonoe incident exposes a number of soldiers to potential prosecution. The Ministry of Defence is quite properly seeking a judicial review of this inquiry, but even if it wins, we must put in place statutory protections for our soldiers, now and in the future, from this persecution. These are men who served their country with honour, heroism and skill, sometimes in the face of the most incredible danger. They are now no doubt hoping for a well-earned peaceful retirement, not a future of endless stress and psychological torture. If the Government leave them open to persecution it will be shameful, and will serve only to further the IRA's attempt to rewrite the history of Northern Ireland.

Many Members may have received letters on this issue from retired Special Air Service soldiers. Most of them say in those letters that they support human rights, but they do more than that; they guarantee those rights for the rest of us. Let me end by quoting the words of Charles Province, the American soldier and poet:

“It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us the freedom of the press.

It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us the freedom of speech.

It is the soldier, not the peace camp organiser, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.

It is the soldier, who serves beneath the flag, whose coffin is draped by the flag, who allows the protestor to burn the flag.

It is the soldier, not the politician...who has given these freedoms.”

These soldiers are the guarantors of our security, our freedom and our justice. I say to the Secretary of State, surely we owe them no less than security, freedom and justice in return.

5.53 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): As we have a little more time than expected, I want to say a few words in support of my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis). I served in Northern Ireland, as many others did, during the troubles. We did not ask to go there; we were sent there, and we were given real restrictions through the yellow card on how we were allowed to behave. In fact, all the soldiers with whom I served were so fearful of loosing off their rifles at any stage that they would probably have erred on the side of bringing themselves into danger, because they were so certain that they must not make a mistake.

Not a single soldier I ever met thought that this was some kind of game to be played. It was a life-and-death issue, and all those whom my right hon. Friend has described were fully aware of what was required of

them under the yellow card provisions. They would not have loosed off their weapons had they not genuinely feared for their life, given the cases that had gone before, and the deaths that happened—the IRA did not give any warnings before they fired. Those issues are critical in all this, and when we sit in judgment over what happened then, all these years later, it is not justice. It becomes a pursuit by those who, as my right hon. Friend said, want to change the history.

We gave away a lot in the Good Friday agreement, and many of those who lost family members—we will all remember various individuals—had to put up with this requirement so that we could get peace. It takes a lot to get peace, and it takes a lot of suffering thereafter to find out what happened. In many cases in which soldiers served bravely and died, there are questions to be answered about the manner of their death.

I think of Robert Nairac, and I make no apology for raising his name again. He was captured by the IRA, tortured, beaten and killed. No one knows where his body lies. His parents died not knowing what happened to him. We do not know whether he had a proper burial. We certainly know that his parents are dead, but we will never find out what happened to him, and many others like him. They served their country because they believed, as my right hon. Friend said, in upholding justice and freedom.

I put it to the Secretary of State that the key to this whole debate is our duty to protect those who put their life on the line to protect our freedoms and our justice, and our duty to make sure that things are fair. If we forget about them for just one moment, we are not worthy of being here, for they do not have a voice and cannot say no when they are ordered into situations where they could die.

Only the British Army could have done what we did in Northern Ireland. We put up with so much and restrained ourselves with such dignity. I urge the Minister to listen carefully to my right hon. Friend, and to ensure justice for those who fear pursuit for only one reason: political purposes. It is time to end this.

5.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I really welcome the opportunity that the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) has given me and the House to listen to this debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond. I congratulate him on securing it. I listened very carefully to everything that he said. As he will know, on 11 February he asked me an urgent question about the findings of the coroner in the Clonoe inquest. In answer to that question, I told him and the House that the Ministry of Defence was considering the coroner's findings carefully. Before turning to the outcome of those considerations, it is worth reminding the House of the facts of the case, which we have heard a lot about already.

On 16 February 1992, there was an attack on Coalisland police station by a unit of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, armed with a lot of weaponry, including a heavy machine gun. Approximately 60 rounds were fired, but thankfully no one was injured. Following its departure, and subsequent arrival at the Clonoe church car park, the unit was engaged by members of the Army's specialist military unit, resulting in four PIRA gunmen being shot and killed. As we know, the inquest into their deaths

began in 2023. On 6 February this year, the coroner found that the use of lethal force by the soldiers was unjustified, and that the operation

“was not planned and controlled in such a way as to minimise to the greatest extent possible the need for recourse to lethal force.”

I listened very carefully to what the House said when I answered the urgent question. Following careful consideration, the Ministry of Defence has written to the coroner to outline its intention of applying for a judicial review. In its view, the findings of the coroner do not properly reflect the context of the incident—I listened very carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman said about what happened—or the challenging circumstances in which members of the armed forces served in Northern Ireland. The Ministry of Defence has also confirmed that it is funding the veterans in question to seek a judicial review, and it is continuing to provide them with welfare support.

The independence of the judiciary is a fundamental democratic principle, and it is crucial to upholding the rule of law in the United Kingdom. One important element of that principle is the right to legally challenge the findings of judicial decision makers where it is believed that an error has been made, and the Government have determined on this occasion that that is indeed the most appropriate course of action. It is now important, as I think the House will recognise, given the confirmation by the Ministry of Defence that it intends to seek a judicial review of the findings of the inquest, that these proceedings are allowed to run their course.

This Government have a long-standing commitment to repeal and replace the almost universally opposed Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. I think it is fair to say that, among the political parties in Northern Ireland, it is universally opposed. The Act has been found by the domestic courts to be unlawful in a number of respects, and we should not forget that the legislation in question made provision to grant those responsible for terrible terrorist crimes immunity from prosecution. That is what the Act did.

As part of our commitment to repeal and replace the Act, the Government are committed to proposing measures to allow inquests previously halted by that legislation to proceed. I set out this position in my written ministerial statements of 29 July and 7 October 2024 and in my oral statement to the House on 4 December 2024.

The Government recognise that the Clonoe findings have caused great concern among many of those who served in Northern Ireland during Operation Banner, and we have heard tonight from some who have given distinguished service to the armed forces and also to this House. The veterans I have met, including a group I met this afternoon, have also expressed a strong view that the way in which we collectively address the legacy of the troubles has to be fair, balanced and proportionate.

Jesse Norman: Could the Secretary of State not simply say now to the House that he has a deep understanding and awareness of the trauma that has been caused, and that he takes the side—not judicially, but politically, in his own mind as a matter of human sympathy—with the poor people affected by these decisions and how they are playing out in the public realm? Could he not say that now, so that veterans and their families understand that a Government Minister in a senior position gets it and is on their side in his own mind, even if not judicially?

Hilary Benn: I expressed that view to the veterans I met this afternoon, when I thanked them for their service in the most difficult and dangerous circumstances. The right hon. Member invites me to do that this evening, and I readily do it, because they were seeking to protect the citizens of the United Kingdom, including of Northern Ireland, in the face of terrorism and terrorists.

As the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington pointed out in his speech, the terrorists were responsible for the vast majority of deaths. However, I would add that many of them were prosecuted and convicted—paramilitaries on the republican side, and also those on the loyalist side who were also guilty of the most appalling crimes. As was pointed out, part of the price—in my view, rightly paid—to enable the Good Friday agreement to succeed and to bring the extraordinary peace and prosperity Northern Ireland has seen in the almost 27 years since, was the release of prisoners, which was really, really difficult for many families to accept, to understand and to cope with. I would also point out that, in recent years, a number of republicans have indeed been prosecuted—in fact, more republicans have been. I think I am right in saying that there has been one conviction in the last 12 years of a soldier who served there, and that was a suspended sentence.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) mentioned the case of Robert Nairac. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains, which does such an important job to try to reunite the remains of loved ones who were murdered by the Provisional IRA with their families—although Robert Nairac's parents are dead, I think he has other living relatives—has made two recent attempts to find his remains, on the basis of information it has received. I am very sad to say that so far that has not proved possible, but I hope that those who have information, and who have enabled the ICLVR to find the remains of a number of people and return them to their families, will continue to provide information to that body so that it is able to recover those remains.

As the Secretary of State, it is my job to ensure that these concerns and perspectives are heard, alongside other views expressed by a range of parties who also want to see, in their own way, a resolution to the complex troubles that happened and the issues that remain outstanding. I am thinking in particular of the many families I have met since taking up the post who have said to me, “We still do not know, decades later, what happened to our loved ones who were killed.” They carry that trauma with them to this day. Therefore, the Government are absolutely committed to trying to develop legacy mechanisms that are compliant with human rights—I stand with the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington in my support, and the Government's support, for the European convention on human rights—and that can command a degree of public confidence across communities in Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

I will just say this about the approach the previous Government took. It caused, self-evidently, immense difficulties, including numerous findings of human rights incompatibilities and therefore an erosion of trust in the Government's ability to address these issues fairly.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I remind the Secretary of State that, at a hearing in 2017, the Defence Committee took evidence from four

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

distinguished professors of law, including Philippe Sands, with whose work he is no doubt very familiar, and they made it very clear to us that in principle there was nothing illegal about having a statute of limitation, provided that it was accompanied by a truth recovery process? That met the requirement of avoiding the otherwise illegal act of giving impunity for crimes committed. The Secretary of State says that there were technical problems with the previous legislation that rendered it in some respects illegal, but will he not accept that the persecution of elderly veterans—which cannot, in the end, lead to anyone spending more than two years in prison anyway, given the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998—will continue unless and until some form of legislation is put back in place to draw a line under prosecutions and to fulfil the other part of the requirement by a truth recovery process? Whatever he thinks about the specific legislation they are repealing, will he not accept the principle that that is the only way to protect people against this form of legalistic persecution?

Hilary Benn: I would say to the right hon. Gentleman, first of all, that there were not technical problems with the legacy Act; there were many legal problems with the legacy Act. It is the Government's position, and I think it is the position of the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington, that we uphold the European convention on human rights. I have said from the beginning that I am determined to ensure that the legacy mechanisms, in the form that they are brought before the House, are compliant with the European convention on human rights. There are plenty of examples of other people in other countries who do not abide by the European convention. In my view, it is a very important foundation of our liberties and our protection. There are legal problems with the legacy Act, not technicalities, if I may say so.

I also point out to the right hon. Gentleman that the idea of immunity from prosecution was also opposed. I have met one family of a soldier who was murdered by the IRA who were outraged by the idea that his killers should get immunity under the legislation the previous Government passed.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am very sorry, but that answer did not address the question of principle. The fact is that, unless the Secretary of State's chum, Professor Sands, and three other equally distinguished professors of law were mistaken, there is no reason in principle—regardless of how flawed he, and the courts, even, may think the previous legislation was—that we cannot have a statute of limitation to put an end to these prosecutions, coupled with a truth recovery process. Of course, it will always be possible to find someone who wants the other lot prosecuted but not their lot, but it is the job of Government to cut through that and do the right thing, as Nelson Mandela did so effectively in South Africa.

Hilary Benn: I am not familiar with that particular bit of evidence. The right hon. Gentleman cites one group of lawyers who hold one view, but it will not surprise the House if I say that it would be possible to find another group of lawyers who hold a different view. The purpose of the courts is to adjudicate between the various arguments that are put and reach a decision, and we respect the judgments of the court. It is not

possible to have a legal system or a coronial system where we get all the verdicts we like and we are guaranteed to never get verdicts we do not like. The fact is—*[Interruption.]* We have appealed some aspects of the judgments. The Government came into office committed to removing conditional immunity because we thought it was wrong to give terrorists immunity from prosecution for the crimes they have committed.

I would also say to the right hon. Gentleman that the truth is that the prospect of prosecutions is diminishing with each passing year. Many of the families that I have met recognise that no one is going to be held to account for what happened to their loved ones—they just want to find the answers.

David Davis: One point the Secretary of State has not yet come to is that there is an excruciating element of double jeopardy here. Every single case we are talking about was investigated carefully by the police at the time—the soldiers and the commanders involved were interrogated as to the intelligence, the plans and the outcome at the time, with all the information available. What we are seeing here is that soldiers were effectively found innocent 33 years ago, only for us to come back and do it all over again to get another answer that we want. He must understand that the soldiers see this as terrible double jeopardy.

May I bring the Secretary of State to the underlying principle of the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (*Sir Julian Lewis*)? What we are all after is a mechanism, however that is found through the law, that will allow us to release these soldiers from a lifetime sentence of being pursued by the courts under what is, in my view, frankly, a misuse of article 2. If it is true that, as my right hon. Friend says, people like Philippe Sands—hardly a hard-line right winger—think that we can do this, will the Secretary of State give the House an undertaking that he will make every effort to deliver on that aim?

Hilary Benn: I would like to give the right hon. Gentleman an assurance that when parliamentary time allows, I plan to bring forward legislation to try to find a way forward. The House will be the judge when the legislation is published. I am consulting widely on it and will continue to do so, including with veterans and others. I am not naive about the prospect of coming up with proposals that command widespread support, but I would simply observe that the last set of proposals signally failed to command support among the political parties and many people in Northern Ireland. That is why I am having to deal with the consequence of repeated findings of incompatibility, because of that legacy legislation, with the European convention on human rights.

When I last stood at the Dispatch Box to address this question, I said that we owed a great debt of attitude to those who served in Operation Banner with such distinction. I wish to repeat that statement tonight. The true legacy of those who served during that awful period is to be found in the peace that the people of Northern Ireland now enjoy. If we are being honest, the armed forces did their job.

The Good Friday agreement was itself not able to get to grips with exactly how legacy would be dealt with—those involved had enough on their plate to secure that

extraordinary agreement on that miraculous Good Friday. We as elected representatives have to recognise that since the signing of the Good Friday agreement, we have not been able to agree and implement measures that effectively address the legacy of the past in a way that is balanced, proportionate, transparent, fair and equitable, and that have a chance of commanding a

measure of public support. That is the objective of the Government. I will do my best to achieve it, but the House will be the judge.

Question put and agreed to.

6.15 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

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.

The House divided: Ayes 349, Noes 14.

Division No. 168]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Bennett, Alison
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brewer, Alex
 Brickell, Phil
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carling, Sam
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Carns, Al
 Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal

Coghlan, Chris
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Bobby
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Farron, Tim
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Franklin, Zöe
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill

Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hanna, Claire
 Harding, Monica
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Tom
 Healey, rh John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Helen
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Maynard, Charlie
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Murray, Susan
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan
 Olney, Sarah
 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
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Perteghella, Manuela

Phillips, Jess
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sabine, Anna
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Scrogam, Michelle
 Shah, Naz

Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Sollom, Ian
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David

Taylor, Luke
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Cameron
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
 cast by Adam Jogee*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian

Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williams, David
 Wilson, Munira
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrigley, Martin
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Easton, Alex
 Farage, Nigel
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Lockhart, Carla
 McMurdock, James

Pritchard, rh Mark
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Shannon, Jim
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Vickers, Martin
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 2 April 2025

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

Non-disclosure Agreements

9.30 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on the use of non-disclosure agreements in civil harassment, discrimination and abuse cases.

It is a great honour, Mr Betts, to serve under your chairmanship, as you are my good friend and fellow Sheffield Member.

As hon. Members know, last month I tabled an amendment to the Employment Rights Bill that would bring an end to the widespread misuse of non-disclosure agreements, which in recent years have proliferated in every single sector of our economy. It seeks to ban the use of NDAs in cases of harassment, discrimination and abuse, unless at the specific request of the victim. I am incredibly grateful to the Minister for his warm words, his interest in this important topic and his commitment during the debate to look at options to take forward. I would like to use this time to explore what those options might look like and what more the Government need to understand in order to commit to legislate on the matter.

This issue burst into the public consciousness off the back of the #MeToo movement and the brilliant campaign work of Zelda Perkins, who joins us in the Gallery today and who exposed the exploitation and abuse perpetrated by Harvey Weinstein. Other brave women have spoken out in recent months and years, including Rebecca Ferguson and Cher Lloyd—about their experiences on “The X Factor”—and countless more across the entertainment industry, but although these high-profile cases grab media attention and absolutely raise the profile of the issue, they have in a way masked the true, horrifying scale of the issue, which is far from confined to the entertainment industry. In fact, the victims of this issue are far more likely to be low-income workers.

A recent survey of the hospitality sector by the Can't Buy My Silence campaign found that 100% of NDAs or confidentiality clauses in the hospitality sector were written too broadly.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): We have no idea how many people in Bolsover this issue affects, because the very nature of it means that they cannot speak to me about it as their MP. The Can't Buy My Silence campaign has found that the issue affects five times as many women as men, so does my right hon. Friend agree that addressing it has to be considered as essential to tackling violence against women and girls?

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The issue overwhelmingly affects women and it overwhelmingly affects low-income workers; it affects all vulnerable people, particularly disabled people and people of colour. She is absolutely right that we have to

address it in order to help fulfil our mission to tackle violence against women and girls, but we also need to be careful that we do not narrow our definition only to sexual harassment, as NDAs cover all kinds of abuse in the workplace. Quite simply, we need to remove this tool from employers completely.

It is only those with the means and the confidence to pursue their employers through the courts who can challenge these practices. Low-paid workers in hospitality or retail are being legally silenced after they have suffered serious harm, and they have no access to redress. I want to stress that I do not think 100% of hospitality businesses are bad employers or that the sector is packed full of people who set out to silence victims after they have been abused or discriminated against. The point is that these clauses have become boilerplate. They are signed unwittingly by workers and, in many cases, are required unwittingly by employers with little or no understanding of the consequences. It has become standard practice to include these broadly drafted confidentiality clauses in contracts that go far further than is required to protect commercial confidentiality or trade secrets.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What the right hon. Lady is saying is very important and the overall thrust of her case is absolutely on point. Is it not the case, though, that NDAs are the symptom, and that the underlying disease is the inability of ordinary people to get access to justice through the courts? That is why people enter into non-disclosure agreements: they fear that there is no other way that they will get proper recognition of their case.

Louise Haigh: The right hon. Member is absolutely right. NDAs are one tool of oppression, essentially, used against workers after they have been abused or discriminated against in the workplace. That failure to access justice through the courts is without doubt a wider disease that needs to be tackled by the Government, but NDAs and their misuse have to be clamped down on because they are having this terrible chilling effect across society and the world of work.

Since the debate last month, I have been inundated with details of such cases. There was the woman who was raped by a colleague at work but had signed a confidentiality clause that explicitly prevented her from discussing the issue even with medical professionals, making it impossible for her to recover from her trauma. An employee who signed an NDA on leaving her workplace has since been effectively blacklisted, because her former employer is undermining her to prospective employers, while she cannot tell her side of the story. A woman I met yesterday told me about the mental health charity she worked for that has discriminated on mental health grounds against at least four people she is personally aware of in the past year; three of them have signed an NDA, but she is bravely pursuing the charity through the courts, because she believes that it is the only way to get justice.

If mental health charities are exploiting this practice to discriminate against people with mental health issues, or, as raised in last month's debate, progressive news organisations and trade unions are exploiting this practice, we have to accept that it is a serious problem in every type of workplace in this country and that employers simply cannot be trusted with this tool at their disposal.

[*Louise Haigh*]

This practice undeniably has a terrible impact on the individuals affected. It prevents organisations from facing up to the fact, or the scale, of their wrongdoing. It also affects our economy and our productivity, as people are forced out of their workplace—maybe because they are pregnant, have additional needs, or their face simply did not fit—and then they struggle ever to return to work. As the woman I met yesterday who had been a victim of this practice said:

“With all the discussion at the moment around disabled people and returning to work, I just want to cry. My experience is far too common for disabled people because too many employers simply don’t support disabled people at work.”

This is the tool that is then used against them.

If we are to tackle such structural issues, we have to remove the ability to silence people at will, and many other countries and jurisdictions agree. Ireland has recently legislated to ban the use of NDAs in cases of sexual harassment or discrimination. In the US, 27 states have legislated to ban the improper use of NDAs, with no apparent detriment to business or discouragement of settlements. Canada and Australia are following suit. Of course, we also saw some limited progress in this country under the last Government. In May 2024, the Victims and Prisoners Bill was amended to make it clear that any confidentiality agreement is void if it precludes a victim from speaking to legal and therapeutic advice services or family when it is related to criminal conduct. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill was also amended to prohibit NDAs being used in cases of sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying.

We now have the absurd situation where students and workers in universities are protected, but a cleaner, who works on a university campus but for an outsourced company, would not enjoy those same protections. We have created a two-tier system of protection, so what is the possible justification for denying workers outside the higher education system that same level of protection?

All of this progress has been predicated on multiple consultations, reviews and evidence bases. In 2019, the Minister’s Department, which was then the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, ran an extensive consultation on measures to prevent the misuse of confidentiality clauses in cases of harassment or discrimination. In 2019, the Equality and Human Rights Commission ran a consultation on the use of confidentiality agreements in discrimination cases. The Treasury Committee in 2023 conducted an inquiry into sexism in the City, which recommended further protections for victims of sexual harassment. The Women and Equalities Committee has conducted three inquiries into this issue, under both the last Government and the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). The most recent one was on misogyny in music, which again explicitly recommended banning the misuse of NDAs. There has been extensive scrutiny in the legal sector, with both the Legal Services Board and the Solicitors Regulation Authority conducting large consultations, resulting in more evidence of the endemic misuse of confidentiality agreements. Both the General Council of the Bar and the Law Society have called on the Government for legislative reform.

My one question to the Minister, who I know agrees that this issue needs to be tackled, is: what else does he or his Department need to be satisfied on the need to

legislate? How much longer must low-paid workers be legally required to suffer in complete silence before we can be persuaded to take the necessary legal steps? I know he wants to take action. The strength of support from a number of political parties in the Chamber today demonstrates that the House wants to take action. Twenty-seven US states have passed legislation. The UK Government are starting to look like the outlier. Let’s not let this opportunity pass us by. Let this Labour Government lead the way on protecting victims and survivors in the workplace and finally bring an end to legalised abuse.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Speeches should be about seven minutes; that is guidance, not an absolute limit. I remind Members not to refer to any cases that are active before the courts, because they are sub judice.

9.41 am

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) for securing this important debate. As we heard in her eloquent speech, the use of NDAs across all industries is far too prevalent, but I would like to focus my comments on the creative industries.

Back in 2017, the #MeToo movement exposed the pervasive issue of workplace sexual harassment and shone a light on the insidious role of NDAs in silencing victims. Despite the movement’s spotlight, abusive NDAs continue to thrive in the creative industries, serving as tools of coercion rather than legitimate business protections. These agreements do not just limit disclosure; they enable perpetrators, protect abusers and perpetuate cycles of harm.

The creative industries, with their reliance on freelance and temporary employment, irregular working hours and lack of employer accountability, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In this environment, NDAs have been weaponised to cover up harassment, discrimination and abuse. They do not exist to protect trade secrets or intellectual property in these cases—they exist to protect the powerful from the consequences of their actions. When 80% of individuals who report misconduct in the music and film industries are silenced by NDAs, the question is not whether these agreements should be regulated but whether they should be allowed at all.

The continued use of abusive NDAs is an outrage. They strip individuals of their right to speak out, forcing them into a cruel dilemma: stay silent or risk financial ruin.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is an even more significant abuse of NDAs when public money is used by public sector employers such as the BBC, which is paid for by the licence fee, to try to silence those who have a case against them?

Zöe Franklin: I agree; we need to look carefully at this issue, particularly where public money is being used. Across the board, we need to end the practice of abusive NDAs. It is an outrage, and I ask the Government today to act decisively. We have waited too long for

a ban on NDAs in cases of abuse, harassment and discrimination. Protecting corporate reputations should not come at the cost of human dignity.

Since its formation, the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority has been a crucial force in fighting this abuse, working to expose harmful practices and advocate for transparency and accountability. If its efforts to become a prescribed person are successful, it would provide legal safeguards for whistleblowers, helping those bound by NDAs to speak out without fear of retribution. By its very existence, CIISA makes it harder for misconduct to be hidden away, forcing perpetrators and institutions to think twice before engaging in exploitative behaviour.

Unfortunately, despite its vital work, CIISA faces the threat of closure due to financial barriers. Its request for just 0.1% of a company's profits—a mere fraction of what other regulatory bodies operate on—is being met with obstruction, delays and shifting goalposts. If CIISA is forced to shut down, it will send a clear message: creative industry workers, despite generating £124.6 billion in 2022, do not deserve a safe and respectful workplace.

I have two requests for the Minister. First, will he please act to ensure that CIISA has the funding it needs to continue its work to protect people in the creative industry and prevent the industry from sliding back into silence, fear and impunity? Secondly—we will hear this again and again today—will he please take the action we have been waiting far too long for and ban abusive NDAs outright? No one should ever be forced to choose between their career and their dignity, so it is time to end the use of NDAs as a weapon against justice, and ensure that those who have suffered can speak their truth without fear, without penalty and without being erased.

