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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 3 April 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rugby League

1. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to help promote rugby league. [903594]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): Mr Speaker, I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work that rugby league clubs do across the country and to my own team, Wigan Warriors, who absolutely smashed Warrington Wolves in Las Vegas last month.

Mr Speaker: Are you still in the cup, by the way? [*Laughter.*]

Lisa Nandy: No comment. Rugby league clubs are at the heart of many communities, including my hon. Friend's in Rochdale. I was delighted that, in the last financial year, Sport England awarded over £30,000 to his constituency to support grassroots rugby league.

Paul Waugh: Rochdale Hornets have had a winning start to their league season—a spicy performance no doubt linked to our new partnership with Nando's restaurants. Mr Speaker, if you get a Rochdale Hornets season ticket, you can get 20% off in Rochdale Nando's. Ours is a true community club with the work off the pitch as important as the results on it. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should be promoting rugby league as not just great entertainment, but a brilliant way to help our nation's mental and physical health?

Lisa Nandy: I could not agree more. Rugby league clubs have the ability to reach where others cannot. This week, I was delighted to convene a roundtable with the Prime Minister to discuss the issues raised by the TV series "Adolescence", and in particular the impact of mental health and isolation on young men. We are working with rugby league clubs to see what more we can do to support young men's mental health in coalfield communities. I will be in a position to announce more to the House shortly.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) are both right to praise the important work that rugby league and indeed rugby union clubs do in their communities. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to better balance that with the Public Accounts Committee's cross-party criticism of how her Department is managing its covid loan book?

Lisa Nandy: This Labour Government will always protect value for taxpayers' money, and we are determined to grip the issues that we inherited. We have already recovered 97% of the repayments scheduled to the Department and we will respond shortly to the serious issues raised about the handling of covid loans in the Public Accounts Committee's report. I will then be in a position to update the House.

Mr Speaker: I am going to call the shadow Minister, but I am not sure whether he should declare an interest as a former apprentice of London Broncos.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I am happy to declare it. We lost a lot of games back then.

The return of the ashes is welcome news for rugby league, but while the next generation will be inspired by the series, the Labour Government have dropped the ball. Encouraging grassroots participation is key to the future of all sports and community clubs across the country, but Labour has cut the £57 million opening school facilities fund, £21 million of investment in multi-sports grassroots facilities, and ended the £25 million Lionesses futures fund that invested in facilities to support women and girls' sport. Arguably, the biggest ongoal for grassroots sport is the removal of planning protections for sports pitches across England. Why is it only the Conservatives who will protect grassroots clubs and the sports pitches that Labour wants to concrete over?

Lisa Nandy: The Conservatives cannot have it both ways. On the one hand, they want to see economic growth but, on the other hand, they are not prepared to take the necessary steps in order to achieve it. The truth is that the Government take grassroots sport incredibly seriously. I am really proud that Sport England is able to provide financial support to clubs across the country through the £160 million movement fund with support of up to £15,000 for grassroots sport organisations. I have to say to the shadow Minister that it takes some brass neck to stand at the Dispatch Box and lecture this Government in the light of the mess that his Government left to us.

Use of AI: Creative Industries

2. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What discussions she has had with representatives of the creative industries on the use of AI. [903596]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): Our creative industries lead the world. This is the top priority for them, and I am clear that if it matters to them, it matters to us, and we are determined to get it right. Since I was appointed, I have discussed this with representatives across music, publishing, film, TV, fashion and gaming. The Secretary of State for

Science, Innovation and Technology and I will shortly convene further roundtables to work with industry across artificial intelligence and the creative industries to strike the right balance and to grip this issue.

Sir John Whittingdale: The Secretary of State will be aware of suggestions that the Government may offer concessions around AI regulation in a deal to reduce US tariffs. Will she assure the creative and news media sectors that any negotiations will not include an offer to weaken our copyright framework, which would be opposed by creative industries both in the UK and in the US?

Lisa Nandy: Our creatives are second to none in the world, as I just said, and our copyright framework is an essential part of their success. We have been clear that if it does not work for creatives, it does not work for us and we will not do it. On negotiations with the United States, the Prime Minister has been clear that this is the start of the process, but we will always work in the national interest, and we are considering all steps as we look to the future.

Gambling Harms

3. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to reduce gambling harms. [903597]

11. **Naushabah Khan** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to reduce gambling harms. [903605]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): This Government have introduced a landmark statutory gambling levy, which will be charged to gambling operators to fund the research, prevention and treatment of gambling harm. The levy will come into effect next week and will raise around £100 million every year. We are also introducing stake limits in the coming weeks for online slot games, which were associated with a higher risk of harm for the first time. We know that gambling brings joy to many, but for those for whom it poses a problem, we are determined to offer all the support they need.

Joe Powell: I recently met the family of Luke, a devoted husband and father of two and a passionate Leicester City fan. Luke developed a gambling addiction in 2018, and although he self-excluded and repaid debts with his wife's support, he relapsed during the pandemic and tragically took his own life in 2021, with the inquest finding that his gambling disorder contributed to his death and that Betfair failed to act, and issuing a prevention of future deaths report to Betfair, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Gambling Commission. In the light of that tragic case and of calls today from more than 30 local government and council leaders for reform on betting shops, will the Secretary of State set out what action the Government are taking to restrict gambling advertising and to better protect people like Luke from gambling harms?

Lisa Nandy: May I thank my hon. Friend very much, and not just for raising that serious issue but for the sensitive way in which he has approached it? I extend my sincere condolences to Luke's family, who I believe are here today. I am so sorry to hear about their loss.

We believe, as a Government, that advertising should be socially responsible. The Minister for Gambling has set the gambling industry a clear task to further raise standards to ensure that levels of gambling advertising do not exacerbate harm, and we will continue to review the evidence, including the very tragic case that my hon. Friend talks about, to make sure we get that right.

Naushabah Khan: A report by the Gambling Commission released in November 2024 showed that the proportion of young people between the ages of 11 and 17 experiencing problem gambling increased by 114% in just one year. Will the Secretary of State please outline the steps her Department is taking to prevent young people from becoming victims of problem gambling?

Lisa Nandy: I share my hon. Friend's view that there is clear evidence of particular problems for young people, and I know she has been active on that in her constituency. The online slot stake limit will come into force on 9 April for the £5 limit and on 21 May for the £2 limit for younger adults. That is a key harm-reduction measure and targeted at those most at risk of harmful gambling.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Minister for Civil Society knows about the fantastic work that Gordon Moody does at its Dudley treatment centre to help people rebuild their lives following gambling-related harm. The Secretary of State may not know, however, that Gordon Moody faces having to suspend its residential treatment because of the Government's dithering over how to distribute funds from the gambling levy. Will she finally get a grip before other fantastic charities with expertise, like Gordon Moody, have to shut their doors?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. We are absolutely clear that we do not want any gaps in funding. The Minister for Civil Society and the Minister for Gambling, who sits in the other place, have met representatives of industry and we are working hard to make sure we resolve that.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that there is a world of difference between betting on sport, which employs many thousands and brings joy to millions, and gaming, which is all about pure chance and requires no skill or knowledge at all? Will she commit to treating the two very differently in regulation and increasing the difference between them in the tax system?

Lisa Nandy: I am not sure that I would share that blunt characterisation, but I very much recognise that we need to treat different forms of gambling differently. In particular, Members have raised concerns about the impact of reforms on land-based gambling. We are working hard to bring forward a package of measures this summer to support land-based gambling in our coastal towns and in places around the country where it brings enormous joy to people, and that includes bingo, which we all want to see protected and thriving.

Free-to-air Events

4. **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): If she will have discussions with Ofcom on extending the list of events designated as free to air. [903598]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): We believe the current list of events works well and strikes an appropriate balance between access and allowing sports to maximise broadcasting revenue. The Government have no plans to review the list at this time.

Seamus Logan: The BBC has secured an exclusive contract to broadcast live all of Scotland's men's international football matches in the run-up to the 2026 world cup. It is part of a wider deal agreed with the European governing body UEFA, which also includes matches for Northern Ireland and Wales. On Friday night, the BBC will provide extensive live coverage on several platforms of Scotland's women's team playing Germany in the nations league at Tannadice stadium in Dundee. I am sure the Minister will join me in wishing them well, but will she also consider taking steps to safeguard these events for free-to-air broadcasters, so that our nations can enjoy them without paying expensive subscriptions?

Stephanie Peacock: I join the hon. Member in wishing the team well. As I outlined in my first answer, the whole point of the regime is to strike a balance. We want sport to be accessible while recognising the importance that broadcasting revenue plays.

Supporting Musicians

5. **Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support musicians. [903599]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I want every child to have a chance to learn how to play a musical instrument or take part in music, and I want every musician to be able to make a living out of their career. I am working on better support for small venues across the UK and better remuneration for legacy artists, songwriters and session musicians.

Lewis Atkinson: Sunderland is a music city, and key to that are our great grassroots venues such as the Bunker, Independent and Pop Recs. But venues like those across the country operate on a financially precarious basis. Will the Minister update the House on how he will monitor the implementation of the voluntary levy on arena and stadium gigs, so that it can rapidly provide financial support to venues like those in my constituency?

Chris Bryant: The Bunker looks absolutely amazing. It is a not-for-profit organisation—apart from anything else—that gives young people and others an opportunity to learn how to play, perform and record. That is precisely the kind of venue we want to be able to support, which is why I am determined to get this voluntary levy over the line as soon as possible, so we can put millions of pounds into small venues. The last time I was in Sunderland was for P!nk at the Stadium of Light. Perhaps a helpful line from her is:

“What about all the plans that ended in disaster?”

I am determined that that is not going to be one of them.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): For the first time since 2003, no UK artist has made it into the world top 10 album or singles charts. That is partly down to effectively closing the EU to touring artists,

where followings now cannot get built and remuneration is not made for artists. The Minister promised to fix this. When will we get our artists back into Europe?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Member makes a good point—obviously, we need more songs from Runrig to get us back to the top of the charts.

To make a serious point, it is absolutely essential for new and emerging artists in particular that they have the opportunity to tour across the whole of Europe. I am determined to get this over the line. It is one of the things that we need to renegotiate with the European Union. We have a key meeting coming up in the next few weeks, and I hope we will be able to make some progress.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Music fans were left outraged last summer by rip-off prices for Oasis tickets. Many paid hundreds of pounds over resale value to access the concerts they wanted to get to as dedicated fans. Liberal Democrats are calling for an outright ban on resales above face value. At the moment, it seems the Government are “Half the World Away” from a solution. When the Ministers answer, “Whatever” they say, please promise me that the answer to whether we will have a ban above resale value is not “Definitely Maybe”?

Chris Bryant: As the hon. Member knows perfectly well, a consultation is ongoing and will close on 4 April. It was a manifesto commitment of ours to ensure that the secondary ticketing market works for everybody. If someone is not able to turn up to a gig for whatever reason—family reasons, a funeral or whatever—they should be able to sell the ticket on. We have asked specifically whether people should only be able to sell it at face value or face value plus 10%, 20% or 30%. I note his response to the consultation. I hope he has responded to all the other issues in the consultation as well.

Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games

6. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Glasgow 2026 Organising Company on the 2026 Commonwealth games. [903600]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): My Department is in regular contact with the organising company, and I was pleased to meet recently with both the CEO and the chair to discuss progress on delivery, at a meeting in my Department and when I was delighted to attend the King's baton relay launch at Buckingham Palace with His Majesty the King to mark 500 days until the games. The UK has been proud to host the Commonwealth games twice since 2014, and I am delighted that the UK Government have been able to get behind and support Glasgow 2026.

Martin Rhodes: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she agree that it is important that the games bring benefits to local communities? What discussions is she having with colleagues in the Scotland Office, the Scottish Government and Glasgow city council to ensure that local communities in Glasgow benefit from the games in 2026?

Stephanie Peacock: Of course, I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important that a successful games supports lasting benefits for the city and the region. As I said, I met with the CEO and chair two weeks ago. I was in Edinburgh to meet with my counterpart in the Scottish Government to discuss the games. My team is in close contact with the Scottish Government, the Scotland Office and other delivery partners to understand the games' ambitions for these wider benefits. The organising company has already confirmed that the games will include £6 million of investment in existing sporting venues, as well as 3,000 trained volunteers and a cultural programme.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The Minister will know the springboard that hosting international events is for the economy, grassroots participation and sporting facilities in the UK. Under the last Government, we secured and hosted a number of major events, with a pipeline of events. What steps are this Government taking to ensure we have that pipeline of major events in the future?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Member is right to pay tribute to the economic contribution and the huge inspiration of these events. We have a number of exciting events coming up, whether that be rugby or cricket, and the Government are hugely supportive of major events.

Promoting Coastal Britain

7. **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to promote coastal Britain to overseas visitors. [903601]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Britain, as everybody will have noted, is an island nation, so our coastline is a vital part of what defines us as a visitor destination. I am really glad that the "Starring GREAT Britain" campaign, which we launched earlier this year, features many coastal areas, but we need to ensure that people get an opportunity to see our amazing beaches, eat our amazing food and enjoy the perfectly sensible summer weather that we have.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: The tourism industry in East Suffolk is worth an estimated £693 million and accounts for over 15% of jobs locally, but we have suffered post pandemic. Estimates suggest that we are down 2 million on pre-pandemic numbers, which I imagine is just the tip of the iceberg. Can the Minister share with me what he is doing to support coastal tourism in places such as Southwold, Aldeburgh and Felixstowe?

Chris Bryant: I am very keen to integrate the creative industries far better into our visitor economy. My hon. Friend will know in her own patch that it is not just the Aldeburgh festival, which has been going since 1948; she has Maggi Hambling living down the road in Saxmundham, and there is a lively artistic community. We need to build that far more into our coastal offer around the country. I want us to get to 50 million international visitors to the UK by 2030. We will only be able to do that if more of them do not just visit London.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In a debate in Westminster Hall two weeks ago, the Minister was quick to respond on the need to ensure that the tourism

industry across the whole of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can take advantage. He will know the advantages of tourism in Strangford; he will know Strangford lough, the Ards peninsula and the Irish sea. The shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), knows it very well—he did not do wild swimming on the day he was over, but he wished he could have. There are many things to attract tourism wherever we are. Will the Minister ensure that discussions to improve coastal tourism for the United Kingdom include Northern Ireland? We can do it better together.

Chris Bryant: It is a bit shameful to accuse the poor shadow Minister of wimping out on cold water swimming—I am sure he would have done it if it had been available. I am very keen that we have a national tourism strategy for the whole country by the end of this year, and I am working with the Visitor Economy Advisory Council to deliver that. That has to address the problems that many of our coastal areas have faced, including in Northern Ireland. Again, I make the point that the creative industries in Northern Ireland are vital to the tourism economy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): As has been said, tourism is a huge contributor to the UK economy, and I was delighted to take part in English Tourism Week, as many Members will have done. The Government have committed to 50 million visits by 2030, and Conservative Members welcome that ambition. I was surprised to hear from the tourism sector that there is great concern about a purported cut to the VisitBritain budget. Will the Minister categorically tell the House whether there will be a cut to the VisitBritain budget, and if so, will he transparently tell the House how much that budget will be cut by?

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Gentleman is talking about the GREAT campaign budget, and it is certainly true that finances have been tough. We are looking at precisely what money we may be able to source into that fund for the next year. I am very serious about wanting to develop a UK-wide visitor economy strategy. I think it might be valuable if the hon. Gentleman and I sat down at some point and he gave me some of the ideas that are rocking around in his brain, and we will see whether any of those can be incorporated into our plan.

Tourism Outside Cities

8. **David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con):** What steps she is taking to help increase tourism outside cities. [903602]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Not only are we an island economy, but I would argue that our towns and villages are just as important for our visitor economy as our great cities. I recently spent a pleasant weekend in Chipping Campden, and many international visitors were wandering up and down Broadway. The right hon. Gentleman has some extraordinarily beautiful villages in his constituency, which I expect he is about to tell us about.

David Davis: Since we are swapping villages, I was in Pocklington last week, at the site of what Professor Alice Roberts described as the most important iron age archaeological site in Britain: the Pocklington chariot burial. It is a magnificent thing, and the centre of a huge area of iron age archaeology. I was there to meet dedicated local volunteers who are creating a new museum at Burnby Hall based on that archaeology, which will bring tourists into the countryside. What can the Government do to help people like that develop ideas such as this?

Chris Bryant: Not every village in Britain suffers the problems of Midsomer, but I know of the work that people are trying to do in Pocklington. The right hon. Gentleman refers to Professor Alice Roberts and her wonderful work in this area, and everything I have seen about the hoard in Pocklington is absolutely amazing. I slightly expected that the right hon. Gentleman would turn up wearing some of the bling—

David Davis: Or the armour.

Chris Bryant: Or some of the armour, because there was a time when it was fine for a man to wear a brooch; perhaps that time will come again. I pay tribute to Burnby Hall gardens and museum, and it would be amazing if we were able to get it back into full use. The gardens are amazing—apparently there are 80 different kinds of wild water lily—but it would be good if we could get the whole museum going, and I pay tribute to the volunteers who are trying to make that happen.

National Insurance: Creative Industries

9. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of the planned increase in employer national insurance contributions on creative industries. [903603]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): As the right hon. Gentleman knows, a large proportion of the creative industries are constituted as small and medium-sized enterprises, and the vast majority of those are protected from the increase in national insurance contributions. Importantly, as many of them have said to me, they fully understand the need for greater expenditure on our public services, and that has to be matched by finding the money from somewhere.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I have always been particularly impressed by your brooch, Mr Speaker. Nevertheless, those increases are damaging for any enterprise, but we could make it up to them by restoring Baroness Kidron's amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill. Will the Minister do that?

Chris Bryant: No, we have just taken it out of the Bill for the precise reason that we do not think it would make the blindest bit of difference to the financial support provided to creative industries today. That is why we are not supporting the amendment.

Grassroots Sports

10. **Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support the development of grassroots football in Scotland. [903604]

13. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to support grassroots sports venues. [903607]

15. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What steps is she taking to allocate funding to local grassroots sports facilities in the north of England. [903609]

16. **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): What steps is she taking to support grassroots sports venues. [903610]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): The Government are clear that people should have access to sport and physical activity when they want, no matter who they are and where they are in the country. That is why we recently announced a further £100 million investment across the UK for the coming year, to ensure better access to high-quality facilities.

Melanie Ward: The Kirkcaldy community football partnership does an amazing job providing a home for 18 teams, and bringing young people into our national game, including from some of the most deprived parts of our town. Facilities at Denfield Park are too often unusable due to water logging on the grass pitch, and it badly needs a new synthetic pitch. It is seeking funding for that as part of the Labour Government's investment in grassroots sport in Scotland. I will meet the Scottish Football Association about that next week, so will the Minister support our funding bid, and will she join me in encouraging the Secretary of State to accept my invitation to visit our pitch in Kirkcaldy and see the need for herself?

Stephanie Peacock: I absolutely will, and the Secretary of State says that she will too; we were both in Scotland a few weeks ago. Will my hon. Friend pass on my thanks to the volunteers at the Kirkcaldy community football partnership for their valuable work? I recognise the issues that she puts forward. We will be investing £8.6 million through our multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, through the Scottish Football Association, which I am pleased she will be meeting soon.

Mr Mohindra: Certain sports often remain inaccessible to women and girls early on, making it harder for them to join later. Will the Minister confirm how her Department is supporting clubs like Chess Valley rugby football club, in my constituency of South West Hertfordshire, that promote women's participation at all levels?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I attended the launch of the women's innovation hub at Loughborough University a few weeks ago, and I convened the women in sport taskforce, along with Karen Carney. We are clear that we want to support women's sport at every level.

Anna Dixon: My constituency of Shipley is not short of sporting talent. Baildon Fisical Sports Coaching Academy's under-eights team has just won the national junior premier league final for the second consecutive season. I pay tribute to the Bumble Bees Barbarians, the first mixed-ability contact rugby union team in England,

which plays at the Bradford and Bingley sports club. Following the Government's welcome announcement of a £100 million investment in grassroots sports, will the Minister assure me that inclusive grassroots sport will receive funding to continue that great work?

Stephanie Peacock: I congratulate the teams that my hon. Friend mentions. Grassroots clubs do such an important job in nurturing sporting talent. Brilliant sports groups across the country will receive funding for facilities. We will be targeting the most deprived areas, supporting under-represented groups and providing the multi-sport benefit through the Football Foundation, which will deliver that through its local football facilities plans, which are being refreshed to reflect changes including the growth in the women's game and need in other sports.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Rugby union is sadly a sport on its knees in this country, propped up solely by the six nations, with top-flight clubs going to the wall despite a ringfenced premiership cartel. Mismanagement of the game has become endemic. The Rugby Football Union sustained losses of £38 million last year, yet still found the cash to provide a total remuneration package of £1.1 million to Bill Sweeney, who has presided over the current shambles. Although he survived a vote of no confidence at a special general meeting of the RFU at Twickenham last week, forced by the Whole Game Union, the RFU is desperately trying to restore credibility with the grassroots game. What oversight are the Government providing of the management of rugby union in England, the implementation of the forthcoming modernisation programme and the six-point plan for community rugby? What support can they give to beleaguered grassroots clubs that are the lifeblood of the game and create our future internationals—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Players like George Furbank, who started his career at Huntingdon Stags?

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, Mr Obese-Jecty, there are other questions.

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Member raises some important points. We had a debate in Westminster Hall on this issue very recently. Of course we want rugby to sort the issues out for itself, but we appreciate the seriousness of the issues, and the Secretary of State and I meet regularly with its representatives.

Video Game Industry

12. **Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of Government initiatives in supporting the long-term growth of the video game industry. [903606]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): We are aware of the importance of the video games sector to the UK as a whole, and the brilliance of Warrington in leading the world, not just in video games but in nuclear and in the sheer number of roundabouts to which my hon. Friend's constituency

is home. We are committed to working with her and others to ensure that we continue to support the video games sector for many years to come.

Charlotte Nichols: The Secretary of State will know that we also produce a fifth of the world's gin in Warrington. The UK video games industry is a huge success story, supporting 73,000 jobs, including in Warrington at companies like 10:10, Mindware, Freesphere Entertainment and Second Impact Games, and contributing more to UK GVA than the film and music industries combined. To strengthen UK gaming's global competitiveness, particularly in the context of the announcements from the US last night, what consideration has the Secretary of State given to enhancing the video games expenditure credit?

Lisa Nandy: The video games expenditure credit has been incredibly important for us, and we were pleased to announce £5.5 million for the UK games fund next year. As somebody who has probably put in more hours on "Animal Crossing" than any other Member of the House, I am aware of the joy that video games bring to many people in this country. The Prime Minister is working to support industries that have been affected by recent announcements from the United States, but we are ensuring the video games are at the heart of that, including by putting them at the heart of a new creative industries sector plan, which will be published in the coming months.

Topical Questions

T1. [903612] **Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): This Labour Government are wasting no time in delivering for communities across the country. Since we last met, I have been delighted to announce £100 million for grassroots sports facilities and to launch the 2027 Tour de France in Edinburgh with the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock). The Football Governance Bill has completed all its stages in the other place. Tomorrow, our consultation on ticket touts closes, and our message is clear: time is up. We promised the biggest-ever conversation with young people, and I am delighted to tell the House that we have already surpassed 11,000 responses to our national youth strategy consultation. I know the whole House will want to join me and my hon. Friends next month in marking the 80th anniversary of VE Day to honour all those who fought so hard for the freedoms that we enjoy.

Sarah Smith: Access to arts and culture can help to break down barriers to opportunity in areas such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden. Sadly, our much-loved Oswaldtwistle civic theatre closed in 2023 and had to be placed on the theatres at risk register. I welcome the recent grants awarded by the Theatres Trust and Hyndburn borough council, but will the Minister meet me to see how the Government could help to secure the future of this much-loved and important community asset?

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend. I know that a lot of work has gone in to try

to get that back up, to get actors back on the stage and to get audiences back in. I hope that we can arrange a meeting as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): May I congratulate Newcastle United on its amazing win in the Carabao cup final? I share the Secretary of State's remarks about the 80th anniversary of VE Day, and we all hope that the ceremonies around the country will be enjoyed by everybody.

In just three days, national insurance bills will fall on the doormats of charities across the country, and they will have to find another £1.4 billion to pay for Labour's jobs tax. While it is right that the Government have provided compensation to the police, local authorities and so on, why have charities, which provide support to those who are the most vulnerable, been left out?

Lisa Nandy: We are providing support to charities. The right hon. Gentleman will know that we have more than doubled the employment allowance to protect the smallest charities and businesses. More than half of those with national insurance contribution liabilities will either be better off or see no change next year. He will also know that there is a reason why we have had to make difficult choices. His party had 14 years in power; it crashed the economy and left charities in an appalling position, with not just the economic mess we find ourselves in, but far more people to support. That is why we are launching the civil society covenant to reset our relationship with charities and put them at the heart of national life where they belong.

Stuart Andrew: We supported charities through the pandemic with millions and millions of pounds and with the £100 million cost of living fund. Month after month, we have urged the Secretary of State to tell the Chancellor that this policy is wrong and will do irreversible harm. We now hear that one charity a day is closing because of Government decisions. How many will have to close before the Government acknowledge that they have made a terrible mistake?

Lisa Nandy: I am afraid that that is an absolute rewriting of history. I am old enough to remember the Conservatives' charities Minister telling charities on his first day in the job that they ought to "stick to their knitting". This Government are determined to treat charities with the respect that they are owed, which is why we have established the civil society covenant, why the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South, meets with the charities sector regularly and why we have taken action to protect the smallest charities.

T3. [903614] **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Cultural spaces across our nation that rely on funding through Arts Council England, such as The Ladder in my constituency, have been dismayed to see a second delay to the new cycle of national portfolio investment. As that investment is fundamental to the income stream and stability of cultural activities, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of making a stable, long-term commitment to funding prospective national portfolio organisations, which have now been affected by two years of delays?

Chris Bryant: I understand the disappointment for some people who want to get into the package, as it were. My hon. Friend has three organisations in his constituency that will receive in the region of £500,000 this year under the national portfolio system. The problem we have is that we are in the middle of a spending review that will affect the next four years and, on top of that, we are doing a review of Arts Council England. We need to have profound change in the Arts Council so that it really works for arts organisations up and down the country, and that is what we will do.

T6. [903618] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Market Drayton in my constituency has really poor grassroots sports facilities for a town that serves more than 12,500 people. Shropshire's Conservatives will not allocate any of the community infrastructure levy money from the significant recent development there to improving those facilities, so will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can get proper funding in, in order to provide Market Drayton—Shropshire's third largest town—with the sports facilities it deserves?

Lisa Nandy: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Lady is not receiving the support that she needs, but we are absolutely determined to provide it to her, and to any other Member of this House who is a champion of grassroots sports facilities. I know that sites in Market Drayton have been awarded grants totalling over £6,000 through the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, but we are very aware that there are huge numbers of people—particularly young people—who want to get involved in sports, and we will work with the hon. Lady to make that a reality.

T4. [903616] **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Grassroots football clubs such as Bletchley Scot FC are inspiring the next generation of girls and boys to take up the beautiful game. When I visited them last month, they told me that securing funding for modern sports facilities was their top priority, but that engaging with the Football Association was incredibly challenging. Can the Minister set out what steps she is taking to work with the FA at the local and national levels?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Our investment through the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme is delivered through the Football Foundation in England, which engages with local Football Association and community stakeholders to identify needs in each area. I encourage clubs such as Bletchley Scot FC to approach the Football Foundation directly to explore potential funding opportunities, and I am very happy to set up a meeting for my hon. Friend.

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

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): As the Select Committee looks into school and community sports, it has learned that the previous Government's opening school facilities fund helped deliver sport to 300,000 people outside of school hours, seeing more girls, more disadvantaged pupils and more of those with special educational needs taking part. That fund ended on Monday, and I have already heard from two schools in my constituency that they will be scaling

back their community provision. The Government talk a lot about the importance of communities and supporting young people, but this flies in the face of that, does it not?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue, and I will certainly look into the specific fund she has mentioned. The Education Secretary and I are committed to putting sport back at the heart of the curriculum and our classrooms. We will be in a position to announce more about that shortly, but we share the hon. Lady's vision of schools that are the hubs of their communities and are open longer hours to enable them to provide those opportunities for young people.

T5. [903617] **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): My constituent Paul Dudge was iconically photographed rescuing a badly burned survivor of the 7/7 bombings. What thanks did Paul get? His phone was hacked by a newspaper looking for stories. Twelve years on from the Leveson inquiry, most national papers are still in the Independent Press Standards Organisation, a complaints handler that they control and that has never investigated or fined a single newspaper in its history. Will the Secretary of State consult on introducing a truly independent press regulator for all national papers, so that we can make sure there are no more victims of phone hacking and press intrusion?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very serious issue. He will know that since the Leveson inquiry concluded, there have been dramatic changes in the media landscape, meaning that we need to take a much wider view of how to protect a free, fair and self-regulated press and to protect the public. Nevertheless, we recognise that there are long-standing issues with the protection of members of the public such as my hon. Friend's constituent, who the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism knows well. I recently met families from the campaign group Hacked Off and listened to their stories. It was a harrowing meeting, and we are committed to working with them to resolve these issues.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I should properly declare an interest as a former member of the British Actors' Equity Association. Mr Speaker, if I enter your house and steal the draft manuscript of your memoirs, I am guilty of a crime. Artists, writers, musicians and other creatives are all having their work stolen as we speak, and you and I have received letters about this issue. We do not have the time to wait; what are the Government going to do to protect creatives and their work?

Chris Bryant: Copyright law stands firmly behind the creative industries today, and will in the future. We will do absolutely nothing to undermine the fact that this country is one of the few great countries in the world that is able to boast of itself as a content superpower, and anything we do in relation to artificial intelligence and copyright will proceed only if we can make sure that the creative industries have more control and more remuneration at the end of that process, rather than less.

T7. [903619] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): I very much welcome the national youth survey, which was launched last month and was mentioned by the Secretary

of State. It is great to see a Government who are not only listening to young people, but are determined to put young voices at the heart of policymaking. In Dartford, we have a rapidly growing youth population, with the number of under-15s having grown by 30% at the last census. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital that policies that affect young people are produced with the people who are affected by them, and will she consider attending my youth engagement event in Dartford later this month?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for that kind invitation. The Minister with responsibility for young people, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), would be delighted to go, if she can make that work with her existing commitments. I share my hon. Friend's view that we, as a Government, are not just interested in young people having a voice; we also want them to have real power to be in the driving seat of their own lives. That is why we have invited young people to co-produce the national youth strategy with us, and I am delighted that we have already made good on our promise of the biggest conversation with this generation that has ever taken place.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Project Spire

1. **Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): What recent discussions the Church Commissioners have had with the Charity Commission on Project Spire. [903583]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): The Church Commissioners are engaged in informal discussions with the Charity Commission to consider what regulatory approvals may be required to progress this project.

Katie Lam: The funds that have been committed to projects via the Church of England's reparations project are in fact for the upkeep of parish churches and the provision of salaries for the clergy. I know that the Second Church Estates Commissioner is dedicated to our parish churches and would not support anything unlawful, so will the hon. Lady please provide the grounds on which the Church Commissioners are authorised to allocate this money to aims for which it was not intended? What details can she share of the conversations that she has had with the Charity Commission to determine whether they can do this, as it seems to be unlawful?

Marsha De Cordova: The fund for healing, repair and justice is the Church Commissioners' response to its legacy links to the chattel enslavement of Africans. The fund will be sourced from the endowment managed by the Church Commissioners, and the board will always act in accordance with the charity's legal powers. Once discussions with the Charity Commission are completed, the board will take a formal decision on those next steps. The hon. Member will obviously agree that I cannot prejudge the outcome of those discussions.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Political Donation Rules

2. **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): What assessment the Committee has made of the effectiveness of the Electoral Commission's powers to enforce compliance with political donation rules. [903584]

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam): There are high levels of compliance with the UK's political donation laws. The Electoral Commission currently has a range of powers to investigate and sanction suspected breaches of the law, but it has recommended making its enforcement powers more effective. It has also recommended increasing the maximum fine for breaches of the law from £20,000 to £500,000, which would ensure that the prospect of a fine acts as a more proportionate and credible deterrent.

Phil Brickell: The Electoral Commission has the power to issue fines only up to the value of £20,000, so I welcome the right hon. and learned Member's comments. I take it that he agrees with the report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which found that this threshold needs to be dramatically increased in order to safeguard our democracy and act as a deterrent against bad faith actors.

Sir Jeremy Wright: Having been a member of that Committee, I do agree with its recommendations—although it did not make them when I was a member. As I have said, the Electoral Commission, for which I speak today, has made clear its views. I hope that he will make clear his views to Ministers because, in the end, this requires legislative change that only the Government can make.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What progress has been made on establishing individual taskforces for each region of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to ensure that political donations are properly disclosed, to provide proper transparency to the general public?

Sir Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman will know that the situation in Northern Ireland is slightly different from that in the rest of the UK. Across the UK, the Electoral Commission's view is that there should be transparency. That is the obligation of political parties, and it is the job of the Electoral Commission to make sure it does what it can to support that transparency across the system.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Christians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

3. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What assessment the Church of England has made of the potential impact of the US Government's middle east policies on Christian inhabitants in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [903585]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): The situation facing all Palestinian communities in Israeli-occupied Gaza and the west bank is devastating, with tens of thousands killed and almost 2 million displaced. The Anglican communion continues to support people in the region, providing healthcare and education alongside pastoral work at St George's cathedral in Jerusalem, in partnership with other Churches.

Mr Dhesi: In Gaza, mass atrocities continue and civilians, including children, are being killed. In recent days, the Israeli Defence Minister has threatened to annex parts of Gaza, and we have already seen the illegal annexation of large parts of the west bank, with Palestinian families being forced from their homes to make way for Israeli settlers. Can my hon. Friend tell us what the Church Commissioners are doing to help promote respect for international law and bring an end to this horror?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend for his important and timely question. The ongoing de facto annexation of parts of the west bank and threats to annex parts of Gaza are incredibly disturbing. In February, the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem issued a joint statement against the threat of mass displacement, and I agree with them that there can be no justification for uprooting people who are already suffering beyond all measure. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to outline that international law must be upheld at all times, and there are significant concerns about what is taking place in Israel at the moment.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The dean of Salisbury cathedral visited me recently to tell me about a visit he had made to the Nassar family farm—the Tent of Nations—just south of Bethlehem, near the Palestinian village of Nahallin. He expressed grave concerns about the situation the family finds itself in. What conversations has the hon. Lady had with the Foreign Secretary about the steps the Government are taking to defend the rights of Palestinians in the west bank, and can she confirm that the Government will raise the abuses of their rights with the Israeli Government?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question on this important issue. I continue to engage with the Foreign Secretary's team and office on this issue, and I will write to the Government yet again, to ensure that they are defending and protecting the rights of all Palestinians. I think we can all agree that we need to see an end to the violence and the killing of innocent people.

Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

4. **Mary Glendon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): Whether she has had recent discussions with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on proposals to extend the listed places of worship grant scheme after 2026. [903586]

7. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Whether she has had recent discussions with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the extension of the listed places of worship grant scheme. [903590]

Marsha De Cordova: I recently met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to discuss the importance of the scheme's future and the impact that any changes will have.

Mary Glindon: As well as facing uncertainty about the future of the grant, churches in my constituency are finding it hard to cope with the rise in revenue costs, which include the cost of church insurance. Can my hon. Friend tell us what is being done to support the financial position of English parish churches more generally?

Marsha De Cordova: There is no question but that churches are facing many challenges in this space. The in-year increases in the running costs for parishes, such as the national insurance increases, increases in energy costs and, obviously, the changes to the listed places of worship grant scheme, have presented challenges, but I can tell my hon. Friend that the Church Commissioners distributed £1.2 billion to support parishes between 2023 and 2025.

Gregory Stafford: The Government's decision to extend the listed places of worship grant scheme for only 12 months, with a reduced budget and a new cap, has caused significant unease in my constituency and across the wider diocese. The rector of Farnham has expressed his concern over a nearby project that faces a massive £750,000 shortfall thanks to Labour's amendments. Will the hon. Lady join me in urging the Government to continue, at the very least, the previous support for projects that have already received planning permission, if not reinstate the scheme as a whole?

Marsha De Cordova: As I have outlined, I raised my concerns when I met the Secretary of State to discuss the impact on the many churches that will be affected, particularly those that already have projects and works ongoing. I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on the potential funding opportunities that may be available to churches in Farnham.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Belfry in York has been left literally in ruins as a result of now having a £1.5 million shortfall. Contracts have been signed and the project needs support. Will my hon. Friend arrange a meeting for churches that are midway through their project, with her and the Secretary of State, so that we can clear up this mess?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend, who has raised this issue on many occasions. Yes, I will seek to arrange a roundtable meeting with the churches impacted. I hope we can also ensure that a Minister is present at that meeting, to hear at first hand about the impact of the cap and the potential future of the scheme.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner for her answers on this topic, but could she outline what support she can offer churches across Guildford that are facing significant shortfalls due to the £25,000 cap? One such church had been expecting to recover VAT of about £750,000 on its £4 million project, but it now faces a major funding shortfall. Although churches can claim for work that

has already been invoiced, that does not address the major concern for those that have not yet completed their work.

Marsha De Cordova: Ever since I took on this role, this issue has come up time and again. I commit to writing to the hon. Member on this, having looked into what other support is available to her. If she could also write to me and set out the churches that are impacted, she can also be included in any such a meeting.

RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent, representing the Restoration and Renewal Client Board, was asked—

Restoration and Renewal Programme

5. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress the client board has made on consulting hon. Members on the restoration and renewal programme. [903587]

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): The restoration and renewal programme has engaged extensively with Members of both Houses. In this House, in the last two years alone there have been about 500 interactions with MPs—for example, through briefings, engagement stands, tours and events. Given the turnover of MPs at the general election, in January one of our Deputy Speakers, the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), wrote to Members to encourage further one-to-one meetings.

Jayne Kirkham: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. As a new Member, I was very lucky to have a restoration and renewal tour. My question was more about how many MPs and Lords, since the change in Government, have been able to have a look round and have some information about the plans going ahead, and is there any idea of the timeframe?

Nick Smith: So far there have been about 150 interactions with MPs in this Parliament, including 85 with new Members elected in 2024. Information about the three restoration and renewal options are expected to be published later this year, allowing Members to decide on the preferred way forward. We want to help Members understand the proposals prior to this important decision point. As the programme moves into the next phase and we get closer to the start of the main works, we must ramp up these interactions so that Members are informed as best as possible.

Restoration and Renewal: UK-wide Contracting

6. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps the client board is taking to ensure that contractors from all parts of the UK are used in the restoration of the Palace of Westminster. [903589]

Nick Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The restoration and renewal programme is one of the UK's biggest restoration projects. For example,

it must deliver for small and medium-sized enterprises by creating apprenticeships, and skills and training opportunities all over the country. The original Act—the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019—stresses the need for the benefits of the works to be available across the UK. Over half of the delivery authority's spend on supplies to date—for example, on surveys—has been to companies outside London and the south-east. The restoration and renewal client board is very clear that this programme must benefit the whole of the UK.

John Lamont: I am grateful for that answer. It is absolutely right that local contractors across the United Kingdom should be able to take part in this historic project. In my constituency we have businesses such as Hutton Stone, which provides a full stone masonry service and has some of the country's finest stone carvers. Can we ensure that the process for bidding to take part in the restoration work is designed so as not to preclude contractors based further away from London, in order to maximise participation, and what else can we do to ensure that this process is used to upskill our workforce?

Nick Smith: These works are already boosting our UK industries. The programme will create jobs and apprenticeships with better skills across the country, from engineering and high-tech design to traditional crafts such as carpentry and stone masonry. The hon. Member will be pleased to know that the restoration and renewal team have visited Inverness castle, the Glasgow School of Art, the Scottish Parliament and the Engine Shed in Stirling to promote these work across the country, and to bring forward and encourage the skills he mentioned in his question.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme: £25,000 Cap

8. **Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): What assessment the Church Commissioners have made of the potential impact of the £25,000 cap in the listed places of worship grant scheme on church repairs. [903591]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): A survey carried out by the Church Commissioners found that at least 200 projects have been identified as likely to be affected by the cap on claims, including cathedrals and many parish churches in areas of considerable deprivation.

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her reply. Christ Church in Wanstead in my constituency is a wonderful community hub in a beautiful building, which sadly needs urgent repair to prevent dangerous stones falling from the belltower. In total, the repairs cost around £2 million, but grant funding and donations for a project of that scale are very challenging to find—a challenge that will be increased by the cap and the reimbursement of VAT. Has my hon. Friend had conversations with the Government about the impact of the cap, and uncertainty over the scheme in future years, on such large-scale essential repair projects?

Marsha De Cordova: As outlined in my earlier responses to questions on a similar issue, I have met the Secretary of State and put across those concerns. I commend the congregation of Christ Church in Wanstead for all their work in the community, providing music festivals, youth groups, bereavement support and so, so much more. Relieving the burden of finding an extra 20% to repair the grade I listed building would mean more time that could be spent on work with vulnerable communities. I will commit to writing to my hon. Friend with information about grants that may be available.

Lithium Mineral Rights: Weardale

9. **Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Whether the Church of England is taking steps to help ensure that its ownership of mineral rights to lithium in Weardale contributes to economic growth in that area. [903592]

Marsha De Cordova: The Church Commissioners granted an option over its mineral rights in Bishop Auckland to a specialist exploration company, Northern Lithium Ltd, in 2023. It has invested significantly in the local economy, which is expected to increase as exploration continues.

Sam Rushworth: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I really welcome the work that has been done by Northern Lithium in Weardale in my constituency. Critical minerals will play an increasingly important role in the UK's transition to net zero and in our economy. With the Church of England owning vast swathes of mineral rights across the country, it is really important that there is transparency and that the Church plays an active role in ensuring local populations benefit from the wealth beneath their feet, as part of a just transition. Will she meet me to discuss that?

Marsha De Cordova: Yes, I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend. The Church Commissioners have transparently registered all mineral rights with the Land Registry. I cannot comment on the specifics, as I am sure he would agree, but I am very happy to meet him and will ensure there are officials from the Church investment team, too.

Eco Church Awards

10. **Juliet Campbell** (Broxtowe) (Lab): Whether she is taking steps to help support churches in Broxtowe to meet the criteria for a gold Eco Church award. [903593]

Marsha De Cordova: The Church of England is working with A Rocha UK to support parishes in meeting their net zero targets. Grants are being awarded to parishes to help them make quick wins in reducing their running costs, such as energy efficient lightbulbs and modern heating systems.

Juliet Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for her reply. On a recent visit to St Michael and All Angels church in Bramcote in my constituency, they were proud to show me the plaque they had received for meeting the silver standard for eco churches. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating St Michael and All Angels, and Christ Church, Chilwell, on achieving the silver eco church award, and on their hard work and commitment to environmental sustainability?

Marsha De Cordova: I am very happy to congratulate the congregations of St Michael and Christ Church on achieving their silver eco church awards. In my hon. Friend's constituency, there are many parishes that I am

sure could learn from the great work those churches are doing. I also thank her for her commitment to her local faith organisations.

Business of the House

10.34 am

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

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

MONDAY 7 APRIL—General debate on road maintenance, followed by a general debate on neighbourhood policing and tackling town centre crime.

TUESDAY 8 APRIL—General debate on the potential merits of awarding a posthumous Victoria Cross to Blair Mayne, followed by a general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Easter recess at the conclusion of business on Tuesday 8 April and return on Tuesday 22 April.

The provisional business for the week commencing 21 April includes:

TUESDAY 22 APRIL—Second Reading of the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 23 APRIL—Opposition day (6th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the Liberal Democrats—subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 24 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill [*Lords*].

FRIDAY 25 APRIL—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 28 April will include:

MONDAY 28 APRIL—Second Reading of the Football Governance Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 29 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 30 APRIL—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill.

THURSDAY 1 MAY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 2 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

Jesse Norman: It is some weeks away yet, but this is the last moment I will have to wish you, Mr Speaker, and all Members of this House and staff a very happy Easter; I hope I may do so. Easter is a joyous occasion, full of families and possibly inappropriate amounts of chocolate. I will be making the shadow Leader of the House's legendary hot cross buns—not very much of the mix actually makes it into the oven, but that is part of the joy.

It is lucky, however, that we have several weeks to look forward to Easter, because this week has not been one of joy. We will be debating tariffs later, and we have also had the impact of the national insurance rises, which have pushed up costs, raising inflation, making it harder than ever to hire a new employee and blocking routes into work for young people.

My question, however, is this: what on earth is happening in Birmingham? As the House will recall, Birmingham city council is now in the fifth week of a strike with the

union Unite over bin collections. Apparently this matter concerns just a few dozen out of some 9,500 city council employees. As the House has heard, 17,000 tonnes of rubbish has piled up so far, growing by a reported 900 tonnes a week. Let us not forget that Birmingham's bin collections were reportedly three and a half times worse than the worst of other councils even before this strike. The public health implications are now so dire that the council has declared a major incident.

The strike comes on top of two other recent fiascos. First, the athletes' village in Perry Barr was built by the city council to host competitors during the Commonwealth games in 2022 but was never used, and has been sold at a reported loss to taxpayers of about £320 million. Secondly, Birmingham city council tried to install a shiny new Oracle IT system, resulting in a disaster whose costs are set to reach £216-odd million by 2026, according to a report by academics at Sheffield University.

As a city, Birmingham is technically bankrupt. It has been controlled by Labour for well over a decade, but my point is not about the council—it is about the Government. The Minister for Local Government let the cat out of the bag in his statement on this topic on Monday, when he said:

“Birmingham's waste service has been in urgent need of modernisation and transformation for many years... Practices in the waste service have been the source of one of the largest equal pay crises in modern...history, resulting in costs of over £1 billion to the residents of Birmingham. This situation simply cannot continue.”— [*Official Report*, 31 March 2025; Vol. 765, c. 45.]

The Prime Minister went further in his own remarks yesterday, saying:

“The situation in Birmingham council is completely unacceptable”.— [*Official Report*, 2 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 294.]

However, neither the Minister nor the Prime Minister has yet offered any criticism at all of Unite, whose action is the cause of all this rotting refuse in the streets.