9.45 am

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Members who have heard me speak on these issues before—I do so a lot—know that I am a solicitor specialising in employment law. I am not currently practising, but I spent 13 years doing employment and particularly discrimination law work. A small amount of it was for small employers, but predominantly it was for employees. I have seen a lot of settlement agreements—pretty much every client I ever had ended up with one—and it is extremely unusual for them not to contain some form of NDA. The typical wording states that the person cannot discuss the terms of the agreement, nor the circumstances surrounding the termination of their employment.

There are too many difficulties to unpack in seven minutes, but one is that some of the people who put forward the agreements are not solicitors. A lot of businesses have a human resources adviser who is not regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority. Many of them are good people who do a good job of providing affordable advice to businesses; I do not want to universally condemn HR consultants. The reality is that at some point they will have been given a precedent settlement agreement by a solicitor—we might be talking 20 years ago—and those agreements contain NDAs, so they are still in widespread use.

As a solicitor, I would go back and say, “But if my client can't say anything about the circumstances concerning the termination of their employment, what are they supposed to say to their new employer when they try to

get a new job?” Some employers would agree to negotiate some sort of vague wording such as “left by mutual agreement”, so the person could at least say that, but some of them would just say flat out, “There's money on the table. Your client can take it or leave it.”

But the client faces significant legal bills, and although the employment tribunals were hypothetically designed to enable them to represent themselves, the reality is that if it is a complex discrimination claim and they have a mental health problem—either because their claim related to it in the first place or because they developed one after they were treated so badly in their employment—they may not be able to face the prospect of an unrepresented employment tribunal claim. It is all well and good that the Solicitors Regulation Authority has said that people should not put forward NDA clauses, but they are still in extremely widespread circulation.

The flipside is that in order for someone to be persuaded to sign a settlement agreement, there is a requirement that the employer pays for them to have some legal advice. The standard legal advice offer is somewhere between £250 and £500, and for low-paid people the standard is still £250. The reality of the legal market is that no specialist employment lawyer will explain a potentially 20-page legal document to the person, send them follow-up written advice and renegotiate the terms for £250.

People on low pay can go to a lawyer who for £250 will perhaps take them through the terms of the agreement and explain what they mean, but then they have run out money, so that is the end of it. The terms are not renegotiated and the person just signs what is put in front of them. Senior execs can often afford the advice, which means they get it fully explained and totally renegotiated, so it is compliant at the end. A solicitor like me working against a solicitor on the other side who has put forward something that does not meet the SRA guidelines will say, “We're not signing that—you know it's not compliant. You're in breach of your professional obligations, now get this off the table.” And they do—swiftly.

If a person has £250 and earns £20,000 a year, there is no way that they will pay for that level of top-up legal advice. That is not happening for them at all. Most good solicitors will explain that they cannot do it for the money and tell them how much it will cost to have it done properly. The person will not be able to afford it and, at best, they end up with some really shoddy solicitor who is not necessarily a specialist employment lawyer and is prepared to sign off pretty much anything and, bluntly, leaves them completely stuck. This payment structure is enriching for non-compliant solicitors at best.

There is, in theory, legal aid for people who are on very low wages or in receipt of certain benefits and who have equality claims, but that has been paid at such a low rate for such a long time that there are almost no providers whatsoever. Unless we significantly increase the hourly rate that we pay to providers, they will simply continue to hand back their contracts, which is what has happened in the majority of places. It is extremely difficult to access advice unless someone is a trade union member.

There are still lots of employers who regard all this stuff as just priced in. I have had clients come to me and say, “He's absolutely notorious—the chief exec is a complete perv.” Everyone in the organisation knows it,

[Mrs Sarah Russell]

but the board does not care. The board can give the women 20 grand to go away, they sign an NDA and that is the end of that. We have watched the chief exec do that time after time—it is just the cost of doing business. He is regarded as the superstar who brings home the bacon, so no one cares. Those are the fundamentals for many UK employers. At UKFast, for example, the chief exec got done for raping his staff. It had been going on for years: he did not just wake up one morning and do that to one woman. He was notorious in Manchester and lots of people knew what was going on. It happens across different organisations; there is no one specific sector.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech and her experience is spot on. I have seen this culture of fear at the Welsh Rugby Union, where thankfully it no longer exists. Women are so scared to speak out, yet the culture of fear is perpetuated everywhere by the use of NDAs.

Mrs Russell: That culture is totally everywhere—across sectors. There is no specific sector where if we just sorted it out, the others would be all right. There is also the phenomenon of organisations that say publicly that they do not use NDAs, but I have seen their settlement agreements and can tell Members that they absolutely do. That is not at all unusual.

In summary, we have a systemic problem that is being used to cover up employment rights abuses across the board. We really do need to legislate and have standard wording that people cannot derogate from, whether they are lawyers, HR consultants or business owners. There are lots of good employers out there. I do not want anyone to think that I think all employers are terrible—I really do not: a lot of people are busting a gut to do the right thing by their employees—but we have to stop the use of NDAs.

9.52 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Mr Betts. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) on setting the scene, and I commend the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell), who has brought a vast amount of knowledge to the debate. She is not a practising solicitor any more, but all the knowledge she has learned has contributed greatly to the debate, so I thank her for that. That does not take away from anybody else, by the way—I appreciate that others will contribute their expertise.

This is an issue in every avenue of life, from public to private life. In 2022, in his then role as Economy Minister, my colleague at the Northern Ireland Assembly, Gordon Lyons, was one of the first to come out in support of the publicly funded universities that were speaking out against the use of NDAs to silence victims of abuse. Others have outlined how NDAs can be abused, which is the point I wish to focus on.

Gordon Lyons issued a statement at the time, which said that

“sexual harassment and bullying is completely unacceptable and complainants should never be bought or bullied into silence simply to protect the reputation of the institution they study or work at. Non-Disclosure Agreements make it harder for other

victims to come forward and help hide perpetrators behind a cloak of anonymity...While there is little evidence of NDAs being used in Northern Ireland higher education settings, I still fully support the Can't Buy My Silence campaign's aim of bringing an end to this practice which is why I wrote to the local higher education institutions asking them to sign the pledge...I welcome the collective leadership shown by Northern Ireland's higher education sector in signing a pledge which demonstrates their clear opposition to the buying of victims' silence.”

That was in 2022, but how wise those words are today, as was the leadership that Minister Lyons gave at that time in Northern Ireland. Even though we did not have many examples of it, we still need to have the same law in Northern Ireland as here, with the same protection for people. Gordon Lyons' actions are to be congratulated: they were the first of a number of steps taken in Northern Ireland to send a message that people could no longer hide behind NDAs to protect themselves when they had clearly done wrong.

Initially, NDAs were created with a view to commercial sensitivity, and the reasons behind that could be understood, but they are not used for that any more. They are used for other reasons, which is where the problems are. What has not been right for some time is that staff are pressured into agreeing to blanket NDAs, which are then abused by those in power to cover over bad behaviour or, even worse, wrongdoing and criminality, with the rights of victims taken away. We have seen very public cases of how NDAs covered up the most vile and disgusting acts for decades, and the time has come to put that right. I very much look forward to the Minister's contribution. He is an honourable person who takes on board our issues and questions, and hopefully comes back with answers.

I believe in the principle of clean hands. A person deserves protection if they have done nothing wrong. When someone with access to a good lawyer can tie a victim in knots, we know there is something wrong with the system. We must change the legislation and offer the protection for victims that is so needed.

There are loopholes for legal professionals to use. I have no issue with legal professionals doing the job they are paid to do. The hon. Member for Congleton is honourable in every sense of the word, and used her position well to help others. However, we know that loopholes are there and must be closed, to protect not the people who are seeking to sell a story to a tabloid but those who have been abused and cannot speak or warn others. They are petrified of the system and the legal complications that surround them. That is not the purpose behind an NDA and the Government must clarify that in legislation.

I ask the Minister to ensure protection for those who have signed NDAs without realising that they went beyond what they thought. Commercial confidentiality is one thing and should be protected, but when it becomes something else—protecting wrongdoing in the business—that has to be taken on. For many victims, the trauma of the reporting process is too much. When they do go through it, the appearance of an NDA they signed, believing it referred to keeping silent about business practices, now means they cannot speak about their abuse. This is simply not right. The right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley referred to victims; some of those who have spoken to me say they never knew what an NDA meant, and they are petrified by the legal complications and implications.

I support the right hon. Lady in her efforts and hope she is successful. We are all here to support her in the goals she seeks to achieve on behalf of all our constituents. Those who are proven to have committed sexual offences should not find shelter under an NDA. We must revise the legislation accordingly, and I hope the Minister will give us that reassurance. The victim has a right to be heard; we can and must make that easier, in a way that ensures they feel confident and reassured that their concerns and complaints are taken on board.

9.58 am

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in a debate with you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I extend my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) for securing this debate on such an important issue, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell), who spoke so clearly about the subject.

We cannot talk about the use and abhorrent misuse of non-disclosure agreements without mentioning the crimes of Mohammed al-Fayed. He was a predator who sexually assaulted and harassed hundreds of female employees over decades. I put on the record my thanks to my constituent Keaton Stone, who has been working with a network of Fayed survivors and has become a tireless campaigner for their stories to be heard. He played a part in the making of a BBC documentary exposé last year, which quite frankly horrified the nation with the scale of what had been going on. He has done a lot to make sure we know just how big the scandal was. I note that a new documentary shining a light on one of the many people who enabled al-Fayed will air on Channel 4, possibly this week.

I say that al-Fayed preyed on hundreds of women, but we do not actually know the true figure. We know that 400 women have come forward, but we do not know how many more have been unable to speak out for years—for decades. That is in large part because of al-Fayed's intimidation tactics, including the coercive use of non-disclosure agreements. Keaton tells me that he still speaks to women who fear going public because of an NDA.

Through non-disclosure agreements, our legal system enabled Mohammed al-Fayed. Lawyers signed those documents week after week, month after month, year after year, and allowed that man to prey on hundreds of women. They were not required by any system to raise the alarm; indeed, they were unable to raise the alarm because of client privilege and confidentiality. That is utterly and unspeakably wrong. Our legal system must begin to protect victims and survivors so that non-disclosure agreements cannot be used to ruin lives in that way again.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said, non-disclosure agreements are often attached to settlement agreements. In my many years working for a trade union, I negotiated a number of settlement agreements, and they invariably included the statement that she mentioned: "You cannot mention this." I worked with teachers, and it is unusual for them to be able to share some kind of secret that will put their school out of business, but the settlement agreements are boilerplate and it is standard practice for that statement to go in them. Settlement agreements are an important piece of our employment law framework, but we must not have this situation where non-disclosure agreements are attached

to them by default, preventing things from being aired. That is particularly true in the case of some of the things we have heard about today, such as sexual harassment—although I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley that it is about not just sexual harassment, but discrimination and other things.

I was going to touch on the Victims and Prisoners Act, but my right hon. Friend mentioned that, so I will conclude by asking the Minister: when can we expect to go further and faster on this? We must have a legal system that protects low-paid workers, in particular, as well as women and those who are at risk of abuse.

10.2 am

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing this important debate.

We have heard from Members how widespread this issue is: we heard about the hospitality industry and the creative industries, we just heard about teachers, and the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) told us that it occurs in every HR department. I am horrified that it also happens in the NHS. I was approached by a constituent whose employment as an NHS nurse was terminated, but I do not know many of the details, because she cannot speak to me about it. Her employment was terminated due to—how can I put it best?—a medical condition that she suffered and is now over, but she cannot talk about it, and it has given her issues ever since. I do not know how many people in my constituency fall into that category, because, as the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley said, they cannot talk to us about it.

Mrs Russell: Typically, the agreement's wording will contain an exemption for whistleblowing—the Solicitors Regulation Authority says it must—so the chances are that the hon. Gentleman's constituent can actually talk to him about the details, and he can refer to it under parliamentary privilege. However, most people do not fully understand the relationship between the whistleblowing exemptions—they are extremely limited and tightly drafted and say that someone can only speak to very limited people in very limited circumstances to whistleblow in line with the law—and the broader statement that I referred to: "You cannot discuss the circumstances surrounding your employment." Unless someone has had good legal advice that makes that really clear, and they can retain that quite sophisticated combination, they do not understand. The exemptions that we have just do not work.

Martin Wrigley: I fully agree. Absolutely—people do not know what they can do.

Will the Minister investigate how widespread the use of NDAs is in the NHS? Given that it is probably in the Government's power to ban it in the NHS without primary legislation, will he take steps immediately to have it stopped and seek what recompense is required for those who have suffered it?

I agree absolutely that this practice must be stopped entirely. It is just one of many poor practices that are carried out by some businesses—not all, but some—often unwittingly. That is why I introduced my Company Directors (Duties) Bill, which will have its Second Reading debate on 4 July. Right now, the company directors' duties say that they must put shareholder interests first

[*Martin Wrigley*]

and might have regard to other things. My Bill—I hope the Minister will consider working with me on making it happen—would change company law so that directors have a duty to balance the interests of shareholders, employees and the environment. I seek the support of Members present to make the Bill law; I hope that we can have further discussions to see what we can do to get it into the Government's schedule. Until we put that balance at the foundation of the company directors' duties, it will be impossible to get rid of circumstances, such as those the hon. Member for Congleton described, where company directors behave badly.

I fully support the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley on all the issues that she identified and will happily engage and do whatever I can to advance work on them.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): The Front-Bench speeches will need to start by 10.28 am. I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

10.7 am

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I certainly will not take that long—that would not make me very popular at all.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Mr Betts, and to follow such informative and heartfelt speeches. I wish that there were more people here, because I have learned something new from every single speaker—those who spoke because this issue matters to them and those, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell), who have huge experience in this area. It is well worth sharing the information that we have heard with colleagues, so that it does not stay within these four walls.

There will probably be some bad-faith actors out there who will want to read what we say as a desire to ban NDAs altogether and not protect commercially sensitive information. That is absolutely not what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh), or any of the other campaigners who have worked hard on this issue, have laid out. Our intention is purely to stop the abuse, discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment that we have heard about. I praise my right hon. Friend for seeking to include a measure on this subject in the Employment Rights Bill, and the Minister for saying that they will work on an issue on which we have not seen progress, despite the existence of quite a lot of cross-party consensus.

We have heard about the high-profile cases, and we know that women are five times more likely to have signed an NDA than men, but the problem is not just the scale; it is that victims of discrimination or sexual harassment are asked to sign NDAs at their most vulnerable moment. Pregnant Then Screwed estimated that around 435,000 pregnant women and mothers in the UK have signed NDAs, and 80% of those felt they had to either leave their job or cut their hours as a result of the NDA. Those are shocking statistics. Surely, that goes against the Government's aim to ensure that people get work, get the jobs they want, and stay in work and progress. This is not just about injustice; it is also about the growth agenda.

We do not know the true scale of the issue. I am grateful that Can't Buy My Silence, Pregnant Then Screwed and other organisations are working on estimates, but we should not be working on estimates; we should know the full scale of what is happening throughout our economy. I do not know how many people are subjected to NDAs in Luton North. I really should. We all should, and we should know which employers are abusing the system.

Why do people sign NDAs, and why are they predominantly women? It is because of the huge power imbalance. We have heard about the low pay, and the lack of justice and of access to justice. They often feel that it is their only option and their only way out. They think, "If I don't take this, what else am I going to get?" The big CEO of a corporation is not going to get taken down by the cleaner. That just does not happen; it only happens in films. That is because our justice system is not balanced or fair, and people feel that the oppression of workers is just part of the cost of doing business.

An NDA not only leaves the victim without a sense of justice, but protects a culture of wrongdoing. Not only does it protect the wrongdoer every step of the way, but, a large chunk of the time, they actually fail up. I have heard about instances of sexual harassment in the workplace in which the woman has to sign an NDA and leave, while the man gets to stay—in fact, not only does he stay, but he is either moved aside to a different department or promoted to gain more power and access. That is happening in all parts of our economy, in every workplace. We saw it at Harrods, and we have just seen it at Primark. It is really downplayed. I think that NDAs are used to downplay the severity of what they are truly hiding. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, people hide disgusting behaviour behind NDAs.

The boss of Primark has just resigned for what he called an "error of judgment" with regard to his behaviour towards a woman. An "error of judgment" is when I decide to dress for winter but it is really hot outside; it is not something that a CEO has to resign for because of his behaviour towards a woman. It is not just about protecting the victim; it is also about how we improve the culture in business and in our economy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley said, this does not just happen in one sector; it happens in charities, in finance and, unfortunately, in trade unions. We have heard about it at the Women and Equalities Committee.

I plead with the Minister to not forget self-employed workers. Whatever changes we make—and I hope that we make progress—we must consider the vulnerability of self-employed workers. The Committee heard that loud and clear in the evidence we received on our misogyny in music inquiry. We heard from brave witnesses, including Charisse Beaumont, Lucy Cox and Celeste. Dr Beaumont, who is the CEO of Black Lives in Music, said:

"We have hundreds of stories from women of being harassed including sexually assaulted by male artists as well as promoters, people assaulting women in music education, participating in almost naked casting videos, young women pressured to drink and take drugs, who are then assaulted, male producers grooming young female vocalists."

She added:

"It's rife in all genres, particularly classical music."

I want to pay tribute to one of the very brave female artists who did speak out. She came from the classical music industry, and she spoke at our Select Committee.

I really do recommend reading her testimony. She spoke about the horrendous behaviour of some of the conductors towards female classical musicians, the sexual favours that those women were asked for in order to get the first positions, and the fact that one conductor had said, “Well, if you want to be in the first chair, you’re going to have to wait until someone dies or gets pregnant.” In the classical music industry, they equated pregnancy with death. I want to say how difficult it was, and how hard my Clerks had to work, to find women who were prepared to speak out against the misogyny and sexual harassment that they had faced in the music industry.

The last Tory Government agreed that there was a problem with misogyny in music but rejected every one of the Committee’s recommendations. I ask this Government to do better. One of those recommendations was about banning NDAs. The general secretary of the Musicians’ Union, Naomi Pohl, has called for a ban on NDAs that prohibit the disclosure of sexual harassment, discrimination or bullying. Some 51% of women report experiencing gender discrimination in music, and 32% of them have been sexually harassed while working as a musician. That proportion increases if the woman is from a global majority—black, Asian or minority ethnic—background, disabled or LGBT+.

Lawyers are probably getting quite excited by the thought of what alternatives there might be to NDAs, so I say to the Minister that we need to be innovative. We need to be ahead of the curve and of all the bad-faith actors. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley is right: we should not be falling behind as a country; we should be leading the way. Minister, the evidence is there—let us get to it.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thank everyone for their co-operation. We now move on to the Front-Bench spokespeople, each of whom has, as a guide, around 10 minutes, but we clearly have more time than that if people want to take it.

10.15 am

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I hope not to take the full 10 minutes, but it is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing this important debate on the use, or indeed the misuse, of non-disclosure agreements in cases of civil harassment, discrimination and abuse.

The Liberal Democrats, like all of us in the Chamber, believe in a society that upholds transparency and fairness, and protects individuals rather than shields the institutional reputations of the powerful. As we have heard, and as the #MeToo movement uncovered, when NDAs are misused they represent a systemic failure to prioritise the rights of victims and survivors over the convenience of the powerful.

We must remember that the original intent behind NDAs was to protect sensitive business information and ensure confidentiality in legitimate commercial dealings, but there has been significant creep. They were never meant to be weaponised as tools to silence victims, particularly women, as the hon. Members for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) and for Luton North (Sarah Owen) highlighted, to suppress evidence of wrongdoing or to allow perpetrators to evade accountability, but bad-faith actors have transmogrified them, and too often now,

NDAs are used in precisely that way—to bind victims of harassment, discrimination and abuse into silence and to isolate them. We hear stories of the loneliness of the many victims who speak off the record. Ultimately, they are denied justice.

This happens across many sectors, including the creative industries, as my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) and the hon. Member for Luton North said; the NHS, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) described; and the retail and hospitality sectors, as the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) said. Imagine for a moment the plight of a new mum who worked in the financial sector, but who returned from maternity leave to face mistreatment and eventually her employment was terminated.

Mrs Russell: On that point, will the hon. Member join me in encouraging the Government to bring into force clause 24 of the new Employment Rights Bill as soon as is humanly possible? It will enable the Government to make provision in respect of dismissals relating to pregnancy other than those covered by redundancy. That was a huge element of the dismissals that I used to see wrapped up in NDAs.

Josh Babarinde: I would love to study that particular dimension. We must defend the rights of pregnant women and new mums, who have been so let down by our legislative framework, including the individual I am asking hon. Members to imagine. She went through mediation, where it was agreed that she would receive a severance payment in exchange for signing an agreement that included a gagging clause. She said:

“The net effect was that I was unemployed and, whilst I was financially compensated, I was unable to explain to future employers why I had left that employment and why it wasn’t my choice to do so.”

That is exactly the point that the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) made. By the way, I really feel that her contribution to this debate has been kick-ass—I am not sure that that is a parliamentary term, but I am sure that hon. Members agree. Further, this new mum said:

“I felt I was the party in the right and yet I was the one who had the uncertainty and stress of being unemployed and having to job hunt with a 9 month old baby.”

There is no need to imagine such a scenario because it is a true story. The only reason I cannot name the individual or the employer is that, although we might be protected by parliamentary privilege in this place, the lady whose circumstances I just described is not.

This is the reality faced by countless individuals across the country, right under our noses, and it is an injustice that cannot be tolerated. We as Members of Parliament have to act decisively to end this moral and regulatory failing. First, and no two ways about it, NDAs should be outlawed in cases of sexual misconduct, harassment and bullying, to ensure that no victim is silenced, no victim is prevented from seeking justice and no police or regulatory investigation is obstructed. We have already seen encouraging steps in the legal and academic sectors to ban the use of NDAs in such cases. We heard a bit about those from the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley, but these piecemeal efforts are not enough.

[Josh Babarinde]

We need comprehensive legislation, and there is precedent for that in other jurisdictions, as has been touched on already. In Prince Edward Island in Canada, new legislation restricts the use and content of NDAs in cases of sexual harassment and discrimination in all out-of-court settlements where a survivor does not want it. In the USA, the Speak Out Act was passed in 2022 prohibiting non-disclosure and non-disparagement clauses agreed to before a dispute that involves sexual misconduct. Last month, Ireland became the first jurisdiction in the world to legislate country-wide against the misuse of NDAs. In the light of that, the efforts of the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley in her amendment are extremely laudable, as are the similar efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). That is the first thing we must do: outlaw NDAs in such circumstances.

Secondly, we must ensure that individuals who sign NDAs outside those circumstances but under duress or intimidation have a clear and legal route to challenge them. Too often, victims sign these agreements without fully understanding their rights or the full extent of the implications. They end up, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, tied up in knots in their endeavour. I have heard from a man in this scenario who said,

“I had no resilience left to fight an investigation nor a tribunal so I accepted.”

On the powerful point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), we must guarantee that legal advice is readily available, independent and free from conflicts of interest for people in these scenarios, so that no one feels coerced into silence by a document they barely understand.

Thirdly, we must foster a cultural shift in public and private organisations so that they no longer view NDAs as a convenient tool to shield themselves from scrutiny, and we can move away from the culture of fear, which the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who is no longer in her place, referred to. Employers must be held accountable not only for misconduct that occurs on their watch, but for any attempt to cover it up. Transparency should be the norm, not the exception.

Finally, we must support victims and survivors in speaking out. That means strengthening whistleblower protections, including through establishing a dedicated office of the whistleblower, which the Liberal Democrats advocated for in our manifesto, alongside organisations such as WhistleblowersUK. There is a particular whistleblower in my constituency who I will not name, but she knows who she is. She is campaigning hard on this front as well.

Silence benefits only those who perpetrate harm. Our role must be to amplify the voices of those who have been silenced for too long. This debate, while ostensibly technical and legalistic, gets to the core of what kind of society we want to be. Do we want to be a society in which institutions prioritise their reputations over human dignity, and victims are forced into silence while abusers continue unchecked, or do we want a society in which justice prevails, transparency is valued and every individual regardless of their status or power can be held accountable for their actions? I know which society I want to live in, and I think that all of us in this Chamber today are on the same page—in fact, I am confident of that. Liberal

Democrats look forward to working with the Government on a cross-party basis to stamp out this insidious practice once and for all. We look forward also to hearing what steps the Minister will take to make that a reality.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I now call the spokesman for the official Opposition.