Unite was Labour's biggest union donor before the general election, giving £553,900 to a total of 86 MPs—although not to the Leader of the House, I am very pleased to say. Does she think there could be any relationship between the Government's reluctance to call out Unite on the disastrous situation in Birmingham and the half a million pounds in donations their MPs have just received? Some Members of the House may see this whole situation as eerily reminiscent of the 1970s, especially Labour's winter of discontent in 1978-79, when striking binmen caused refuse to pile up across major cities, including in Birmingham. My worry, however, is about not the past but the future. Labour consistently backed public sector union strikes when they were in opposition—a point the Prime Minister conveniently forgot to mention yesterday—but now they are in power they have thrown money at the unions hand over fist with little or no negotiated improvements. Let us not forget that Northern Rail negotiators have even said that their agreements with the union require them to use fax machines.

There is a very serious point here, Mr Speaker. At this moment, the Government are abolishing NHS England and taking direct control of the NHS. Does anyone seriously think that a Government who are incapable of calling out their union donors over bin collections will have any ability at all to withstand pressure from the same and other union donors on the NHS? What will that do to cost control and productivity, to public spending and inflation? I would be grateful if the Leader of the House reflected on those issues in her remarks.

Lucy Powell: May I join the shadow Leader of the House in wishing everybody a very happy Easter? I hope that Members can resist eating too much chocolate and hot cross buns, especially those who are on diets at this time of year.

Today is a day to reflect, Mr Speaker, because we face unprecedented times, which have the potential to change the global trade consensus of the past 80 years—a consensus that has brought this country, and most western countries, a great deal of prosperity. We are still processing exactly what the new tariffs will mean for British businesses, and we will shortly hear from the Secretary of State for Business and Trade about that in more detail. Just as President Trump is acting in what he believes is his national interest, we will always act in our national interest. We will do whatever is necessary to protect British jobs, British businesses and British consumers. I am sure the shadow Leader of the House will agree that, in any eventuality, securing the long-sought economic deal with our closest partner, the US, which the Prime Minister has been leading on for many months, is in our national interest, and I am sure the whole House will support him in those endeavours.

As the shadow Leader of the House said, this week is the start of a new financial year and the annual uprating of Bills. It is also a very worrying time for families. The cost of living crisis is not yet over, and many people will be wondering, as the month begins, how long their pay cheque will last. We have inherited a very difficult situation, and the global trade war will not help, but we are determined to protect working people. That is what we are all about. We are about making work pay with our Employment Rights Bill. We have seen a £1,400 a year increase to the national living wage. And for young people, there has been an unprecedented uplift to the national minimum wage, which is now up to £10 an hour. The state pension will increase this week by £470. We will take the action necessary to bring down in the long term our bills, including those for water and energy.

The shadow Leader of the House raised the situation in Birmingham. I was in Birmingham just last weekend visiting my husband's family and found the conditions to be totally unacceptable. It is awful what people are living with, and we want to see the situation end, and end immediately. I am happy to tell the right hon. Member that I have no problem in saying that the trade union Unite needs to step up, get back round the table and come to an agreement. A reasonable agreement is on the table, so the trade union and the council should be able to deal with this very quickly.

I gently say to the shadow Leader of the House, however, that I do not think the situation in Birmingham covers anybody in glory. To make some party political point about it does not serve him too well. He and other Conservative Members might have a short memory, but this is a failure of successive leaderships of that council, including the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition of the early 2000s in particular. That was a critical phase in resolving the equality pay dispute, which other councils, including in Manchester and other cities, dealt with during that time, while Birmingham's buried their heads in the sand about it.

If the shadow Leader of the House wants a discussion about what has happened with local government finances, let me say that local government was absolutely starved of finances for 14 years under his Government. Month

after month, we saw councils go bust, including Tory councils such as Northamptonshire and Thurrock. We have put record investment into local government, and will bring forward a devolution Bill later this year, which will include further measures on auditing local finances.

The shadow Leader of the House mentions the impact of industrial action on the working people of this country, but what did his Government preside over? We saw more days of industrial action in our NHS and on the railways under the Conservative Government than we have done under Labour. That is what the Conservatives want to do every time—cause conflict and have industrial action. We have seen an end to industrial action in our NHS. Because the strikes ended, waiting lists have gone down every single month for five months—and another 2 million doctors' appointments have become available. On the shadow Leader of the House's watch, rail companies boasted about free cash from the Government for their rail contracts, and we had a record number of days lost to industrial action. We put an end to that. We got this country back to working in the interests of working people, so I will take no lectures from him.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I wish you and all the House staff, colleagues in the Chamber, and those outside an early happy Easter.

Sky is a household name in Britain and has millions of customers. I am proud to represent Stockport, and Sky is a major employer in our town. Unfortunately, it was announced last week that almost 2,000 jobs are at risk in Sky's UK operations, with 545 roles in Stockport and more in Leeds and Sheffield impacted. I have been working with my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), and my immediate constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), to support the staff impacted.

Serious questions have been raised with me by Sky employees about the mass redundancies, the process being leaked to media outlets before all staff were made aware of the redundancies, and the lack of clarity about the level of support on offer to members of staff. These redundancies will have a detrimental impact on the economies and communities of Stockport, Sheffield and Leeds. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on Sky and how it treats its hard-working, loyal staff?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about the redundancies at Sky, which will affect my hon. Friend's constituents, as well as some of mine nearby. He is doing his job as a constituency MP by raising this important matter on the Floor of the House. I am sure that the company will have heard his concerns about the announcement being communicated via the media before employees were told. That is just not acceptable. One of the reasons why we are bringing forward our Employment Rights Bill is to ensure that workers have more rights in these circumstances, and that employers have an obligation to ensure that redundancies are handled sensitively, and with regard to people's long-term interests.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): On 15 April, we will mark the 36th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster and remember the 97 people who tragically lost

their life on that dark day, as well as their families' subsequent fight for justice. Last September, the Prime Minister gave a commitment that the Hillsborough law would be introduced in Parliament before we reached this anniversary. A duty of candour for public servants and public bodies is long overdue, and will help stop future cover-ups. It is vital that the legislation delivers on the commitments made to Hillsborough families in a meaningful way. Can the Leader of the House give an update on whether the legislation will be introduced before we rise for the Easter recess? If it will not, when we can realistically expect it?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue; it was also raised last week by my hon. Friend the Member for Widnes and Halewood (Derek Twigg). She is right. As we approach the anniversary of the Hillsborough tragedy, we should remember the 97 lives lost, all the families affected and the years and years of fighting for justice and accountability that the families have suffered since—frankly, with the state fighting against them, in most cases. That is something we should all endeavour to put right. As she says, the Prime Minister and the whole Government, myself included, remain focused on fulfilling our commitment to the Hillsborough families to bring forward and enact a Hillsborough law, which will of course include a duty of candour at all times. That is a very important measure to take forward.

At this time, the most important issue is to ensure that the legislation reflects the full range of concerns and experiences, and meets the expectations of the families. The very worst thing we could do is not meet those expectations, given that all the trust issues relate to the state failing to live up to the families' expectations. We are working on the Bill at pace, but we will take whatever time is necessary to work collaboratively with the families and their representatives, because getting the legislation right is overwhelmingly our priority, as I am sure the hon. Lady can understand.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Last month, Whitburn Band, from a former mining town in my constituency, won the Scottish brass band championships for the third time in four years. The band will represent Scotland at the national brass band championships in London, and at the European brass band championships next year. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Whitburn Band on its remarkable achievement, and wishing its members the very best of luck as they represent Scotland? Will she make time for a debate on the important contribution of brass bands to our musical heritage in communities across the UK?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Whitburn brass band, the Scottish brass band champions, and wish them all the very best in the UK-wide national brass band championships. If I may say so, she is doing a fantastic job of blowing the trumpet on behalf of her constituents. [*Laughter.*] It is Easter. I wish the band all the best in the championships.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On the business that the Leader of the House announced, I have to say it is disappointing that we do not have Backbench

Business on 24 April. My reading of the business that day is that the Bill is uncontroversial and we are likely to finish early, but we will be denied the opportunity to have a debate on St George's day, which is of course on 23 April, or a debate on Parkinson's Awareness Month, which is April.

We are contemplating organising three 90-minute debates on 1 May, which is local election day. Colleagues may wish to be campaigning elsewhere, but that would at least allow debates on some of the motions that we have in the queue. It would help if the Leader of the House could confirm when estimates day will be in May. By my reckoning, there are only around four possible dates, and our Committee has to advertise the opportunity for people to apply for an estimates day debate, and then choose the debates.

On Tuesday 8 May, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on the persecution of Christians. When we return on 22 April, there will be a debate on residential estate management companies; I remind colleagues that we will sit Monday hours on that day, so the debate will start at 11.30 am, rather than at 9.30 am. On Thursday 24 April, there will be a debate on Lesbian Visibility Week, followed by a debate on the trading relationship with the European Union, which will be quite topical, given the tariff arrangements that have just been announced. On Tuesday 29 April, there will be a debate on compensation for criminal injuries.

Most of our allies, including the United States, have indicated their objection to the reappointment of Francesca Albanese as the UN special rapporteur on the occupied territories. This is a woman who has attempted to justify the atrocities on 7 October 2023, and repeatedly excused the atrocities committed by terrorists, yet she is apparently going to be reappointed by the UN. Our allies have called this out, but there has been total silence from the Foreign Secretary and nothing from any of our Ministers, so may we have a statement on how the Government will instruct our representatives at the UN to vote? Indeed, will they register their strong objections to her reappointment?

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, as ever, for organising so many good, well-attended debates. He asked about 24 April. I am sure he will recognise that there is a bank holiday that week, and two weeks later, so we have a number of short weeks and a lot of Government business to get through. Given that Tuesday 22 April will be more like a Monday, I am afraid that Thursday 24 April will be more like a Wednesday, which is why, on the Thursday, time was not allocated to the Backbench Business Committee. However, I heard what he said about St George's day and am happy to have a conversation with him about that. As ever, I will try to give him as much advance notice as I can of estimates day.

I thank the hon. Member for raising the issue regarding the UN rapporteur. He will appreciate that such matters are for the UN. However, I will ensure that the Foreign Office has heard his point, as I am sure his constituents have. In general, the Government and I would not find acceptable any comments of the kind that he described; I join him in saying that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Just to help the House, I think we will say that these questions will last another hour or thereabouts. Hopefully we will get everybody in, if we help each other. Let us have a good example from Dave Robertson.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Nether Stowe school in my constituency—my old school—has just completed a consultation on closing its sixth-form provision. This has caused a huge amount of stress for kids who are prepping for their GCSEs. They do not know where they will be able to do their A-levels. The other school sixth forms in Lichfield at Friary and King Edward are already heavily oversubscribed, so there is a risk that we will lack academic places for people to do A-levels when they reach 16. A month ago, I asked Conservative-controlled Staffordshire county council to share its planning for how many sixth-form and academic places we need in Lichfield. It has completely failed to provide that information. I need to know that there is a plan, so that everybody who reaches the age of 16 can take courses that are appropriate for them. Will the Leader of the House arrange for me to meet the relevant Minister urgently to discuss post-16 provision in Lichfield?

Mr Speaker: That was a bad example.

Lucy Powell: I will try to keep my answers short, Mr Speaker. I am really sorry to hear about the closure of Nether Stowe school's sixth form. I know that A-level provision is a challenge in many areas, and it sounds like it is in Lichfield. I am sure that Baroness Smith, the Minister responsible for further education, will be happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I am happy to arrange that meeting for him.

Shivani Raja (Leicester East) (Con): While inequalities during pregnancy and childbirth have reduced, they remain a cause of concern for pregnant women from ethnic minorities. According to latest data, black women are 2.8 times more likely to die during and up to six weeks after their pregnancy, and Asian women are 1.7 times more likely to die during the same period. Ethnic minority women also have higher rates for stillbirth and various other complications. Will the Leader of the House kindly make time for a debate to explore those health inequalities and racial disparities?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising that important issue, which I know has caused considerable concern and debate across the House over a number of years. She is right to identify the poorer maternal health outcomes for those with black and ethnic minority backgrounds. The Government are committed to addressing that, and I am happy to keep her updated on progress.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): May I take the opportunity to thank 1st Priestwood Brownies, 1st Priestwood Guides, the Wayz youth centre and all those who took part in Bracknell town council's great British spring clean litter pick last weekend? Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking litter pickers in Bracknell and across the country for all they do to keep our communities clean?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Brownies—I was once one—and all those who took part in the spring-cleaning efforts in Bracknell. I join him in bringing that to the Floor of the House today.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Much to my surprise, but perhaps to the relief of the Prime Minister, at Prime Minister's questions yesterday not a single Member of this House raised the fact that energy bills have once again increased. In fact, on the Labour party's watch, they have gone up by £281, despite its pre-election promise to reduce them by £300. Will the Leader of the House afford us all a debate on Government time as to that latest broken promise from the Labour party?

Lucy Powell: It is always a pleasure to see the right hon. Gentleman here. I am not sure how his promise to stay committed to this House is faring, as I think he has now had another flip-flop on that and I hear he is still going for that second job. For as long as he is here—*[Interruption.]* He asks if I would miss him. I, and I am sure the whole House, would miss him greatly.

He raises an important issue, which is energy bills. He will know that this Government are absolutely determined to lower our bills, to create the jobs of the future and to get our energy security. As a country, we are still far too exposed to international gas prices, as we are seeing with the increase in energy bills this year. That is why we are even more determined than ever—I am sure he will join us in this—to ensure that we have that clean, renewable energy of the future, which is the only way that we will get lower bills.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please share when the Government will publish the impact assessment on the assisted dying Bill? Will she further update the House on current plans for Report stage and Third Reading of the Bill?

Lucy Powell: A number of Members have raised that with me over the last couple of weeks and I think it was raised last week at business questions too. As I said then, given the close scrutiny of the Bill in Committee and the number of amendments accepted from all sides of the debate, the impact assessment will require significant work by the Government to get it ready. However, we are absolutely committed to doing that in time for Report stage.

My hon. Friend asks about the future progress of the Bill. She will know that Report stage of this private Member's Bill is on the Order Paper for 25 April. It is a matter for the House to decide on the Bill's progress and I am sure that, as on Second Reading, so ably chaired by you, Mr Speaker, this House will come together in that debate. Hopefully, it will be chaired by you, Mr Speaker—let us see—and we will have a respectful debate in which people can contribute, make their views heard and show the public that we can come together and discuss such issues.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Active Learning Trust is closing the sixth-form Neale-Wade Academy, which will be harmful to social mobility in Fenland. Given that the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) raised a similar point, may we have a statement on what action Education Ministers and the regional schools director can take to ensure that the Active Learning Trust, about which there are serious questions, puts in place a recovery plan and is much more transparent about how its decisions are reached?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue for his constituents and for many others about the Active Learning Trust and the provision in his constituency. I will make sure that the Minister is in touch with him. As he says, the regional schools directors, as well as Ministers, should ensure that there is adequate provision that is of a high standard and that trusts such as the Active Learning Trust are held to account for those issues. This is one of the reasons that we are bringing forward the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill—to make sure that accountability for trusts is really there.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): One of the biggest issues raised with me in my constituency is the availability of council and social housing. In Conservative-led Northumberland, a recent freedom of information request found that there were more than 300 void council properties in south-east Northumberland alone, with £750,000 lost in rental income. The failure not only wastes money, but leaves people languishing on waiting lists, often in inappropriate housing. May we have a debate on how we ensure council properties are not standing empty for months on end, costing local taxpayers and limiting income that could be spent improving services?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of void council homes in her constituency. As she said, these homes could be housing those desperately in need of a social home, and it involves a loss of income. We are putting extra money into local government to ensure that they have the capital and revenues to bring those homes back into use, but we are also committed to ensuring we have more affordable and social housing for all her constituents.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The Leader of the House may remember that on 5 December I raised the issue of adopters not being eligible for any financial support from the Government if they are self-employed. She helpfully recommended that I table an amendment to the Employment Rights Bill, which I did. I also have had a Westminster Hall debate and raised the issue with the Minister at the Dispatch Box. At every stage, every member of the Government has mentioned a parental leave review. In response to a written question this week, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders) suggested that this would start “in due course”. What format will the review take, and what is the timetable for conclusion so that all Members can participate?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for pursuing the issue through all those different means. She is an example to other new Members as to how to take forward an issue across a range of opportunities in this House. I will ensure that she gets a fuller response from the Minister about the timescale and how Members can be involved.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): A retired postmistress in my constituency served our communities at the post office in Parson Cross from 1994 to 2002 and was affected by the Horizon scandal, leaving her mentally and physically unwell. She has not

been paid the compensation she is owed from the fixed sum payment scheme. Please will the Leader of the House advise me on how I can help my constituent and her husband Michael to expedite access to their compensation payment?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that my hon. Friend's constituents have not had their compensation payment. Over 5,000 victims have had their payments made so far, but we certainly have more to do. She will recognise that this Government set aside the proper amount of money necessary for the first time, but I will ensure that her case is expedited.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Following the conversion from paper visas to e-visas, members of the Ukrainian community in the United Kingdom who are refugees are having considerable difficulty renewing their visas because of IT failures within the Home Office system, leaving them effectively without any proof of status. I know the Leader of the House is sympathetic to their plight. Would she be kind enough to ask the Home Secretary, given the shortage of time between now and the recess, if she would make a written statement to clarify the position for everybody?

Lucy Powell: I was not aware of the issue the right hon. Member raised. I know the matter of Ukrainian visas will be of concern to many Members across this House, and I thank him for raising it. I will absolutely ensure that the Home Office considers a written ministerial statement or some other means to communicate an update on the matter.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I recently met Hertsavers, a credit union providing affordable loans and saving products all across Hertfordshire. Of its nearly 3,000 members, I am proud that the majority are in my community in Welwyn Hatfield. It makes a particular difference to young families through access to loans for people in receipt of child benefit. Would the Leader of the House join me in thanking the trustees of Hertsavers credit union, who work so hard to ensure that people have access to affordable finance in my community?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking the trustees of Hertsavers in his constituency. Credit unions are incredibly popular and an important part of our constituents having access to loans and finance when they otherwise would not get them. I am sure that would make a popular topic for debate if he wanted to have one.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Llefarydd. The House should know that, unlike in England, Welsh public services are not fully protected from the cost of increased employers national insurance contributions. That is because compensation from the Treasury does not take into account Wales's bigger public sector, and it means Wales is losing out on £65 million. Can we have a debate about why it is fair that the NHS in England gets more money proportionately than the NHS in Wales?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Member will know that as a result of this Government's Budget, we delivered a record £21 billion settlement for the Welsh Government—

[Lucy Powell]

the biggest in the history of devolution. That has allowed additional funds to go directly to the NHS in Wales and elsewhere, and I am sure that that will come through the system soon.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measures:

- Church of Scotland (Lord High Commissioner) Act 2025
- Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025
- National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Act 2025
- Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Act 2025
- Chancel Repair (Church Commissioners' Liability) Measure 2025
- Church Funds Investment Measure 2025.

Business of the House

Proceedings resumed.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I have met many leaseholders fighting for fair treatment from housing association freeholders such as Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing, Hyde, L&Q, Notting Hill Genesis, Optivo and Peabody, to name a few. They are struggling to secure general repairs, sort issues with damp and mould and get transparency about rising service charges that are running into the thousands of pounds. Such behaviour from a landlord or council would be considered unacceptable, yet housing associations continue to act with impunity, and past leasehold reform legislation has done little to address the issues. Can the Leader of the House assure leaseholders in my constituency that the Government will take legislative steps to ensure that they are able to hold their housing association freeholders to account?

Lucy Powell: The plight of leaseholders is raised with me regularly in these sessions, and I represent many tens of thousands of leaseholders in Manchester Central. The Government are committed to bringing forward a draft leasehold reform Bill. We recently published our commonhold White Paper, and the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), laid before the House an extensive written ministerial statement that outlined how he was enacting the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. We need to go further to protect leaseholders; my hon. Friend is right to raise that with me today.

Mr Speaker, given that you have just announced Royal Assent for a number of Acts, I want to put on record my thanks to Figen Murray, who is in the Public Gallery, for her tireless campaigning for Martyn's law, which is now an Act. It will protect many venues across the country, and I am delighted that we have had a voluntary scheme across Manchester, which has already prevented some incidents from happening. I am sure the whole House will want to pay its respects to Figen Murray and Martyn's law, which is now an Act.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed this week that the tariffs announced have not been factored into the forecast, nor has the effect of the Employment Rights Bill. I talked to local businesses in Salisbury last Friday at a Budget breakfast, as I have done for the last eight years, and they are very concerned about the cumulative impact of the Employment Rights Bill on top of the national insurance changes. Could we have a statement from a Treasury Minister on the need to revise the OBR forecasts and the implications for tax increases, which are now all but certain in the autumn?

Lucy Powell: We have only just had the spring statement last week, and the OBR has forecast that the economy will grow faster than expected over the forecasting period. The right hon. Gentleman might not like our Employment Rights Bill, but I am afraid Government Members stand proud behind it, because we have a firm belief that making work pay and giving people dignity and security at work is how we will boost our economy and boost growth. I will not get into speculation about

what may or may not happen in the future. I respected the right hon. Gentleman greatly as a Minister, but he was part of a Government who presided over a huge crash in our economy and all the problems that came from it.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): With thoughts turning to Easter, I recommend to Members who might not already have plans a visit to my beautiful constituency of Carlisle and north Cumbria, and in particular RSPB Geltsdale, where they will see the award-winning Howgill Beck restoration project, which just last night won the UK river prize. It is a fantastic restoration project that has restored the wetlands, and native species have returned to the environment. It is a stunning part of north Cumbria. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the RSPB and all its partners on this wonderful project?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating the RSPB in Geltsdale and Howgill Beck, which sounds fantastic. I am actually a member of the RSPB, in part because my son is a bit of a keen twitcher, and I am sure he will be nagging me to pay a visit to her constituency and see that fantastic project.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Last night I attended the meeting for worship at Westminster Quaker meeting house. Last Thursday, that place of worship was forcefully raided by 20 police officers, equipped with tasers, and they arrested six women and charged them in relation to planning a peaceful protest. That raises important questions about the criminalisation of public protest, and indeed religious freedom. May we have a debate in Government time about the need to repeal those elements of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Public Order Act 2023 that have such a repressive effect on the right to peaceful protest, which is a cornerstone of British democracy?

Lucy Powell: I am sure the hon. Lady would not expect me to comment on that particular case, as that is an operational matter for the police, but she is right to say that the right to protest is a fundamental part of our democracy, and one that we hold dear. We also have to balance the right to protest with protecting the right of the law-abiding majority to go about their daily lives, free from disruption, and that is the comment I will make in that regard.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): In 2018, Warrington borough council applied for and was successful with a proposal for a new 56-place special free school for pupils with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder, whose needs cannot be met by our current provisions. The free school is part of an expansion plan to address that issue, and the implications of dither and delay from the Department for Education have exacerbated the funding challenges that the local authority and our schools face when sending pupils to out-of-borough independent placements, which cost circa £8.5 million from the high needs budget in 2024. May we have a debate in Government time about the process for opening new schools, and ensuring that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families, can have their needs met in their own boroughs?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the challenges facing the free school in Warrington that is designed to support those with autism and special education needs. I am sure she will recognise that the situation we inherited was not delivering for parents, not delivering outcomes, and was on its knees in terms of SEND provision—this issue gets raised regularly with me in these sessions—and I will ensure that she gets an update from the Minister on that application, and hope it can be expedited.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Last night, along with colleagues from across the House who represent constituencies in northern Lincolnshire and east Yorkshire, I met the Humber Energy Board. Representatives from the board were particularly concerned about delays in support for a number of projects that are pending Government support in the region, and that is particularly important given the potential job losses at Scunthorpe. May we have a debate, or a statement from the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, about support for a number of energy projects in the Humber?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. I am sure he will recognise that this Government have done more to create opportunity, jobs and investment in the energy opportunities of the future than the previous Government did in 14 years. We are committed to ensuring that places such as the Humber, and Humberside more generally, which powered this country in the past, will do so again in the clean energy sprint that we are embarked on. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets an update from the Minister about what is happening with those particular issues.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Land-based gambling shops represent a silent crisis up and down this country, targeting some of our most disadvantaged and deprived communities. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Muhammed Butt and Mili Patel, leader and deputy leader of Brent council, on their campaign, now supported by leaders of more than 30 other councils, to reform the Gambling Act 2005 to protect our high streets from rapacious gambling and betting shops? May we have a debate in Government time about the need to change the presumption that exists in the 2005 Act and states that councils to “aim to permit” such licences?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the work of Brent council and its leadership in addressing some of the issues and challenges presented on our high streets and in our communities by problem gambling. I do not know exactly where we have got to with reforms to the Gambling Act, but I will ensure that he gets a full update.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On 6 February, I asked the Leader of the House if she would “use every lever in her power”

to ensure that this House had a debate on the climate emissions framework

“before any new airport expansion is given the green light”,

including at Luton airport. The Leader of the House replied, saying

“I will ensure that any such decisions are brought to this House first for scrutiny by her and others.”—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2025; Vol. 761, c. 954.]

[Daisy Cooper]

And yet, it has been reported this morning that the Government intend to give the green light to Luton airport expansion via a letter on the national infrastructure planning website at 2 pm—in less than three hours—with no debate at all. Is that true? If so, why has there been no debate in Government time about the climate emissions framework, as the Leader of the House had promised?

Lucy Powell: As I said to the hon. Lady at the time, individual applications by airports are a quasi-judicial decision for the Secretary of State for Transport, so it is difficult to comment in advance of them. However, all those decisions are taken in the context of our legally binding climate commitments, as well as other factors. I do not know about today's press reports that she mentions, but I will ensure that she and the House are updated on those decisions.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Ten young people confidently presented at my “Pitch your Policy” event in Rugby, and I promised to take the winning idea to Parliament and Ministers. Theo Speed won with his policy of extending voting rights to those with settled status; Izzy Hart came second with her policy for funding and support for people known to and working with children's services; and in third place, Molly Wall suggested more resources for political education in the national curriculum. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all who participated, and does she agree that my event shows that young people have the ideas and skills to be the architects of the future? We need to listen to them more and focus additional resources on the next generation through the national youth strategy, and perhaps there should be a dedicated Minister for youth sitting next to my right hon. Friend at the Cabinet table.

Lucy Powell: I congratulate Theo, Izzy and Molly on their success in the “Pitch your Policy” event. My hon. Friend is right that that shows that young people have a huge amount to contribute to the political debate in this country. That is one of the reasons why I and this Government are committed to votes at 16, because we think young people who are 16 and who want to and are able to contribute to our political debate should be given the opportunity to do so. I might not extend so much democracy among my own teenagers at home, but my hon. Friend makes an important point.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): On the same day as the closure of the sustainable farming incentive, without the notice that the Government had promised, Ministers announced the end of the fruit and vegetables aid scheme, which provided match funding for capital investments and was vital for the competitiveness of English growers. Similar schemes exist in Scotland and Wales and continue in Europe, so can we have an urgent debate on that incredibly foolish decision?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the previous Government underspent on the sustainable farming incentive and on other schemes, and we went out of our way to ensure farmers knew they were available and applied to them, which is why we had to close the scheme early. But we are bringing forward a range of schemes, because food security and supporting

our farmers in this country are extremely important to this Government, and we will ensure that they are sustained.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I am concerned by reports on social media that a disabled person in a wheelchair in Bedworth was stranded because their bus did not show up and several taxis refused to take a wheelchair. I am sick and tired of hearing how my vulnerable constituents are let down by Warwickshire's buses, which is why I launched my petition to bring buses back into public control. We must look at the issues facing disabled people when using transport. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on access to taxis for people using wheelchairs?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the experience that my hon. Friend's constituent had. I support her endeavours on the Warwickshire buses; that is why we have the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill progressing through the House of Lords. She is absolutely right to raise issues around accessibility for those with disabilities when it comes to public transport, which includes taxis, and that would make a very good topic for a debate.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): North Shropshire is home to some historic and beautiful market towns, and I recommend a visit over Easter. I have been contacted by some high-street retailers, particularly Niche Patisserie and the Covent Garden Fruit & Veg shop, which are concerned about the double whammy of business rates increasing and NIC hikes happening this week. They are worried about the impact on high streets, which also face the closure of post offices and banks. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can radically reform business rates to bring our high streets back to life?

Lucy Powell: This Government are committed to business rate reform. We have already taken through a piece of legislation beginning that process by creating a new lower level of business rates as well as a higher band for some of those much larger businesses, but we need to go further. We have retained the discount into next year, but I appreciate that these are difficult times for high street business and businesses in our town centres. This Government are committed to ensuring that we protect and support businesses and working people.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I note that the Government have today issued a best value notice to the Tees Valley mayoral combined authority. Concerns around governance, financial mismanagement and procurement have been voiced over a number of years, yet Mayor Ben Houchen has resisted demands for openness and transparency—indeed, just last Friday he openly called questioning members of the public “idiots” and deemed their questions to be “insane”. That all changes today. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate in Government time for this House to consider how we balance our laudable further devolution ambitions with the need for a much more robust system of oversight and accountability?

Lucy Powell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has been a tireless campaigner on issues around accountability and transparency in the Tees Valley mayoral combined

authority. I am sure I will join in him welcoming the fact that we have today issued a best value notice; he should take some credit for that given the work he has done over many, many years. Ministers welcome the recent improvements, but there is much further to go, and as my hon. Friend says, this is the beginning of that process. We will publish our devolution Bill later this year, which will include aspects of accountability and audit, and I am sure he will welcome debating that at the time.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Can we have a debate about the importance of local swimming pools? Sadly, the much-loved Laidlaw Memorial swimming pool in Jedburgh closed at the end of last year due to rising costs. Hundreds of local residents recently attended a public meeting in the town to show their support for reopening the pool. Does the Leader of the House take the view, like me, that learning to swim is an important life skill? Can she encourage her colleagues in Government to open up dedicated funding to support local swimming pools?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely will join the hon. Gentleman in saying that learning to swim and water safety are really important life skills. I am really sorry to hear that his local swimming pool has closed. I am sure he will recognise that funding for swimming pools and sports facilities such as that is devolved in Scotland and that the Scottish Government now have the level of money to provide more support for communities such as his to ensure that his constituents can learn to swim and get those life skills.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Growth and job creation are central to rebuilding this country. On Monday, the Office of Rail and Road found that the cross-channel rail network could achieve higher capacity. That is an exciting opportunity for my constituency, as the potential doubling of Leyton's Temple Mills depot offers opportunities for meaningful local jobs and the strengthening of our European relationships. I have written to the Rail Minister and look forward to his reply, but seizing these opportunities is crucial. Will the Leader of the House support a debate on the expansion of HS1 services in order to hear the totality of the benefits that it could offer us across the UK?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a strong case for the expansion of HS1 services, and all the benefits that that boost to cross-channel rail links would provide to his constituents and, indeed, the wider economy. I will ensure that the relevant Minister updates him, and that the House is updated when there are important developments in this regard.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Today, the consultation on the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020—introduced by Boris Johnson to constrain devolution at the height of the Brexit chaos—closes. That Act is equally loathed by the SNP Scottish Government and the Labour Welsh Government. For some reason, abolition of the UK internal market was not included in the consultation's terms of reference, so when the Government respond to the consultation, will they make sure that that option appears and that we get the opportunity to get rid of that awful, devolution-destroying Act?

Lucy Powell: I remember well that Act passing through these Houses, and some of those issues being raised at the time. Of course, the Government will respond fully on those issues and make sure that the settlement we have in this country works for the whole of the UK, and that we have a strong internal market, as well as getting all of the benefits that we can now get from not being inside the EU.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have just 20 minutes remaining, so questions must be short, and I ask the Leader of the House to be brief with her answers as well.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Before scheduling legislation on the "Pathways to Work" changes, will the Leader of the House ensure that there is proper consultation with disabled people on the fiscal elements of the proposals, and that the Government publish the transition arrangements in full and their response?

Lucy Powell: I know that my hon. Friend has been campaigning on welfare reform issues. I am sure she will appreciate that we have committed to publishing legislation and taking through a Bill; that will give us ample time to debate and consider these issues, and to look in great detail at aspects of the proposals. As she says, that includes transitional arrangements, and we should absolutely debate those arrangements. We have produced the impact assessment—however Members view what it says—in good time, so that Members across the House can consider all the issues before we debate the primary legislation.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): On Tuesday 25 March at Windsor castle, His Majesty the King honoured George Kelly, making him an MBE in recognition of his dedication to the Royal British Legion. A former president of the Royal British Legion's St Ives branch, George joined the legion in 1982 after an incredible 42-year career as an RAF navigator. He was shot down during the second world war aged 21, and went on to take part in the Berlin airlift and the Suez crisis. At a sprightly 101 years old, he is known locally as the poppy man. Can I ask the Leader of the House and all Members to join me in congratulating George on his achievement and his incredible life of dedication and service, and will she make time in the parliamentary schedule to give thanks to all those who dedicate their lives to volunteering for charity organisations and to the help of others?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Lucy Powell: What a lovely tribute to George Kelly—I am sure he will be very pleased to hear that. I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating him on a very long life of dedication and service to this country, and thank him for bringing that tribute to the Floor of the House.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I have previously raised in this House how the use of Operation Brock to queue freight lorries heading to Dover on the M20 causes disruption to large parts of my constituency. My constituents are not against it being used as an emergency traffic-calming measure, but I have been extremely disappointed by the decision of Kent county council

[Sojan Joseph]

and the Kent and Medway resilience forum to routinely deploy it over the school holidays—this time, it will last until 22 April. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on traffic management, so that we can discuss how measures such as Operation Brock should be used only as a last resort?

Lucy Powell: We understand the disruption and inconvenience caused when Operation Brock is deployed in Kent. Unfortunately, it is sometimes necessary, but I will ensure that a Minister comes back to my hon. Friend about how this can be done in a more sensitive way, especially during the school holidays.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): When I met Great Western Railway earlier this week, we discussed how the half-hourly Bristol to Gloucester service is vital not only for capacity at Yate station, but to serve the new station due to open at Charfield in 2027. However, the current funding ends next year and an extension is vital to bridging the gap. Will the Leader of the House raise that with the Transport Secretary and ensure that a full impact assessment is carried out before the funding expires?

Lucy Powell: I will certainly ensure that a Minister gives the hon. Member a full response about rail capacity in her constituency and that any assessments of the damage caused are shared with her.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The Renters' Rights Bill will help to curtail the use of section 21 evictions to flip houses to holiday lets in Cornwall, but we still have a massive issue with second homes, and with holiday lets in particular. Can the Leader of the House find out what progress the Government are making on bringing in a registration scheme—or preferably a licensing scheme—for those holiday and short-term lets?

Lucy Powell: As my hon. Friend says, we are committed to introducing a short-term let registration scheme. I will get for her the latest estimation for delivery of that scheme. We are also abolishing the furnished holiday lettings tax regime. I know that both those things will be of great significance to her constituents.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): In the words of the legendary rock band 10cc:

“I don't like cricket...I love it.”

However, with reduced council budgets and annual park budgets falling by 14% over a decade, and with the pressure on urban playing fields meaning that we have lost 50% of playing fields to other developments, clubs in my constituency, including the South Asian and Caribbean cricket clubs, which go strategically from grassroots cricket to professional players, have now found themselves homeless. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate to discuss the valuable contribution of grassroots sports and how they can be protected in the future by supporting things like “A Better Future for Parks and Green Spaces”?

Lucy Powell: I am a fan of cricket myself. It is something that my children enjoy, but the hon. Member is absolutely right to identify the diminution we have

seen in cricket playing fields, in cricket sports clubs and in grassroots sports over recent years. This Government are committed to grassroots sports. We have put extra money into that, and we are also putting extra money into local government so that it can support the kind of measures he wants to see.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): My first job was working at Bolton hospital, so will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the many staff at Bolton NHS foundation trust who, between October 2024 and January 2025, secured a drop in local waiting lists of 2,447 patients? After 14 years of neglect under the Conservatives, will she find Government time to discuss additional innovative solutions to bring waiting lists down even further?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those at Bolton NHS foundation trust for their amazing work in reducing waiting lists by more than 2,000 in recent months. We have further to go in reducing waiting lists, but I am determined that this Government will achieve our objectives.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Last weekend, I attended the ninth Harrogate K. R. Ali Taekwondo Academy mayor's cup tournament in my constituency. More than 400 people attended from across the UK and overseas, and it was a fantastic event. Master Ali, who runs the taekwondo academy, had to fund the event himself and could not find access to any funding. Will the Leader of the House first congratulate him on a fantastic and well-run event, but also look to make Government time to debate support for grassroots sporting organisations?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. The home of British Taekwondo is actually in my constituency, so it is a sport I am familiar with. As I said in a previous answer, we are committed to supporting elite sport, as well as grassroots sports in this country. I think we have a debate later today on these issues, but I will certainly raise that with the Department.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Last week, I visited the Gateshead district energy scheme, a ground-breaking project that uses geothermal energy from mine water in old coal workings to heat local homes and businesses. The scheme is the first of its kind in the UK, and is owned and operated by Gateshead council. It is fantastic to see this legacy of our industrial past playing a pioneering role in decarbonisation, so can we have a debate in Government time on the contribution that our coalfield communities are making to fighting climate change?

Lucy Powell: What a fantastic initiative that is in my hon. Friend's constituency to get geothermal heat providing heat and warmth to local homes and businesses through these local heat networks. I am sure a debate on such issues would be popular.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On the Muslim holy day of Eid, Ahmadiyya Muslim worshippers across the Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan faced widespread obstruction in their efforts to get to their place of worship. On the same day, the authorities

sealed two more mosques belonging to Ahmadiyya Muslims, bringing the total to 10. Some 169 graves were desecrated at the same time, and 42 Ahmadiyya Muslims remain behind bars on faith-based charges. Will the Leader of the House request that the Foreign Secretary call upon the international community to urge Pakistan to protect Ahmadi Muslim mosques, release all Ahmadi Muslims arrested on fabricated charges, protect Ahmadi Muslim graves, uphold its obligations under the international human rights framework, and uphold the rights and safety of all its citizens?

Lucy Powell: The British Government condemn the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, and we are aware of the recent reports of threats and incidents at holy sites. As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a very important matter, which I will raise with the Minister.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): The Droitwich transmitter in my constituency, commonly known as the Wychbold masts, celebrated its 90th birthday last year. The longwave transmitter was used as a jamming device by the Royal Air Force to obstruct enemy transmissions trying to reach Luftwaffe aircraft that were approaching Britain, and it played a pivotal role on D-day and in communicating with the French resistance. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling for the masts to be strongly considered for listing by Historic England for their role in defending this nation?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has made a very strong case for the masts to be listed as part of our history. Fantastic work was done during the world wars to make sure that we were protected.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. There are 12 people wishing to speak and we have 10 minutes—you can do the maths. Keep your questions short.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Yesterday, on 2 April, I received an unprompted letter from the Home Builders Federation, which said:

“A recent Freedom of Information request...shows that Rushcliffe Borough Council holds £50 million of unspent developer contributions in total, equivalent to £1,000 per household. This is the fifth-biggest amount in the country on a per-household basis, and 4 times the national average.”

Nationally, a total of £8 billion-worth of developer contributions are unspent. Does the Leader of the House agree that these are eye-watering sums of money not being spent on local infrastructure and local people, and will she ensure that the relevant team look into why this is happening?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises the very important issue of unspent developer contributions. There really is no excuse for the eye-watering length of time it has taken for his local authority to deploy them, and he has made a strong case here today.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Last year, there were more than 4,000 incidents of fly-tipping in Buckinghamshire. I have been working with Thames Valley police, who are increasing patrols in affected

areas such as Slapton and Ivinghoe Aston, but it is not enough. One resident has told me that it is beyond a joke. Does the Leader of the House agree that we have to do more to tackle fly-tipping, and will she make time for us to debate introducing tougher sanctions for those who continue to spoil our countryside and our villages in this way?

Lucy Powell: We are absolutely committed to forcing fly-tippers and vandals to clean up the mess that they have created as part of our crackdown on antisocial behaviour. There are further measures in the Crime and Policing Bill, and I look forward to debating them with my hon. Friend.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Fourteen years of neglect from the Conservative party left high streets, such as the one in Edgware, in a shocking state. One common complaint that my constituents have is that phone boxes on Edgware high street have become derelict and act as a magnet for graffiti, vandalism and litter. I am pleased to say that after lobbying BT, two of these unsightly phone boxes will be removed, but there is much more work to be done. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time to map out the Government's comprehensive plan to revive Britain's high streets?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the important issue of high streets. From my time as a Member of Parliament, I know that any debate on the future of phone boxes would be incredibly well attended if he wanted to apply for one.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): I recently met constituents who are campaigning locally to improve care for those with Parkinson's. Next week, we will observe World Parkinson's Day, which helps raise awareness about the disease and its impact. Enhanced funding and support for research can lead to better treatments, and potentially to a cure. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of research into Parkinson's?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this important issue, which has been raised with me a number of times. We are committed to supporting those with Parkinson's. We can go further on research and support, and I am sure that a debate on this matter would be very well attended.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): John Staines has volunteered with Hertford Town football club for 30 years, and he has been a fan for 60 years. To mark his 93rd birthday, he wants to see 1,000 people attend Saturday's game against Flackwell Heath FC. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging our residents to watch Saturday's game and in celebrating John's outstanding contribution to the club over those years?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in supporting John Staines's call to get 1,000 people down to Hertford Town FC this weekend, which would be a great tribute to his life. I am sure he will want to raise such an issue when we debate the Football Governance Bill, which is coming back to the House after Easter.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): Under current passport application rules, an applicant needs a counter-signatory who has known them for at least two years

[*Martin Rhodes*]

and is in good standing in their community or from a recognised profession. One of my constituents has faced a problem with these requirements due to losing contact with her social circle as a result of complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Although in theory discretion exists in these rules, my constituent remains unable to get a passport. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on ensuring passport accessibility?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the difficulties my hon. Friend's constituent has. We want to ensure that people can easily and readily apply for a passport, which is a vital identification document. We have to do that in a way that makes sure we have confidence in the system, but I will certainly ensure that the relevant Minister looks into this case.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I recently had the honour of attending Renfrewshire council's provost community awards to celebrate the incredible contribution that many make to our communities. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the winners from Paisley and Renfrewshire South—Jean Gallagher, who has volunteered for 25 years at the Johnstone learning centre, the Autastic Club, OB Muay Thai gym and Craig Ferguson, who has raised many thousands of pounds for men's mental health?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating all the winners of those community awards, to whom she has paid a great tribute.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): My constituent Jagtar Singh Johal, who has now been in arbitrary detention in India for seven and a half years, was acquitted of all charges on 4 March in the first case against him to conclude. However, he has not been released because he is facing eight other essentially duplicate cases, without the prospect of any credible evidence by the Indian prosecutors against him. Time is of the essence. It is exactly one month since the verdict, and my constituent's family advise that his conditions of detention have significantly deteriorated since the acquittal. Can I ask the Leader of the House to arrange an urgent statement confirming that our Government are acting with the utmost urgency, that there is the political will to push robustly for his immediate release, and that they recognise that now is the moment to bring him home to my constituency and to his family in Dumbarton?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me and others many times, and I am sure his constituent is really glad to have him as his Member of Parliament in these difficult times. As I have said to him in previous answers, we want to see this case swiftly resolved, and I will ensure that the relevant Minister discusses with him the latest on this case.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Newlife, a charity based in my constituency, provides specialist equipment for disabled children. In 2023 alone it helped 1,524 children nationwide. It has told me about the challenges these children face in getting the right equipment at the right time. Would the Leader of the House grant

a debate on the roles and responsibilities of health, social care and education services and the charity sector in ensuring that disabled children receive the specialist equipment they need?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to join up better all the different services and charities to ensure that disabled children get the equipment and support they desperately need, and I think this is a really good topic for a debate.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Wednesday last week was Epilepsy Awareness Day. My constituent Sara contacted me about its acknowledgment in Parliament, and today I am wearing a purple tie to mark epilepsy awareness. Will the Leader of the House reassure Sara and me that support for the hundreds of thousands of people who suffer from this challenging condition will remain at the heart of the Government's healthcare policy?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising Epilepsy Awareness Day, for wearing a purple tie and for supporting his constituent Sara. He has raised another important issue, and tackling epilepsy and other health conditions is what this Government are all about.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I recently attended the official opening of Her-Place Charitable Trust's new hub in Winsford, using space generously provided by Weaver Vale Housing Trust. The hub will provide the charity with its first permanent base, from where it can deliver services to support women and girls across Cheshire, including the community launderette, drop-in clinics and friendship groups. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Her-Place not only on the opening of its new hub, but on the invaluable work it does in my area?

Lucy Powell: I will join my hon. Friend in congratulating Her-Place. It sounds like a really important hub in his constituency for women and girls to come together.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): For the final question, I call the ever-patient David Williams.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Residents from Newchapel and Butt Lane in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove recently contacted me about inconsiderate pavement parking in their areas. One resident who has significant health issues fears that ambulances will struggle to make it down her cul-de-sac, placing them at unacceptable risk. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on appropriate parking enforcement and resourcing requirements?

Lucy Powell: Parking always generates a very considerable debate in this House, and pavement parking would be no exception. I join my hon. Friend in raising that issue today. I am sure it would be a very popular topic for a debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House and colleagues for moving at pace—we got everybody in.

UK-US Trade and Tariffs

11.51 am

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the United Kingdom's economic relationship with the United States. The UK has a strong and balanced trading relationship with the US worth £315 billion, which supports 2.5 million jobs across both our countries. This is second only to the EU, where our trading relationship is worth £791 billion.¹ Yesterday evening the United States announced a 10% reciprocal tariff on UK exports, and it has today imposed a 25% global tariff on cars. That follows the application of tariffs of 25% on US imports of steel, aluminium and derivative products announced on 12 March.

No country was able to secure an exemption from those announcements, but the UK did receive the lowest reciprocal tariff rate globally. And although that vindicates the pragmatic approach the Government have taken, we know that while the tariffs are still being levied the job is far from done. We are, of course, disappointed by the increase in tariffs on the UK and on other countries around the world. The impact will be felt among all trading nations. But I would like to update the House on how the UK can navigate these turbulent times, acting in our national interest and for the benefit of all our industries.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my American counterparts, Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick, US trade representative Jamieson Greer, and special envoy Mark Burnett for their engagement over the past few months. While any imposition of tariffs is deeply regrettable, from the beginning they promised to make themselves available and they have been true to their word. I look forward to our continued engagement over the days ahead.

As Members will know, since the new US Administration took office, my colleagues and I have been engaged in intensive discussions on an economic deal between the US and the UK, one that would not just avoid the imposition of significant tariffs but deepen our economic relationship. On everything from defence, economic security, financial services, machinery, tech and regulation, there are clear synergies between the US and UK markets. That is reflected in the fair and balanced trading relationship that already exists between our two countries.