10.25 am

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mr Betts.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing this debate. I remember sitting as the shadow Minister on Report of the Employment Rights Bill, listening to her speak about her amendment to the Bill in that debate. All too often, we sit in the main Chamber and listen to speeches from Members in all parts of the House that are, perhaps loosely, hung off handouts from Whips.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): By you. [Laughter.]

Greg Smith: I can say in response to the Minister’s quip from a sedentary position that I have never spoken with a handout from the Whips.

Sometimes, we sit there in the main Chamber listening to the usual yah-boo of party politics, but every so often there is a speech—it can come from any part of the House—that makes our ears prick up a little bit and think, “They have a point.” The Member is making a genuine case about a real grievance or a real problem out there in our country that needs resolution, almost undoubtedly via primary legislation. I therefore congratulate the right hon. Lady on her passion and dedication to this cause, and on ensuring that we continue to debate it here in Westminster Hall this morning.

The right hon. Member was absolutely right to highlight the two-tier absurdity brought about under the current law. I was particularly struck by her point that 27 states in the United States of America have passed legislation on this issue. The United States is hardly a nation that is looked to for high-end employment rights. It is a country where, for example, most people get only two weeks’ holiday a year, and where maternity and paternity rights are far short of those we have here, so the fact that those 27 states have passed laws on this issue in varying respects is something that we should reflect on.

During the debate the hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) spoke powerfully about the creative sector; the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) clearly brought extensive experience of this matter from her time as a solicitor; my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) brought his usual eloquence to supporting this cause; the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) gave powerful examples from his experience working for a trade union—the example he gave about a school setting was particularly powerful—and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) powerfully cited a local case. The hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who is Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, gave a particularly powerful speech, reminding us that of course this issue is not about banning NDAs in their entirety, but about stopping this very particular abuse.

In fact, the hon. Lady's most powerful point—on top of the one about self-employment, which is a subject that I will always prick my ears up about, having been self-employed myself for 15 years before I entered this House in 2015—was that people are being forced into signing these agreements at the lowest ebb of their lives, at the time when they are at their most vulnerable. We should face that fact and reflect upon it.

I am grateful for this opportunity to continue the debate on non-disclosure agreements, which have become a tool that too often is used to silence victims of harassment, discrimination and abuse in the workplace. This is not just a matter of employment law; it is a fundamental issue of justice, accountability and transparency. At their worst, NDAs allow perpetrators to escape scrutiny, enabling toxic workplace cultures to persist unchecked. Undoubtedly, some victims, facing an imbalance of power, are pressured into signing away their right to speak out in exchange for a financial settlement. This not only denies individuals the justice they deserve, but prevents organisations, and indeed our society at large, from learning from past failure and making necessary change.

Of course, we are not in any way suggesting that every single NDA out there is inherently wrong. There are legitimate reasons for their use in protecting trade secrets or commercially sensitive information. However, when they are used to cover up wrongdoing, they become a shield for bad employers and an obstacle to a fair and open working environment. Like other Members, I believe that the vast majority of employers do act in good faith and are good people, but where it goes wrong and they are acting in bad faith or—let's say it how it is—criminally, NDAs should not be a shield for that.

The Government have said they are committed to tackling workplace discrimination and harassment. There are elements of the Employment Rights Bill that the Opposition support, but we had a particular debate about the provisions on third-party harassment. I say this in a spirit of wanting to solve this problem: we all want to see harassment stamped out, but those provisions will have the unintended consequence of what we call the “banter ban”, whereby an employee can take their employer to court if they happen to overhear something that politically offends them in a hospitality setting or whatever it might be.

Mrs Russell *rose*—

Greg Smith: I will just finish the point; I am pre-empting the hon. Lady. There is still time, as the Bill passes through the other place, to look again at this legislation. Instead of risking those unintended consequences in hospitality settings, for example, the Government could put provisions in the Bill to tackle the serious, life-changing problem that we are debating this morning and stop this use of NDAs to silence victims.

Mrs Russell: There is a defence to that form of discrimination, which is where an employer has taken all reasonable steps to prevent it—and I speak only of reasonable steps, not every single magical thing that could be thought of. In fact, there was a case just last week in the Employment Appeal Tribunal in which an employer did successfully defend a harassment claim on the basis that it had taken all reasonable steps to prevent harassment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the

position is not as extreme as he is presenting by any stretch of the imagination, and that as long as hospitality businesses have taken all reasonable steps to prevent their employees from being harassed, they will be fine?

Greg Smith: I do not particularly want to relitigate our debate in the main Chamber a few weeks ago. It is the job of the Opposition to kick the tyres on legislation that the Government put forward, and that is what did in that debate. I hope the hon. Lady turns out to be right, but the Employment Rights Bill is still a Bill, and when it undoubtedly becomes an Act due to the parliamentary arithmetic at the moment, we will be able to fully test that and see who is right.

I want to focus on the importance of the issue before us today. His Majesty's loyal Opposition echo the question that Members have asked the Minister this morning: when can we expect legislation to be brought forward to tackle this issue? Will it be stand-alone, or will the Government amend the existing vehicle available to them in the House of Lords?

We also need to ensure that the Government's own house is in order on this front. I gently ask the Minister for transparency on the Government's own use of NDAs. How many non-disclosure agreements have been used across the civil service since the Government took office last July? Do the Government rely on these agreements to settle disputes within their own Departments? If the Government believe, as I hope they do, that NDAs should not be misused—and misused is a light term for this—they must lead by example.

I do not believe that this is about party politics; it is about ensuring fairness and justice in our workplaces. We must end the practice of silencing victims and start fostering a culture where wrongdoing is exposed and addressed. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response and, more importantly, seeing the meaningful action that every Member who has spoken in this debate this morning wants to see come to pass.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I call the Minister. I would appreciate it if he could leave two minutes at the end for the mover to wind up.

10.35 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this morning, Mr Betts.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing this debate. As the shadow Minister said, her contribution on Report of the Employment Rights Bill was particularly powerful and certainly helped to shape some of my thinking about where we need to go on this. I am grateful, too, for all the thoughtful and considered contributions from all parts of the Chamber.

Let me pay my respects to the individuals whose stories we have heard both today and on Report—stories of awful exploitation, harassment and terrible treatment, which have been silent for far too long. As my right hon. Friend said, often we are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in the workplace, and at the most vulnerable time for them. Often, only those who have the means and the confidence to take on their employer escape the clutches of NDAs.

[Justin Madders]

I wish to acknowledge the comments made by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, about the work that the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) has done in this area. She has campaigned tirelessly, as have many Members, alongside organisations such as Can't Buy My Silence to ensure that victims of sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying are able to speak up and get the help that they need.

Many of the issues that we are debating today are not new, but things have been talked about that I was not aware of, such as the classical music sector, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). Clearly, there is widespread concern about the use of non-disclosure agreements. I recognise that this is an important issue. As we know, NDAs or confidentiality clauses are legally binding. Their intention is to keep information confidential but, as many Members have said, they also have a legitimate role in contracts to protect trade secrets, intellectual property and commercially sensitive information.

Josh Babarinde: Does the Minister agree that the purpose of an NDA is, for example, to protect the identity of the 11 spices that KFC uses in its chicken, and not to protect sex pests? If so, what action will he take, as soon as possible, to protect those victims and survivors over the rich and the powerful?

Justin Madders: I shall come on to the action that we are taking a bit later. None the less, that is an important point: there are legitimate uses for NDAs and it is important that we get that balance right, making sure that those commercial and legitimate business interests are protected while, at the same time, not deliberately silencing victims. NDAs should never be used to silence victims of harassment or any other misconduct in the workplace.

There are important legal limits to the use of NDAs in the employment context. Any clauses of an NDA that were to stop a worker from blowing the whistle, for example by making a protected disclosure to a lawyer or a prescribed person, are not enforceable. The use of an NDA by an employer could also amount to a criminal offence if it is an attempt to pervert the course of justice or conceal a criminal offence. A settlement agreement under the Employment Rights Act 1996 and any confidentiality clauses it contains would be void if the worker did not receive independent advice on the terms and effects of that agreement.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service have both published guidance on NDAs to ensure that workers and employers understand those limitations, but we have heard from many hon. Members that the guidance is not being observed in practice as much as we would expect. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley mentioned the guidance from the Solicitors Regulation Authority, which has issued an updated warning notice to remind the legal profession that NDAs should never be used to try to prevent the lawful disclosure of serious misconduct or potential crime. The SRA is also clear that evidence of the use of inappropriate clauses in such agreements may lead to disciplinary action.

Nevertheless, we hear the calls to go further, and the issues raised today highlight some of the key areas that we want to further investigate. It is clear that there are still serious concerns about how employers are using NDAs to silence employees. We have heard today that victims often feel that they are left with little choice but to leave their employer, without any assurance that their employer is addressing the misconduct and dealing with the perpetrator.

Martin Wrigley: Does the Minister agree that we need to change the social contract for companies such that they no longer take all the benefits of limited liability and simply focus on shareholder value? Will he support my better business Bill—the Company Directors (Duties) Bill—which will have its Second Reading on 4 July, and meet me to discuss it? The Bill is backed by some 3,000 businesses, the Institute of Directors and others. As I mentioned, it would balance the responsibility of company directors with the interests of shareholders, employees and the environment; fundamentally change their basic responsibilities in how they run their companies; and therefore turn the purpose of the company to good, including that of the employees. It would prevent many of the circumstances that we are describing today.

Justin Madders: I have not seen the hon. Member's Bill, and I suspect that its application is rather broader than just to the topic we are debating. We are looking at corporate governance, and in due course we intend to introduce legislation that may pick up on a number of the issues addressed by his Bill.

As we have touched on, a number of recent reports, such as the Women and Equalities Committee's "Misogyny in music" and the Treasury Committee's "Sexism in the City", highlight that NDAs do not stand up in a court of law and are often used to chill victims.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) spoke about the good work of the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority. I understand that the Culture Secretary recently met the authority to discuss how they can work together to improve workplace standards and behaviour in the creative industries. We want to support the authority moving forward; that is a matter for the Culture Secretary, and I am sure that she continues to engage with it.

Louise Haigh: The Minister talked about protected disclosures, including in relation to criminal offences. As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) said, this area of law is complex, and low-income workers in particular cannot access the kind of legal advice that she provided so authoritatively to her clients. Does the Minister agree that we therefore need to end the blanket use of NDAs so that it is much clearer that victims of abuse, harassment or discrimination cannot be silenced? It is next to impossible for them to navigate this complex area of law without specialist legal support, which they are clearly struggling to access.

Justin Madders: My right hon. Friend makes an important point: this is a complex area for individuals to navigate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) spoke about her experiences in the profession, with which I am familiar. Non-legally qualified consultants often simply apply boilerplate clauses to agreements,

which has a practical impact on the victim's ability to explain how their employment ended. I have seen agreements that prevent people from even confirming that they have reached a settlement, which makes it doubly difficult for them to explain that when seeking future employment prospects. My hon. Friend also talked about the financial contribution that employers provide towards that advice, which does not always cover the cost of taking proper advice, rather than going through a rubber-stamping exercise. Both those issues highlight the inequality of arms in the workplace when disputes arise.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made an excellent contribution, as always. He was absolutely right to highlight that the original intention behind NDAs has been distorted. They were about commercial confidentiality and protecting business interests, but they are being used for wider, less justifiable purposes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) raised the terrible case of Mohammed al-Fayed. He was right to say that we do not know how many victims there are; some will not come forward because the gagging orders still prevent them from speaking out or make them feel that they cannot do so. Of course, we addressed that to some extent in the Employment Rights Bill, in which we now make it clear that a complaint of sexual harassment qualifies as a protected disclosure under the whistleblowing Act. We will never know whether that kind of protection would have prevented the atrocities committed by Mohammed al-Fayed, but it would at least have given people some reassurance that they could speak out and have additional protections.

Mrs Russell: As I understand it, the whistleblowing provisions in the Employment Rights Bill will let people go to the police or a regulator, but they do not automatically mean that they can go to the media, although they might be able to in some circumstances. If the Minister does not mind my saying so, what he has described is possibly not a blanket solution to the problem.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend highlights some of the limitations of the whistleblowing Act, in terms of what qualifies as a protected disclosure. As I have commented previously, that legislation needs to be looked at again.

The hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) talked about the widespread use of NDAs in the NHS. That highlights that there is no sector of the economy in which such agreements are not in use.

The hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) talked about the use of NDAs in Government Departments. I will make inquiries about that and get back to him, and I will pass on the comments of the hon. Member for Newton Abbot to the Department of Health and Social Care.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North, Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, gave an informative and well researched speech, as always. She was right that this is not just about protecting victims; there is a wider issue relating to the growth agenda. These issues are debilitating and damaging for victims and can have an impact on their ability to return to work. She made the important point that it is nearly always the victim who has to leave their employment and move on. As we have heard, they do not always have a clear explanation to give prospective employers

about why they have had to leave. It is usually the man, who is often in a position of greater power, who stays in work, and sometimes advances off the back of the claim. That relates to the culture in organisations: victims are not protected and perpetrators are often supported because they are seen to be in a more powerful position in the workplace. My hon. Friend also made an important point about protecting self-employed people and contractors in particular industries. We will need to consider that further.

On the current legislation being passed, we are pressing ahead with plans to commence the provisions relevant to NDAs in the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 and the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, as a number of hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley, mentioned. When commenced, section 17 of the Victims and Prisoners Act will ensure that clauses in NDAs cannot be legally enforced where they seek to prevent victims of crime from reporting a crime, co-operating with regulators or accessing confidential advice and support. It will provide that clauses in NDAs that seek to prevent disclosures that are necessary to access confidential advice and support needed to cope with and recover from the impact of crime are unenforceable.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Eastbourne, talked about a new mother's experiences of discrimination and the consequences of that. The Employment Rights Bill will provide a new baseline of protection, enhanced dismissal protections for pregnant women and mothers, extra requirements to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment—something that has been a matter of considerable debate—and protection of workers against third-party harassment. It will also make it clear that the disclosure of information can be a protected disclosure. We think all those things will improve the workplace experience, but I hear the calls to go further.

We know that there are calls to roll out the approach in higher education to the whole economy. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley provided a clear example of how the provisions in the Employment Rights Bill will not apply to an outsourced worker working in higher education. The legislation has not yet been enacted, but the Government intend to press on with it shortly. I share concerns that something needs to be done, but the changes that have been proposed through amendments to the Employment Rights Bill would need a significant amount of engagement with workers, employers and stakeholders, as well as an assessment of the impact on sectors and across the economy.

This is a complex area of policy, as we have heard today, and it is important to take a balanced approach to make sure that we reach the right end point. There are different views and opinions. There are organisations and hon. Members calling for a ban on NDAs in specific circumstances. Some advocate for a greater say for victims in when they can be legitimately used. Others warn about unintended consequences for victims who are looking to settle a claim to avoid the stress of litigation.

Louise Haigh: I am grateful to the Minister for being so generous with his time. I completely accept that there are different versions of the amendment that could be successful and I accept the need to consider the impact

[*Louise Haigh*]

on businesses. Will the Minister meet me and other interested Members to look at a way in which this amendment could be written that would satisfy him and the Government? We have heard today that there is support from the official Opposition and the Lib Dems. There is every chance that this could receive serious cross-party support in the other place and pass into the Employment Rights Bill. Will he meet me and others to discuss exactly what the amendment could look like?

Justin Madders: I am always happy to meet my right hon. Friend. It would be good to get cross-party support on our Employment Rights Bill—something that has been sadly lacking in the Commons so far. The shadow Minister is grinning knowingly—I am not sure whether that means we shall ever get him on board for the whole package. I am happy to work with individual Members. I would just note that there was a consultation under the shadow Minister’s party’s watch, and a number of proposals were developed that never saw the light of day because the previous Government did not introduce an employment rights Bill. His late conversion to this cause is welcome, but he should recognise that his party perhaps did not do enough in government. Some of the recommendations made under the previous Government did not go as far as is reflected in the general mood of the Chamber today.

There is a range of issues that we need to consider to get this right, such as whether some sectors, such as the creative industries, need particular protection, and the different relationships—we have heard about self-employed people and how this would operate for those in the gig economy. We can have the debate about whether they are self-employed or workers: I am sure that will be returned to on many occasions. We also need to consider the international approach—we have heard some examples from across the pond, and Ireland recently introduced its own legislation—and how the legislation will apply to different groups with protected characteristics.

It is important to ensure that any work we do does not create a new loophole for clever lawyers to exploit, so it should be future-proofed as much as possible.

We also need to ensure that any legislation includes an option for a victim to freely choose to have an NDA without pressure, if that is what they want. We need an awful lot of discussion to get that right. Hon. Members have mentioned access to justice and legal advice that is timely, correct and affordable. A cultural shift from employers is also important. Legislation can say what it wants, but unless we get employers to tackle rather than protect the perpetrators of these terrible acts, we will continue to debate these matters.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley said, I am happy to work with hon. Members. I recognise that non-disclosure agreements are important and need looking at. I thank her for securing the debate and am happy to continue working with her and other hon. Members to get this right.

10.56 am

Louise Haigh: I have not been in a Westminster Hall debate for nearly six years, because I was faffing around in the shadow Cabinet and then the Cabinet. I do not recall being in a Westminster Hall debate where there has been so much cross-party support. I am incredibly grateful for the quality of contributions today and the support from the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats.

I completely agree that the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) was kick-ass. Her experience in this area is second to none and shows how widespread the issue is. As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said, the scale and nature of the crimes covered up, as demonstrated today, warrants urgent and immediate attention. I am grateful to the Minister for committing to work with those of us who care about this issue, looking at what steps can be taken. If we can get cross-party support for an amendment to the Employment Rights Bill, we can ensure that victims no longer have to suffer in silence.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government policy on the use of non-disclosure agreements in civil harassment, discrimination and abuse cases.

Digital Landlines: Rural Communities

10.58 am

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that it is up to the Member who is speaking whether they take an intervention. If any Member wants to speak in the debate, they must have got the agreement in advance of the Member in charge and the Minister. They cannot just get up and speak. They must have done that in advance, according to the rules that apply in this debate.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the switch to digital landlines on rural communities.

It is good to see you in the chair, Mr Betts. You are correct that a 30-minute debate is normally a two-person debate. This subject has attracted more attention than is normally the case. I come at this from this from the perspective of my beautiful rural constituency, with places such as the Candovers and the Tisteds, Binsted and Buriton, Froxfield and Privett, Hawkley and East Meon, but the debate is deliberately is not entitled “East Hampshire”; it is entitled “Rural Communities”, because the impacts and the issues are much broader. Colleagues from all parts, possibly all four nations of the United Kingdom, with us today may therefore wish to intervene, and I have trimmed my remarks to make sure that colleagues can intervene—within reason, obviously—should they wish to.

Analogue telephony will soon be no more. PSTN, the public switched telephone network, uses technology that is outdated, with copper wire infrastructure nearing the end of its life and spare parts becoming harder to source. Britain, like other places, will thus be digitising its phone network. What follows will in many ways be better—more resilient, more scalable and more flexible. The roll-out of VoIP, Voice over Internet Protocol—we sometimes hear different names such as Digital Voice—is an industry-led initiative, but some of the issues that we will be talking about today go beyond that. They are issues for our society and therefore for the regulator, and ultimately, they are issues for the Government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The right hon. Member is right to highlight the issue. Although the technology is moving, for those of us in coastal and rural areas, the new digitalisation will cause problems where there is a dependence on landlines. If we have electricity cut-outs and storms, which we have had this last year, the system will not work. For those in rural and coastal areas, such as the right hon. Gentleman, myself and many others here, the problem is that it just does not work.

Damian Hinds: I hear him. The hon. Gentleman is right—I cannot claim coastal for my area, by the way, but I can claim rural. Telephony is a fundamental service, most acutely for contacting emergency services whenever that need arises, but there is also a broader question about people just being able to stay in touch. Although the word “voice” is often used, including in Voice over Internet Protocol, the telecoms network is also used for other connections, including medical devices and security alarms.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The right hon. Member might be aware that the all-party parliamentary group on digital communities, which I chair, produced a report this week on this very issue, where we urge the Government to take greater leadership in building awareness and ensuring that people are identified as vulnerable so that they can be helped in an emergency. Does he agree that the Government should look to take a greater leadership role in that area?

Damian Hinds: I am aware, and I do agree.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman talks about vulnerable people. A constituent of mine, a widowed mother, lives in Westport with her son who has ME—indeed, she suffers from ME as well. Two weeks ago they were left without power and therefore without a phone. Had an emergency occurred during that time, they would have been. Does the right hon. Member agree about the serious risk that the rapid switch to digital landlines poses to more vulnerable residents in rural areas?

Damian Hinds: I do. It is a major infrastructure change and there are particular considerations around the elderly and the vulnerable. I have heard from many constituents who have shared their concerns about the switchover, mostly about fear of losing that means of contact during a power cut and not having a mobile phone signal to fall back on. Elderly people often speak of their phone—their landline, as we would call it—as their lifeline, not only for their health support, but to be able to be in touch with friends and family, their support network. One constituent who has had the changeover talks about having her landline cut off, in her words, and replaced with a battery phone, which she says is too bulky for her to carry around and which does not reach all parts of the house. Because she lives alone and is disabled, she has relied on having multiple phones in the house, including a landline extension in her bedroom. The new phone has to be placed on a charger overnight, and the charger is located in a room up steps that she struggles to reach, so she no longer has a phone within reach of her bed.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I spoke last week to one of my constituents, the daughter of a 99-year-old lady who was looking for her commode in the night. She pressed her personal alarm, but owing to Storm Darragh and the power cuts, nobody came, and very sadly she died in the dark. She was discovered after two days. Does the right hon. Member agree that Ofcom needs to have real teeth now to take account of that and force the communication companies either to put battery back-ups on the masts, or to ensure that constituents get the batteries on their phones to make sure that that never happens again?

Damian Hinds: First, my sympathies to the hon. Gentleman’s constituent’s family in that terrible case. I do agree, and those are points I will come on to.

Identifying vulnerable users is vital; some will already be known to the communications providers, but the list of vulnerable customers is further expanded by data-sharing agreements with local authorities and housing associations. That is not a perfect process, and there is no complete picture of that user group, which leaves some elderly and disabled users exposed to non-voluntary migration.

[*Damian Hinds*]

The previous Government did make important progress with the PSTN charter in 2023, with steps that the industry should take to protect vulnerable consumers and a pause on non-voluntary migrations unless a customer had not used their landline in the previous 12 months. That came after several incidents where medical alarms had failed to function on digital landlines, with tragic results. The March 2024 network operator charter, a voluntary agreement between the Government and the communications providers, aimed to ensure a smoother transition.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Llanerchindda—now that is a proper Welsh name, is it not?—farm guest house and self-catering cottages in Cynghordy, in the north of my constituency, recently contacted me with serious concerns about the digital switchover. It was one of many businesses to do so. Openreach has no plans to connect that area with commercial fibre delivery, so what are they expected to do? I have had discussions with the Minister about that, and I thank him for his time, but in reality, 3% of Caerfyrddin will never have fibre connectivity. Does the right hon. Member agree that the Government must take a more proactive role in the digital switchover, to ensure not only that our rural communities are connected, but that they are not neglected or disproportionately affected by this?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady is, of course, right. My constituency is not quite as rural as hers, but it is true that, while it sounds great when people talk about reaching 95%, 97% or 98% of households, hon. Members in this Chamber represent the 2%, the 3%, and the 5%, and we absolutely need a robust, reliable solution for them as well.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Large parts of the Bridgwater constituency lack both effective broadband and mobile signal. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should pause the switching-off of landlines until there is an effective technology that can be used in rural areas?

Damian Hinds: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we need to find robust solutions.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for securing this debate on an important subject. Given the challenges that we have heard about, especially for those in rural areas such as my constituency, does the right hon. Member agree that it might be prudent in the switchover for at least one copper wire line to be left at a community building, perhaps a community or church hall so that, in the emergencies that we have been talking about, there is at least one place in a settlement?

Damian Hinds: I have heard that suggestion; it is interesting and something to be explored, but I do not think it is a substitute, particularly for elderly and infirm people who need that contact at home.

My focus today, however, is not only on the elderly, infirm and the vulnerable; it is on anyone, because anyone can be vulnerable at some time. Anybody can need to dial 999, and anybody who lives in the sort of rural area that is prone to more frequent, sustained

power cuts is someone we should be concerned about. Since we were born, we have all been used to the idea that, even if there is no power, we can still pick up the phone and be in touch. In emergencies, that landline can literally be a lifeline, but digital telephony needs its own power supply.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I congratulate him on raising this issue. During the recent storm that affected my constituency in the borders, many constituents who rely on the digital phone service could not contact the 999 service because not only do they not have a mobile phone signal, but the mobile phone masts were destroyed by the storm. Does he agree that there is an argument for greater resilience for the mobile phone network to deal with storms, and that the roll-out should not happen until the mobile phone network is more comprehensive in more rural areas such as mine and his?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify the importance of network resilience as well as individual household connectivity—and, in a more general sense, to keep reminding us of the linkage between landline and mobile telephony. For so much of the country there is an assumption that if someone cannot get on the phone at home, they can still use a mobile phone. That just is not the case in some places, and certainly not in cases of storm damage.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): The reality is that in rural and semi-rural areas such as Tatton, broadband is unreliable, poor and intermittent; when coupled with power cuts, there is no broadband whatsoever. We have heard about the needs of vulnerable people with medical devices. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are rural businesses that need connection to the internet to pay for things online, and that they use a landline to dial for that automation?

Damian Hinds: I do recognise that, and hopefully I will be able to come on to it. While broadband and mobile connectivity have improved markedly in many areas, there is still a big gap between towns and rural areas. With electricity, the key point is that we have been having storms more frequently—and in our sorts of rural areas, with storms comes damage to powerlines.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): In the relatively recent example of Storm Arwen, which had a huge impact on the north and north-east of Scotland, some communities were without power for in excess of a week because of the sheer number of trees that were down over power lines. The back-up generators for the mobile networks ran out of fuel because no one could get to them to refuel them. In most communities, there were at least some houses that still had a working landline, but there is a real fear among those communities about that happening again. Does the right hon. Member agree that that needs to be addressed?

Damian Hinds: Absolutely. I found it difficult to get reliable data for a local geographic area on the instances of power outages but, like the hon. Member, I can say from my personal experience, as well as from constituents' reports, that in my constituency we do have power cuts—as we would call them in old language—that are

frequent and can be of significant and sometimes long duration. In the last few years we have had power cuts of multiple days at a time.

With the PSTN charter, the previous Government asked communications providers to work with Ofcom to provide solutions going beyond the minimum of one hour of continued uninterrupted access to emergency services in the event of a power outage. I understand that Vodafone is now providing back-ups with four to seven hours of usage time free of charge to vulnerable customers. I am grateful to Vodafone for letting me see that technology and to ask about it further. For other customers not on the vulnerable list, however, those back-ups come at the customer's own cost.

In September 2024, Ofcom issued updated resilience guidance setting an industry expectation that power back-ups for newly installed fixed network cabinets should last four hours. As I understand it, however, although the Government continue to encourage providers to go further for householders, the actual minimum requirement remains at just one hour. That is simply not nearly enough for people experiencing power cuts of the duration that we have been talking about.

I have the following asks. There must be much greater awareness about the digital switchover, through a nationally led campaign, alongside the telecare national action plan. Some of the fears people have could be allayed through just understanding more about what will happen.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member on getting so many interventions in. I completely agree with the need for better communication, and better industry-led communication in particular. Does he agree that communication between industry and those rural communities, such as Rochester, Otterburn and Byrness, is crucial to getting this right?

Damian Hinds: I agree entirely about the importance of communication. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) said, it is important for businesses as well as vulnerable consumers to understand some of those implications. When we communicate things, we need to think about people who do not use the internet. Organisations like Citizens Advice could play an important role in that, along with local authorities.

Government Departments need to work with each other to make this infrastructure transition work. The Department for Energy Security, Ofgem and the energy sector need to work hand in hand with the Minister and his Department, regulator and sector, because electricity and communication are no longer two separate utilities—one relies on the other.

Crucially, communication providers must find a way for all customers in areas that have a high incidence of power cuts—especially those that do not have a good mobile signal either—to provide a decent power back-up without additional costs to them individually. Those costs should be considered part of the fixed costs of the network as a whole, not for that individual household. Given that I do not have that data, I cannot work out how many postcode areas that is, or how many individual homes, but it must be a manageable number, because from what the Department for Energy Security has told me in answers to written questions, we have one of the most reliable energy systems in the world. Therefore, presumably the number of homes getting significant numbers of power outages must be relatively small.

My final ask to the Minister is: please do not say, “This is an industry-led programme”. Ultimately, it is for the Government to ensure that people are not totally cut off and can contact the emergency services in their hour of most pressing need.

11.16 am

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): It is a delight to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts, and to see so many Members take part in this debate. From the moment I was appointed as the Telecoms Minister, this issue has been the single thing that has kept me awake most at night. It is about very vulnerable people up and down the country, many of whom have absolutely no understanding of what PSTN might mean, how their telecare device works or whether it will work when a man or a woman comes to change the connection to their house, and so on.

At the same time, on day one, I was made very aware by officials that the single biggest problem we have is that the copper network is simply becoming less and less reliable. Simply remaining with the old system will not work, because that will leave more people in danger, rather than fewer. The very first thing I did as a Minister was to rant in the office, “We are going to get everybody round the table to come to a better set of decisions.” It was preposterous to me that people were still selling telecare devices that would only work on an old analogue system, and would not work on the new system at all.

Esther McVey *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I will not give way for the moment; I want to make a few points first, if that is okay.

It was also preposterous to me that still very few people had any understanding of what was happening in their own home and that most operators had no proper connection with a list of vulnerable patients or customers, despite the fact that local authorities, health boards and a whole series of other public sector bodies have precisely that information.

As I said, the very first thing I did was to stamp my foot and we got everybody round the table—I think it was in July last year, and we had another meeting later in September. I was forceful with all the operators in this field. First, I wanted to make sure that every single local authority was written to and told that they must provide that list of vulnerable customers to the operators. They started saying things about GDPR and I said, “No, you know perfectly well that we are able to get round these issues for this specific purpose.”

Secondly, I was trying to make sure that there was much greater resilience in the system—the point that several Members have made. Thirdly, of course the Ofcom rules say batteries only need to have one hour of back-up, but it is not just Vodafone that offers more than that; BT, KCOM and Zen Internet have all announced, following discussions I had with them back in September and November, that they will now have a battery power of between four and seven hours. Of course, that is not perfect—if there is a flood or something that will knock out the systems for several days—but that is when other resilience measures from local authorities really need to kick in.

I have acted in all those different areas from the beginning. I say this as gently as I can to the former Minister, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire

[Chris Bryant]

(Damian Hinds): the briefing that I had was that previous Ministers were utterly complacent in this area, and that is why I was determined to act.

Esther McVey: The explanation that has been given is that the switchover is happening because of the poor condition of the copper, but has the Minister sought reassurances? Has there been a full investigation? I find it hard to believe that the copper is so bad that the switchover cannot be delayed. Will he go back and get assurances that it needs to be done?

Chris Bryant: It is a fact. We have to deal with the facts, I am afraid. It is a simple fact that the copper system is now failing on a daily basis.

Esther McVey: Has the Minister got facts?

Chris Bryant: Yes, I have facts. I would be happy to write to the right hon. Lady if she would like me to. I remember that last July, my anxiety was that somebody would end up having a telecare device not working because of VoIP. Since that time, the number of failures has increased far more in relation to when copper has failed, rather than in relation to VoIP. That is the precise fact that we have to deal with.

The former Minister, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire is right; it is an industry-led process and it always has been. We have to deal with the practicalities of the fact that the copper system is not going to last forever. The other former Minister over there, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), is looking cross with me. I am not saying that the civil service briefed me to that effect.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): You did say that.

Chris Bryant: I did not. I will finish my point. All of industry briefed me about that point—they were grateful because they said that everybody was, frankly, complacent about the issue until we came to power.

Steve Barclay: The Minister did say that. I welcome the fact that he has just corrected what he said. I think this is a debate in which everyone has a common purpose—particularly relating to the vulnerable and those with medical devices when there are storms and other crises—which is how we can arrive at a solution. Hopefully, we can work on that together.

What came out of many of the interventions we have heard was a concern about gaps in data. For those of us who, as Ministers, have attended Cobra, one of the first things that is almost always found is a concern over the quality of data. In covid, we had to get the Information Commissioner to change the rules for the clinically extremely vulnerable because we did not have enough data.

The Minister seemed to be saying that, having stamped his foot and intervened, he has fixed the data issue, but colleagues have been saying that they are concerned about data. Could he clarify—is he still concerned about gaps in data, or is he saying that the gaps in data have now been addressed? Could he also write to the Members attending the debate to confirm the data issue?

Chris Bryant: That was a long intervention and I am not sure what precise elements of data the right hon. Gentleman is referring to. What I am saying is that one of the things the operators needed to have was a full list of all vulnerable customers. It is never going to be 100% perfect, because there are some people who had telecare devices but have moved on to a different system, and so on, but in the main the people who know who their vulnerable customers are—those who might be relying, for instance, on a telecare or similar device—are local authorities and local health trusts or boards, or whatever the pattern may be in different parts of the United Kingdom. We have got to a place where 85% of local authorities are now reliably providing that information. I have not had any further complaints from the operators, but we keep on pressing the point with them.

In November, we also introduced the non-voluntary migration checklist, which means that nobody will be moved from one system to another without having had a visit, without having had the system explained to them, and without it being made sure that the new telecare device, or whatever it may be, would work under the new system. That has substantially reduced the dangers that there may be to individuals.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire referred to the subject of working between Departments. We have been working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, and that has led to the new telecare national action plan, which was announced a few weeks ago. That, too, was a result of the consultations that we started last July, September and November about trying to make sure that every person in the country who could be at risk because of an outage, an electricity failure, or the simple transition from one system to another, would be covered, and that they would have a system that worked as efficiently and effectively under VoIP as it would have done under the copper system.

I do not think we have any choice about whether we transition from copper, because copper will simply not survive for the next five to 10 years. I am happy to write to the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) on the specifics if she wants.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): If there is a recognition that we need to switch from copper to broadband, then this plainly is another incentive to get broadband rolled out to the most remote rural areas. A councillor wrote to me to say:

“As we only get 2MBs on a good day, adding the land line will reduce the signal to a point where our devices will not work”.

These are people who are trying to work, earn money and pay taxes in rural areas. Does the Minister agree that, if we are going to scrap copper, we need to make sure that we have broadband?

Chris Bryant: There is a big point about broadband generally, and I will come to mobile because I think that several Members' points have not been about PSTN at all today; they have been about mobile connectivity. That is an important issue of resilience as well. I could speak for the whole day about that, not least because of the reports today—I think in *The Telegraph*—that all of Ofcom's previous announcements on mobile coverage are rather wide of the mark when it comes to what people are really able to achieve. The hon. Gentleman referred to 2 megabits per second; a telecare device will

work on 0.5 megabits per second, so that is not the issue. The issue is whether someone has a router that has a back-up battery that will survive long enough if there is an electricity cut.

Damian Hinds: The Minister is right that the most vulnerable people must be at the very top of our list of concerns, but can I be really clear that this debate is not only about that group? It is about anybody who is cut off in a storm and may need to phone the emergency services, because anybody—they may not even be elderly—might have a medical emergency. That has not been getting enough attention in his remarks so far.

Chris Bryant: In truth, the advice I have had so far from the industry is that in the main in those kinds of instances, people would be using their mobile phone to—*[Interruption.]* Well, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire got cross with me when I was not listening to him earlier, so I will get cross with him back.

There is a legitimate point here: how do we make sure that we have the resilience for mobile technology as well? The point that I have made many times is that Ofcom reports 97% coverage for all mobile operators in many constituencies, but we all know from our lived experiences that that simply is not true. I think that that is partly because its expectation of mobile coverage is 2 megabits per second, whereas to be able to do anything reliably, a mobile signal today needs 5 megabits per second. There are also still areas with notspots—where there is simply no mobile signal. In my own semi-rural constituency in the south Wales valleys, there are many areas like that.

We need to make sure that the industry providing the mobile signal is able to deliver greater resilience in its masts. I am sure that other Members will have had the experience that I have had in my constituency, where people have set fire to masts because they believe that they do medical damage and things. If there is no mobile signal, people do not have any ability to make

calls. The vast majority of people now do not rely on their home landlines to make emergency phone calls; they rely on mobiles.

Damian Hinds: Will the Minister give way? I know he is very short of time—

Chris Bryant: And therefore I am not, I am afraid, going to give way again.

Esther McVey: Come on—it's his debate.

Chris Bryant: All right. I will give way.

Damian Hinds: This may be the last thing in the debate, but it is important to say that in many of our constituencies, there are places where people cannot make a voice call on a mobile telephone indoors. That is what an elderly person would be trying to do. It is not about a data transaction; it is about being able to make a phone call.

Chris Bryant: That is literally the point that I made two sentences ago, so I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for reiterating it. The point is that we need to be able to get broadband to every single home in the country. We are working on Project Gigabit to deliver that as far as possible.

I am aware—not least because I am a Welsh MP in Wales—that there are some places in the UK where it is going to be phenomenally difficult to get to every single home with gigabit-capable broadband. That is where other solutions, such as fixed mobile and potentially satellite, are going to have to come into play. We will need to develop new technology to—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Universities: Funding and Employment

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of university finances on jobs in higher education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. The UK's higher education sector is facing a severe financial crisis, with profound implications for both staff and students. Two years ago, university lecturers across the UK raised an urgent call for help when they voted to strike. Regrettably, their concerns were largely ignored. Over 5,000 job cuts have already been announced, with projections indicating that more than 10,000 jobs will be lost across the sector this year.

The Office for Students' latest modelling suggests that nearly three quarters of English higher education providers could be in deficit by 2025-26. The University of Bedfordshire in my constituency has recently announced plans to cut over 200 jobs as part of its efforts to address financial challenges. Several factors have contributed to this situation, including tuition fees that fail to cover actual costs, rising operational expenses and a significant decline in international student numbers from 5,270 in 2023 to just over 2,000 in 2025.

The funding model, which depends on international students paying higher fees, has harmed universities since Brexit, as has the Conservative Government's policy to crack down on student visas, despite international students contributing over £40 billion to the economy before the restrictions were introduced. The amount of income English universities receive for teaching home students has declined in real terms almost every year since 2015-16 and is now approaching its lowest level since 1997.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. A 2024 report from PwC said that 10 of Scotland's 15 universities were at risk of falling into financial deficit by 2027. Of the 18 institutions that students can now study in, seven have a deficit, so there is a particularly acute issue in Scotland. Does he agree that falling Government investment is part of the issue? Indeed, in Scotland, it is 22% lower than it was in 2013-14.

Mohammad Yasin: I will come to that point about universities in Scotland in a minute.

Even prior to the 2022 reforms, the UK had the lowest share of public funding in tertiary education among OECD member countries, with the majority of the funding coming from fees and student loans. The tuition fee system is unpopular with both students and universities. Although reversing it may be unrealistic, the model has to be improved.

A disturbing pattern of job cuts is emerging, with universities following suit at an alarming rate—even those that are running a surplus. Critical administrative and technical staff, key to the smooth running of courses and the welfare of students, are often the first to be let go. We are witnessing widespread deficits, restructuring, fire and rehire tactics and even the closure of entire

departments, with faculties, schools and jobs being lost or downgraded. A survey of institutions in spring 2024 found that almost 40% had seen voluntary redundancies, almost 30% had reduced module choices for students and almost a quarter had closed courses.

In just the past month, universities in Dundee, Coventry and Bradford have announced similar measures. Perhaps most shockingly, Kingston University has proposed the closure of its humanities department. The closure of a humanities department, in a country renowned for its literary and cultural heritage—Shakespeare's birthplace, no less—signals a troubling future for our higher education system. It is not merely a loss for humanities; it is a loss for the future of education in our nation and a blow to our global reputation as leaders in education. These subjects are disproportionately impacted by the cuts, and that reinforces the damaging notion that studying arts is the privilege of a select few—a hugely regressive step.

Under the previous Conservative Government a false narrative emerged, claiming that arts cannot equip students to thrive in a rapidly evolving world. In reality, these disciplines are adapted to a skills-based agenda, producing exceptional communicators, critical thinkers and researchers, which is still essential for a healthy democracy and a world increasingly driven by artificial intelligence.

The English higher education sector contributes £95 billion to the UK economy, while our vibrant creative industries generate £125 billion in gross value added each year. Last year, Labour unveiled our exciting plans for the arts, culture and creative industries as key sectors for driving economic growth, but none of that can be achieved without investing in the teachers and lecturers who train the next generation of skilled professionals. Post-1992 universities, which often serve the most diverse student demographics, are hit the hardest. Many students in those institutions are the first in their families to attend university and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These universities are essential for students who cannot afford to live away from home.

The problem for the arts and humanities is not confined to post-'92 universities. Newcastle University, whose chancellor is the chair of the prestigious Russell Group, has announced plans to cut 300 full-time positions, including 65 academic roles. Cardiff University also plans to cut 400 academic staff, which is almost 10% of the total, and to eliminate subjects like music, modern languages, and nursing, despite ongoing NHS workforce shortages. The University of Edinburgh has a £140 million deficit forecast over 18 months, which outstrips the £30 million deficit recorded by Cardiff University.¹ Durham University has joined the ranks of Russell Group institutions planning job cuts, with a target of reducing staff costs by £20 million over two years, starting with 200 professional services staff this year.

For a full view of the scale of the cuts, people can visit the UK HE shrinking page, compiled by Queen Mary University of London and the University and College Union, which tracks redundancies, restructures and closures across the sector.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): Before the hon. Member moves on, and to save people from going to the website, can I mention Brunel University? I have been on the picket lines with UCU, and there are

1. [Official Report, 7 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 4WC.] (Correction)

large numbers of job cuts being threatened. It is a successful university that is doing everything asked of it by Government to provide skills training for the future. What is extremely disappointing to me is the refusal of management to even engage with the union to look at transitional arrangements and future planning. There must be a way in which we can work through this, after years of austerity. The Government must work with universities' management and the unions to see the way through.

Mohammad Yasin: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his comments; I must make some progress now.

Universities are major employers and significant contributors to local and national economies. A recent report on the economic and social impact of Lancaster University, for instance, found that it contributed £2 billion to the UK economy in 2021-22, with 61% of the impact felt in the north-west. If we continue to cut essential departments—English, nursing, modern foreign languages—where will our teachers and professors come from? The approach is so short-sighted. Without a strong university sector, how can the Chancellor grow the economy? Universities are central to delivering education, research and innovation in critical areas for future growth, including in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.

Degree-level apprenticeships are another important part of the Government's strategy to address skills shortages and rebalance the economy. By combining academic study with practical work experience, apprenticeships offer a valuable alternative to academic degrees, but when universities shrink, the skills gap will only widen. In the blink of an eye, we are losing thousands of years-worth of accumulated knowledge. The university exists to pass expertise to the next generation; there is a moral imperative to protect it.

I urge the Government to review university governance and ask why expensive building programmes are being prioritised over investment in staff and students. Multi-year commitments on research and higher education funding are expected in June, when the Government's spending review is finalised. The reduction in faculty options, loss of vital services and pressure on remaining staff all contribute to a diminished quality of education. This is not the future we should offer our students. We have to fix the broken funding model, safeguard staff, enhance the student experience, and ensure that our universities continue to be engines of economic growth and innovation.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The hon. Member is making the powerful point that money should be put into staff and students. In my constituency, the University of Dundee faces critical challenges just now, with almost 700 jobs at risk. My thoughts are with those staff, and I thank the Scottish Government for the £22 million package of support for them. Does he agree that the UK Government need to reverse the Tory hostile environment policy for international students that means they cannot bring members of their family here? It has cost our university alone more than £12 million. Does he agree further that the national insurance contributions increase—an additional £3 million that the University of Dundee has to find—needs to be stopped right now?

Mohammad Yasin: I am asking the Government to look into this whole scenario very carefully, because it is impacting staff, students and future generations.

Higher education in the UK is at a crossroads. We have a choice: continue down this path of a boom-and-bust approach, cutting jobs and course offerings, or make the necessary investment to secure our universities as pillars of innovation, growth and opportunity. I urge the Government to take immediate action to address the crisis, consider a sustainable funding model, look at capping the numbers for a fairer distribution of students, and look again at student visas, to save our universities. They must ensure that higher education remains a vibrant and accessible resource for future generations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should bob, as indeed they are, if they wish to be called in the debate. It will clearly be necessary to impose a time limit, so we will start with four minutes. Jim Shannon will show us how to go about it.

2.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Vickers, you are very kind to give me the challenge of four minutes; it will probably be an eight-minute speech in four minutes. I thank the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for setting the scene so very well and for providing lots of detail and information.

I wish to give a Northern Ireland perspective. We witness hundreds of students going to different areas in the UK to study. There is no doubt that the financial stability of our higher education facilities is important, so it is vital that we are here to discuss it.

As in many other areas, Northern Ireland has a different set of guidelines when it comes to higher education. Our approach is distinctive, because we have oversight from a Government Department: the Department for the Economy. In the 2012-13 financial year, the combined income of higher education institutions in Northern Ireland was approximately £502.9 million. Fast forward to 2023, and Queen's University—Northern Ireland's primary education facility—reported a total income of £474.2 million. I thank Queen's University and Ulster University for the partnerships they have and for trying to find cures for some of the great diseases and problems, including heart disease, diabetes, cancer, cardiac arrest and eyesight issues.

Furthermore, there are growing concerns about the higher education sector's reliance on international tuition fees. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee has warned that higher education providers are potentially exposing themselves to significant financial risks if future growth in international student numbers is not high as they expect or had hoped. For example, Ulster University back home in Northern Ireland did experience increases in income, with tuition fees from international students rising by more than 50% in the 2021-22 financial year, reaching some £12 million.

Although it is understood that we cater for and are generous in welcoming international students, as we should be, when I spoke to students in my constituency it became clear that many are put off going to England, Scotland and even Northern Ireland for university

[*Jim Shannon*]

placements because of the intense tuition costs. Yes, universities rely on fees to deliver fantastic programmes across the board for lots of people, and they train our young ones for the future to get them the jobs that will help the economy to grow, but it is no secret that the levels of tuition fees are extortionate, and they will have to be paid back.

In addition, it is worrying that one in five graduates, or around 70,000 students a year, would have been financially better off if they had not gone to university. That tells me that many students will ask whether they should go to university or get a job and not have a debt to pay back in the future. That is a worrying statistic that we cannot ignore. I seek the Minister's thoughts on how that can be addressed.

There is a parallel between supporting students and supporting our wonderful universities. There is always a balance to be found, and we need to get that right. Universities can use partnerships with businesses to try to find cures to the world's diseases, which Queen's University and Ulster University both do, along with others across this great United Kingdom.

If we allow our universities to suffer financially, they will face challenges such as reduced funding for academic programmes, limited grants and diminished support. Although we must encourage students to attend universities and pursue their dreams, the facilities must be financially supported to allow that to happen.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister, and I have a request. There will never be a debate when I do not ask for something, but I ask in a respectful way. In future, will the Minister ensure that we engage collectively as a nation, despite our having different guidelines, so that universities and jobs are protected and all our students are supported?

2.47 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this important debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am a member of the UCU and a former professor in higher education.

As someone who dedicated over 20 years to teaching and research in higher education, I have seen at first hand the transformative power of that work. Students' lives are changed, economies grow, communities are transformed and cities are lifted. Despite the challenging times facing the sector, I remain optimistic about the future of our universities and the vital role they play in our society, but we need to act before it is too late—which means sooner rather than later.

The current financial model for universities is the most challenging it has been since the previous Labour Government enabled so many to access higher education. Members will know that in 2012 a cap on the domestic tuition fee was introduced, which increased only slightly in 2017 and again this year. It has not kept pace with inflation, and the financial strain is felt across the sector.

Research funding is another area of concern. We cannot have universities without research, because the research informs the teaching. That is the nature of the beast and

of the game. The UK rightly prides itself on being a global leader in innovation. Our universities are world class and attract people from around the globe. Research often runs at a loss and is subsidised by education provision, even though that research underpins our productivity and economic growth. That is the case in any sector I could name: AI, defence, health, life sciences and the creative industries. If the universities were taken away, where would we get that innovation—accessible innovation that is open to all—from?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford said, international student recruitment has been severely affected. The University of Essex, where I taught, has seen a 47% decline in EU student enrolments post Brexit, and recent changes to visa policies have contributed to a 40% drop in international student numbers. The subsequent reduction in income exacerbates the financial challenges faced by the sector.