I can confirm to the House that those talks are ongoing and will remain so. It is the Government's view that a deal is not just possible but favourable to both countries, and that this course of action serves Britain's interests as an open-facing trading nation. I have been in contact with many businesses, across a broad range of sectors, including those most affected, who have very much welcomed this approach. It is clear to me that industry itself wants to grasp the opportunity a deal can offer and welcomes the Government's cool-headed approach.

In increasingly insecure times, I have heard some Members cling to the security of simple answers and loud voices. I understand the compulsion, but I caution Members of this House to keep calm and remain clear-eyed on what is in our national interest, not simply to proclaim that we follow the actions of other countries. The British people rightly expect the Government to keep our country secure at home and abroad, and an unnecessary, escalating trade war would serve neither goal.

True strength comes in making the right choices at the right time. Thanks to the actions of our Prime Minister, who has restored Britain's place on the world stage, the UK is in a unique position to do a deal where we can, and to respond when we must. It remains our belief that the best route to economic stability for working people is a negotiated deal with the US that builds on our shared strengths. However, we do reserve the right to take any action we deem necessary if a deal is not secured.

To enable the UK to have every option open to us in the future, I am today launching a request for input on the implications for British businesses of possible retaliatory action. This is a formal step and it is necessary for us to keep all options on the table. We will seek the views of UK stakeholders over four weeks until 1 May 2025 on products that could potentially be included in any UK tariff response. This exercise will also give businesses the chance to have their say and influence the design of any possible UK action. If we are in a position to agree an economic deal with the US that lifts the tariffs that have been placed on our industries, this request for input will be paused, and any measures flowing from it will be lifted. Further information on the request for input will be published on [great.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) later today, alongside an indicative list of potential products that the Government consider most appropriate for inclusion.

I know that this will be an anxious time for all businesses, not just those with direct trade links to America. Let me say very clearly that we stand ready to support businesses through this. That starts by ensuring that businesses have reliable information; any businesses that are concerned about what these changes mean for them can find clear guidance and support on [great.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk), where there is now a bespoke webpage.

This Government were elected to bring security back to working people's lives. At a time of volatility, businesses and workers alike are looking to this Government to keep our heads, act in the national interest and navigate Britain through this period. While some may urge escalation, I simply will not play politics with people's jobs. This Government will strive for a deal that supports our industries and the well-paid jobs that come with them, while preparing our trade defences and keeping all options on the table. This is the right approach to defend the UK's domestic industries from the direct and indirect impacts of US tariffs in a way that is both measured and proportionate, while respecting the rules-based international trading system.

As the world continues to change around us, British workers and businesses can be assured of one constant: this is a Government who will not be set off course in choppy waters. The final part of our approach will be to turbo-boost the work this Government are doing to make our economy stronger and more secure, including our new industrial strategy. We will strike trade deals with our partners and work closely with our allies for our shared prosperity. We have a clear destination to deliver economic security for working people. We are progressing a deal that can do just that, laying the foundations to move quickly should it not, and ensuring that British businesses have a clear voice in what happens next. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1. [Official Report, 8 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 6WC.]

11.58 am

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Businesses, workers and their families woke up this morning with greater fear and more uncertainty about their future. Tariffs make us all poorer by pushing up costs, suppressing demand and making the pound in our pocket buy less of the things we need. It is free trade to which we owe our past prosperity, and free trade that has lifted billions out of poverty since the second world war.

This is a moment for calm words and cool heads, and we will support the Government when they do sensible things to reverse the impacts on our already fragile economy. I am glad they have recommitted to reaching a deal with our closest ally and largest single country trading partner. However, this is also a moment for honesty and telling the truth. The Government, sadly, got no special favours from the White House last night. The Secretary of State refers to vindication. This is no vindication at all. We are in precisely the same band as the Congo, Costa Rica, Kosovo and Christmas Island. In fact, I can count more than 125 countries and territories that have the same US tariff levels as we now do—not that special.

Our automotive manufacturers face unchanged tariffs of 25% on around £8 billion-worth of cars and auto parts exports. Steel and aluminium exports remain at 25% and, on a volume-weighted basis, our exports face an average tariff of closer to 13%.

Above all, last night was a vindication of those who were pilloried and abused for wanting our country to have the freedom to decide our own trade policy. If Labour and the Liberal Democrats had their way, we would still be in the EU. As the Prime Minister acknowledged this morning, thousands of British jobs have been saved today as the result. I hope that he and his colleagues had the decency to regret the 48 times that they voted to stay in Europe, and to thank us for getting Brexit done.

Last week, the OBR warned that these tariffs could knock up to 1% off GDP. We are already in a per capita recession and markets are falling this morning. It is businesses that create jobs and grow our economy, yet, at every turn, the Government have piled on headwinds when they need our support. They put a tax on jobs, more than doubled business rates for many, introduced the family business death tax and are barrelling ahead with flawed recycling charges. No wonder business confidence remains at rock bottom.

To help British exporters survive, the Government must urgently tackle our sky-high energy costs. A business in Birmingham, west midlands, faces energy costs that are four times those of its competitors in Birmingham, Alabama in the US. That dwarfs the impact of tariffs and is no basis on which to compete.

The Secretary of State was responsible for the Employment Rights Bill, which will hit businesses so hard that the OBR has not even begun to assess how much it will hurt the economy. Now is the time, today is the day for the Secretary of State to walk back to his Department and, in the national interest, instruct his officials to shelve the Employment Rights Bill. He should put ideology aside, put the unions on hold and put the Government on the side of British business. The cost of

failure is too high, the burdens on business are too great and time is too precious, the Secretary of State must act and act fast.

Let me conclude with some questions for the Secretary of State on behalf of all our constituents. Will he publish an urgent assessment of the impact of today's tariffs on the UK economy so that the markets can see whether the Chancellor's emergency Budget sums still add up, or whether she will be back for more taxes? When will he give the car makers the clarity they need on the ZEV—zero emission vehicle—mandate? Will he undertake to keep Parliament informed and to publish the UK's broader objectives—not its negotiating strategy, but the broader objectives—in these trade negotiations with the UK, precisely as the previous Government did in March 2020? Will he assure us that any deal will back British farmers and food producers and uphold our high environmental protection and animal welfare standards, which we have enhanced and upheld in the agreements that we have reached since leaving the EU?

Will the Secretary of State now surge additional resources for exporters, reallocating resources across Government to fund a new version of the UK trade show programme and enlarge the GREAT campaign? What consideration are the Government giving to the special situation of Northern Ireland? Will he guarantee that all claims under the duty reimbursement scheme for Northern Ireland will be paid promptly and the Government will commit additional resources when required? Can he reassure us that, in the event the UK did see a major trade distortion in Northern Ireland, the Government would be prepared, if necessary, to trigger article 16 of the Windsor framework? Will he reassure the House that any concessions to UK tech giants on the digital services tax will not simply shift the burden to the United Kingdom's small businesses?

The Conservatives are on the side of business and Britain. We understand the gravity of the situation, and we will support the Government where they act in the national interest. I hope that they will take this moment seriously, get back around the table with their US counterparts and involve the House in their deliberations.

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his response and his tone in responding. I recognise his commitment to free trade and the case he has made for it. I believe it is something we broadly share. He asks for honesty—that is always good in Parliament—but he is a little bit flippant about the position we find ourselves in today. He mentions a series of countries—Christmas Island, Kosovo—that do not have the kind of complex trading relationship that we have with the United States.

The shadow Secretary of State can see from my tone, presentation and words that I am disappointed that we are in this position, but I look at the EU, facing a tariff of 20%; at Japan with 24%; at India with 26%; and at Canada and Mexico with 25% tariffs already in place. Yes, we are in a more favourable position compared with those key friends and allies, but we must go further, especially in relation to the tariffs on the automotive sector, which is a particular concern for me.

The shadow Secretary of State again brings up Brexit, which was perhaps not the Conservative party's finest hour in preparing the state for large trade shocks, but let us pass over that. As the President of the Board of Trade, I am of the view that it is good that we can set

our own trade policy, but I say to him and to all colleagues: is it not time that we try to unite the country for the future, rather than keep on harking back to the past? Is that not how we will find our way through this? Half the country voted one way, and half voted the other way, but let us build together and look to the future. It is the right way forward. My next point is very important: it is false to see this as a choice between working with the US and working with the EU. We can work in a way that is consistent with both, and we should all be committed to that.

The shadow Secretary of State also asked about the implications for the United Kingdom. Broadly, he asked me to reverse a series of policy choices made in the last 14 years; I will go through all of those. In relation to the spring statement, the Chancellor had already rebuilt the headroom substantially higher, due to the global turbulence, than that bequeathed her by the Conservative party.

On the Conservatives' spending plans, they left no business rates relief whatever: it was a one-year relief, rolled over, that never had any longevity. I have not yet received any credible proposals on how their spending plans would be paid for, but I am always available to receive those in writing.

The shadow Secretary of State asks for reassurance, which we are always happy to provide on domestic policy changes. On things like the ZEV mandate for the automotive sector, we are more pragmatic than the Conservative party was when in office. As he knows, the Department for Transport leads on that policy, but our response to the consultation on potential changes will be published soon. As colleagues would expect, I will not comment on the details of any negotiations with the US.

In our manifesto, we committed to the UK's sanitary, phytosanitary and food safety standards system. Of course the Government will adhere to that. The shadow Secretary of State also knows that we are imminently preparing to publish our trade strategy, which covers a lot of these issues, particularly around support for exporters that we want to proceed with.

Northern Ireland is an incredibly important issue for all colleagues. The potential for a differential response from the European Union could lead to a difficult situation in Northern Ireland. As the Secretary of State highlights, the key policy is the duty reimbursement scheme, because goods entering Northern Ireland from the US that will not go into the wider single market are subject to the reimbursement programme. We must make sure that that works well. I recognise the points that he has made on it, and I will continue to update the House and all colleagues on our work in this area. I recognise how important and relevant it is to all our constituents, so we will endeavour to keep all colleagues updated on progress.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Workers at BMW at Cowley are deeply concerned by the recent news. BMW is right that a trade war would have no benefits. The Secretary of State is right to engage calmly with his US counterparts, but what discussions has he had with his EU counterparts, given how integrated our automotive sector is with that of EU countries?

Jonathan Reynolds: My right hon. Friend is right that some of our iconic automotive manufacturing brands, such as BMW, Jaguar Land Rover and Aston Martin,

have had particular success in the US market and are therefore exposed to tariffs. There is close co-operation in Government between the teams working on our EU reset and on our trade negotiations in this area, so I assure my right hon. Friend of the alignment, continuity and consistency of our policy.

My right hon. Friend will know that, along with the changes to domestic policies such as the ZEV mandate, there was significant money in the Budget for incentivising the roll-out of infrastructure for electric vehicles, and £2 billion has been put aside for the wider joint collaboration and research and development initiatives with the automotive sector, which remains a clear and consistent Government priority. I will keep my right hon. Friend updated given her particular constituency interest.

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

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Donald Trump has launched a destructive trade war that threatens the jobs and living standards of people across the UK and around the world. Let us be clear: this is not about reciprocity or a level playing field. The US is conflating our high British standards with trade barriers, and it is doing so on purpose. This is Donald Trump saying to the UK that he will lower tariffs only if we lower standards. He is saying, "Sell out your NHS to US vulture firms, or else; sell out your farmers to US big business, or else; and give up protections against online scammers and for children's safety to US tech barons, or else." If the Government give in to Trump's threats, it will only encourage him to use the same bullying tactics again and again.

It is simultaneously true that the way the White House has made its crude calculation actually makes Britain's negotiating position a bit better than the position of other countries, and we genuinely welcome that—it is a relief to us all. With regret, there is, however, no sign that the Government's lobbying has borne any fruit, given that we have been put on the same regime as a number of other countries such as Honduras, Peru and Guatemala. This must be a wake-up call.

We Liberal Democrats believe that we must end this trade war as quickly as possible, which means standing firm with our allies against Trump's attempts to divide and rule. Will the Government take urgent steps to bring our Commonwealth and European partners together in an economic coalition of the willing against Trump's tariffs? We welcome the month of consultation with business; will the Government confirm that they will look at energy costs and business rates reform as part of that four-week consultation, especially in respect of the car industry? Will the consultation run in parallel with talks with our allies to draw up plans for the co-ordinated use of retaliatory tariffs?

When do the Government expect to publish an assessment of the impact of the tariffs on small businesses, jobs and the cost of living? Will they look seriously at launching talks with the EU to create a bespoke customs union? Let us be clear: the UK would not be in a worse place if the Government had heeded our calls to negotiate a customs union. Even the Conservative party should

[Daisy Cooper]

be able to see that Turkey has been in a customs union with the EU since 1995, and it has likewise been hit with tariffs of only 10%.

Finally, will the Government rule out once and for all the watering down of the digital services tax, or our digital competition regulations, to appease Trump's billionaire backers?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her questions and her submission. I am pleased to hear that she feels we need to end any potential trade war—although I am pretty certain I heard her in the media last week demanding that we escalate the trade war. I do not think that is in any of our interests, and it is not the route and direction we need to go in.

The hon. Lady mentions that there is no sign of the UK being treated in any different way; she will know that the US has a view of VAT that we do not share—the US compares VAT to its sales tax. If we look at our rate of VAT and the comparable treatment of the European Union, we see that there is a differential. That does not satisfy me, because I believe we could seriously get to a position in which we not only avoid the imposition of additional trade tariffs and barriers, but deepen our trade relationship and remove some of the barriers that already exist, particularly in the trade in services. That is the Government's objective.

We of course work closely with a whole range of friends and allies, but when they go into any negotiation, they represent their own national or customs union interest, and we do the same. I would not expect any country to go into a negotiation trying to represent the UK; other countries will have their own interests. I do the same for the United Kingdom: I have to put our interests first. There is a different structure to the trading relationship between the US and the UK—for instance, the US does not have with us the large deficit in traded goods that it has with the EU or China—so it is a different level of conversation and it allows us to put our own interests first. That is all that the Government seek to do in our policy towards the US.

The hon. Lady mentions a range of other issues that I recognise. Colleagues know that I had strong views on the very large increases in industrial energy costs that occurred after 2010—there was an increase of almost 50% in real terms—and I think they need to be addressed. The industrial strategy and other Government initiatives set out our wider policy objectives and tools in this area. The consultation and call for input that I announced today is much more about the formal steps we need to take to understand from businesses the impact and give them the chance to put forward their views. As I say, that will not be necessary if we can come to an agreement, which I believe all Members want us to do. I believe that the relationship can be deepened. If we get it right, it will not come at a cost to our other key trading relationships, such as with the European Union. That is the Government's objective and I welcome any support from throughout the House for fulfilling it.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Yesterday's dramatic shift in US trade policy marks an historic abdication of the principles of open commerce and global trade that have underpinned the economies of

the western world since the end of the second world war. Tariffs bring no winners—there are only losers, through higher costs for consumers and higher barriers for business and industry. Will the Secretary of State set out how the Government are working with international institutions such as the World Trade Organisation to prevent further escalation and position the UK as a leading champion for open markets?

Jonathan Reynolds: I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's question. He is right that this is a substantial change in US policy. It is important that, even if we do not agree with some of the decisions made and the thinking that underpins them, we recognise where they come from. Indeed, they were part of the US presidential campaign, so we have been able to prepare the ground for our conversations.

My hon. Friend asked about international co-operation. We are strongly involved with the WTO, and particularly supported the re-election of Dr Ngozi as its director-general. It is important to remember that despite the problems the multilateral system faces, it is still the basis on which the vast majority of trade around the world takes place. We will continue to play a constructive role in relation to the WTO, and any multilateral organisation, where that serves our interests.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What was missing from the Secretary of State's statement, and from his reply to both Opposition Front-Bench spokespeople, was the Government's estimate of the cost of the tariffs, particularly in the context of the Chancellor's fiscal headroom. Will the Secretary of State update the House on that specifically?

Jonathan Reynolds: As a former Treasury Minister, the right hon. Gentleman will know the kind of work that goes on to make sure that such assessments are made. The announcement came late last night; it is only last night and this morning that we have had the chance to respond to it. He will also appreciate that the impact on the UK is about not just the direct relationship between the US and the UK, but what happens in the wider global trading system. How other countries choose to react to the US announcements will be the determining factor for the impact on the UK, and we do not know that at this stage.

I promise to keep the House updated, and to update the right hon. Gentleman personally, if he wishes, at any stage on our work to assess the impact on the UK. For all Members of Parliament, this should be a time for reassurance, for calm heads and for giving clear information to British business on how we will navigate these difficult times. That is the correct message to send out from Parliament.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): If those on the Opposition Front Bench are still trying to propagate the arguments of 2016, I suggest they are a bit drunk on chlorinated chicken. We need to get real. Celebrating a tariff of 10% rather than 20% is like a person celebrating the fact that when they were mugged, only their wallet was taken, not their watch as well. The British public deserve better.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for talking about our relationship with Europe, because who knows what President Trump will bring next week? We do five

times more business with the European Union than with America. It is in our interest to have a close and stable trading relationship with Europe, but right now, that is up for grabs, too. What do the tariffs mean for the Secretary of State's negotiations on the European reset, and for the summit in May?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. Let me be clear again: no one is celebrating the position that the country found itself in this morning. We recognise the differential for the UK, but all of us in the House—Members from all parties—are disappointed by the announcement from the United States, and are seeking to provide a way through.

I know that my hon. Friend feels very strongly about this matter, but I reiterate to her that we do not have to make a choice between the US and the EU. They are two key, long-term and important trading partners, and security and defence partners as well. The EU summit next month is a key event. Our aspirations remain for an ambitious EU reset on trade, to rectify flaws in the agreement made by the previous Government. Our objectives are clear and were all in the manifesto on which Government Members stood for election and won. They remain a key priority. I assure my hon. Friend that the alignment in Government between the EU reset and the US negotiation is very strong.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): The Business Secretary delayed and dithered for five months before meeting his US counterparts, and working people and businesses in the UK are paying the price for that dereliction of duty. Does he regret his refusal to meet his US counterparts earlier?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Lady is incorrect, and I must ask her to take a bit more of a serious tone in the questions that she brings to the House. This is really serious stuff. I have met my counterparts on many occasions, and we were in contact even before some of the formal procedures on the US side were confirmed. It was not technically possible to have been in touch with them sooner. Their engagement has been consistent and serious. She is incorrect, and I ask her to please approach these important proceedings with a bit more seriousness.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The US tariffs have serious implications for UK industry. They are a reminder of the importance of the industrial strategy and Government support, including for domestic steel-making capability, which, sadly, the Conservative party neglected badly over 14 years. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is fully committed to the plan for steel, and confirm the importance of our sovereign steelmaking capacity?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and for the work that he did, alongside me, in this area over many years in opposition. He knows the commitment of the Government and Government Members to the steel industry. Of all the issues of industrial neglect that we were bequeathed, those are some of the harder ones to resolve; there is no doubt about that. He knows that our ambition is strong, whether we are talking about the future of British Steel at Scunthorpe and Teesside, or, in terms of sovereign

capability, our aspirations under the steel strategy for new investments and new technology. The issues are difficult—particularly this week; I know that all the workers at Scunthorpe are concerned—but the Government's commitment to and work on the steel sector will go on.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Can the Secretary of State offer us any guarantee that the Government will not enter into a trade deal with America that will allow the importation and sale in this country of food produced to lower environmental and animal welfare standards than those that we demand from United Kingdom farmers?

Jonathan Reynolds: The right hon. Member knows that I will not go into the detail of any negotiation, but he knows of our manifesto commitment to our SPS regime, which I mentioned to the shadow Secretary of State. That commitment is important to the Government, and it affects all our trade negotiations, not just this one.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. The port of Felixstowe is the UK's busiest container shipping port. Though we import more than we export, we are also the ninth-largest exporter, and the USA market is important for our local and national trading markets. Last night's news will likely have a significant impact on global trading markets, and it is not an exaggeration to say that it could change the global trading consensus of the last 80 years. Just as President Trump is acting in what he believes is his national interest, will the Secretary of State reassure me and my constituents in Felixstowe and across Suffolk Coastal that he and the Prime Minister will act firmly in our national interests, and do whatever is necessary to protect British jobs, British trade and industry, and British consumers?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the historic scale and significance of the announcement last night, particularly for her constituency, which has economic infrastructure that is so vital to the country, and how we will process the scale of the changes. I assure her that the Prime Minister, members of the Cabinet and I as the Secretary of State are at all times doing what she mentioned, in the decisions that we have had to make at pace, so that we can put our national interests forward in a way that has allowed us to progress negotiations and to keep opportunities open.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): For all the carefully choreographed bonhomie in the Oval Office last November, the Prime Minister failed to secure a US military backstop for his coalition. Despite No. 10 briefing a narrative about productive discussions at the weekend, the Prime Minister has admitted to business leaders that there will be an economic impact from the decisions that the US has taken. On Times Radio this morning, the Business Secretary said that he would roll up his sleeves to try to remove the impact on businesses entirely. That is a bold claim, given the circumstances and the impact that the Chancellor's Budget is already having. What timeframe does he envisage for an economic deal with the US? What will he be doing until 1 May while waiting for the views of UK shareholders?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Member will have heard me this morning on the media and here in Parliament being clear about how we feel about these decisions. We are deeply disappointed that no country has been able to secure an exemption from the tariffs, but we remain committed to working hard to deliver a potential way through this.

The hon. Member asked how we will respond. Respectfully, the statement covered the fact that we will ask British businesses to work with us on the necessary formal steps. On the timeframe, I shadowed a lot of Conservative Business Secretaries in the last few years—there was fairly rapid turnover at one point—and some of them gave all kinds of timeframes and commitments on trade deals, but that is not in our interests because it puts pressure on us in the negotiations. The US side will have timescales that it wants to engage on, but I believe that no country in the world is further advanced in its talks with the United States, and hope and optimism comes from that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Chi Onwurah will be followed by Steve Darling.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The US is our closest ally and the world's largest economy, as well as being the UK's greatest source of foreign direct investment, so I welcome my right hon. Friend's calm and pragmatic approach, and his determination not to abandon British workers' rights in the face of these tariffs, as the Conservatives urge us to, but rather to focus on the trade talks. Will the Online Safety Act 2023, the Digital Markets Competition and Consumers Act 2024 and the digital sales tax be part of the talks? Will he also say a little more about his counter-argument to the Trump Administration's view that VAT and the DST represent tariffs, rather than tax?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend reminds me that I did not get a chance to respond to the shadow Secretary of State. If, following these announcements in the United States, we had come to Parliament and said, "You know, the answer to this is that low-paid people will not get the sick pay they would otherwise have got under this Labour Government," that would have been the wrong response. Again, as ever, that would be scapegoating the wrong people for difficult things that have nothing to do with their position in the UK economy.

My hon. Friend skilfully leveraged in a number of questions. There are real differences of opinion between us and the United States on VAT. We say that it applies, as it does, to domestically produced goods as much as to goods that come into the UK, and that it is not trade distorting; indeed, the balance of trade between the US and the UK is evidence of that. The argument from the US is slightly different. I will not go into the content of all the negotiations—she will appreciate that—but success in any negotiation is about being willing to be at the table and put forward our argument, while recognising the other side's argument. That is the approach of this Government, and that is the way forward.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): We must stand up to the bully that is Trump and support British business. This morning, I reached out to Gooch & Housego, a manufacturer in Torbay of fibreoptics that help to facilitate

international communications. It has interests in manufacturing in the US, the UK, Europe and Thailand. It and other players in the high-tech sector now have an extremely complex world to navigate. How does the Secretary of State plan to help the high-tech sector navigate the challenging world that we now live in?