Despite the difficulties, universities have been proactive in seeking solutions—I was personally involved in creating those solutions over many years. At the University of Essex, we introduced efficiency measures, diversified income streams, invested in transnational education and merged departments. We have done an awful lot over the past few years—I felt myself slipping back into using “we” there, in a rather odd way.

The university also collaborated with local businesses. Indeed, I ran a doctoral training consortium that spanned 10 universities across the south-east of England, and my whole job was to get money in from business to support collaborative master's and PhD programmes. Industry and business do need to step up in this regard. They benefit from universities and those who are educated there, and they need to step up and provide assistance.

The contribution of universities to economic growth is palpable. For every £1 of public money invested in universities, we get £14 back, so there is a good economic case to be made. I am encouraged that the Education Committee is to start an inquiry into higher education and funding on 8 April, and I urge the Minister to take seriously the issues raised. I encourage her to meet those of us who have worked in the sector to explore solutions that involve the unions, business and all the other stakeholders.

2.51 pm

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): In following the hon. Member for Colchester (Pam Cox), I should refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary university group and I am proud of my relationship with the University of St Andrews. The hon. Member talked about her experience; I was previously assistant vice-principal at St Andrews, with oversight of recruitment and internationalisation—areas that are crucial to the health of the university sector.

Today, I will remain closer to home and talk a little bit about the University of Dundee. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee Central (Chris Law) has already referred to this issue. I should also register my interest as a graduate of the university. Like most people locally, the university is very much part of my family, with my father also being a graduate of it and my grandmother having worked there as a cleaner.

Before I move on, I want to make clear something that we do not hear enough in this place. Our higher education sector thrives and is world leading in teaching and in research because it is international, and because it is competitive and brings in the best researchers and students from all over the world. It will remain competitive only if it remains international. Today, the University of Dundee and the city face 700 job cuts. That would be devastating for families, for the city and for Scotland and the wider UK. We all benefit from the research and the teaching there.

The main issue that has been highlighted—it dwarfs all the others—is the huge drop in international income. The acting principal, Professor O’Neill, told the Scottish Parliament recently that

“changes in immigration policy and related factors...have had a negative impact on our international student recruitment.”

He also pointed to a two-thirds drop in taught postgraduate student numbers in the last two years.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s points about the impact of immigration policy—the sector needs a policy that helps it to attract the best staff and the best students—but he will know that the challenge facing the sector in Scotland is long-lasting and is due to underfunding. Student fees have dropped substantially below the level in England and there has been a cap on places. That is why universities in Scotland have had to look overseas so much. Does the hon. Gentleman share my disappointment that this year Scottish universities faced a real-terms cut from the Scottish Government?

Stephen Gethins: I wanted to give the Member the opportunity to intervene because I am going to criticise Scottish Labour and talk about some of its priorities. The difference between English fees and Scottish fees would not even cover the national insurance increase that has been imposed by his Government.

Dr Arthur *rose*—

Stephen Gethins: I think the hon. Member has said enough. His Government have damaged the sector enough, never mind the £12 million, which is structural, that my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee Central highlighted. The sector has been battered by Brexit and by a Tory hostile environment that the Labour Government have embraced. We want to see something international.

Scottish Labour previously proposed that we should devolve greater migration policy. The First Minister has talked about a tailored visa route for Scotland, which Scottish Labour proposed previously. I would love to find out whether Scottish Labour still propose that, because that could make a real difference to our sector. The Labour party previously campaigned on that.

We have seen the biggest drop in dependant visas, whereas we know that the markets bring in dependants from all over the world. The hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) identified that as an issue, as have others. Will the Government rethink wiping out dependant visas? It is entirely understandable that people bring their kids with them when they come to study. I understand that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) cannot answer that, but I know that the Minister will. I hope the hon. Member will agree with me that the dependant visa needs to be looked at, because the health of the sector depends on it.

The UK is hobbling universities’ international competitiveness. I am pleased that the Scottish Government stepped up for the University of Dundee and made a contribution. Labour and SNP Members called on them to do so, and I was glad we all had that common approach. Given the damage that is being done at a UK level, as we sit in the UK Parliament, it would be nice to hear Scottish Labour stand up for the sector and address the damage that their own Government are doing. Will the Minister look at the hostile environment when they look at this issue? That is key to the sector.

2.57 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this important and timely debate on the issues in our constituencies in respect of our fantastic higher education institutions.

I have the pleasure of representing Brunel University, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) mentioned earlier. Many of the students and staff who make up the university community also live in my constituency. Brunel educates 16,000 students a year and contributes £750 million to the UK economy. It is an important employer, an important buyer of services and the centre of much of our community activity. It hosts a range of community sports groups, concerts and conferences, and has links with local schools. Brunel University even—I have some distant memories and scars on my back—hosts the election hustings, of which I have some positive and negative experience.

Unfortunately, because of the long-term funding challenges, which Members have already raised, and, particularly in Brunel’s case, a reliance on international students from particular regions who have been affected by visa changes, the funding crisis at our university means that Brunel has been hit extremely hard and is projecting a deficit this year of £32.9 million. Brunel has therefore instituted a scheme of redundancies of 125 academic staff and 239 other staff across the university and professional services. Around 20% of the workforce at Brunel is affected.

A few weeks ago, I met staff members from the university in Parliament at UCU’s lobby day. They told me they had dedicated their lives—sometimes 20-plus years—to the university. There is a deep level of concern among them and their colleagues about not only their futures but the university’s. It is a deeply disappointing situation for the university to be in. As has been said, universities are central to human capital, to education and to opening opportunities, as well as to research for our nation and more globally, as we face the challenges that we see before us. The cuts are bad for staff and bad for students, who want the very best possible education.

Moreover, I am concerned about the knock-on effects on the local economy in Uxbridge and South Ruislip. Brunel is a very good institution and an incredibly important part of my community. As we face up to the missions around recruiting more medical staff through its recently opened medical college, or supporting those who are not in education, employment and training into training and work, Brunel stands at the centre of our community to meet the longer-term challenges that the Government face.

[*Danny Beales*]

I hope that we can put in place a more sustainable, long-term funding solution for higher education that will stabilise Brunel and the broader sector's finances. More immediately, I hope the Government will consider how relatively small amounts of transition funding, through grants or loans, might be made available to institutions such as Brunel. Newer universities do not have very large reserves, historic estates or trusts on which to draw to change the institution at pace, so without those relatively small amounts of funding the cuts will bite harder, and they will have to make more redundancies than they might otherwise need to make. I hope the Government will explore those options for universities such as Brunel.

I hope that, through long-term funding settlements, we can secure Brunel's future and ensure that it continues to provide the best quality of teaching and remains the best possible institution for students, staff and the broader community in Uxbridge and South Ruislip.

3 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing this very important debate.

As we have heard, a great number of higher education institutions across the United Kingdom face very worrying times indeed, and I am sure we will hear of other examples from Members. Many who are more learned than me will say that the situation has been developing for quite some time. Scarcely a week goes by without yet another announcement of significant job cuts at a university somewhere in the UK, so there can be no doubt that the situation is unsustainable. If we do not act, and if the Government do not intervene to get a grip of it, a great number of higher education institutions face collapse.

That should worry us all because, as well as the incredible research and teaching they provide, universities make an important contribution to the economy of the United Kingdom. In Wales, higher education supports more than 60,000 jobs, contributes more than 4.2% of Welsh GDP and has an overall economic impact of nearly £11 billion. The new Government have identified growth as a key mission, and as such research and development will be key. In Wales, just as in other parts of the UK, universities are critical to ensure that research and innovation benefits not just communities but the economy. They account for 37% of all Welsh research and development expenditure. I have seen that at first hand in my constituency of Ceredigion Preseli, from the good work of the AberInnovation centre, associated with Aberystwyth University.

Universities also help ensure that we have the skills we need for a prosperous society and economy. A report by Universities UK estimates that more than 400,000 extra graduates will be needed in Wales by 2035 to respond to the skills gaps and workforce challenges of the future. That is clearly a problem if institution after institution in Wales announces severe reductions to teaching provision and staff cuts. We should also bear in mind that universities are crucial to train the workforce of key public services, particularly in education and health.

From my personal experience, not just as an MP but as someone born and raised in a university town—Lampeter, the birthplace of higher education in Wales—I know we face a very uncertain future. The university in Lampeter has announced its decision to relocate undergraduate teaching from the campus in the town; more than 200 years of history is going down the pan. The point is that the university also sustains a whole load of extracurricular community benefits, from the arts hall to the sports facilities. We often make the point that universities are important to the economy, and they are—that is where I had my first job, so perhaps I should declare an interest—but as a young student at sixth form I was able to benefit from the resources at the library and the extracurricular courses that the university provided to enrich my own learning and prepare myself for university. Many of my sports teams trained in the university sports hall during winter months. The university also plays host to two of the big events in the town: the St David's day march and the annual food festival. All that is now in jeopardy. When we consider the importance of higher education providers, let us remember not just the economic impact but the wider social and community consequences.

3.4 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing the debate.

As we have heard, there is a crisis in higher education in this country. The crisis is writ large in an academic institution in my area, the University of East Anglia, which is why I am attending the debate. The University of East Anglia really matters for our city, our county and the country. It is a vital hub that delivers cutting-edge research, educates thousands of students and provides thousands of jobs. It is more than just an education facility; it is on a campus that is home to five research campuses funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, 40 businesses, four independent research institutes and a teaching hospital. That university, which has produced renowned novelists, filmmakers, scientists and cardiologists, is now in a precarious position, as are so many other institutions.

The proposals advanced by the University of East Anglia could see up to 190 staff members—163 full-time equivalents—losing their jobs, and it comes after losing more than 400 staff members a year and a half ago. It will have a direct impact not only on many people's lives but on our economy. Last week, about 700 university staff members held a strike day to fight against the job cuts. I understand the pressure that chancellors and vice-chancellors are under, but the loss of knowledge and expertise when staff go lasts for not just years but generations.

I want to be clear that the jobs, and the education of students, must be protected at UEA. I am sure that the Minister agrees that higher education institutions such as UEA are central to our local and national economy. As we move towards more devolution in Norfolk and Suffolk, it is deeply worrying that the largest HE provider in our region is in such a difficult position.

I have recently spoken with the UCU branch at UEA, as well as with the vice-chancellor and members of the team. I know that work is being done to try to find

a solution, but it is clear that stress levels are high and morale is low. Of course, for staff who go, the impact is huge, but it is also huge for the staff left behind as workloads increase and their colleagues leave. As we have heard, each institution will have particular issues, but there are systemic issues that need to be addressed. I think we all recognise that it is complex, with many factors at play, but also that it has been going on for too long and it has to be gripped. I do think this Government will get to grips with it. We have heard about some of the measures that we could be considering, such as how student loans, payments and tuition fees are structured, and about some of the shorter-term measures. We heard about considering caps on student numbers, and the impact of visa changes.

I also want to make a point about the importance of transparency and accountability for those who lead UK higher education institutions. I am talking broadly, not specifically about UEA. From listening to people at UCU, it sometimes feels that staff are not necessarily as fully involved as they should be in some of the decision-making processes. We need robust systems of accountability.

When we talk about higher education funding, we also need to talk about further education funding. We have very good colleges in Norfolk, but I heard from City College Norwich that under the previous Government, it felt invisible. I urge the Minister, as we look at all the funding conversations holistically, to also look at the role of colleges in addressing issues such as pay parity.

I would also like to take the opportunity to draw the Minister's attention to the proposal for an undergraduate dental school at the University of East Anglia. That touches on funding and jobs. It has cross-party support and has been in the pipeline for a long time, but in order for courses to start this autumn, we urgently need an allocation of places from the Office for Students. I know that a lot depends on the spending review, but I want to highlight that important investment that we need in our area.

3.8 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I start by putting on record my thanks to higher education. I could not be here if I had not been the first in my family to go to university, and that was possible because the last Labour Government set that high ambition for people from poorer backgrounds. This Government, too, can set that high ambition for people to go into FE and HE.

I also thank Professor Inderjeet Parmar at the University of Manchester and Professor Duncan Bell at the University of Cambridge. If they had not taught me critical thinking and helped to strengthen my sense of independence, I do not know that I would have pursued a career in politics. I say that because when I speak to professors and teaching staff at the universities in Bournemouth, the town where I am an MP, it is clear that they are passionate about the student experience and education. However, the three universities are facing danger.

We are fortunate, in Bournemouth, to have three universities, including Arts University Bournemouth, which teaches 4,000 students and was established in 1880. I was pleased to be there on Saturday, as they were hosting a youth celebration showing the ways in which they contribute to our local society. We also have Health Sciences University, which just installed Her Royal Highness

Princess Anne as chancellor, showing that it is taking a leap forward in providing education, research and clinical care to help build a healthier society, and I commend the leadership of Lesley Haig there.

We also have Bournemouth University, the largest in the town. Its motto, "To learn is to change", is one that the teaching staff and students feel deeply. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), I have been honoured to hold election hustings there, be quizzed by students, tour their facilities, meet frequently with their leadership team and attend their graduation ceremonies. It is a fantastic university, but it is in a difficult position. On 26 March, it was announced that teaching and support staff could face up to 200 potential redundancies. It was also announced that there would be a reduction of the number of faculties from four to three and a suspension of 15 courses, all to address a £15 million to £20 million financial black hole inherited by the new leadership team, which is moving quickly to put the finances right in a difficult set of circumstances. I have met constituents in surgeries to talk about the possible repercussions of that on their livelihoods and of their commitment to their students. They are worried about the possible impacts on students' education.

Arts University Bournemouth is also in a difficult financial position, announcing earlier this year that it could be at risk of job losses due to ongoing financial pressures, having posted a deficit in the last three financial years. This shows that two of the three universities in Bournemouth are not immune from the national challenges. They are in the firing line because over the past 14 years we have seen the funding model for higher education trashed and higher education disrespected by the Conservatives. Enough is enough. I am calling on the Government to provide to all universities—and in doing so the universities in Bournemouth—the longer-term financial settlement that will offer the security that universities need to plan and the certainty that teaching staff need to develop their courses, improving both the teaching experience and professional development. That will ensure that students have the very best possible education.

3.12 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair today, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for introducing the debate so well. I should start by referring Members to the register of interests and saying I am a member of the University and College Union. I am also proud to say that I employ two university students in my office on a part-time basis.

"Our education system in Scotland is crumbling, and it's being allowed to happen. It's becoming all too common to hear from university or college management that course closures are necessary and staff redundancy schemes unavoidable."

These are not my words, but those of Sai Shraddha Suresh Viswanathan, the current president of NUS Scotland. Scotland is unique in so many ways, but one of those ways is that it stands alone in the world with a Government who think they can grow the economy by cutting university funding and capping the number of places available to Scottish students. Our universities are at breaking point in Scotland. Funding per undergraduate student in Scotland is more than £2,000 less per student compared with England. Think about what that would

[Dr Scott Arthur]

mean for universities in England. Undergraduate education in Scotland—universities—cannot run at a profit; they cannot break even. They have to do other things.

The cap on places is brutal. Since 2006, there has been a 56% increase in the number of applicants to universities, which is fantastic, but the number of refused entries has increased by 84%. When clearing comes in the summertime and options are posted for Scotland's universities, they are available only for students from outside Scotland. Even when Scottish students have better qualifications, they cannot get access to those places because the cap has been used up.

The financial crisis is resulting in job losses right across Scotland. We heard about Dundee; the hon. Member for Dundee Central (Chris Law) is not in his place just now, but he outlined that 700 jobs are at risk there due to a £35 million deficit. The Scottish Government described the bleak outlook in Dundee as “troubling”—I think the staff there probably view it quite differently. The University of Edinburgh is looking at £140 million-worth of cuts over the next 18 months. That is 10% of its annual budget. The principal there has refused to rule out compulsory redundancies, saying, “nothing is off the table”.

In Aberdeen, voluntary redundancy schemes are open. Robert Gordon University is talking about losing 100 staff. It is expected that the Scottish Funding Council will say, that, as we heard earlier, over half the institutions in Scotland are running at a deficit. This is a crisis that demands urgent action.

It is not just universities that are being short-changed; poor students are when it comes to loans for living costs. The living wage went up yesterday, which is good, but a single parent on the national minimum wage in Scotland working 37 hours per week will be earning £3,000 over the threshold for their child having full support at university, meaning that that single parent is expected to give the child £1,500 to attend university. That is utterly shameful.

I am a huge supporter of Scottish universities, and I love meeting staff and students in this place to hear about all they do. I have to acknowledge that often the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) is also there, supporting the sector in Scotland. Universities are at the heart of Scotland's economy, and have been for centuries, but they need to be cherished, and that is not happening right now. We need a Scottish Government who take the sector seriously.

3.16 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. There is a real mismatch between the Chancellor's growth agenda and the policies impacting the higher education funding landscape that we inherited. As has been highlighted, every £1 of public investment into university research generates £14 in economic output—but scale up, add in the direct, indirect and productivity overspill, and we are talking about £15.2 billion returned to the Exchequer from a £2.49 billion investment. The N8 Research Partnership universities have an economic impact greater than the whole of the premier league. We know that this is of significant value, and we must honour that. If £1 billion is deducted from UK Research and Innovation

investment, we are talking a 42% fall in that return. That is poor for the economy and the UK industry, and catastrophic for universities and students—22,000 jobs could be lost. That must not happen.

We also must be aware that the demands of UK industrial ambition far exceed the supply of graduates that we are currently producing. We are all alerted to the falling roll that will hit higher education by 2030—another 11 million graduates will need to be found to fuel our economy into the future—yet last year we saw 5,000 jobs cut in the academic year. This is a real challenge. If we are going to realise the knowledge and scientific, innovative and technical opportunity that this country presents to the world, we must have a global outlook on the investment we must make into higher education.

There have been many factors impacting universities, many of which we have heard. On international students, I urge the Minister to make representation to the Home Office to ensure that dependants can accompany academics and students as they come to this country, and that we look again at visa costs and NHS surcharges. That will enable people to come our country to put in to it and bring benefits—including the economic benefit that we know has been deeply damaged with the change in visa rules.

We also must address our relationship with the EU, which we got so much out of. We must address a deeper relationship with Horizon, look at Erasmus again, and ensure that we are getting the very best academics, researchers, staff and students from across the EU. We must also give our students the opportunity to travel overseas and make it more attractive to engage in higher education.

The pain has been felt in York. There are two universities in my constituency: York St John University has removed 70 vacant posts and deleted 30 posts, while the University of York has already seen 273 leave. I know from talking to the unions just last week that the pressure is there once again. It is having a real impact on staff and academics as well as students. We know about the mental health challenges and the stress that people are experiencing, and those workloads are going up.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): As an academic in recovery, currently working as a visiting professor at Royal Holloway, University of London on Monday mornings before Parliament sits, what the hon. Lady is saying resonates with me very powerfully. Today, Royal Holloway announced a voluntary severance scheme. I remember that moment in 2016, after the Brexit referendum, when our international student numbers fell off a cliff. Britain cannot claim to be a genuine world leader in many things, but in our university sector we absolutely can. We have the second largest number of Nobel prizes of any country. Does the hon. Lady agree that, to paraphrase Joni Mitchell, we won't know what we've lost until it's gone?

Rachael Maskell: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and thank him for participating in this debate and bringing his experience. The referendum was nine years ago, and the country was in a very different place then. We must address that, but also look at opportunities to put funding into the sector.

It is clear that the funding model is broken. We know that students cannot continue to pay higher tuition fees, and nor should they. The funding model needs to shift. I support a progressive taxation system, because whether someone earns more money because they are a graduate or through other means, I believe the more they earn, the more they should put into the system. In York, where the cost of living is exceedingly high, students are breaking. They are working more hours than they are studying, and as a result some are not even able to complete their course. That is not the kind of education system that we want, so we must revisit the funding model. Tweaking around the edges is not enough. We are missing opportunities for the economic future of our country. In York, there are the bioeconomy, digital and advanced rail opportunities, safer automation and the digital creative sector. They need these graduates and academics, and we need our universities to remain.

3.22 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I should like to speak this afternoon about the vital but vulnerable role of clinical academics. These are the people who combine frontline work in the hospitals with teaching and research at the universities. They are essential to the success of life sciences, and central to the training of the future NHS workforce.

Clinical academics are employed by the NHS and higher education institutions jointly. Their pay follows the NHS consultant contract, which was updated last year after national negotiations. Universities, however, were not part of those negotiations, and are now required to implement that contract without having received any additional funding. The result is deeply worrying. I understand that 20 out of 26 medical schools may be preparing to offer redundancy to clinical academics because they simply cannot afford them. That would be a disaster. We cannot afford to lose the very people who train the future NHS staff and carry out the medical research that underpins all the innovation in our health service. As the Government rightly expand the number of medical school places, we will depend even more on clinical academics to educate the next generation of doctors. Their numbers are declining.

Clinical academics now make up just 5.7% of the consultant workforce—down from 8.6% in 2011. Over the last decade or so we have seen a 6% fall in medically qualified researchers, and a 24% decline at the senior lecturer level. We are marching towards a cliff edge. More than a third of clinical academics are over the age of 55 and approaching retirement, so universities need to provide incentives to get younger clinical academics to come.

We did solve this problem previously. When the consultant contract changed in 2003, the then Department of Health provided £15 million to support the medical schools with the implementation of the consultant clinical academic contract. That funding was later embedded in the baseline grants to the universities. That is a model for solving this problem. Unless we act now, we will lose this vital workforce altogether at the very moment when we need them most, and we simply will not be able to run our medical schools.

3.25 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for bringing us this important debate.

In my constituency of Bournemouth West, we are fortunate to have two world-class universities producing the next generation of entrepreneurs, leaders in the creative industries and journalists. Universities are a cornerstone of our communities and play a hugely important role in our local economy, but as we have heard from many hon. Members from a range of parties, higher education is in crisis. Our education system is struggling to cope with the many years of chronic mismanagement under the Conservatives, and student numbers have suffered from a combination of visa changes, Brexit and the rising cost of living. Those factors have affected student decisions on whether and where to study in the UK, and universities across the country have been left facing difficult decisions about what they continue to offer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) has rather stolen my thunder by talking about the two universities in my constituency, Bournemouth University and Arts University Bournemouth, so colleagues already know that the challenges are great, and not simply limited to Bournemouth University. The whole higher education system faces these issues. I too have heard from numerous staff members and students who are worried about what cuts will mean for them. Many have moved to Bournemouth to make their lives because of the opportunities offered to them by Bournemouth University. I met local university leaders to discuss these issues with them, and I hope to do so again during the consultation period, which I encourage all staff to engage with.

I am pleased that the Government have demonstrated commitment to supporting the higher education system. I know Ministers are acutely aware of its challenges, and I appreciate the steps that have been taken. Our higher education system creates vital soft power links with nations and individuals around the world, and it is important to our standing in the world. Given that, what assessment has the Minister made of the impact that visa changes will have on international students and university finances?

I welcome the Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunities and to provide young people with the right pathways that are suitable for them after secondary school. Given that the funding crisis is clear, what assessment has the Minister made of the stability and sustainability of the current fees-based model? What steps is she taking to ensure that young people across the country can access good-quality, affordable higher education should they wish to?

I now turn back to Bournemouth. Can the Minister reassure students and staff at Bournemouth University that the Government are aware of the proposals that have been made, and that they will work with local partners to address the issue? Would the Minister be willing to meet me and the other Dorset MPs, who represent many amazing universities, to discuss this situation in greater detail? I want to reassure the students and staff at Bournemouth University that I will continue to press for the support you need during this difficult time, and I

[Jessica Toale]

will work closely with the university, the local community, the UCU and my colleagues in Parliament to ensure that your concerns are heard and that we begin to tackle the gravity of this situation.

3.28 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing this important debate. I note with sadness that barely any Conservative Members—whose party presided over the system when it was in government—are here.

The impact of university finances on jobs in higher education is felt deeply in my constituency of Rushcliffe, which is not only home to a University of Nottingham campus but sits in the middle of a fantastic cluster of east midlands universities: the University of Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University, the University of Derby, Loughborough University, the University of Leicester and De Montfort University. The universities are all vital to our local economy and play a major role in producing spin-out businesses, which in turn create high-quality jobs for local people.

However, as has been admirably described by many hon. Members, the pressure of the funding crisis in higher education is already being felt locally. In 2024, Nottingham Trent University removed over 230 staff members in a cost-cutting drive. The University of Nottingham has also faced a highly challenging year, reporting a £17 million loss. Those are not isolated events; they are part of a sector-wide crisis. The University and College Union has warned that over 5,000 jobs are already marked for cuts this year and, if current trends continue, more than 5,000 additional posts could follow. That equates to thousands of lecturers, researchers and support staff, many of whom are already working under precarious contracts, now facing uncertainty or redundancy.

The consequences of the crisis extend far beyond employment. When institutions are forced to shrink their workforce, course offerings are reduced, class sizes rise and students—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—lose access to the quality education that they deserve. The knock-on effects on research output, regional economies, and especially the UK's global reputation for higher education, are significant.

University finances are being squeezed on multiple fronts: numbers of international students are declining, costs associated with inflation and pension liabilities are increasing, and income from domestic tuition fees is flatlining. For many institutions, especially those without large endowments or global brand recognition, the financial model is simply no longer sustainable. We therefore need a serious review of governance structures across the sector. Will the Minister explain what the Government are planning to do in this regard? If some institutions are being forced into short-term reactive cuts, while others remain relatively stable, we must ask why. Are decisions being made transparently? Are senior management teams being held to account for financial planning? How can we ensure that long-term educational quality is prioritised over short-term balance sheets?

Today's debate is not simply about special treatment for one sector; it is about recognising that higher education is a national asset. Universities drive innovation and regional economies and provide opportunities to millions. If we allow them to hollow out their workforces, we risk eroding the very foundation on which they stand. I know that many Members across the House have universities in their constituencies facing similar pressures, and I hope that today's debate serves as a call to action, not just to acknowledge the funding crisis in the higher education sector, but to begin charting a new, sustainable path for its future.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): We now come to the Front Benchers. If they limit their contributions to nine minutes, we will just have time for Mr Yasin to sum up.

3.32 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford for securing the debate and raising this important issue—

Mohammad Yasin: Bedford.

Ian Sollom: I am sorry. I should know; I was just about to say that the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) is a near neighbour of mine.

Although I am here as the Lib Dem spokesperson for higher education, the proximity of St Neots to Bedford gives me a particular constituency interest in the concerns that the hon. Member raised about the challenges facing the University of Bedfordshire, which, as we have heard from hon. Members across the Chamber, are echoed around the country. It is clear that many universities are feeling huge financial pressure, and it is something we are all concerned about. Universities' financial challenges are not just numbers on a spreadsheet; they affect real people, their livelihoods and their communities, as well as the quality of education and research.

I am not as young as I used to be, so I hope it is valid for me to say that I cannot remember a time when universities faced such financial pressures. We desperately need the situation to change. The income that English universities receive for teaching UK students has declined in real terms almost every year since 2015-16, and is now approaching the lowest level since 1997. There are major budget shortfalls due to rising energy costs and, more recently, the increase in national insurance contributions, as well as a lack of investment and support after years of neglect from the last Conservative Government. That is coupled with a decline in international student numbers because of visa restrictions, as point that many hon. Members made well. We are in a global competition in that regard, and it is unsurprising that our institutions have ended up in such a fragile financial position.

Figures released in November by the Office for Students revealed that 40% of education providers were already forecasting deficits, but I believe that new data suggests that, without mitigating action from the Government, up to 72% of providers could be in deficit by the 2025-26 academic year. It is unsurprising that many institutions are being forced to make difficult decisions on staffing across the sector, in all jobs—support workers as well as academic staff. That is deeply worrying, and will negatively impact the sector and the country more widely.

Universities play a crucial role in our country by providing a high-quality education to many, through research and development and, crucially, by boosting regional economies. Many universities are the largest employer in their area, and the knock-on economic benefits of students living in those areas cannot be over-emphasised. The bottom line is that higher education is an investment in our future on many levels.

When it comes to research and development activities, our universities are world leading and at the forefront of discoveries and innovations that boost growth and improve everyday life. The hon. Members for Colchester (Pam Cox) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned that for every £1 invested in university research and innovation, the UK gets £14 back. I had a slightly more—dare I say it?—conservative figure, £10, but the order of magnitude is clear, and it is reassuring that different research reinforces similar numbers.

On top of that, universities are vital in supporting start-up companies across the country. Universities UK recently launched its “Unis start up the UK” campaign. It says that partnering with start-ups boosts economic growth by creating jobs and attracting investment, and sees universities equipping entrepreneurs with the right skills through incubator hubs. Analysis by the Higher Education Statistics Agency shows that between 2014-15 and 2022-23, there was a 70% increase in the number of start-ups founded in UK universities, and that in 2022-23, around 64,000 people were employed by those start-ups—up 170% from 2014-15. HESA predicts that, with the right support, 27,000 new start-ups, with a predicted turnover of around £10.8 billion, could be established by students and staff at UK universities by 2028.

Despite the positive contributions that universities make to social and economic life, in far too many cases their finances are simply unsustainable. In the past year, around three quarters of universities have implemented significant savings programmes, including, sadly, redundancies, course closures, reductions in module options, and the consolidation of professional services and student support.

Thriving universities are essential to a thriving UK, delivering stronger growth, better public services and improved individual life chances. If the Government are serious about their growth mission, they have to work with the higher education sector to stabilise funding, protect fair pay and jobs, and ensure long-term sustainability. We have been calling on them to implement a full-scale review of higher education finance. We believe there are many more things that could be done to support universities that do not involve raising tuition fees further, such as recognising the benefits that international students bring and giving universities policy stability in that respect, and reversing the decline in quality-related funding for research. Finally, the Government should work with the sector to put clear plans in place for any university that finds itself in financial distress. We really do not want to lose any university in the higher education sector.

3.40 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this important debate, which could not be more timely, and I am grateful to all colleagues who have contributed.

Our universities are among the most important institutions in our national life. They are centres of research, innovation and learning, and for many thousands of young people every year, they are the route to opportunity, economic independence and personal growth. Despite its great importance, the higher education sector has come under increasing pressure in recent years. The latest modelling from the Office for Students suggests that nearly three quarters of English higher education providers could be in deficit by 2025-26, and 40% would have fewer than 30 days' liquidity. Indeed, as we have heard from many Members today, redundancy programmes are already under way in some institutions and, across the country, university staff are understandably anxious about the future.

I will say at the outset that I am deeply sympathetic to those who work in institutions that have found themselves in financial difficulty. Nevertheless, I believe it is past time for us to have a grown-up conversation about university finances, in which we look seriously at what is driving the pressures and what it might be possible to do to alleviate them.

I will begin by stating the obvious: decisions taken in recent years have increased the financial pressure on students and graduates, without necessarily addressing the deeper questions of value and sustainability. We have seen steady rises in student loan interest rates and tuition fees, which both fall heavily on students, and now, the spike in employer national insurance contributions is putting further cost pressures on universities.

Meanwhile, the Government's proposals to cut funding for level 7 apprenticeships, which are essential qualifications in a number of fields, including education, health and engineering, risk further undermining key parts of the post-18 education ecosystem. Many university departments rely on that funding not just to sustain course provision, but to attract and retain highly qualified staff. The impact of the cuts will not be evenly spread, and it is right that we consider how they will affect institutions already under financial pressure.

Pam Cox: Will the shadow Minister take some responsibility, on behalf of her party, for the situation that many universities find themselves in?

Rebecca Paul: I suggest to the hon. Member that we need to deal with the situation that we have now, and that her questions should be targeted towards the Minister. We should make the right decisions to do the right thing for our country, and for our students and university staff.

We must confront an uncomfortable truth: there is mounting evidence, including from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, that a sizeable share of higher education courses simply do not provide good value for money either for the taxpayer or for the individual student. The IFS has concluded that around 30% of graduates, both men and women, would have been better off financially had they not gone to university at all. That raises important questions about how we can ensure that our higher education system delivers for those who fund it—namely, the students who invest years of their lives and take on significant debt, and the public whose taxes support the student loan system.

The current funding model is failing under the enormous weight of rapid expansion, marketisation and insufficient quality controls. The ability of an institution to prop

[Rebecca Paul]

itself up on the backs of overseas students who pay vast fees is coming to an end. Although fee income from international students has grown by an average of 15% a year between 2017 and 2023, the recent international recruitment environment has been challenging. Recent Home Office data indicates that 393,125 visas were issued to main applicants in 2024. That is down 13.9% year on year and down 18.8% compared with two years ago.

While some institutions have embraced innovation, strong outcomes and world-class research, others have pursued growth at all costs, adding courses with limited market value, often to attract overseas students or to maximise short-term income. We cannot and should not return to a time when university was accessible only to a wealthy minority, but we do need to have a serious conversation about the purpose of higher education, who it is for, and how it can be sustainably funded in a way that delivers for students, taxpayers and the wider economy. That means looking at systemic reform, rather than simply demanding that young people pay more without addressing the underlying issues. We need to examine course quality, graduate outcomes, student choice, and the role of further education and apprenticeships alongside traditional degrees.

Stephen Gethins: Will the hon. Member give way?

Rebecca Paul: I will in a moment.

Such a reform could begin by addressing the unacceptable lack of transparency around the student loan system. The public have a right to know how the system is operating, who is borrowing, who is repaying, and where there may be a risk of fraud or misuse. I understand that a paper on this very subject, compiled by the IFS and commissioned by the last Government, remains unpublished, despite efforts to obtain it via freedom of information requests. I hope the Minister will explain why that is the case, and will understand that transparency builds trust, while withholding data only fuels suspicion.

On a related theme, questions have rightly been asked about the eligibility criteria for student loans, particularly for non-UK nationals and EU citizens with settled status. It is surprising to many that, even several years after Brexit, more than 180,000 individuals were granted settled status in the first six months under this Government. That figure deserves scrutiny, and it is legitimate to query the implications for access to taxpayer-funded support for accessing higher education. It has been widely reported that the Student Loans Company is now accepting a mere certificate of application for settled status in order to approve loans. If that is the case, I urge Ministers to review that policy as a matter of urgency. We must ensure that eligibility checks are robust and that the system is not open to exploitation.

Stephen Gethins: Will the hon. Member give way?

Rebecca Paul: I am going to continue because of the time.

On the concerns about the quality of some higher education provision, the Government have said they are considering changes to the regulation of franchise providers, some of which have been implicated in cases of poor-quality provision and potential fraud. Although I welcome the

consultation launched by the Department for Education, I caution that many of the largest franchise providers are already regulated by the Office for Students, so the key question is not simply whether they are regulated, but how well the regulatory framework is working and whether it is actually driving up standards.

Finally, we have heard Ministers speak in recent months about “tweaking” the role of the Office for Students to strengthen its focus on value for money. In September, the Department said that it was “developing options for legislative change,”

and the Secretary of State has since re-announced that commitment, but as far as I can tell no tangible progress has been made. When will we actually see legislation brought forward? We have also heard mention of the Public Sector Fraud Authority being brought in, but that sounds remarkably similar to the Internal Audit Agency investigation mentioned in last year’s National Audit Office report. What is changing, exactly? Are we simply hearing the same announcement robed in new language?

I conclude by emphasising that the largest losses to the taxpayer do not always come from outright criminal fraud, and can come from legally operating institutions that provide poor value. These providers operate within the letter of the law, but not within its spirit. They enrol students on low-value courses with high drop-out rates and weak earnings potential, while drawing down large sums from the student loan system—sums that in many cases will never be repaid. We cannot continue like this. Our goal should be a higher education system that is sustainable, high quality and genuinely life-changing. I look forward to continuing this discussion in the months ahead.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing a debate on this important subject. I know he has a keen interest in the financial sustainability of the higher education sector. I have heard my hon. Friend and many Members from all parties speak about the amazing universities in their constituencies, and I welcome all their contributions. I have heard about universities’ contributions to economic growth, systemic issues, operational expenses, home and overseas student numbers, staff redundancies, the deficits that universities carry and many other issues.

I hear and acknowledge the concerns raised. In response, I will address higher education employment; the financial position of higher education; the role of the Office for Students; the tuition fees increase; the risk of financial failure; the sector’s independence; the higher education workforce; higher education reform; international students; research funding; and employer national insurance contributions. I will also address the franchising fraud mentioned by the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul).

I thank all the Members who have spoken: the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain); the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell); the hon. Members for Dundee Central (Chris Law) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon); my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Pam Cox); the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry

(Stephen Gethins); my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), and for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales); the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake); my hon. Friends the Members for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell); the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton); and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley).

I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket that the Government recognise the vital role that clinical academics play in research and education in the NHS. Although universities are independent and, therefore, responsible for decisions around pay, we are committed to working closely with partners in education to ensure that clinical academia remains an attractive career choice.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) for her invitation to visit Dorset MPs; I will pass that on to my noble Friend the Minister in the other place, who responsible for skills, higher education and further education. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish), the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) and the hon. Member for Reigate.

As I set out in a similar debate on this topic in December, the Government value the vital contribution that our world-leading higher education sector makes to the United Kingdom. Through education provision and research output, our providers are integral to our economy, industry, innovation and wider society. The sector contributes to productivity and growth, and plays a crucial civic role in local communities. It also helps to enhance the UK's global reputation.

Of course, higher education providers are vital employers in their local communities and across England. They provide not only jobs for academic staff, such as professors and researchers, but a wide range of non-academic roles in administration, facilities management, IT, student support services and many more.

The Government recognise that the financial position of the sector is under pressure. In November, the Office for Students published an update to its May report on the financial health of the sector. The update states that the financial context for the sector has become more challenging since the May report. By 2025-26, the Office for Students predicts that incomes will be £3.4 billion lower than provider forecasts, and up to 72% of providers could be in deficit if they do not take significant mitigating action. We have heard much about that in the debate.

It is clear that our higher education providers need a secure financial footing to face the challenges of the next decade. I assure Members that we are committed to working in partnership with the sector to put providers on a firmer financial footing than that which we inherited. As has been mentioned, the fact that absolutely no Members from His Majesty's Opposition are here to speak on this important issue sends a message to universities about how they are valued, or not.

The Government have acted quickly to address the challenges. Last month, Professor Edward Peck was appointed as substantive chair of the Office for Students. Professor Peck will continue the excellent work of the interim chair, Sir David Behan, focusing on the sector's

financial sustainability and increasing opportunities in higher education. In recognition of the pressures facing the sector, in December the Office for Students announced temporary changes to its operations to allow for a greater focus on financial sustainability. It will work more closely with providers that are under significant financial pressure, to protect the interests of students.

Of course the Government have announced that tuition fee limits will increase in line with inflation. As a result, the maximum fee for a standard full-time undergraduate course in the 2025-26 academic year will increase by 3.1%. Fees will increase from £9,250 to £9,535 for a standard full-time course; from £11,100 to £11,440 for a full-time accelerated course; and from £6,935 to £7,145 for a part-time course. This was not an easy decision, but it was the right one to put our higher education sector on a more secure financial footing. In return for the increased investment that we are asking students to make, we expect providers to deliver the very best outcomes for students and the country.

I want to affirm that all providers, regardless of their current position, must continue to adapt to uncertainties and financial risk. Although the Office for Students has statutory duties in relation to the financial sustainability of the higher education sector, the Government have a clear interest in understanding the sector's level of risk. As well as working closely with the Office for Students, my Department continues to work closely with higher education representative groups such as Universities UK, and with other Government Departments, such as the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, to better understand the sector's changing financial landscape.

I also want to make clear the Government's position on providers that are at risk of financial failure. If a provider was at risk of unplanned closure or, indeed, found itself in the process of exiting the sector, my Department would work with the Office for Students, the provider and other Government Departments to ensure that students' best interests are protected—students will always be our priority—and to support the university itself as best as possible.

I commend the dedication of staff across the sector during these difficult times. Their hard work and commitment continue to uphold the quality and reputation of our higher education providers. These are undeniably challenging times and we understand that some providers have had to make difficult decisions around staffing to safeguard their financial sustainability. As independent institutional providers, they are responsible for managing their budgets, including decisions about pay and staffing, and the Government do not intervene in these matters, or in disputes between providers and their staff. However, we expect providers to engage constructively with their workforce to identify ways to reduce unnecessary expenditure while ensuring sustainable long-term benefits for both students and the sector as a whole.

Looking ahead, Ministers and officials remain committed to maintaining strong collaborative relationships with employers, staff and unions through continued dialogue. We aim to better understand the challenges facing the sector and to provide support for its evolving needs. Due to the time, it feels like I need to finish, so I will end by saying that this Government are committed to working with universities.

3.59 pm

Mohammad Yasin: It is an honour to open and close this important debate. I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has participated and made a compelling case for the future of our higher education sector. It is clear that we all share a deep pride in our world-class universities and the exceptional staff who dedicate their lives to educating and shaping the workforce of tomorrow.

However, we must recognise that words alone are not going to be enough. We must take meaningful action to ensure that our universities remain sustainable and fit for the future, without compromising their invaluable knowledge base or limiting student choice.

I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their contributions. I look forward to the Education Committee session on this matter next Tuesday. Together, I hope that we can rise to the challenge and collaborate to ensure that our universities continue to provide transformative educational experiences.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of university finances on jobs in higher education.

Irish Guards: 125th Anniversary

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I will call Gavin Robinson to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may only make a speech with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 125th anniversary of the Irish Guards.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and as a Parliament to take the opportunity to celebrate a significant milestone for the Irish Guards. I thank the Minister for being present on this enjoyable occasion.

Yesterday evening, in the Royal Military Chapel—the Guards' Chapel—and in St Mark's, Dundela, in my constituency of Belfast East, services were held to give thanks for the service and the sacrifice, for the bravery, loyalty and determined strength of the Irish Guards. Today I am privileged to offer the same opportunity to our Parliament. Yesterday, 1 April, marked 125 years since the formation of the Irish Guards. On 28 February 1900—you may remember it well, Mr Pritchard—a letter to *The Times* read,

“Sir,

May I venture to suggest, through you, to the authorities within whose province it may come, that now is a most opportune time to recognise the distinguished valour of our Irish soldiers who, in the Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Dublin Fusiliers and the Connaught Rangers, have shown to the world such conspicuous bravery in the many recent battles which they have fought with such brilliant dash and daring throughout our South Africa War. Is there not one mark of distinction and honour that can be conferred upon them and their country which belongs to Scotchmen and Englishmen, but is withheld from them? There are Scotch Guards and English Guards—why not add to the roll of glory a Regiment of Irish Guards?”

On 3 March 1900, a letter in response was issued from the Queen's private secretary, Windsor Castle, in reply to the Secretary of State for War:

“My Dear Lord Lansdowne,

By a curious coincidence The Queen has during the past week been seriously considering the question of a Regiment of Irish Guards, thinking that the present was opportunity for its creation. Therefore I am glad to be able to tell you the Queen entirely approves of the ideal. Her Majesty asked the Duke of Connaught to speak to the Commander in Chief on the subject and hopes that you will therefore find that Lord Wolseley is already in procession of Her Majesty's views.”

So was issued Army Order 77, on 1 April 1900:

“Formation of Regiment of Irish Guards:

Her Majesty The Queen, having it deemed it desirable to commemorate the bravery shown by the Irish regiments in the recent operations in South Africa, has been graciously pleased to command that Irish Regiment of Foot Guards be formed. This regiment will be designated the ‘Irish Guards’.”

Affectionately now known as the Micks, the Irish Guards were formed in solemn recognition of their antecedents' bravery, arising from their sterling contribution

to our nation. Their formation was a fitting tribute to the bravery of the Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Dublin Fusiliers and the Connaught Rangers during the Boer war. This Unionist is not only grateful, but proud, that the history and heritage of the Irish Guards predates partition and to this day draws personnel from across the island of Ireland; and this Unionist is proud that the regiment's emblem, motto and blue plumage all draw upon and recognise our patron saint, St Patrick.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend my right hon. Friend for bringing this debate forward. He is immensely proud of the Irish Guards, as am I. In Newtownards, we have the second largest Irish Guards Association—after Liverpool. The reputation of the Guards from the Ards, as they are well known, is secure, with Ards and North Down borough council granting the freedom of the borough to the Irish Guards in 2022. Does he agree that we can all be proud of the reputation, service and legacy of the Irish Guards, wherever we live in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and those in the Republic of Ireland who served in the regiment as well?

Gavin Robinson: My hon. Friend is right to mention the Guards from the Ards, just as it would be right to mention the Mini Micks—the cadets associated with the Irish Guards—and to recognise the affection for those past and present who have served the Irish Guards and our country with distinction, many of whom leave the service and go on to perform duties in support of us. With your permission, Mr Pritchard, I would like to recognise Mr Wayne Jenkins, our Deputy Principal Doorkeeper, who I believe is here this afternoon. He served his country proudly in the Irish Guards; I think it is important that we recognise his service—especially as my hon. Friend mentioned Liverpool.

Each St Patrick's day, the regiment receives shamrock from their Colonel of the Regiment; Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales is admired and highly regarded beyond the regiment, but it was wonderful this year to see her with the regiment, enjoying a customary pint of Guinness.

One hundred and twenty-five years is an epoch. That duration of service can be marked in many ways. The regiment was formed in 1900, when the only thing flying in the skies were birds. In the century that has followed, our skies have not been the limit to man's exploration. When the regiment was formed, mail was sent after putting parchment and quill together. Now mail is sent through the ether in bytes. During the passage of those 125 years, we have endured two world wars, a war on terror and, ongoing today, the invasion of the sovereign nation of Ukraine in our own European continent. In each of those examples, the Irish Guards served with distinction.

Forming part of the British Expeditionary Force, the Irish Guards were pivotal during the first world war in France. As a regiment, four Victoria Crosses were earned. Their gallantry was unquestioned in Ypres, as it was elsewhere. During the course of the second world war, the second battalion was raised in 1939 and a third in 1942. Efforts in Normandy, Belgium, Holland and Germany cannot be considered historically without the role of the Irish Guards.

Since then, Palestine, Suez, Cyprus, Afghanistan and Iraq have all formed part of the regiment's illustrious history. It is hard to consider a conflict over the last century without considering the bravery and fortitude of the Irish Guards. More recently, guardsmen have been training, equipping and supporting Ukrainians in the defence of their country through Operation Interflex. Although that is their primary function, as Foot Guards of the Household Division the Irish Guards also have the illustrious privilege of ceremonial duties. At times of national pride and national sorrow, the Irish Guards have played their part with impeccable distinction.

I fondly remember being present for Trooping the Colour in 2022. It was a special year, with our nation celebrating the platinum jubilee, marking the enormity of our Queen's 70 wholesome years of reign. The annual showcase occasion was made all the more special by its historic nature, providing a climax to wonderful jubilee celebrations held throughout our nation and the Commonwealth, and it was suitably led with the colours being trooped by the Irish Guards—an incredible honour that was accentuated some three months later, when we all realised that that Trooping the Colour was Her Majesty's last.

All too often at times of distress, we seek the familiar and the comforting—the warming reassurance of the constant—and yet on this occasion it is right that we recognise that those who serve in the Irish Guards and our armed forces more generally often forgo the constant family life, family support and comfort of home so that we can enjoy ours. As this Parliament wrestles with the legacy of our past, I ask that it is prepared to honour and recognise the service and sacrifice of those who have gone before, to defend those who defended us, and in this week to celebrate 125 years of the Irish Guards. We honour them, we thank them and we wish them continued success. *Quis separabit—who shall separate us?*

4.11 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for the opportunity to celebrate the outstanding service of the Irish Guards and to have in our presence the Doorkeeper who served his country so admirably in that fantastic regiment.

It would certainly be foolish to think we can sum up 125 remarkable years of service in a 30-minute debate. Indeed, one of the most renowned writers, Rudyard Kipling, spent five and a half years researching his 1923 history of the regiment. It was a labour of love in honour of his son John, a teenager and Irish Guardsman who was killed in 1915 during the first days of the deadly battle of Loos, an allied offensive that was meant to be the big push but ended up with 60,000 British casualties, many Irish Guardsmen among them, but negligible territorial gains. During the great war, Irish Guardsmen went on to win four Victoria Crosses—a remarkable achievement for any regiment. Over the next century, the regiment served with distinction at different turning points in British history.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for securing this important debate. When I started at the Royal Military

[*Louise Jones*]

Academy Sandhurst as a member of 29 Platoon, Alamein, we were very fortunate to have as our first colour sergeant a member of the Irish Guards, Colour Sergeant Griffiths. Although I have to admit that I probably was not very promising material, under his guidance and tutelage I learnt an awful lot. Many of the lessons that he taught me at Sandhurst, I have carried forward in my life since; they have come in very helpful in my life as an MP. It is safe to say that there are few people that I have learnt as much from as I have from Griff. Does the Minister agree that there are few better cap badges, providing us with our first colour sergeant when we begin our military career?