Jonathan Reynolds: Our job is to defend the UK national interest, and the company in Torbay that the hon. Member described—it sounds like a fantastic company—is an exemplar of why I want businesses to be based in the UK: because they can then access a whole range of markets from the best possible position. That is exactly the kind of company that, because of complex supply chains, will have questions about what the announcements mean for it. We decided to launch bespoke information on [great.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) today to coincide with this announcement precisely to attempt to provide such companies with the assurance that they need.

A business like that can genuinely help us through this difficult period, because whatever hon. Members think of the President and his agenda, that agenda is based on returning a certain type of good-quality manufacturing job to the United States, and in many cases British firms and British business already provide those. They will provide more if we can find a way through these trade tensions and the imposition of tariffs, so they can work with us on the solution to these problems. I am grateful to the hon. Member for mentioning that company.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State's commitment to steel. Stocksbridge Speciality Steels in my constituency is a strategically significant site with world-class, unique capability for creating specialist parts that will be essential in increasing our defence capacity and net zero infrastructure. Last week, I held a community listening event on the Government's excellent steel strategy. The message was clear: let us ensure that British-made steel is best. Does the Secretary of State agree that today's news further demonstrates why it is so important that this Government are committed to a £2.5 billion plan for steel?

Jonathan Reynolds: I greatly appreciate my hon. Friend's advocacy for steel. She puts the case extremely well, which is that the kind of products that we make in the UK steel sector and which, in the main—where we export them to the US—are niche, high value and in critical sectors such as defence and the manufacturing supply chain, are complementary to the US. That is a good case of why I believe there is no need and no argument for the imposition of tariffs in the sector. Our steel sector is complementary to the US, whether that is in defence or the manufacturing supply chain. That is the basis on which we can find a way through this.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the level of domestic support has increased considerably through the steel strategy and the £2.5 billion—£3 billion in total, including Port Talbot—that this Government have put forward. It is very important to us that we support the foundation industries. The steel strategy is a clear example of that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: From another steel constituency, I call Martin Vickers.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Dealing with the erratic Trump Administration must be something of a nightmare for negotiations. The unexpected can always emerge from the White House, but one certainty is that tariffs were going to form part of the Trump agenda. It is somewhat surprising that the Minister is only today launching a consultation about the implications of retaliatory measures. Building on the previous questions about steel, will the Secretary of State at least acknowledge that the current uncertainty in the whole of the world market increases the pressure on the Government to acknowledge that further support will be needed for that industry?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He knows that I always have time for him to discuss the particularly challenging constituency issues that he faces through the position at British Steel. Just to be clear, today's announcement is the formal step necessary to engage with British business about last night's announcements. That is an important stage and the right way forward, and we have been prepared for it.

In relation to the other challenges around the steel industry, this is a particularly challenging situation—he and my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin) know that better than anyone. Our commitment, even in difficult circumstances, is absolute. We will continue with that, and I will continue to keep him and his constituents updated at all times.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Many of us may remember a time when Boris Johnson and many of those on the Conservative Benches claimed that a trade deal with Donald Trump could increase our trade with the US by up to five times. It was clearly more difficult than they thought, but it is important to learn from failure. I wonder whether the Opposition had been in a position to pass on any pearls of wisdom or any advice—maybe even an oven-ready deal—that might help the country at this time of difficulties. [*Laughter.*]

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I have been in touch with a lot of people who have been this country's Business Secretary, including some Conservative colleagues who remain in touch. I find that, at times, to be a very useful and worthwhile thing. I cannot tell my right hon. Friend that I am in touch with Boris Johnson on this or any other matter.

On the work of the previous Government, nothing substantive was negotiated in the trade talks they had with the US. This is a very different situation, but one where I think, if we get it right, there are gains. As I say, it is not just to avoid what was announced last night or before that on steel, aluminium and automotive tariffs, but to genuinely improve that trading relationship to our mutual benefit.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Tariffs are always and everywhere a diminution of the choice available to consumers. So it is not liberation day; it is the very antithesis. I hope the Secretary of State will bear that in mind as he considers the policy and the consultation on any retaliatory action.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for how he has put that. I think he is right on where the burdens of policy fall in that area. It is not in anyone's interest. No one wins a trade war; that is

impossible. However, it requires us to react in a way that is calm, reassuring and pragmatic and which seeks a way forward. I can tell him that that is exactly what this Government will seek to do.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and his colleagues for all he has done so far in negotiating an economic partnership deal with the US. The automotive sector is an incredibly important one for Cheshire and Merseyside, both for manufacturers such as Bentley, Vauxhall and Jaguar Land Rover, and the wider supply chain, which supports the employment of tens of thousands. The US is the biggest export market for Bentley Motors in Crewe, so it is likely to be at the sharp end of the tariffs. We all hope that my right hon. Friend's calm-headed approach has meant that we are in the best position to secure a deal. What specific support does he have in mind for the automotive sector to help it weather the storm?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that. I am tremendously proud of our automotive sector. Indeed, he may know that I come from and grew up in one of our automotive sector powerhouses, Sunderland, with the Nissan plant. It is incredibly important to lots of communities in the supply chain all around the UK, but particularly to our exports. The US is a key market, particularly for the high-value models, some of which he mentioned, which are incredibly valuable to this country. We want and seek to maintain that success.

On the kind of support, first, it is about dealing with this issue. Secondly, there are things such as the announcement in the Budget of the £2 billion for collaboration with the private sector in the automotive field, the money incentives for electric vehicle infrastructure and the changes around the wider ZEV mandate that we are consulting on and about to publish a response to, for which we need a more pragmatic response than we have seen in the past.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Despite there being a trade deficit and despite the best efforts of this Government, including the Secretary of State, for whom I have a great deal of personal respect, the reality is that we have still been hit by significant tariffs from the States. People at home right now will be worried about jobs, inflation and the global headwinds, which will undoubtedly hit us irrespective of our own tariff situation. One industry in particular, back home in Scotland, that will be watching with eager eyes is the Scotch whisky industry, given the billions of pounds of exports that go to the United States. I do not want the Secretary of State to try and control—nor could he—Trump's tariffs policy. What he can do, however, is control his domestic taxation regime. Will he take this opportunity to re-engage with the Chancellor in and around the Scotch whisky taxation status?

Jonathan Reynolds: The right hon. Gentleman knows the value that we place as a Department on the incredible product that is Scotch whisky. We have a particular set of policy initiatives on geographic indicators to make sure the brand is protected, and I always do everything I can to support Scotch whisky, which is just absolutely world class and always will be.

He is right to say that our joint success in Scotch whisky produces a prominence that sometimes makes it vulnerable to retaliatory measures because of the recognition

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of the success in that field. On domestic policy, I remain in close contact with the Chancellor on all matters and will do on this one. There are tremendous opportunities for Scotch whisky from some of the other trade negotiations that we are having, such as with India in particular, which is the biggest whisky market in the world, as the right hon. Gentleman will know. I think there could be real steps forward in terms of our market access there and the arrangements that we have, which will give us an advantage over other countries, and that is also a prominent part of our work.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): War does not benefit anyone. A trade war between the UK and its closest ally will not benefit our industry nor our people and will stifle our ability to grow our way out of 14 years of Conservative mess. For that reason, I thank the Minister for his pragmatic and cool-headed approach. However, the measures also threaten our ability to prevent military conflict here on the continent of Europe. Will he detail what action he is taking to ensure that our air and space industry can work with our European partners to implement the defence industrial strategy, which is central to ensuring peace here in Europe?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in his assessment of the burdens and benefits of solving the challenge we have been faced with by the announcements yesterday evening. He will know that the defence sector is one of the eight priority sectors of our industrial strategy. There is a whole range of work across areas like air and space that we are engaged in with Ministry of Defence colleagues. Of course, we have also had a significant increase in defence spending, which is a crucial part of how we respond to these threats. The US will always be a crucial security ally for us, and our shared interests—whether they are economic or in the defence and security space—are enduring. That is something we should always bear in mind as we try to find a way through.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I very much support the Secretary of State's concerns about the automotive industry in this country. Will he therefore take action immediately to remove the arbitrary restrictions on the ability of our domestic motor manufacturers to produce and sell vehicles with internal combustion engines? The Government's policy has already reduced the domestic production of vehicles in this country by a third between February last year and February this year. Why does he not lead by example and remove all tariffs on US vehicles?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Member for his words on the automotive sector. On the ZEV mandate that he references, it was a policy of the previous Government to be clear. We inherited that policy. The consultation we have opened with our colleagues in Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Transport will look at that in the context of a fall across all European markets in automotive production and demand, and this incredible entry on to the world economy of increased Chinese production, which is a challenge for all of us. He will also know that the automotive sector is very much an export-led sector—we

export 80% of what we make—and all our key markets have the transition policies in place towards electric vehicles, so if we did not make that transition, we would not have a product to sell in those key markets. We have to work with industry to do it, but we also have to recognise that what we inherited from the Conservative party was not working. That is why we opened the consultation, and we will publish the response very soon.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for his efforts and those of his team thus far. I also welcome the fact that there will be engagement with businesses on the potential for retaliatory action—that input is vital. While the UK has the lowest rate of reciprocal tariffs, that will be cold comfort to the many businesses in my constituency of Bathgate and Linlithgow and, indeed, for those in the whisky and salmon industries, which employ thousands of people across Scotland. Will the Secretary of State assure the business community that he will work at pace with his team to secure a sustainable trade deal with lower tariffs and to bring much-needed certainty to businesses and households across this country?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for her support. We are taking steps to ensure that all options are on the table for the action we may need to take in future—that is important. It is inevitable when an announcement of this magnitude has occurred that businesses will be concerned, and I understand that will be what her constituents are telling her this morning. I absolutely assure her that the approach I have laid out today will be something that we continue to work towards at pace. Our tone, the assurances we can give and the fact we are approaching this with calm-headed pragmatism is vital, and that will be part of how we can reassure businesses. We will work to get to the position she articulates—a better set of trade terms with the US—and that is the objective of the Government.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Business Secretary said in his statement,

“True strength comes in making the right choices at the right time.”

Will he assure parents, carers and young people up and down this country that he will show true strength with Donald Trump and his sidekick Elon Musk, and make the right choice by refusing point blank to trade away our children's safety online in watering down—in any way, shape or form—the implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023?

Jonathan Reynolds: I do believe that strength comes in making the right choices at the right time in our national interest. I can tell the hon. Member that the talks I have had with my US counterparts are not to do with what she has articulated; they are to do with goods, services, the regulation of professional bodies and all the things we would associate with normal trade talks. The United States is not seeking to make our children unsafe or more vulnerable. That is not the right approach to take to our key and core ally. I think sometimes the Liberal Democrats are inventing problems to try to propose that they are the solution. This is a conversation about trade, and it is vital that we keep it in those important and appropriate terms.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): There is a threat, but there is also an opportunity. What measures is my right hon. Friend taking to combat trade leakage and the diversion of goods produced in countries hit by high US tariffs, which may dump their products in the UK, undercutting our domestic producers? What steps is he taking to encourage manufacturers based in those countries and, indeed, in the EU, to relocate to the UK and export from here to the US to take advantage of our lower 10% tariff?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising one of the most important issues we face: the impact of trade diversion—not just the relationship between the US and the UK, but what it means for goods that potentially would have gone to other countries coming to the UK market. That is something we have to be extremely vigilant about. He will know that we have those safeguards in place on the tariffs already announced on steel and aluminium, and that we have our own quotas and 25% tariff to protect domestic production to ensure that that is not the case. I can tell him that we stand ready to use those powers for any sector of the economy that we need to use them for, or indeed to take further powers if that is deemed to be necessary.

I want businesses to be based in the United Kingdom and to serve a whole range of markets from the United Kingdom. That pitch is not just about the comparative position we find ourselves in, but about the kind of policies we put in place to ensure we have the level of competitiveness we need. That is something that every country in the world is engaged in, but I assure my hon. Friend—not so much on the announcements last night, but on the wider agenda of the Government—that that is our commitment.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Tariffs are a tax on import paid by domestic businesses. As the Business Secretary reflects over the forthcoming weeks and consults with businesses, will he reflect on the taxes he has raised on our own domestic businesses and think about whether that is an appropriate response to what is happening?

Jonathan Reynolds: We always reflect on the decisions we have made as the UK Government. I say to the hon. Member again—we have probably had this exchange a few times—that I am always willing to hear from the Conservative party how it plans to fund its spending plans, but it certainly did not set that out in the spending plans we inherited. If the Conservatives are ready to make a decision on that, we would love to hear from them, but until they do so, they should stop criticising us for fixing their mess.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I hope the Secretary of State agrees that protectionism is not the way to protect consumers and businesses. Our own history teaches us that: the Tory corn laws kept working people impoverished for generations in this country. I hope our approach will be that we should have free and fair trade with other countries and not see rising prices for British people, American people or people anywhere else in the world, and that we will do our best to ensure that people's living standards rise by ensuring the fair and free flow of goods and services.

Jonathan Reynolds: We have talked about not reliving the arguments of Brexit; my hon. Friend has brought up the corn laws—it is about time we had that one again. He will know that if we go back to arguments from the past, such as those around imperial preference, and look at the stance the Labour party took, it was always for free trade. That is because free trade makes food and other goods and services cheaper for the people we represent. That has always been our history and our commitment. What we are announcing today and how we are seeking a way through these difficult and disappointing sets of announcements is entirely consistent with our own history in the Labour party and our commitment to internationalism.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): *Diolch yn fawr, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd.* Some commentators are fawning over a 10% tariff simply because our nearest neighbours have been hit worse. Let's get real: the 25% tariff on steel and aluminium will hit Wales's biggest export to the US—machinery and transport equipment. The EU is Wales's greatest trading partner, with Welsh exports valued at £11.2 billion. In the face of the American President's obsession with international economic revenge, does the Secretary of State recognise that it is economic common sense to accelerate the scrapping of trade barriers with Europe?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful for that question. Again, the right hon. Lady can see that no one in this Government is fawning over the relative position we find ourselves in. That is why we are so determined to find a better way through. She is right to say that the announcement on steel and aluminium is a real danger to us, particularly the potential for derivative tariffs—that is, on a product that is not the raw steel or aluminium but is produced from them. That is why we are taking this so seriously.

We have an ambitious commitment to the EU reset. We need a partner on the other side. There has been some relative political instability in some key European partners, and they have to be in a position to have that conversation. But I say again that this is not a choice between the US and the EU—we can tackle this together. We can improve our trading relationship with both partners and with India, the Gulf and other parts of the world, and it is the commitment of this Government to do so.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): In January 2017, the then Conservative Foreign Secretary claimed that the UK would be “first in line” for a US trade deal; 2,722 days later, when the Conservatives left office, precisely nothing had been achieved. Incidentally, that is 37 times longer than the 73 days President Trump has been in power for his second term. Does the Business Secretary agree that it is hard to take the Conservative party's criticisms of our trade approach seriously, given its appalling record on meeting its claims to be able to achieve trade deals? I urge him to continue with his calm approach to this, in the interests of businesses in Basingstoke and across the country, and to take those decisions in the national interest.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. There was no real progress on a federal level with the US under the previous Government. The former

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President made the decision that he would not pursue trade deals, so there was perhaps not much they could do on that, but I do sometimes reflect that the Conservative Government broke our relationship with our nearest and most important trading partner, which is the European Union; they then fell out with countries in the Gulf and could not do that deal; they could not do the deal with India; and they would not engage with China. For a global Britain policy, there is not much of the globe left if we find ourselves in that position. That is not best practice for us to follow, but we welcome Conservative Members' support for our approach if it exists and continue to say that this is surely the right way forward for all our constituents.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Farming, textiles and whisky are all important parts of the economy in the Scottish Borders and across Scotland more broadly, and they will be affected by these tariffs. There are also real concerns in Scotland that products currently heading to the United States market from other countries will be redirected and dumped into the UK market, which will impact the domestic market. What action are the Government taking to address that? Will the Secretary of State undertake to engage with the National Farmers Union of Scotland, the Scotch Whisky Association and other representatives of industry in Scotland to ensure that this problem is tackled head-on?

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree: this is one of the principal issues that we have to address. Whether it is on farming, textiles or whisky, what is going on in the rest of the world and other countries' relationship to the US have a direct impact, even though that does not relate directly to the conversation about tariffs and our own trade deal with the US. I am meeting the chair and chief executive of the Trade Remedies Authority imminently. This is a crucial part of the work that we have to get right. We have some measures in place for steel and aluminium, but we have to ensure that we are ready for other sectors of the economy, too.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Many of my constituents work at Jaguar Land Rover or in the motor manufacturing supply chain, and they are really concerned about 25% tariffs on exports to the US. Can the Secretary of State set out what steps he is taking to get those tariffs reduced and to support west midlands businesses before I meet Jaguar Land Rover later today? Does he agree that a calm and measured approach is exactly what is needed to get the best deal for British businesses?

Jonathan Reynolds: JLR is an example of an incredible UK-based business in terms of its success in the US, China and other parts of the world. We want to maintain that and give that business the platform it needs for that success. I am in regular contact at the most senior levels with JLR. I am delighted to hear that my hon. Friend is meeting it today to share some of these messages of reassurance. I know that, like all businesses, it supports this calm, pragmatic, rational approach to finding a better trade relationship with the US, not just to avoid the imposition of what was announced yesterday evening.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The previous Government undertook secretive trade negotiations with the USA that included health. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that in any bilateral discussions with the USA, there will be no question of US private healthcare interests coming into Britain to undermine our national health service or, indeed, take over sections of it?

Jonathan Reynolds: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I do not comment on the detail of talks, but I can tell him that there have been no discussions in relation to the NHS or anything that would concern him in that regard. This is about goods and services and how we recognise each other's standards. There is nothing relating to the health sector that I have been able to talk about with US counterparts. I hope he finds that reassuring.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): The automotive industry is incredibly important for workers in Milton Keynes, with many headquarters based there, such as Volkswagen's. I realise that these tariffs will be incredibly difficult for the automotive sector, and it is good to hear what the Secretary of State said about looking for a pragmatic approach to the ZEV mandate. What else will he be doing to support the automotive industry here in the UK?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. He has some tremendous businesses based in his area, and it is great having him here as a champion for them. In terms of the automotive sector, it is about the regulatory environment, which we have discussed, and it is about the funding that we make available for co-investment with the private sector, which is always a priority, and £2 billion was allocated for that in the Budget. We have to accelerate and improve our electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and there was £300 million for that in the Budget. The pressures on the automotive sector across Europe are fierce—that is widely recognised—with changes in consumer demand and much more competition from China coming into the market. We have to be serious about making sure that the UK is the place to be a producer of automotive vehicles. My personal commitment to that is very strong.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I thank the Secretary of State for his responses so far on Northern Ireland. I trust that he will continue to engage with my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive in the days ahead. However, he has not been able to allay my fears about the possible inclusion of online safety in any US deal. Can he reassure me and the Molly Rose Foundation that no more young lives will be sacrificed in order to try to get a deal with the US?

Jonathan Reynolds: As I said, I updated the First Minister and Deputy First Minister yesterday. It is a particular situation that we need to remain very much aligned to, making sure the system is working as it should, difficult as that will be. The hon. Lady knows that I will not go into the specific negotiations on any part of a deal, but I say seriously to any colleague that their concerns are misplaced if they think this is what the negotiation is about. It is about goods and services and regulation, and that is what we are focused on delivering.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has rightly said that this Labour Government will always work in the national interest, so can the Secretary of State assure the House that it is in our national interest to protect the copyright of our creative industries and the £126 billion of economic power they bring to Great Britain?

Jonathan Reynolds: The creative industries are not just a wonderful cultural asset to the UK but a tremendous economic asset as well. I do not necessarily agree with the commentary in parts of the media that posits a tension between being a creative powerhouse and supporting the tech sector. There is a way through that, and that is what my work in government seeks to achieve. I think we all recognise the economic impact on the UK of our creative sector, the cultural soft power that comes from it and the huge asset it represents. That is always first and foremost in our thoughts.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): It is estimated that 25,000 jobs directly linked to the automotive sector are at risk due to reduced exports to the United States. That is a deep concern to many of my constituents who work at either JLR in Solihull or Aston Martin in Gaydon. Can the Secretary of State set out what specific steps he is taking to protect those jobs, and whether it will involve reforming the regulatory environment in which they operate?

Jonathan Reynolds: I have seen the Institute for Public Policy Research report that contains that figure. Because the automotive sector is such a jewel in our crown, we are all aware of what would happen if we were not able to find a way through this. Our work to find that deal and remove this threat of tariffs is intended precisely to deliver that way through. I met Aston Martin yesterday, as an example of the work we are trying to do.

The hon. Gentleman asks a specific question about the regulatory environment we inherited. I cannot preempt the publication of the consultation, which has just finished, but he will be aware of comments I have made publicly about changing that to reflect different circumstances. He will not have to wait long for the outcome to be published, and I can tell him that the Secretary of State for Transport, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero and I are aligned on ensuring that we get the regulatory environment correct for the future.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and his colleagues for the practical and pragmatic approach they have taken to put us in the best possible position with the US. Does he agree that as well as the US, political and economic co-operation with our European friends and neighbours is essential and in our best interests?

Jonathan Reynolds: It absolutely is, and there is no tension between those two things, as I have said. It is a false choice if people try to present it in that way, and I am particularly looking forward to some of the progress that I hope we will make in our relationship with the European Union. It is looking not to the past but to the future, and of course it is in both our interests to do so.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The US is clearly seeking concessions from the UK, and it has been widely speculated that the UK Government are considering a reduction in the digital services tax as a way of placating Trump and his ally Elon Musk. My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) asked the Secretary of State this question but I did not quite catch an answer in his response: will he commit today not to cut the digital services tax, as that is the way the tech giants pay their fair share here in the UK?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Lady has heard me say repeatedly that I will not go into specific negotiations, but ensuring that not just a US tech company but any tech company pays a fair rate of taxation in the UK, for the economic activity that it has in the UK, is something that all parts of the British Government are committed to—she does not need to be worried about that. In any discussion there will always be a lot of issues that need to be dealt with. In the main, those are trade issues. I understand that there are all kinds of speculation, but speculation is not always correct. I ask all colleagues to bear that in mind and understand that we cannot publicly share every single aspect of such a negotiation. If she is worried about US tech companies, or any tech companies, paying the right rate of tax in the UK, let me say that that is something we are deeply committed to.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that now is time for unity across the Chamber in the national interest, in contrast to the politicking that we had earlier from the shadow Minister? Will he commit that this Labour Government will always put country first and party second?