Al Carns: That is a really fitting tribute. I am sure that that colour sergeant is looking on with great pride to see how my hon. Friend has come from the military and is now in Parliament.

Jim Shannon: I am not sure whether it is the same person, but Simon Nichols, a colour sergeant from Newtownards and one of the Guards from the Ards, trained personnel at Sandhurst—he actually trained Prince William and Prince Harry; one of them turned out well, while the other one I am not so sure about—and was instrumental in looking after the soldiers, male and female, who went through there.

Al Carns: Another fitting tribute. I suggest that there will be many from across the House.

The Irish Guards have served with distinction in north Africa, Italy, Normandy and Arnhem, where the Irish Guardsmen led the ground assault to relieve the besieged British paratroopers. In the post-war years, they served with distinction in Palestine and Malaya and, in my lifetime, in Northern Ireland, the Falklands—although I was very young at the time—the Gulf, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and of course Afghanistan. I had the privilege of serving under a general who had served in the Irish Guards, and I learned a huge amount from him. He is an example of the exceptional leadership of individuals and young officers who have come up and grown up through that fantastic regiment.

The regimental motto lays down a pledge of unity: who shall separate us? That is hard-hitting and poignant. After 125 years of service, that motto has stood the test of time. The Irish Guards stand strong and united with a bright future ahead of them. They will be better equipped for warfighting as they have recently gained a new role within the Army's advanced forces, and that will further bolster NATO and, importantly, European security.

As guardsmen, the regiment has also made an immense contribution in non-combat roles. In recent years, it has been particularly focused on training, including partners in Africa, and has countered security challenges as varied as violent extremism and the illegal wildlife trade.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I want to add my own words of tribute to my brothers in the Irish Guards. My warrior sergeant was a man called Glyn Crawley. As a result of an accident he had, I think as a child, he only had one eye, and he was known universally as the "one IG", which is one for the military among us to appreciate.

In the 1st Battalion Scots Guards, when we were Taskforce Lashkar Gah, we had Sergeant Dale Alonzo McCallum, who we inherited from the Irish Guards and who rebadged as a Scots Guardsman. He was tragically killed by sniper fire in Afghanistan. I paid tribute to him at the time as undoubtedly the coolest Scots Guardsman ever to walk the earth. No doubt his time in the Irish Guards prepared him for that role admirably.

The Minister may not be aware that the Irish Guards have also spawned the Blackthorn Rally, members of which go on two wheels and four to some of the craziest places in the world—not least the northern Sahara, Tanzania and Kenya. This year, for the organisation's 10th anniversary, they are going to Colombia. Sadly, I will not be joining them, because I will be enjoying the joys of the Conservative conference in Birmingham instead. What this extraordinary group of mostly Micks do—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that, even though this is all fascinating, interventions do need to be kept short. I am going to be flexible; the Chair has discretion. If the mover of the motion is happy for him to continue and the Minister is happy to reserve his remarks until after the hon. Gentleman has concluded, then I will let it go. I want to hear all this. I will probably get in trouble, but subject to the mover of the motion and the Minister agreeing, I will let the hon. Gentleman continue. Are you happy, sirs?

Gavin Robinson *indicated assent.*

Al Carns: Absolutely.

Lincoln Jopp: I am very grateful for your forbearance, Mr Pritchard, and it is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship. [*Interruption.*]

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Forgive me, but there is a Division. I am sure we will get around to these excellent tributes and stories of the Irish and the Scots Guards, and others indeed.

4.18 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.30 pm

On resuming—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Let us crack on. The debate must end at 4.40 pm; I am sure hon. Members will be mindful of that.

Lincoln Jopp: I thank the Minister and the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for their generosity. Before the suspension, I was talking about the extraordinary work of the Blackthorn rally. It is great fun, delivers conservation projects around the world and takes with it former service personnel who are in some cases incredibly disabled—I think our record was one working limb between the two drivers in one RZR. The Irish Guards' effectiveness and reach are extraordinary, and I pay tribute to them on their birthday.

Al Carns: I would be really interested to follow that four and two-wheeled rally. I will see what they are up to next year, and whether we can visit or take part.

As I previously mentioned, the Irish Guards have a fantastic operational role but have also played a visible role in British life, pulling society and defence back together, primarily through ceremonial duties in the London region. They have supported countless important political and royal events, including both the state birthday and the funeral of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Today, 125 years and one day after Queen Victoria formed the Irish Guards in recognition of the bravery and service of Irish soldiers during the second Boer war, it is right that we reflect on their collective past achievements.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for securing this debate. The Minister speaks of the contribution of the Irish Guards. It would be remiss of me not to mention Sir John Gorman, former Ulster Unionist Member of the Legislative Assembly, and former Deputy Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. He was titled Sir John Gorman CVO CBE MC because of the actions he took during Operation Market Garden, when he got across the length of Nijmegen bridge before that operation was called off.

I acknowledge the contribution made to our society in general by all those who have been part of the Irish Guards, or been trained by Irish Guards, and still recognise and salute the Irish Guards, in whatever walk of life they finish up in.

Al Carns: That is a really fascinating point. I think it was 30 Corps, of the Army, that went to relieve the bridgehead in Arnhem, with the Irish Guards at the front of it. The operational orders written for 30 Corps are only about six pages long. It took a truly remarkable level of mission command and leadership to relieve the bridgehead of the tricky position it was in.

Yesterday evening, in celebration of the Irish Guards, a service of commemoration was held simultaneously in the Guards' Chapel, and in Liverpool, Belfast, Birmingham and Dublin. Representatives of the regiment also marked the occasion in Ladysmith, South Africa: a place with links to the regiment's conception, where the Irish Guards have enjoyed the freedom of Ladysmith since 2005. Yesterday's events were part of a year of commemorations. Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, colonel of the regiment, joined the St Patrick's day celebrations at Wellington barracks, presenting shamrocks to the officers and soldiers on parade. Over the summer, there will be a series of concerts and parades in Northern Ireland and London, including a parade in Belfast to lay up the 1st Battalion's old colours.

In conclusion, as we honour 125 years of distinguished service by the Irish Guards, we recognise not only a regiment and its achievements but the countless acts of individual courage, sacrifice and duty by the men and women of the Irish Guards over the years. Their collective endeavour and legacy transcend borders, politics and the passage of time. For 125 years, they have been the very best of us. For that, hon. Members across the House, and people across the country, offer their most profound thanks.

Question put and agreed to.

Green Book Review

4.36 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Green Book review.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank all hon. Members who have come today to talk about the Green Book. Our constituents all know that something is very clearly not right and has not been right for a very, very long time. They pay their taxes but they cannot see things getting any better. In Congleton, I cannot see any evidence of any significant infrastructure spending for many years, except for where it has been facilitated through house growth. Government money does not appear to have been involved in significant ways for a long time.

The previous Government talked a good game about levelling up the north, but actual investment never followed, which is why my constituents voted for change. In my area, I want to see the Middlewich bypass, the A50/A500 north midlands manufacturing corridor, massive investment in improving our electricity grid, and all kinds of other changes and improvements, but I can see very clearly that something is not right.

Total capital public spending per person in the north-west in 2022-23 was £13,297 per year; in London, it was £14,842. Something is being done to allocate money in that way. The Green Book is the guidance issued by His Majesty's Treasury on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects. The five-case model is the required framework for considering the use of public resources. They must be used proportionately to the costs and risks involved, taking account of the context in which a decision is taken.

The five-case model involves a strategic dimension—what the case for change is, including the rationale for the intervention, the current situation, what is to be done and so forth. There is an economic dimension and a commercial dimension: can a realistic and credible commercial deal be struck, and who will manage which risks? There is a financial dimension and a management dimension—are there realistic and robust delivery demands, and can the proposal be delivered?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady led the charge in the 9.30 am debate, and she is doing the same at 4.30 pm—well done for both. I just want to back her up. Does she agree that the Green Book review has to have a view to each area of the United Kingdom, and must not simply point all roads to London and the south-east? We are all aware that, in other areas, UK policies and procedures that work well in London do not translate to rural local authorities, so we need a review of that. Is the hon. Lady saying exactly that?

Mrs Russell: I certainly agree.

We are pleased that the Treasury has initiated a review into the Green Book and we believe it is an opportunity to once and for all address a range of key issues that have undermined successive Governments' attempts to rebalance our regional economies. We must grasp this opportunity. We believe that the review must be done with ambition and a willingness to challenge underlying customs and practices. In particular, it needs to learn from the successes and failures—largely failures, I would say—of previous Green Book reviews, in particular the 2020 review.

The review recommended that the locational effects be understood via place-based analysis, with the benefits of any intervention valued specifically for the area, hence enabling any transformational impacts to be properly recognised. But once again, those recommendations do not appear to be generally reflected in practice, particularly in the application of Department-level appraisal guidance. It is vital that the current review addresses that. I believe that considering options in the context of place and properly valuing the transformational impacts of interventions is crucial if we are to realise the potential of the north-west and all our regions.

We need to simplify and speed up our Green Book processes. The guidance is enormously long and incredibly complex. It has multiple supplementary documents adding up to thousands and thousands of pages. Its changes, subtleties and intent get lost within the complexity, and practice remains unchanged. That very complexity leads to a desire for a metric that cuts through, and that probably explains why the business case thresholds remain so dominant. That is probably how the weighting towards expenditure in London and the south-east continues to predominate.

There is a consultancy industry around the Green Book, and that raises the cost of developing a successful business case. It also makes it very difficult for smaller local authorities to successfully put together a business case because the complexity of doing so is absolutely mind boggling. Frankly, the whole thing is just a bunch of piffle—we need to make this very simple and outcomes driven. We need to really slim it down and for it to be in a format that our local and devolved mayoral authorities, as we acquire one in Cheshire and Warrington, will be able to actually use in a practical way.

We need a stronger focus on place. We need to really look properly at where money has been spent historically and where we therefore need investment. We need to weight that specifically towards areas that have not received investment so that we can redress the imbalance in which transport spending in London vastly outweighs that in the rest of the country.

When I moved to the north of England, I was so shocked when I first used the railway network; I was in my 20s and the Pacer trains were still being used. Those trains were fashioned out of bus chassis and carried on being used for 37 years. They were given a maximum lifespan of 20 years; they were supposed to be a very basic short-term thing to start with, and the level of shoddiness was just astonishing. That is what we are always given in the north-west. We are given the cast-offs, and then we are expected to make do, and then what we are expected to make do with is expected to continue way beyond its intended lifespan. That has been going on now for as long as anyone can remember, and our economy then reflects that very sad point.

I know the Labour Government are focused on improving the situation. I would really like us to work extensively together on that. I know that the Green Book review will be carried out at pace, and that the Government have announced these plans. That cost-benefit analysis needs to be fundamentally changed so that we can shift capital expenditure out to our regions at pace. By that, I do not mean demanding, as the last Government did, that local areas produce a shovel-ready project at the drop of a hat, so that they could rush spending through

and make it look as if they were doing something for the north of England. I mean a fully considered set of proposals that enable regions to be fully developed through our devolved mayoral authorities, which I think are going to be a spectacular improvement for many areas of the north, and that will enable us to have proper economic development in the north of England.

Alistair Darling said:

“it isn’t just about pots of money or building the odd rail or extending a road. It’s about quality of life. It’s about making places that people want to go and live in, where they feel confident, they can live there, their children can grow up there, there’s opportunities there, and they don’t have to go somewhere else to get on, as it were. None of this is beyond us. Most other countries do it, and I don’t see why we shouldn’t either.”

That was quite some time ago, but it applies more than ever now.

4.44 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) for securing the debate.

The current design of the Green Book holds back communities such as mine in Loughborough, and by doing so holds back our country. Due to a flawed methodology, it overestimates the benefits of investment in London, and by doing so underestimates the benefits of investing elsewhere. It is one of the reasons why we have the most economically centralised nation in the OECD, and the reason why places that have been locked out of investment and growth are turning away from us in this place and away from democracy. I am so glad that the Chancellor is reviewing the Green Book at last to help spread investment across our nation, so that we can all reap the gains.

I represent a constituency in the east midlands—a region that has been left behind because of the decline of our great industries and chronic under-investment. The fall in industrial employment was one of the most rapid anywhere in Europe. Suddenly community centres were gone, jobs were lost and people’s sense of purpose and dignity disappeared. On top of that, and contributing to it, my region has the lowest transport investment in the country. We need to end this cycle of decline, because it is holding back our nation. We need to invest in communities such as mine to make the country a better place and to help create good jobs.

For too long, investment has been biased towards London and the south-east. Someone living in London gets £800 more infrastructure spending per year than the national average. That is because the cost-benefit analysis set out in the Green Book to evaluate projects has a hardwired London bias. First, the Green Book prices the benefits of projects in a way that benefits places with higher wages—namely, London. Secondly, it does not estimate the wider impact of investment on growth.

To take the first issue, hourly wages are higher in London, and the benefits of transport projects are calculated in terms of commuting time saved. That commuting time is priced in wages, so according to the current methodology, one hour saved is worth more in London than elsewhere. The projected benefits of investing in London become larger, more projects are built here and the logic because self-fulfilling.

To take the second issue, economies are dynamic—they respond to investment. Better transport allows businesses to attract more customers and workers. It gets economies growing and wages rising. But the Green Book does not account for those dynamic effects. Instead, it assumes that every single project is marginal to an area. It assumes that projects do not influence either growth or prices around the area in which they take place.

The review is taking place precisely because the Government know that investing in our regions outside London will make us all better off. Getting the basics right—more investment outside London, and basic transport infrastructure—will do a lot more for growth than another infrastructure project in London. That is the change we need.

To achieve all of that, we need to overcome the tyranny of the cost-benefit analysis. It has to be confronted and destroyed. This review must not be like reviews of the past. Warm words about regional inequalities are not enough. We need to change a flawed methodology and appreciate the dynamic benefits of investment.

For non-graduates in communities such as mine, it is far more difficult to find a good job than it is here in the capital. The jobs available to my constituents are less secure and lower paid, because we do not get the public investment we need. Our future has been held back by a flawed methodology and a system that does not work for my community, my region or indeed the country.

When people cannot see a good future, their anger grows. We can end that anger, and rebuild hope and a better future, by changing the Green Book so that investment takes place outside London—in my community and in communities across the nation. We can create good jobs, get wages rising and drive growth across the country.

4.49 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. For too long, my constituents in Warrington South have been told to wait their turn—for infrastructure, for investment and for opportunity. This Labour Government were elected to change the way this country works, and nowhere is that more urgently needed than in how we decide where and how public money is spent. The Green Book should enable fair and effective investment across the UK, but instead it has too often reinforced the very inequalities that we were elected to overcome.

My constituency sits between powerhouse cities such as Liverpool and Manchester, yet struggles to unlock the investment that we need to improve our transport links, further regenerate our town centre or bring truly affordable housing to our communities. Why? Because despite previous reforms, the rules governing public investment are still rigged in favour of places that already have higher land values. That means that towns such as Warrington are too often seen as low-return risks, rather than high-potential communities.

I welcome the Chancellor’s announcement of a full review of the Green Book under this Government, but let me say this clearly: this must not be a technocratic tweak; it must be a fundamental reform, where people, place and long-term potential are at the heart of investment decisions, unlocking the long-term, sustainable pipeline of investment needed in areas such as mine.

[Sarah Hall]

But this about more than Warrington South; reforming the Green Book is about building a fairer, stronger and more productive Britain. It is about enabling spending decisions that truly serve the whole country—lifting all our regions, reducing inequality, enabling better growth, wages, opportunity and health, and delivering fair public spending.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is talking about fairness, which is really important. The Institute for Public Policy Research said that, if the north was a country, it would be second bottom in the OECD league table in terms of public investment, just above Greece. Is that not a sign of how unfair public investment is in the UK?

Sarah Hall: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Things are deeply unfair as they stand. Delivering fair public spending in all our regions is urgently needed. We cannot grow our economy using a toolkit that still assumes that the south-east is the default. We need a Green Book that reflects the reality of 2025, not the London-centric logic of the past. This is our moment to rewrite the rules—[*Interruption.*]

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I will suspend the sitting because we have a Division. I encourage Members to come back as quickly as possible. If there are multiple votes, a maximum of 15 minutes will be allowed for the first vote, with 10 minutes for subsequent votes, but please try to get back earlier.

4.52 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.59 pm

On resuming—

Sarah Hall: We cannot grow our economy using a toolkit that still assumes that the south-east is the default. We need a Green Book that reflects the reality of 2025, not the London-centric logic of the past. This is our moment to rewrite the rules and deliver the growth, dignity and opportunity that the people of Warrington South and the people of the north have been denied for too long.

5 pm

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) on securing this important debate.

Investment in regions such as the north-east is not just about fairness; it is about unlocking economic growth and ensuring prosperity for future generations. Good infrastructure is the backbone of a strong economy. By investing wisely now, the Government can set themselves on the right course to achieve their growth mission, creating jobs, boosting businesses and putting more money in working people's pockets.

But let us be honest: too often, as we have heard today, the north has been short-changed. For years, grand promises have been made, only to be broken. Successive Conservative Governments have failed to deliver the infrastructure we need. Take Northern Powerhouse Rail, a transformative project that would have boosted capacity,

slashed journey times and strengthened connectivity between key cities in the north. It was scrapped, and where did the money go? Whether it went on fixing potholes in London or vanished in an accounting black hole, the result was the same.

Even promised Conservative investment in the north, such as dualling the A1, was built on money that never existed in the first place. The north was left behind again and again. Even when the last Government tried to find their way to the north-east, they could not decide whether it was Tyneside or Teesside; they were never quite sure. However, they would have struggled to navigate the mess they left us.

Members across the House will recognise that our roads have suffered years of under-investment. For five years, we heard talk of levelling up, but did the previous Government actually adjust the Green Book to prioritise communities such as Cramlington and Killingworth, where better transport links could change lives? No. Instead, they boasted about redirecting funds to Tunbridge Wells at the expense of the north.

That is why I really welcome this Government's commitment to responsible, properly funded investment. I am pleased that the Department for Transport continues to assess critical projects, such as the Moor Farm roundabout and the A19 junctions north of Newcastle. As it stands, that is the only north-east project in the road investment strategy 3 pipeline, and those are the last two A19 roundabouts not to have been upgraded. That project has the potential to unlock tremendous growth for the North of Tyne area.

Improvements in the road network there are crucial to unlocking growth in south-east Northumberland—a key growth corridor, both regionally and nationally, that includes the Northumberland Energy Park, which will house a £10 billion AI data centre—and in north-west North Tyneside. But we find ourselves in a constant catch-22, where we know of investment and commercial opportunities that are being missed. National Highways, a statutory consultee, objects to the plans due to the congestion, but then we do not have the investment to do anything about the congestion on the roads there.

If we are to meet the ambitions for growth and development, these upgrades will be absolutely critical. They will also strengthen industries such as wind turbine production and improve connectivity between manufacturing in Blythe and the River Tyne, further driving growth. These upgrades are also recognised in the local growth plan that the North East Mayor has put together, and they are key priorities for Northumberland County Council and North Tyneside Council. That investment can drive the development and job creation that the north-east urgently needs, unlocking its potential.

Unlike the last Government, this Government do not make unfunded promises, and I welcome the Treasury's commitment to seriously review the Green Book. In its current form, it bakes in regional inequality. When Ministers look at infrastructure investment as part of the spending review, I urge them to recognise the enormous potential in communities such as Cramlington and Killingworth. Currently, the Green Book holds back the north-east and prevents us from getting our fair share of investment. If we get this right, we can ensure that the north-east gets its chance and the right investment, which will drive growth for not just the region but the whole country.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I do not like setting time limits, but I am trying to get everybody in, so I will set an informal time limit of around four minutes.

5.4 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) for securing this timely debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) and for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody). I do not believe that there is any rule about repetition in this Chamber, but I will none the less do my best to express my points in a new and interesting way.

The Green Book is part of a colourful spectrum of current Government guidance and standards documents, which alongside the Aqua Book, the Magenta Book, the Orange Book and 19 other publications and pieces of supplementary guidance forms the basis of how the Treasury appraises policies, programmes and projects. On top of that, several Departments have issued their own interpretation of the guidance as it applies to them, thankfully avoiding extending the colourful metaphors any further.

That complexity—well over 1,000 pages of guidance—is at the root of the criticism of the small industry and almost mysticism around navigating the assessment process and of the poor outcomes to which it leads. Local authorities and other public bodies, which have been grappling with cuts to their non-statutory functions for more than a decade, are the ones putting forward investment cases, yet they often lack the capability and capacity to deal with that complexity, which has several unintended consequences.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton referred to the expensive consultant bonanza that that complexity has created. It also creates a world in which those organisations that do have the capacity, or indeed the consultancy budget, are more likely to succeed, not necessarily those areas that are most in need of investment.

Most importantly, that complexity has led to an over-reliance on benefit-to-cost ratio to drive decision making. Because salaries are higher in London and the south-east, and because high-value sectors tend to be located here, it will always be easier to demonstrate a higher return on investment than elsewhere in the country.

We have a few decades of evidence that says that that is exactly what happens. Over the period from 2008 to 2024, had Governments instead chosen to fund the greater south-east at the same level as the England-wide average for growth spending, they would have freed up over £100 billion. That money could have been used to invest in infrastructure and people, narrow inequalities and address specific regional needs.

The Johnson Government's review into the Green Book in 2020 was supposed to fix that. It said:

“Current appraisal practice risks undermining the Government's ambition to ‘level up’ poorer regions and to achieve other strategic objectives unless there is a step change improvement.”

It went on to make a series of recommendations to improve practice. However, it is widely recognised that little has actually changed. The Department for Transport guidance, for example, still includes value-for-money categories derived entirely from the BCR. Local authorities

tell me it is still common practice for response letters to open with sentences such as, “We note that the BCR for the proposed scheme is 1.8.” That belies the intent of the 2020 review.

To my knowledge, the terms of reference for the 2025 review have not been published, but when they are they must seek to address those points on culture. The review must end the arbitrary BCR thresholds across Government. It must simplify, increase public transparency on calculations and require publication of judgments on why conclusions have been drawn and decisions made.

Most importantly, we must not lose sight of what we are trying to achieve. It is imperative that we address regional inequality. Doing so is a moral, political and economic necessity. We have allowed some parts of the country to be left out, to the detriment of economic regeneration and social cohesion. We have overheated other parts of the country, leading to a housing crisis and even more pressure on the cost of living.

We should seize the opportunity to rebalance public spending, drive economic growth in areas that have suffered from under-investment, and use the strategic focus that comes with devolution to make investment go further. This is the moment—the opportunity—not just to talk about handing power and money to our regions, but to set the rules to ensure that that happens.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): That was an excellent example of a four-minute speech, with no repetition either—well done.

5.8 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) for leading this important debate.

I stand in Westminster Hall again to highlight the urgent need for a strategic, place-based approach to investment in our towns. Earlier this month, I led a debate on improving transport connectivity in the north-west, and this debate feeds quite nicely into the same narrative. As I mentioned in my last speech, growth goes where growth is, leaving towns such as ours struggling for investment. Without targeted intervention, deprivation becomes entrenched and opportunities are lost.

As chair of the Labour MPs group on local growth funding, alongside the Industrial Communities Alliance, I have worked closely with colleagues across the UK who represent former industrial communities—places that have been overlooked for too long. The Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity is therefore one I wholeheartedly support, but it must be backed by investment that reflects long-term, transformative impact.

Leigh and Atherton rank high on the indices of multiple deprivation, with lower life expectancy, higher unemployment and poor transport links. Our cities have deeply deprived neighbourhoods, but they also benefit from economic vitality, larger workforces and greater infrastructure investment. In contrast, smaller towns experience deprivation more acutely. Towns such as Leigh and Atherton suffer from long-term underinvestment, lower job diversity, reduced access to essential services and poor transport connectivity, making it harder to recover and attract new economic opportunities. That is why the Green Book review is so important; it must go beyond Treasury metrics and ensure that investment

[Jo Platt]

decisions align with the Government's regional growth goals. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work. We need a model that recognises the unique challenges and potential of different places and improves public health, revitalises high streets, enhances transport links and creates local jobs.

There is also a lack of clarity about the extent to which the Green Book should apply within devolved regions, especially when funding comes from the devolved administrations rather than from here in Westminster. The review offers a chance to both guide and empower devolved regions and local authorities in deciding where growth funds should be allocated and to ensure that investment reaches the areas that are most in need without adding another frustrating layer of bureaucracy.