Jonathan Reynolds: Absolutely, country first. I would hope that all Members of the House could get behind the approach we are taking, which is genuinely in the national interest. That is the way forward and the way to deliver what all our constituents want in these troubling times, which is a much better path towards the future.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): I appreciate the tone of concern with which the Secretary of State has come here today. I am particularly concerned about what these measures mean for the UK defence industry, particularly companies such as BAE Systems in Fylde and across Lancashire that manufacture component parts for US-UK defence programmes such as the F-35. What conversations has he had with those in the Ministry of Defence about working with their US counterparts to address this issue from a national security perspective, for both the US and the UK? Can he give an assurance that the order of 25 fighter jets that the RAF needs to place will not be used as a bargaining chip in any trade deal, and that British-built Typhoon jets will be used for the RAF?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I have constituency interests that are similar to his, and the close alignment between ourselves and the US on defence and security matters is an enduring and huge asset to both countries, so I share the sentiments he has raised. He asks whether we can engage US counterparts in this conversation about a more constructive way forward. Yes, that was always part of our thinking, and our trading bodies in the UK have excellent US links in

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the main, and they engage in similar activity around that. On his specific point, I have no detail to give him—I have no knowledge of anything like that being used as a bargaining chip, but if I need to give him additional information, I am happy to write to him to provide that.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Bracknell is home to the UK and European headquarters of many US companies, as well as to many UK businesses that do business in America. Can the Secretary of State assure businesses in Bracknell that this Government's position is that barriers to trade are bad for growth on both sides of the Atlantic, and that he is working hard with a cool head to secure a trade deal?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend is right; Bracknell has some tremendous businesses, such as Honeywell, Dell and 3M, so he will be seeking to promote and defend particular constituency interests. I have had tremendous support for the approach that I have mapped out today not just from UK businesses but from US businesses as well, particularly those with an economic relationship with the UK. Right now people are seeking evidence that countries around the world are trying to deal with this difficult situation in the right way, in their own national interests but also in a way that gives us an opportunity to strengthen rather than weaken those important trading relationships.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is clear that the UK needs to show some backbone in standing up to the US President's bullyboy tactics on trade. The Secretary of State says that he is keen to negotiate a deal, but at what cost? What is he putting on the table? Can he assure the House that, in seeking a carve-out from President Trump's tariffs, he is not prepared to offer President Trump and his big tech billionaire buddies an opportunity to carve up the NHS, our environmental and food standards, or our sovereign right to make our own decisions on taxing digital giants?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Lady will have heard the answers I have given to some of the questions she raises, and the unequivocal assurances I have been able to provide. She talks about backbone—backbone and strength. Strength and wisdom are not opposing values. Backbone comes from putting our own national interest first, and negotiating on a basis in the interests of all our constituents, not bandying around rhetoric and escalating the situation. That, respectfully, is not the right way forward. The right way forward is to engage on national interest, make sure we are delivering and have the chance to find the right way through this.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and his team for the enormous amount of hard work they have put in on this issue. It feels apt to mention that I represent the town of Kirkcaldy, the birthplace of Adam Smith, who I am sure would have had something to say about last night's events. My right hon. Friend is keenly aware of the importance of the US market for Scottish exports, including but not limited to salmon and whisky, which I know he is very fond of. What further reassurance can he offer to Scotland's leading export industries about the impact of these developments on trade with the US?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am tremendously grateful for my hon. Friend's support and for her question—Adam Smith is probably the best historical reference we have had in this statement so far. As she knows, I have always aspired for my Department to be one of the most pro-Scottish UK ministries, because of the interests that we are there to defend and promote. She will also know that this week is Tartan Week in the US. The Secretary of State for Scotland is in the US right now, and I admire the way that he has turned the Scotland Office into such an economically focused Department, working with Scottish businesses, and working closely with me. That is a tremendous initiative, and one that we will continue to promote.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Trump's tariffs will make everyone poorer and are extremely disappointing, so is it noteworthy that Reform Members have not bothered to turn up to share in our disappointment? Our automotive sector is already announcing closures and layoffs, including Stellantis in Luton, which has provided great jobs for my constituents for many years. In his review of the regulatory environment in response to these tariffs, will the Secretary of State ensure that it will be easier, not harder, to create jobs in the UK in future?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, and he is right to note some conspicuous absences from the Chamber on such an important subject. I could not make it clearer: I care a great deal not just about the transition to new technologies in the automotive sector, but about ensuring that we make those vehicles in the UK. We face tremendous competitive pressures, as he will know from the stories his constituents tell him. We must be alert to that and willing to be adaptable, to ensure that we are a place where vehicles can be made. We have some tremendous industries. If we chart the productivity and efficiency of some of our plants on a global scale, we see that are at the top end. We must get that policy and regulatory environment right, and I give the hon. Gentleman a total assurance that that is my personal objective.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for all the work that he has done so far in negotiating an economic partnership with the United States. He will appreciate that the lower levy applied to the UK will be of cold comfort to my constituents, who will see their bills rise. Can he assure me that he will resist calls for a knee-jerk reaction to this? The escalation of a trade war will not help anybody, and the way we achieve a negotiated settlement is through constructive dialogue and a calm approach—I say that as somebody who spent 20-odd years as a negotiator prior to entering this House.

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend is a formidable negotiator, as I have seen at first hand—we might see if she is available for some of the work we have to do. She is right that this is about delivering for our constituents, who must be concerned when something of this magnitude has been announced. No one in Government or in any part of the Chamber is relaxed about the relatively better position we find ourselves in, because it is still something that we have to find a way through. We must keep all options on the table—that is behind some of

the announcements I made in the statement—but the approach that my hon. Friend advocates and promotes is my approach, and I thank her for her support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I watched the Secretary of State on television this morning, and I thank him for his calm, collected and carefully chosen words. He understands my real concerns about Northern Ireland businesses—my stomach is doing somersaults worrying about the impact for Northern Ireland. My party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), made a point at Prime Minister's questions that still stands: Northern Ireland remains exposed to potential EU retaliation, and local businesses must not become collateral damage. The Government must take urgent steps to protect Northern Ireland interests and to ensure that our place in the United Kingdom internal market is fully safeguarded. In his reply to my right hon. Friend yesterday, the Prime Minister kindly committed to act in our national interest, so will the Secretary of State outline for the record what steps will be taken to do just that?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his kind words. It has been quite a week so far, and we still have some way to go. This is an issue not just for Northern Ireland Members, but for all Members of the House. We have to be alert to the particular situation that would occur if there were a different retaliatory stance from us and the EU. That is why I briefed the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and my counterpart yesterday. The shadow Minister was right that the issues around the duty reimbursement scheme are key. On the formal steps that we have taken, businesses can now input their concerns and what the tariffs will mean to them directly to Government. We need to work together, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, to ensure that specific voice and that specific question are a key part of how we look at the issue and respond. I am keen to work with the hon. Gentleman in that regard.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): May I echo the thanks to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for the calm and effective way that they are dealing with the United States? Unlike some of the frivolous comments we have heard from Conservative Members, does my right hon. Friend agree that the US's 20% tariff on EU goods is to be deeply regretted, as it could indirectly affect the many UK businesses that supply components to EU manufacturers that export to the US, particularly in the automotive, aerospace and pharmaceutical sectors? What discussions has he had with European counterparts about the US decision? How he will represent our concerns to them in the coming days, if there is an escalation of tariffs?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend is right that our concerns have to be not just about what this means for our own relationship with the United States, but about the second-order impact on the UK from the trading relationship changes between the US and other key allies and markets. No discussion on trade or tariffs is complete without bringing up rules of origin. The complexities of some of the supply chains, particularly in the automotive industry, are key issues; we have to ensure that we have preferential tariff access to markets

and that the products we make in our country qualify for those under the rules of origin. We are closely engaged with all partners. He will know that the Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), deals with the EU reset, but we will continue to have a very close working relationship, as well as having direct conversations with our European Commission counterparts.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): In answers to questions so far, the Secretary of State seems to have dismissed the threat of the US trade negotiations to the safety of our children. I am sure he has seen the abandonment of content moderation on social media platforms and heard what Trump, J. D. Vance and Musk have said about free speech in our country: what they mean is the freedom of US social media giants to keep our children addicted to their platforms, no matter how harmful the content. I know the Secretary of State says that he does not want to get into the specifics of the negotiations, but is the Online Safety Act 2023 part of those negotiations, or will he take the opportunity to rule that out?

Jonathan Reynolds: I want to be clear with colleagues, not to invent problems that do not exist. I am aware of comments that have been made about freedom of speech in the UK. They have not been part of the trade negotiations. The hon. Gentleman recognises that I cannot share details of negotiations, but then he asks me to share those details. He knows that I am not going to do that because it would not be in our national interest. However, I say to colleagues that these negotiations are about goods and services in the main. It is important to focus on that—let us not make this more difficult than it is.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): West Bromwich is a metal industry heartland. We are home to the Confederation of British Metalforming and many brilliant exporting businesses are in the automotive steel and aluminium supply chain. This morning, I spoke to the chief executive of William King, one of those brilliant local businesses, and she was clear that the Government are right to remain calm and to work to do the deal. While Ministers are working towards that deal, what else can we do to support those businesses to continue to trade and invest with confidence?

Jonathan Reynolds: That is the right approach to take. I welcome my hon. Friend's support and that of the businesses in her constituency that she mentioned. Of course we are trying to find a way through this, but given the situation we inherited after the election, our domestic competitiveness is not what it could be and what it needs to be. Even Conservative Members recognise the impact of aspects of regulation, energy prices and the direction of travel. The output of foundation industries last year and this year is at levels that should concern us all. We have to get that right, which is why this Government are committed to an industrial strategy and a trade strategy that works in partnership with it. As well as endorsing our approach, the feedback from businesses is that that is exactly what they want. West Bromwich is a powerhouse, but I want it to be an even bigger powerhouse in the future, and the same applies to the constituencies of many Members across the House.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): The tariffs announced by Trump last night will be concerning for many businesses in the UK, not least British farmers, including in my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon. We all recognise that Trump will use the imposition of tariffs to try to get concessions from countries around the world. Will the Business Secretary reassure the whole country and commit today that he will not agree to any deal with the US that would lower food standards and undermine British farmers?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Lady will have heard me say very clearly that we are committed to the sanitary and phytosanitary regime, as set out in the Labour manifesto. The UK is currently the biggest importer in Europe of US agriculture, so we should not present this as something that we do not already have that the US is trying to open up. We have a strong, mutually beneficial relationship. British agricultural products are premium products that have a tremendous reputation, whether in the US or in other parts of the world. Seeking to remove trade barriers on both sides, while maintaining the SPS regime in UK, which is very important to our other trading relationships, is vital, but that could be a positive story of how we open up more markets to excellent US products. That is fundamentally what good trade policy is about.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House and for his calm head in a difficult situation. My constituency is home to many businesses, including Wright's Flour, A1 Bacon, Harlow Group and Raytheon, that trade directly and indirectly with the US. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give to those businesses and their consumers? Does he think that Raytheon's work sourcing UK parts for its defence systems will be increasingly vital in the months and years to come?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support and for mentioning some of the excellent local businesses in his area. On the impact of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine on supply chains, the private sector has been working with Government to look at vulnerabilities to ensure we do not have strategic weaknesses. We intend to include that vital work in the trade strategy, which is due to be published imminently, but that aspect of economic security is extremely important.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The Secretary of State cannot have failed to notice the number of Members from all parties who have raised the food and drink industry, particularly in Scotland, where many products are made in my constituency. I admire his approach of speaking softly and carrying a big stick as he prepares his plan B, but retaliatory action is not the only lever that we could pull. In discussions with the Chancellor, would he be prepared to offer some sort of mitigation to businesses in the food and drink industry in the autumn statement?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman has skilfully raised issues relevant to the autumn statement that are more for the Chancellor than for me. Products from the food and drink industry form a prominent part of our economic exports. Because of that industry's success

and what it means to the prosperity of every bit of the United Kingdom, it features heavily in all our decisions, whether on trade, business support, export support or the wider regulatory and policy environment. I assure the hon. Gentleman that his constituents and the excellent and successful businesses in his area are always prominent in our thinking.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his hard work and for his calm and pragmatic approach. In my constituency of Aylesbury, there are almost 5,000 small and medium-sized businesses, several of which export to the US or have been seeking to do so. Will the Secretary of State set out what he is doing to protect our SMEs in his ongoing negotiations with the Trump Administration?

Jonathan Reynolds: Fundamentally, I want to see greater market access to the US for small and medium-sized businesses in every part of the UK. We can tackle particular things as part of that, such as the regulatory system in the United States and the federal-state dichotomy, particularly for services and exports. All that is the prize on offer if we get this right. A big part of trade policy is also about not just free trade agreements, even though they tend to get the most prominence, but how we come to agreement on e-commerce and functions of online marketplaces and transactions. All that is a very practical difference that we can make, through good trade policy, to small and medium-sized businesses. That will be a premium and important part of the trade policy we are about to publish.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The pharmaceutical sector appears temporarily to have avoided tariffs, but that may well change. However, medical devices and diagnostics do not appear to have that same exemption. The UK is home to many medtech and diagnostic companies, and the tariffs will have an impact on them both here and abroad and may well push up prices. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care about ensuring access to medtech and diagnostics in the face of increasing prices?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He may be aware of the biopharma conference held in the UK yesterday with the top chief executive officers of many of the leading companies in this area. It was attended by myself, the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we could see further announcements in this area. There are particular US issues, such as the differential in drug pricing, which has always been a fairly prominent part of trade negotiations. There is an integration and shared aspiration between people in Government, such as myself and the Health Secretary, and recognition of our need to be more forward-leaning, to use more innovation, to look at how we provide that and the relative allocation of resources in our existing health system. We take that very seriously, and we are very much looking at that. There is a lot to do, and it is a difficult situation, but we need more of the success that the hon. Gentleman outlined.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The announcement of a 10% tariff on all products exported from the UK to the United States means that for the second time in just five years, the Scotch whisky industry could be impacted by tariffs in the industry's largest global market. That will be concerning news across communities where Scotch whisky is a major employer, including in my constituency. Scotch whisky makes up a quarter of all Scottish exports to the US, but it is not one-way traffic; to give just one example, the Scotch whisky industry imports up to \$300 million of ex-bourbon casks every year. I urge the Secretary of State to work with the US Administration and ensure that a mutually beneficial resolution can be agreed as soon as possible to support the Scotch whisky industry.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and for his accurate insight into some of the co-dependencies and relationships that exist between Scotch whisky and other key international sectors of the food and drink economy. If he ever wants to come and see me in my office in the Old Admiralty Building, I keep a bottle of Lagavulin there, which I think we can all agree is an excellent choice. You would be welcome to come for that conversation at any time, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have to keep the numbers down, but we will look at that if we come through with a deal. *[Interruption.]* Of course the shadow Secretary of State would also be very welcome to come—what an excellent meeting we have just set up accidentally.

Often an equivalence is made in some markets between, for instance, the tariff on bourbon from the US and Scotch whisky. A comparison is made, and those are often seen as competing products, but there is an interdependency as well. The point about the sherry barrels is also really important and fascinating. I can tell my hon. Friend that we are in regular contact with the Scotch Whisky Association, which is tremendously supportive as a resource to us and is very closely engaged with Government. These issues, which are so important to his constituency, are always considered and prominent at the highest levels in Government.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and congratulate him on his choice of whisky; that is my favourite as well.

There are no winners in this dire situation—we think of the people waking up this morning in Vietnam, Cambodia and so on—but we have to acknowledge that the cool heads in Government have meant, at least for now, as we start this process, that the jobs of people in Edinburgh South West have been saved. I do no doubt that, as we speak, businesses in my constituency and across the UK are trying to figure out what this means for them, so we have to redouble our efforts in our search for growth.

I welcome the pragmatic words given around the zero emission vehicle mandate. Ultimately, without compromising our aims, we can work together with businesses and trade unions to get a better outcome, but I wonder if the same approach can be taken elsewhere. The AI regulations that we have been discussing, which I think were mentioned earlier, come to mind. *[Interruption.]* I will be very quick, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is also HFSS advertising and the sustainable aviation fuel mandate.

We do not need to compromise on all those things, but we can work closely with industry to get the right outcome.

Jonathan Reynolds: I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's words and his endorsement and seconding of my whisky choice. I should say that other excellent whiskies are available; a lot of Scottish Members are present, and I do not want to offend anyone. He is right to say that businesses will need reassurance: I hope they will get that from the tone that the Government are striking today, but they will need information. If Members get out their phones and go on to great.gov.uk, they will see a link to a bespoke page where that information is provided. We have advertised around that.

My hon. Friend makes an important point. Where we can look at alleviating some of the domestic pressures, whether through regulation or other areas, this is clearly the time to do so. I have had those conversations with Cabinet colleagues. He is right to say that this is not about changing policy, but about looking at the impact right now and how we can make a difference. That is a very wise observation to make.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend for the measured tone he has taken on events in Washington. I want to reflect on the agency we have here in London and with our allies in Brussels. Does the Secretary of State agree that now is the moment to seek the most ambitious trade deal we possibly can with the European Union, seeking deep alignment in goods and services? Furthermore, while the United States may want to make it harder to trade, does he agree that the UK-EU reset provides us with an opportunity to break down the barriers to trade that the Conservatives put up when they were in government? If we get this right, the prize on offer from the UK-EU trade deal could be even greater than what was lost overnight.

Jonathan Reynolds: I warmly thank my hon. Friend for his question and his support for the approach we are taking. I believe there is a competitive advantage to seek for the UK where we are able to reach agreement with the US. We are able to do those trade deals and negotiations with countries such as India or customs unions such as the Gulf Co-operation Council, and also to get the EU reset right. Although this is not about looking to the past, a lot of smaller businesses stopped exporting entirely after Brexit. They almost certainly set up subsidiaries in the single market, which was not to our advantage, and we saw a real decline in certain types of food and drink trade, even though we had a broadly similar SPS regime in place. We can work on those practical things, and that is our objective. There is real gain to be had from that. We need a partner on the other side who sees the benefits as well, but I believe that they exist, and that is a crucial focus for what we call the twin-track approach to trade under this Government.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for the work he is doing as we face this challenge. I welcome the Government's commitment to increase defence spending. That is good for not just our national security, but our economy. The sector employs many people in Derbyshire, including at Rolls-Royce. As we seek a trade deal that will create the economic conditions for our public services to thrive and for prices and bills to remain as low as

[Jonathan Davies]

possible, can I encourage the Secretary of State to remind the US of the importance of manufacturers such as Rolls-Royce and the defence sector, and the strategic and economic partnerships they offer us, so that we can work with them more constructively?

Jonathan Reynolds: Those are very wise words, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting them on the record. Defence spending is crucial for our national security. The big change and uplift that we have seen is a big part of that, but he is right to say that it would be wrong for anyone in this country to think there is not a domestic economic dividend for that. Those jobs are spread all around the United Kingdom, including in places that are really reliant on them, so it is great news on the economic front for all parts of the UK and Derbyshire—Rolls-Royce is a great example of that.

My hon. Friend talks about how we can get this right with our relationship to the US. We already have some great things under way. We can think about the AUKUS agreement, in which the US treats domestic UK suppliers as part of the domestic supply chain; there is equivalence there. We can think about steel and the role that Sheffield Forgemasters plays, for instance; that is a crucial part of the defence supply chain for the US. These are really important and mutually beneficial strengths to recognise. If we look at the facts and at how our trade interdependencies work, there is a great prize on offer if we get this right.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call David Pinto-Duschinsky to ask the final question.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—a joy as ever. I thank my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister for their

tireless efforts, which have secured the best, most powerful position available for our country. Of course, there is deep disappointment that tariffs have been levied, but the fact that they have been levied at the lowest band is a vindication of the Government's strategy, and businesses I have spoken to—in Hendon and nationally—have been unanimous in their support for the Government's approach. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best way to stand up for Britain is through a cool, calm, collected and pragmatic approach, and that we must reject the knee-jerk response and calls for action on invented problems that some Opposition Members demand?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He has articulated our approach, which is that we are not complacent or happy; we are disappointed about any tariffs being imposed on the UK. We recognise that the lowest band has been applied to the UK, but that does not mean that we will not redouble our efforts to secure an agreement that offers a way through.

I am grateful for the support of my hon. Friend's constituents. I hear in every part of the country that our approach is genuinely the one that businesses want us to take. It is calm—I am not sure whether it is cool—and, I hope, reassuring to businesses in my hon. Friend's area. A lot of people are always offering advice in this area. At times, they are offering to escalate a conflict, and perhaps do not have a plan to de-escalate it, but this Government's approach is always to pursue our national interest, work with partners, and look at the mutual benefits we could get from doing things right. I am extremely grateful for the support for that policy from Members in all parts of the House today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That marks the end of the very lengthy statement on UK-US trade and tariffs.

Children in Temporary Accommodation: England

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Florence Eshalomi will speak on behalf of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. They should be brief questions, rather than full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.31 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): Today, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee publishes our first report of the Session, following our inquiry on children in temporary accommodation. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for kindly granting time for this statement, and the Committee's staff for their assistance in producing the report.

This morning, over 164,000 children woke up without a permanent roof over their head. Their parents were unable to sleep, worrying about making the long journey to work and school, about the state of their accommodation, and about when they will finally get a home of their own. Given that the number of children in temporary accommodation rose by 15% in the last year alone, we know that there will not be an overnight fix to this problem. That is why our Committee's first inquiry of this Parliament focused on the stories of children in temporary accommodation, and the impact that the increasing amount of time families are spending in what should be temporary accommodation is having on those children. How can we expect children to have the best start in life when they are living out of suitcases? How can we expect them to grow up without the basics of a private bathroom or kitchen, and how can we expect them to be ready for school if it takes them hours to get there, on a route that is always changing?

When a family with children become homeless, their local authority has a duty to provide housing for them until they can settle in a more permanent home. This temporary housing could be a privately rented property, short-term social housing, a council-owned property or nightly paid accommodation, such as a bed and breakfast or a hotel. Our inquiry found that far too often, temporary accommodation is completely inappropriate for families, and in some cases is unfit for habitation. We heard about cases of families living in accommodation that is excessively cold, that has serious damp and mould, and that has mice infestations. Temporary accommodation is often overcrowded; sometimes older children have to share beds with their parents or siblings, and babies cannot crawl or learn to walk due to a lack of floor space.

However, that accommodation is costing the public purse a fortune. In 2023-24, local authorities in England spent around £2.29 billion on temporary accommodation, and London boroughs alone spend £4 million a day on

temporary accommodation. The cost of homelessness services has led to at least one local authority applying for exceptional financial support from the Government. Representatives of local authorities across England who we heard from during our inquiry all agreed that the cost of temporary accommodation is utterly unsustainable. Even the term "temporary accommodation" is misleading, because these placements are often far from temporary. As of March 2024, more than 16,000 families had been in their temporary accommodation for over five years. Can any of us imagine starting secondary school, in year 7, in temporary accommodation, and still not having a home of our own when we leave in year 11? That is the reality for so many young people in so many families— young people who are often voiceless, out of sight, and stuck in completely unsuitable accommodation.

Our report is therefore entitled "England's Homeless Children: the crisis in temporary accommodation". It was apparent to us that we have not only a housing crisis in England, but an acute crisis in temporary accommodation. During our inquiry, we heard about conditions so appalling that they are having a negative impact on children's health. We heard that housing conditions are contributing to respiratory illness, sleep deprivation and mental health conditions in children. Most shockingly, we heard that temporary accommodation has been a contributing factor to the deaths of at least 74 children in the past five years. Of those children, 58 were under the age of one. In one of the richest countries in the world, that is shameful. That alone should inspire us all to act urgently and bring an end to this crisis before more innocent lives are lost.