I appreciate the Government's commitment to reassessing the Green Book. However, that should not be solely a Treasury initiative; it needs to be a cross-departmental effort that prioritises communities in the decision-making process. By doing that, we can create a fairer, more inclusive economy, ensuring that towns like Leigh and Atherton receive the opportunities that they deserve.

5.12 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) for bringing this crucial debate back to Westminster Hall and it is great to be here with north-west colleagues again. Reforming the Green Book—the Government's rule book for assessing public investment—might sound technical or dry, but for the people I represent in Bolton North East, it is profoundly consequential.

The Green Book is not just a document; it is a tool that shapes where investment goes, what gets prioritised and who gets left behind. Unless we change how those decisions are made, towns such as mine in Bolton will continue to be overlooked. Many hon. Members have spoken powerfully about how the Green Book favours London and the south-east, and they are right. At the heart of the problem are its outdated rules, which prioritise short-term, easily predicted returns. The rules do not ask about need or potential. They ask where we will see the biggest, fastest payback and, almost every time, the answer is the places that are already thriving—places with high wages, strong growth and well-connected transport. The result is a baked-in bias that overlooks the untapped potential of towns such as Bolton and says that our time, our housing, and our transport matter less, just because our postcode starts with a "BL" rather than a "W".

Bolton does not just need fair treatment from London, it needs it from Greater Manchester, too. Even when public investment comes to Greater Manchester, the same pattern repeats. Time and again the Green Book prioritises funding into Manchester, where the numbers look better, and leaves Bolton behind. On the ground, the consequences are obvious: fewer jobs, slower trains and many more missed opportunities. Look at the business case to extend the Metrolink to Bolton. It has strong local support, clear economic value and huge potential to drive business growth, unlock investment and boost productivity. However, under the Green Book,

the business case falls short because it does not account for induced demand. Infrastructure does not just respond to growth; it creates it. The Green Book neglects the homes that would be built, the businesses that would invest, and the people who would finally be connected to opportunity. That holds Bolton back, both in ambition and in growth.

Between 2007 and 2022, Manchester's economy more than doubled, while Bolton's grew 40% less. In the last five years alone, Manchester's economy grew by a third, but Bolton's by just 12%. That is not because we lack talent or ideas, but because the Green Book rewards places that are already well-resourced and overlooks Bolton's potential. Here is where the frustration sets in. We are told that the numbers do not add up, but I say that the system does not add up. We are being asked to play a game that we were never meant to win, judged by rules that we did not write. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how the Green Book can be reviewed so that towns such as mine feel the difference, and no longer feel left behind or overlooked.

First, I hope that we can adjust the appraisal formula, so that £1 of benefit in Bolton is not judged to be worth less than £1 in London or Manchester. Secondly, I hope we ensure that business cases reflect long-term impact—not just what can be delivered in year one, but what can be delivered over five, 10 or 20 years. Finally, I hope we can ensure that public investment allocated to Greater Manchester reaches towns such as Bolton.

Bolton does not lack ambition; it lacks backing. It does not lack ideas; it lacks investment. Public investment should open doors, but the Green Book, as it stands, is locking towns such as mine out of the future. It is about time that that changed.

5.15 pm

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell), for securing the debate.

As we have heard, the Green Book is the document that sets the framework for deciding where public investment goes. That means it is a subject that is not often spoken about—it is under-spoken about—but it is crucial, and it should be crucial to all our constituents.

We live in a society with grotesque place-based inequality. London enjoys productivity at 170% of the UK average, and that productivity gap has widened over time. The access that my constituents have to public transport is incomparable even with that in central Manchester, never mind the other planet that, frankly, we experience here in this city. Health outcomes and life expectancy are inextricably linked to having a thriving local economy and a place that people can be proud of.

Addressing this grotesque place-based inequality will require place-based investment. The status quo simply represents a game rigged against my constituents. It is baffling that there is a train station in my constituency that is unrivalled in terms of its capacity to connect the north and the midlands through genuine, 360° connectivity, but that we have struggled to secure the investment—frankly, Crewe station is dilapidated—to match the needs of projected future passenger growth. That is simply unsustainable, and it is not acceptable to my constituents and the many people who use that train station every day.

The status quo also forces talented people in my constituency and across the country who may wish to build a life for themselves in their own community to move to where the jobs and opportunities are, which is often not the place they would naturally choose. The place they would naturally choose is often the place where they grew up.

It does not have to be this way, but we have to change the rules if we are to see real change. I welcome the commitment to a review of the Green Book. The 2020 review made a number of recommendations, including placing greater emphasis on the strategic objectives of the Government of the day; deploying a place-based analysis to ensure that the needs of specific regions and sub-regions are taken into account; considering transformational interventions, which have the potential to bring significant long-term benefits to regions; and, crucially, as other colleagues have touched on, reducing the focus on cost-benefit ratio as a measure—a narrow focus that simply compounds regional inequalities. I would welcome the Minister's reflections on the implementation of the recommendations made under the previous Government; they certainly do not seem to have brought any benefit to my constituents or to have delivered that Government's so-called levelling-up agenda.

We have to stop treating towns across our country as if the people living in them are somehow fundamentally different from the people who live in metropolitan cities—as if they are less deserving of strong local economies and communities with access to quality jobs, public transport and amenities on their doorstep. A further review is welcome, but it must deliver real change.

5.19 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) for introducing this important debate.

I rise today to make the case for communities such as mine in Bolton West to be placed at the heart of the Green Book review. The Government's laser-like focus on growth is welcome, but I know from talking to businesses in my constituency, such as Woodall Nicholson in Westhoughton, Scan Computers in Horwich and Cohens Chemist in Lostock, that they face real obstacles to expansion and job creation. Some of that is a result of a lack of central Government co-ordination. The Green Book has consistently reinforced an economic model that prioritises investment in parts of the country that are already more prosperous, such as the south-east, rather than constituencies like mine.

Despite the expensive self-congratulation from the previous Government, levelling up did not amount to all that much in Bolton West. Indeed, under the last Government, Bolton West simply did not get a fair deal on funding. Time and time again, our towns lost out—a situation played out across the north. The result is that inequality has become entrenched and high streets across the north-west have become ghost towns, with young people having to leave their communities to find work, just as many of my peers had to when I was growing up.

The review is the perfect opportunity to fix this fatal, regressive flaw and ensure that investment decisions consider the wider benefits to our communities: job creation, skills development, better transport and improved

public services. Crucially, investment in Greater Manchester cannot just mean investment in Manchester city centre; it must mean investment in the towns and communities that make Manchester the innovative economic powerhouse it has become.

We are at the cutting edge of the cyber and digital industries in Greater Manchester, and Bolton is a key part of that, with a growth corridor that stretches out across to Wigan. Bolton and other surrounding towns, however, have yet to be given the tools to harness that immense opportunity. After years of the Conservatives failing to put their money where their mouths were, we now see more investment into connecting Bolton to these high-growth sectors through training, infrastructure and partnerships, which bring those opportunities to my constituents' doorsteps.

In my constituency, despite having a number of brilliant small and medium-sized enterprises, including the pioneering Blackedge brewery around the corner from my office in Horwich, I worry that many smaller firms still struggle to access the finance they need to grow. Too often, our local businesses struggle to secure the funding they need to expand, innovate and compete. We must ensure that businesses across the UK, including those in Bolton West, can access the capital they need to succeed.

If we are serious about driving economic growth, Government must invest and build the appropriate infrastructure. We must also work with the private sector to empower our entrepreneurs and local businesses, and not leave them battling a system that is stacked against them. The Green Book review must lead to real, tangible change that rebalances our economy and puts regions like ours at the heart of national prosperity. Never again should we live in a country where people's futures are too often determined by their postcodes.

5.23 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It really is a pleasure to have you in the Chair today, Mr Pritchard. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) for securing this important debate.

Our communities deserve responsible Government. That means a stable economy, support for green innovation and ensuring that no one is left behind. In its current form, the Green Book holds us all back. It is time for a smarter and fairer approach that invests in and for every community. The country needs to move forwards from the last Government's fairly reckless approach to public finances and backtracking on climate commitments that left our country decidedly weaker.

The Green Book's framework continues to entrench regional inequality. The reasons for that are clear and twofold. It relies too heavily on blunt and limited cost-benefit analyses, and it fails to adequately factor in broader socioeconomic benefits to proposed spending. Placing disproportionate weight on cost-benefit ratios based on existing economic activity means that proposed spending that would invest in communities where wages and prices are lower is disadvantaged, because the short-term economic benefits appear to be lower. The Green Book therefore directs funding to areas that are already enjoying high levels of economic activity—namely, London and the south-east.

[Lisa Smart]

Projects in areas such as my own in Greater Manchester, by contrast, can struggle to compete on paper, even when the real-world need for investment is clearly greater. By focusing disproportionately on direct economic output, the Green Book often misses the wider socioeconomic benefits of investing in less affluent regions. Those benefits include wellbeing, job creation, community cohesion and long-term sustainability. Without a national strategy to prioritise regional equity, too many good projects in the north fall through the cracks.

The Liberal Democrats believe that all communities deserve a fair shot, not only the ones that already happen to be thriving. We need a framework that looks beyond simple economics and recognises the human, social and environmental value of infrastructure investment. It is not just a philosophical argument; in practice, the current system leads to under-investment in projects that could transform struggling communities.

There is also an important environmental angle. The UK has legally committed to net zero emissions by 2050, but our appraisal framework has not caught up. The Green Book still applies discount rates that undervalue the long-term benefits of green investment, making it harder to justify climate-friendly projects with slower financial returns. If we want a green economy, we need green tools, and right now, the Green Book is steering us away from the very infrastructure—whether that is renewable energy, public transport or nature restoration—that will power our net zero future. We need to realign our economic models with our environmental goals.

The 2020 review, undertaken by the last Government, was a missed opportunity. While it nodded to levelling up and net zero, it failed to make the structural changes that are needed. The think-tank Centre for Cities has argued that the Green Book should empower local leaders to choose the best projects for their regions, rather than leaving the Treasury to pick between places. I am interested to hear from the Minister what the thinking of this Government and the Treasury is on that.

As it stands, the Green Book holds back the north. It stifles green investment and ignores the full value of infrastructure investment. My constituents are living with the consequences of that every day. There are many examples of transport infrastructure upgrades in Hazel Grove that would have a transformative effect on their lives. Direct rail links from areas such as Romiley and Marple to Stockport would save my constituents a lengthy and unnecessary trip via Piccadilly. Level access at stations in Woodley and Romiley would ensure that those with physical disabilities can get on the train, and a bus link to the Bredbury industrial estate would promote job growth and reduce the number of people driving to work.

In debating the Green Book, a framework for investment decisions, we should not forget that it is not just about numbers—it is about people's everyday lives. It is about their health, jobs and opportunities. We cannot let technical frameworks stop us from doing what is right. The Liberal Democrats are calling for bold reform: a system that promotes long-term prosperity, tackles inequality and delivers on our environmental commitments. We should all be working to build a country in which every region and community has a proper chance to thrive.

5.27 pm

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) on calling this debate, and the nine other speakers on speaking with great passion about the potential of their constituents and their constituencies, as well as about the role that the Green Book review—a rather obscure topic—can play in seeking to unlock that potential. I note that they spared the blushes of the Chancellor. When she announced the review, to unlock the potential of which those hon. Members are so hopeful, she announced further growth measures in the south and south-east of the country. That shows the difficulties there are in achieving some of the objectives. The hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) was kind enough to say that those objectives were the intention of the 2020 review: levelling up this country.

I am, perhaps, an ironic choice to respond in this debate. If I may stretch your tolerance, Mr Pritchard, I will mention some things about the area of the country that I represent, North Bedfordshire. To give hon. Members some sense of the disparities, let me enumerate some of the growth potential projects going on in my county: our housing growth rate is already two and a half times the national average; we have a proposal for a solar farm in my constituency, which will be seven times the size of the largest one in the country; we have the country's largest road project at Black Cat roundabout on the A1; we have a proposal for a railway line, which will be the third largest railway construction project in the country; and we have the doubling of the capacity of Luton airport to bring people into the country. We are also awaiting, when the Treasury finally pulls its finger out, a potential £10 billion investment for Europe's theme park from Universal Studios, which will then start a whole new range of investment potential in the south. The hon. Member for Congleton has the right person responding from the Opposition to answer some of her points—because frankly, that is too much for one area to take at one time.

The 2020 review mentions some points that have been repeated today, and the allegations were: systematic bias towards London and the south-east; the tyranny of benefit-cost ratios; overlooked unmonetised benefits; no allowance for transformation or other complex effects; and that guidance was responsible for strategic policy faults with no focus on where, or by whom, effects are felt. Those allegations have been echoed today, but I have to say to Members that the findings were that there were no systematic methodological biases in the process. However, there were significant problems in understanding of the Treasury's five case model, leading to significant poor practice in the application of the Green Book, and some changes have been made as a result.

As I thought Members would raise the issue of disparities in expenditure, and whether those changes had any effect, I went to table 9.4b of the "Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 2024", which enumerates the public expenditure on services per head in real pounds between regions. It splits that between current expenditure and capital expenditure, which is the focus of today's debate. I have to tell Members that, if we look at those statistics between the years 2018-19 to 2022-23, real capital per head went down by 3% in the east and by 5% in the south-east. Real capital per head did go up by 20% in London, but it also went up by 25% in both the north-west and the

north-east, by 24% in the west midlands and by 22% in east midlands. That is not to say that everything is done, but it is important to build on the progress that is being made. There is a lot more commonality here than we perhaps think.

Mrs Russell: Will the hon. Member give way?

Richard Fuller: I am afraid that I am very short on time. I would love to give way, but I know Mr Pritchard, and he will not give me any more time.

The view that focusing on the BCR as the answer is incorrect. East West Rail, which goes through my constituency, has a BCR of 0.3. It loses money, but the Treasury still wants to push ahead with it—that is another question for the Treasury. There is not sufficient quantification, so we do not understand what those benefits may be for people.

I have one final question for the Minister, as I have only a little time—I do have some other questions, which I will send to him. Can he look at the implementation of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012? Getting that done is really hard for small businesses and social enterprises in particular.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I am sure the Minister knows this, but I remind him that he has 10 minutes. He can leave a minute or so at the end for the mover of the motion, but it is entirely up to him.

5.33 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): It is a pleasure to have you overseeing us today, Mr Pritchard. Like everybody else, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) on securing the debate. I also thank all Members for setting out their views, which are in themselves important contributions to the Green Book review that His Majesty's Treasury is undertaking, and which is our focus this afternoon. Before I respond to the specific points raised, I will spell out what the Green Book is and what it is for.

The Green Book is a technical guidance on how to assess the costs and benefits, and the opportunities and risks, of different options to achieve Government objectives. It is not a decision-making algorithm or a test that must be passed. It is a framework for identifying and assessing different options. It is an important framework but, as lots of Members have rightly pointed out, it should be just one input into decision making. It is ultimately for Government, both national and regional—who are held to account by this place, in our case—to decide on policy objectives and spending choices. We must not evade our responsibilities behind technical frameworks.

This Government have listened to the concerns raised about that framework, such as concerns from our mayors, including my friend Steve Rotheram, and Members present today. That is exactly why the Chancellor announced a review in January: to ensure that all regions get a fair hearing when it comes to the allocation of public funds. The review is looking at potential problems with the guidance itself, as well as how that guidance is being applied by the Treasury, and how it is being applied by other Departments or public bodies. Since January, the Treasury has been in conversations with a whole range of organisations and individuals, regional and national, and this debate offers us the opportunity to hear the well-considered views and perspectives of Members. I assure

all Members that what they have said today will have been heard in the Treasury, and will influence that review as it is finalised ahead of the spending review in June.

The frustration that many people feel on this subject is entirely understandable. It is rooted ultimately not in technical questions about cost-benefit analyses, but in unacceptable outcomes, not least flatlining wages for the UK as a whole over the past decade and a half—and, for some areas, abandoned during the 1980s and sidelined during 2010s, for far, far longer.

The frustration is understandable, when low investment manages to combine being both the cause of this economic decline and a visible sign that it is taking place, not least when our roads are riddled with potholes, our trains—whether they are Pacers or not—are unreliable and our housing stock is deeply inadequate. Public, not to mention private, investment has simply been far too low for far too long. It has too often not reached every part of the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) set out and as any rail user in Wales—particularly in Swansea, since the electrification does not reach our great city—will say.

For this Government, growth in every part of the country is the goal, because Britain is scarred by deep regional inequalities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith) set out eloquently. Our shared growth is the goal, and higher investment is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for it. That is why we have ended the public investment boom-and-bust cycle, with £113 billion higher investment this Parliament, sustaining public investment at levels not seen since the 1970s. We will work side by side with our mayors, local leaders and devolved Governments to support all regions to achieve their potential, investing for the long term in the infrastructure, transport and housing needed to ensure that all parts of the UK benefit from growth.

We are supporting empowered local leadership with the publication of the English devolution Bill, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned, and we are moving away from the short-termist, competitive approach to local funding so that we can instead support local leaders to drive growth in their areas. That includes implementing this month the first integrated settlements for Greater Manchester and the West Midlands combined authorities, ahead of the roll-out to other mayoral areas.

We are investing in economic infrastructure across the country: we are committed to the trans-Pennine upgrade—the largest investment in northern rail for decades, with a further £415 million announced last week; we are backing West Yorkshire mass transit; and £4.8 billion for the strategic road network will deliver critical road schemes across the country. We are working with Doncaster council and the Mayor of South Yorkshire on their plans to reopen the south Yorkshire airport. There are places outside the north-west that will also classify themselves as being in the north and feel left out by this discussion, so I am getting some of them in too; we will set out further details of our plans for infrastructure across the whole UK in the 10-year infrastructure strategy, which is to be published in June.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) both rightly noted that we must care about a wider range of social factors, including deprivation, when making investment decisions. They are both right.

[Torsten Bell]

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised the issue of consultants—an issue that is emerging again in the review that is under way. Of course, while there are times when the use of consultants is value for money, more needs to be done to improve the capacity of local government in this area, and by national Government to ensure that their asks in that regard are proportionate and sensible.

Other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody), have made a powerful case for specific projects, particularly transport projects. I am sure that they will continue to bend the ears of each and every Department for Transport Minister, or, in some cases, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, where they are the appropriate decision maker, and I was glad to hear that everybody recognised that that should happen within important public spending constraints.

Andrew Cooper: Does the Minister agree that in recent years we have seen such a reduction in local government funding that local governments have lost the capacity to develop long-term transport projects and a pipeline of projects, so when the Department for Transport comes along and says, “We’ve got 20 million quid burning a hole in our pocket—what can you spend it on?” many authorities are not in a position to be able to do that? Is that something he thinks needs to be rectified as part of the comprehensive spending review in the 10-year transport plan?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is completely right about both points. We need to address that, partly by providing decent funding for local government. Members will have seen that being laid out over the last few months since the autumn Budget, but it needs to continue. We need to make sure that, instead of setting out short notice, competitive pots between areas, we empower local leaders to decide the right answers for their areas—and that is exactly the approach we are taking.

My hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) and for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) rightly noted that we need to consider the dynamic effects of investments—a point also powerfully made by Diane Coyle in recent years. I agree. There are questions about whether the implementation of the 2020 review has been followed through in that regard. I can reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough that the Department for Transport does use the same value for commuter time for all parts of the country. He may think it is not

enough or that it is too much, but it is the same pounds and pence in every part of the country for commuter times specifically.

I can reassure the hon. Member for Hazel Grove that the Green Book is not preventing this Government from delivering a step change in green investment. If the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) had had time, I am sure he would have said that we are investing too much in green projects—or at least his party’s leader would.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) noted that there are real dangers of overreliance on BCRs. He is right: decision-making should always be rooted in strategic objectives, or what he called, “What are we trying to achieve?” Closing regional gaps is exactly what our objective should be, and it is for this Government.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire, took his life in his hands by listing the investments happening in his part of the south—broadly defined—although he may have saved himself by pointing out that maybe it was excessive. I look forward to his letter.

As we have heard, investment matters, and it matters that all parts of this country get a fair hearing when it comes to infrastructure investment. This Government understand that, which is exactly why we are acting to support growth across all regions. Once again, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton on securing this debate.

5.41 pm

Mrs Russell: I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. I absolutely accept that, underlyingly, we need a framework for evaluating projects. I am immensely looking forward to the 10-year infrastructure strategy, which is a real opportunity for the Government to grasp and fundamentally change how we are investing in the north of England; that is encapsulated by the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall). We need to stop our communities being seen as low-return risks rather than high-potential communities. I want growth to stop going to where growth already is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) said; I want growth going where people are, in the north-west of England.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Green Book review.

5.42 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Wednesday 2 April 2025

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Combating Hatred against Muslims Fund

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State (Lord Khan of Burnley) has today made the following statement:

The Government have announced a new fund to provide a comprehensive service to monitor anti-Muslim hatred and support victims with applications opening on 7 April 2025.

Last year, police-recorded hate crime statistics found almost two in five of all religious hate crimes targeted Muslims, an increase of 13% in comparison to the year before.

With cases of anti-Muslim hatred on the rise, up-to-date and detailed information on incidents and drivers of this hatred will play a fundamental part in supporting the Government to combat Islamophobia and ensure Muslim communities feel safe and supported.

As well as monitoring and reporting incidents, the grant recipient will work to increase awareness of what hate crime is, encourage victims to come forward to report incidents, and facilitate support for victims of hate. They will work alongside a network of local and national partners and stakeholders including the Government, and faith and belief groups to deliver on this vital work.

The establishment of the fund will contribute to the Government's commitment to creating safer streets as part of the plan for change, with addressing the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate playing a crucial part in building safer, stronger and more cohesive communities for all.

The Government will work with communities to confront all kinds of racial and religious hatred to create a more tolerant and understanding society for everyone. The funding announced today is an important step in that mission.

The competition window will be open for six weeks from the 7 April 2025, closing on 18 May 2025 at 11.59 pm.

[HCWS574]

Petition

Wednesday 2 April 2025

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Kendal Post Office

The petition of residents of the constituency of Westmorland and Lonsdale,

Declares that Kendal Post Office should not be included in the list of 115 directly operated post offices at risk of closure; further notes Kendal Post Office's role as a vital community service at the heart of Kendal; further declares that it should remain in its current position or should only be moved to suitable premises.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government and Post Office to reconsider and guarantee the future of Kendal Post Office.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Tim Farron, Official Report, 25 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 748.]*

[P003046]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):

Thank you to the petitioners for raising concerns regarding the potential closure of Kendal Post Office. Given the Post Office chair's November 2024 announcement on the future of the Post Office, and subsequent media reports on branch closures, I understand local residents' concerns regarding the directly managed branch within their local area.

No decisions have been made regarding the future of any individual DMBs, including Kendal Post Office. We expect the Post Office to fully engage and consult with local communities, Citizens Advice, trade unions, and potential future partners to consider how to best meet the needs for Post Office services in a local area.

The Government protect the Post Office network by setting minimum access criteria to ensure that 99% of the UK population lives within three miles of a post office. The access criteria ensure that however the network changes, essential services remain within local reach of all citizens.

The Post Office has the freedom to make commercial decisions regarding the composition of its network, providing it fulfils the Government-set access criteria. Decisions around individual branches are a matter for the Post Office.

The Government will continue to work closely with the Post Office as it develops its transformation plan, while the Post Office continues to deliver on the 11,500 minimum branch requirements set by Government.

Written Correction

Wednesday 2 April 2025

Other Correction

NESIL CALISKAN

Planning and Infrastructure Bill

The following extract is from Second Reading of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill on 24 March 2025.

Joe Powell:...If we are serious about speeding up delivery, however, we must address the capacity crisis in planning departments, so it is welcome that the Government have committed to 300 new planners. What assessment has been made of the total need for planners across the country to get to the level of approvals we need to meet our housing targets? Can the planning fee reform in the

Bill support that recruitment through full cost recovery? We know that planning reform must be matched by the people and resources needed to make it work.

Nesil Caliskan: I thank my hon. Friend for his speech and for highlighting the gaps that exist in local government. I am sure he will recognise that, as the Local Government Association and the National Housing Federation have said, only 80% of local authorities have the capacity at the moment—in fact, it could be far less.

[*Official Report*, 24 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 718.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan):

Nesil Caliskan: I thank my hon. Friend for his speech and for highlighting the gaps that exist in local government. I am sure he will recognise that, as the Local Government Association and the National Housing Federation have said, **80% of local authorities are operating below full capacity** at the moment.

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