Why, then, are local authorities not required to inspect the quality of their temporary accommodation at all? There is no requirement for local housing departments to carry out in-person checks on the properties being used. Our report recommends that local authorities carry out mandatory inspections of housing before it is used as temporary accommodation, as well as whenever new residents are placed in that housing, to ensure its basic suitability for children and families. Perhaps the worst form of temporary accommodation is bed and breakfast accommodation. B&Bs are rarely self-contained, meaning that families must share facilities with complete strangers. We heard about alarming cases of prison leavers sharing bathrooms and kitchens with families, and heard evidence that families had been placed in housing with men with a history of domestic abuse. Local authorities must work with the Government to put an end to those mixed placements in order to mitigate the clear safeguarding risks.

In some areas, demand pressures have forced local authorities to place homeless children in temporary accommodation outside the area. Families are often left with no choice but to move away from everybody and everything they know, including their friends and support networks, sometimes not knowing when or if they will return. For children, an out-of-area placement can mean hours spent travelling to and from school, or needing to move schools entirely. Just last week, new research from the Children's Commissioner highlighted a stark link between the number of times a child in temporary accommodation moves school and low GCSE results. Only 38% of children who moved homes five times while at school achieved five GCSEs, compared with 65% of children who had only one home address. While

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

we were not able to consider this latest evidence in our inquiry, those findings demonstrate the point that we need to keep improving data collection and reporting across public services, so that we can fully understand the health and education impacts of child homelessness.

We also recommend that the Government establish a formalised notification system, so that a child's school and GP are alerted when they become homeless. The Government have set up an inter-ministerial group, which will publish a strategy on ending homelessness later this year. While we welcome that announcement, we recommend that the inter-ministerial group considers the link between welfare reforms—particularly the re-freezing of the local housing allowance—and homelessness.

Fundamentally, England's housing crisis is an affordability crisis, and the same can be said about the temporary accommodation crisis. We know what has caused this problem: there has been a failure of successive Governments over decades to deliver new homes. The Committee supports the Government's ambition to deliver 1.5 million new homes during this Parliament, but we also stand ready to help scrutinise those plans as they come forward. We must ensure that these new homes are safe, of high quality and are genuinely affordable. A long-term part of that strategy is a national target to promote social or affordable rent homes in the housing mix. Clearly, building those homes is the long-term objective, but the 164,000 children in temporary accommodation, and their families, cannot wait. They need an immediate response from the Government.

This is personal for me. I still remember being placed in temporary accommodation at a bed and breakfast in King's Cross. I remember the joy and the relief of receiving our home and the keys. It was somewhere we could build a home and not have to carry belongings around in a black bag. Sadly, those 164,000 children in temporary accommodation will have to wait years for that same feeling, and they will continue to suffer under an unacceptable system for too long.

I thank my fellow Committee members, and the many homeless organisations, local authorities and others who presented evidence to our Committee during this inquiry. We look forward to receiving the Government's response, and I commend the report to the House.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my hon. Friend not just on this report, but on her strong leadership of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. In the report, the Committee describe the very real lives of the 3,770 children from my borough who are in temporary accommodation. That is enough to fill eight primary schools. There are other impacts, too. She talked about what the Government are doing, and the report mentions the report that is expected in July. Can she give the House any indication of when that report will come, and what will her Committee do to follow up on it?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my fellow Chair, the Chair of the Treasury Committee. This is really important. As we said, we welcome the Government's inter-ministerial group, which meets regularly to consider key findings. It is vital that it works to end homelessness across the UK. We are pushing the Government to bring forward their

strategy before the summer recess; it is vital that local authorities, charities and organisations can plan before the summer holiday, when, sadly, more children will be shunted from one borough to another if we do not get to grips with this issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady. She has a big heart, and we thank her for her leadership of the Committee. It is right to address the issue of homeless children. Rental accommodation is too expensive. We have high demand for social housing, multiple families living in one household, and mould and damp issues. This report is excellent. It lays out the issues but also puts forward recommendations. Will she share it with the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Florence Eshalomi: I am always happy to see the hon. Member in the Chamber, and he makes an excellent point. We have to make sure that we share our learnings right across the UK, including with Northern Ireland, and I am happy to do that.

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and Chair of the Select Committee, of which I am a member, for presenting the report. We heard compelling evidence during the inquiry. Does she agree that the Government should look carefully at the evidence we heard about the impact of out-of-borough placements on children, families and host boroughs, particularly when thinking about future legislation?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my fellow Committee member, who brings her experience to the issue from her work with homelessness organisations. Local authorities want to work with the Government, but they need to talk to each other more. We will push the Government further to ensure that local government is speaking with one voice. At the moment, some boroughs are not notifying each other. It is vital that we look at that.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Select Committee Chair for bringing this report to the Chamber. It relates to two of my previous roles, as I have worked as a teacher and with homelessness charities, so the subject is close to my heart. What joint working has the Committee done with the Department for Education and teaching professionals on the impact of being in temporary accommodation on learning? I also want to raise an issue that came up in Harlow when I worked for a homelessness charity. The decision by the previous Government—I do not think it was malicious—to raise the housing element of universal credit led to many private sector landlords raising their rent. That had an impact on temporary accommodation, because many people were being housed in temporary accommodation in the private rented sector. Will the Committee consider that?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my hon. Friend for his points, and I again commend him on the work he has done in this area, which I have heard him speak on in the Chamber. It is important that we recognise that the long-term ambition is to build those genuinely affordable homes, but in the interim, it is about how we work to address this important issue. One way is ensuring that this issue does not just sit with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It has to be an

inter-Department agenda and focus. That is why we welcome the Government's cross-departmental ministerial team looking at this, because the issues are not confined to MHCLG, but are about education and health, too. It is important that the Departments continue to talk, and that is one thing we will feed back as we get responses from the Government.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and her Committee on this crucial report. As my constituency neighbour, she knows how much this is an issue within our borough, and I am sure she would agree that the end to no-fault evictions in the Renters' Reform Bill will be a positive step towards ending the number of families who are evicted with no cause and forced into emergency and temporary accommodation. Our hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) just spoke about extortionate and unregulated rent increases in the private sector forcing families into temporary accommodation. Does the Chair agree that the Government should be looking at regulating private rents—essentially rent controls—so that they are affordable for the average family?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my neighbour and hon. Friend. This issue sadly affects our borough of Lambeth. In the past year, the data shows that average rents have increased by 9%, and we know that many families' incomes have not increased by that rate. We need to look at how we get to grips with the private rented sector. As I have said, the reality is that we cannot build these homes tomorrow, so more people will continue to rent. It is about working with local councils, housing associations and other organisations to make sure that the rents being charged are fair. Most importantly, we must ensure that conditions in properties are being addressed. We are seeing a situation where more than £2.29 billion is being spent on accommodation. That is frankly unreasonable, and that is where we need to get to grips with what is happening.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and the Committee for bringing forward this report. Too many children in Beckenham and Penge live in temporary accommodation and I know, from speaking to local headteachers and others, the impact that has on every aspect and every corner of their lives, from their education to their health and wellbeing. Does she agree that we will only make progress in improving outcomes in other areas when we have tackled this crisis?

Florence Eshalomi: As a fellow south Londoner, my hon. Friend will recognise the pressures that many boroughs are facing. London councils and all political parties have come together to flag this key issue with the Government. It is not sustainable for London councils to be spending £4 million a day on it. It is vital that we continue to work with all Departments. If we are saying that our children are the future, it is important that they get the best start in life. We have situations where children do not have space to crawl. Their first few years are hindered by that. It is vital that we look at how we address and tackle this issue.

Backbench Business

UK Democracy: Impact of Digital Platforms

1.48 pm

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of digital platforms on UK democracy.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to host this debate today, and I thank the sponsors and Members here present for supporting it. I begin by paying tribute to Jo Cox and Sir David Amess, two public servants murdered in the name of hatred—the very hatred and radicalisation that digital platforms fuel. We are failing a whole generation. We are failing young women facing unprecedented levels of abuse and harassment. We are failing young men being radicalised and exploited in plain sight. We are failing democracy itself, as misinformation and intimidation silence voices and distort political participation.

Today's digital age presents a new, unparalleled threat to our democracy. Social media is not without its benefits. It allows us to connect with constituents and promote causes; indeed, I am sure that all of us would be looked upon very unfavourably if we did not engage in the online space in some shape or form. It has become one of the few ways that young people engage with politics, and it has played a pivotal role in promoting grassroots activism and greater transparency. However, we now face a national emergency of misinformation and digital violence. Families, teachers and even young people themselves are crying out for an overhaul.

Just this past month, we have seen stark reminders of the harm that digital platforms enable. The release of "Adolescence" has rightly ignited a national conversation about online misogyny and radicalisation, exposing the toxic digital culture infiltrating our homes and classrooms. We only have to look at cases like the murder of Brianna Ghey to see the horrifying real-world impact. The reality is that young men radicalised online do not just stay there; they go out into the world and sometimes commit the most heinous acts of violence.

The rising tide of online hate and radicalisation does not exist in isolation. Misogyny, incel ideology and far-right extremism, among others, are not just thriving in online spaces; they are being actively cultivated by algorithms that are designed to maximise engagement and profit. That is a really important point, which I will come back to later.

Esther Ghey, Brianna's mum, has called social media "an absolute cesspit", and I am sure that we all agree. She has called for an under-16s ban, and she is right to do so. I want to make it clear that this crisis is not confined to one country, one background or even one ideology. The names change, but the pattern remains the same. Parents are terrified and teachers powerless, and children are being exploited right under our noses. All we have to do is look at the case of Alexander McCartney, a prolific paedophile who sat in his bedroom in County Armagh and abused thousands of children across the world. It is the UK's largest ever catfishing case, involving a man who used social media to blackmail,

[*Sorcha Eastwood*]

torment and sexually exploit children across the world. When I participated in a discussion last year on the safer phones Bill, all the big social media companies were present. After they had boasted about how they self-regulated, I asked them whether they were familiar with the Alexander McCartney case.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate, and on all the campaign work that she is doing. Does she agree that although there are some fantastic examples of social media being used positively to enhance democracy and political participation, this is often reliant on benevolent and honest owners, and that our democratic safeguards should not rest on the presumption of good will or honesty from technology giants?

Sorcha Eastwood: Absolutely, and that is a really timely point. We should not outsource our children's safety to social media companies. Indeed, we heard in a previous statement about the impact of content moderation and how it may or not form part of discussions on trade agreements as we move forward.

When I sat in a room with all the social media companies, only one had heard of the Alex McCartney case. That tells us everything that we need to know about how seriously big tech takes child safety.

It should not take a TV show like "Adolescence" to make the Government wake up to what has been warping our society for years. The actions that they have taken so far have been inadequate. Meeting the creators of "Adolescence" was indeed welcome, but it is simply not enough. Commissioning more reviews, talking about cultural change, and tinkering at the edges will not fix the problem. We must speak to the platforms in the only language they understand: profit and loss. We know what drives this issue: algorithms, content recommendation systems and the financial interests of the big tech companies actively steer vulnerable young people towards ever more extreme content. This is not a side effect; it is their business model.

Fundamentally, this debate is about power: who holds it, who wields it, and in whose name are they acting? Right now, big tech billionaires and online extremists are working hand in hand, shaping our children and democracy, and warping our society. This Government have been too slow, too weak and too captured by vested interests to stop them. Figures like Andrew Tate have built empires by manipulating young men into their worlds of violent misogyny, lies and conspiracy. Tate has ingratiated himself with Donald Trump and Elon Musk, but does he care about men? Not a bit—he exploits them. This is not just an individual person behaving irresponsibly; it is a co-ordinated machine trying to drown out critical voices, spread misinformation and undermine public debate.

Let us be honest: agitators and bullies like the Tate brothers have always existed. What has changed are the tools and the platforms that they have at their disposal, which give them access to young people in particular. Let us be clear: their reach is not accidental. Andrew Tate is amplified, promoted and monetised by the same platforms that claim to be unable to regulate online harm. This is not just about free speech; it is about radicalisation and control. Powerful malign actors—some overseas, and

some home grown—are exploiting our young people and our political system for profit. Social media platforms are not neutral: they push extremist content deliberately, algorithmically and at scale.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for the clear way that she is laying out some of the issues that we are talking about today. I am lucky enough to be a vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections, and one of our strands of work is on tackling myths and disinformation. One of the calls I have heard is that, at the very least, the social media giants should have a duty to carry out a risk assessment of legal but harmful content, which covers some of the issues that she is talking about. Does she agree that that is the very least the platforms could do?

Sorcha Eastwood: I thank the hon. Member for her comments, and I completely agree that that is the bare minimum that they should do.

A report by Hope Not Hate found that almost 90% of boys aged 16 to 18 in the UK have consumed content from Andrew Tate. On Elon Musk's X, a platform that has dismantled its trust and safety teams, Tate's videos dominate young men's feeds. If we allow this climate to continue, we are handing digital platforms the power to dictate political debate, poison young minds and do irreparable damage to our democracy.

Of course, the loudest free speech warriors are the first to silence criticism, as I know from personal experience. After I called out Elon Musk for platforming extremism, Tate's followers immediately descended on me with a flood of abuse and harassment. That was not random; it was a deliberate attempt to silence an elected representative. I was bombarded with death threats, rape jokes and abuse from accounts both local and international. Then the Tate brothers themselves came after me—two men running from the most serious criminal charges and propped up by the world's most powerful leaders. They targeted me, an elected representative from Northern Ireland, for daring to speak my mind. It was not even about them—it was about Musk—but it was a calculated attempt to silence an elected politician. I was, in their words, "a nice target". It was a direct attack on democracy and on this House itself.

This is not just about individuals; it is about democracy. We have seen a deliberate, organised effort to create an online environment where extremism flourishes, where intimidation becomes the norm, and where women, minorities and political opponents are driven out of public life.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for securing this really important debate, and for her passionate speech. She highlights the ripple effect that will be created if we do not challenge social media companies. In the last general election, we saw so many women and black and minority ethnic candidates being targeted online by anonymous social media accounts, and much of that went unchecked. Does she agree that if we do not deal with this issue, we will see fewer people putting themselves forward to stand for public office?

Sorcha Eastwood: Absolutely, and I thank the hon. Member for her contribution. I am really honoured that she is here today, because her voice is so important.

When I was elected to the House last year, I was really proud to be here as part of a diverse Parliament. That diversity is welcomed across the House and is reflected on these Benches. That is good, but I have to be honest and say that we have heard from many parliamentarians—not just here, but across the UK—that if they had known what being an elected representative would bring to their life, they would not have stepped forward. But that is exactly what we need, because the social media companies want those voices to be silenced.

This is not just about our agreeing with the political views we like—absolutely not. I will defend to the hilt the right of people to express views that I absolutely do not agree with, because they need to be heard too. The hon. Member made a really important point, and I thank her for it.

The Northern Ireland Electoral Commission's report on the 2024 UK general election laid bare that over half of candidates reported harassment, intimidation or abuse; one in ten faced severe abuse; and women were disproportionately targeted, as were minorities, often by anonymous accounts—the point just made by the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi). The consequences were immediate: nearly 40% of candidates avoided solo campaigning and almost 20% avoided social media altogether. This is a system in which intimidation silences voices before they can even be heard. I have heard the same warnings from colleagues across this House, and the chilling effect is real.

It is much bigger than this too. Let us be clear: our democracy is under threat, and the battlefield is not just in Parliament or the ballot box, but online, where rogue states and billionaire tech moguls are manipulating public opinion for their own ends. The recent Romanian presidential election should have been a routine democratic process. Instead, it became a cautionary tale. A pro-Russian candidate who did not debate, did not campaign and supposedly spent nothing suddenly surged to the top of the first round, and the election was then annulled. That was digital interference in action—a warning for every European democracy, including our own.

If Members think that is just happening in Romania, they should think again. Here in the UK, over half of the public said they saw misleading information about party policies and candidates during the last general election. Nearly a quarter of voters say they have encountered election-related deepfakes, while 18% were not even sure if they had. The scale of the problem is staggering. Democracy does not function when voters cannot trust what they see or hear, yet the people in control of these digital platforms are not just bystanders, but active participants.

How is it that Elon Musk, now sitting in Trump's Administration, owns one of the world's biggest digital platforms, which has spiralled into a far-right cesspit? Remember when we thought silicon valley's tech bros were going to make society better—more open and more progressive? Those days are long gone. Now they have tasted power and they are in the White House, endorsing the AfD—Alternative für Deutschland—in Germany, while their algorithms push misogynists and conspiracy theorists to the top of feeds.

This is not a glitch in the system; this is the system. It is a system that rewards the loudest, most divisive voices while drowning out facts and reasoned debate. If we

care about democracy here in the UK, we need to stop treating social media giants as neutral platforms, and call them what they are: political actors. If we do not hold them to account, we are not just allowing misinformation to spread, but handing them the keys to our elections on a silver platter.

For online abusers, anonymity is not protection; it is a weapon, and overwhelmingly it is used against women and minorities. For centuries, democratic debate was based on people knowing who they were engaging with. Anonymity once existed to protect the speaker from harm. Now it enables the speaker to inflict harm with impunity. This is not about free speech; it is part of a political strategy; a co-ordinated effort to undermine trust in institutions, silence opposition and create a hostile environment for anyone who dares to challenge the status quo. When those in power let this happen—by dragging their feet on game-changing legislation, by gutting a private Member's Bill and by potentially scrapping a digital tax, handing more money to the very platforms on which these predators thrive—they are sending a message. It is a message to every woman in public life and every girl in this country that their safety is not the Government's problem.

What needs to be done? We must deprive these hate figures and predators of the oxygen of publicity. Why is it being tolerated? The Online Safety Act 2023 was outdated before it was even fully implemented. It is too slow and too weak, and the harms it was designed to address have only worsened. Regulators lack the power to challenge big tech, and Ministers are too afraid to stand up to Musk and Trump. Every concession emboldens these extremists, there is no appeasing them, and our children's lives cannot be collateral damage in a reckless pursuit of growth.

Australia has taken decisive, world-leading action. It has introduced a full ban on social media for under-16s. Meanwhile, the UK's digital age of consent remains 13. That means children as young as year 8 can legally sign up to platforms awash with violent misogyny, porn, self-harm content and extremist material. What more proof do this Government need? The safer phones Bill could have been a game changer. Instead, it was watered down, gutted and abandoned. Why? It was because this Government prioritised big tech's profits over our children's wellbeing. We do not need any more reviews or consultations, but we do need decisive, courageous action. While this Government dither, the average 12 to 15-year-old now spends 35 hours a week—more than a full-time job—on their phone.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a genuinely powerful speech with a really strong argument, and I commend her for it. The Government may be struggling to tackle the digital platforms themselves, but would a useful first step be banning telephones in schools up to the age of 16?

Sorcha Eastwood: The hon. Member is absolutely right. This is a huge issue to grapple with, but I think the evidence is clear about what this has caused so far. There is a valid discussion to be had about the use of phones, and school is possibly one of the only places where our children's devices will be taken off them for a set period, but the issue is what is on the phones when they get them back. For me, that is the point at hand.

[Sorcha Eastwood]

To conclude, who would want to be a child growing up in this world today? That question is really distressing and disturbing. It is a world in which radicalisation is just a click away, misinformation spreads like wildfire and people's reputations are trashed in seconds, and it is one in which those who challenge it are met with a wall of co-ordinated abuse. I know I would not want to be growing up today, with political donations, foreign interference in elections, voter manipulation, online bullying, deepfakes, mental health problems and class disruption—and that is just the tip of the iceberg. Sadly, I do not have time to cover it all, but I do know that we have a moral duty to protect young people and future generations, and I truly believe that everybody in this House genuinely believes that and wants to act on it.

This is now a national security issue. A society in which young men are radicalised against women is a society that becomes more violent, fractured and dangerous for us all. We are at a critical juncture. The question before us is clear: do we allow the likes of Andrew Tate, Donald Trump, Elon Musk and others to profit from poisoning the minds of our young people, or do we stand up for our children, our country, our democracy and the very fabric of our society? The Government must act, and act now. So I ask: what is stopping us? If not now, when? The time to act is today, for the sake of our children and, indeed, our very democracy.

2.7 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I rise from the Back Benches for the first time in many years, having resigned from my position as Minister for Development and for Women and Equalities. The view is “much better from here”, as the late, great Robin Cook said, but I do deeply regret that I could not continue to serve in the Government for which I campaigned for so long. I wish my successors, Baroness Chapman and Baroness Smith, all the very best. I will not try their patience—or indeed yours, Madam Deputy Speaker—by reprising the contents of my resignation letter, but I do want to explain why I have chosen to break my silence during this debate.

The new Government entered office at a time of unprecedented geopolitical and economic flux. There is no muscle memory in Government, or indeed in politics, for the instability we are currently seeing, and as democracy backslides globally, instability is the new normal. It demands a strategic, not tactical, response. Economically, I believe, as I set out in my letter, that we must be prepared to reassess shibboleths, whether on the fiscal rules, as Germany has done, or on taxation, especially when the very best-off are seeing so little impact on their wellbeing from the economic headwinds.

In addition, we must work with our allies—particularly in Europe but also beyond—to build our resilience on defence production and exports, with productivity growth hammered by post-Brexit impediments to trade and now, as we have heard this morning, with US-imposed tariffs. From Turkey to Somalia, people are desperate for democracy, stability and economic growth. In supporting them, we also support our country's security.

I therefore regret that, on top of the huge cut to official development assistance that led to my resignation, the shift to a cash basis may limit resources further.

I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to work closely with other countries to bridge some of that gap, but it must include radical action to tackle indebtedness, increase financial guarantees, protect lifesaving health services, and to support and reform multilateral bodies as they come under attack from autocrats.

I believe that we need the same strategic approach—not tactical—when it comes to the protection of our democracy. Last summer saw the worst racist riots in our country since the second world war. None of us can forget the appalling scenes when racist thugs set fire to hotels knowing that people remained inside, and all in the name of three poor beautiful little girls—may they rest in peace. The policing and criminal justice response was swift, and I commend the Government for that, but in this case and others the influence of social media has not been fully digested, let alone acted upon.

There are many other canaries choking down the coalmine, not least due to the growth and impact of violent online misogyny. Here I commend the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) not just for her steadfast campaigning, but for the fact that even as she has received such appalling abuse herself, she continues to stand for women and girls. I stand in solidarity with her, as should all Members in this Chamber.

Considerable progress is being made to defend democracy by the new Government, through: the taskforce of that name; the joint election security and preparedness unit; the foreign influence registration scheme that was released a couple of days ago; the Speaker's Conference focused particularly on the safety of candidates; and the new ban on the creation, as well as the sharing, of sexually explicit deepfakes, whether they are focused on politicians or other victims. But attempts to degrade our democracy have involved actors from states that are not classified as hostile, and they have taken place outside election times, too. Policy must deal not with how things were 10 years ago, but with the reality of an online world that is having huge offline consequences.

First, I agree with the hon. Lady that we lack tools to deal decisively with the growth in disinformation. The Online Safety Act does include measures to protect content of democratic importance, but without a clear definition of that content, and with Ofcom's advisory committee on disinformation and misinformation apparently not having met yet, that must be remedied speedily, given that over half of people now receive news through social media, and that rises to 82% of young people. Recommender algorithms, as she said, privilege engagement above all else, and extreme content engages more. I urge the Government to consider including independent audits of recommender algorithms, as contained in the EU's Digital Services Act but not in our Online Safety Act.

Secondly, our new legislative regime, although welcome, relies on an antiquated separation of large and small platforms. Last summer showed how the far right often switch from Telegram to YouTube to Rumble, and to other platforms large and small. When they spread disinformation, they do not keep it only on large platforms, so regulators should be prepared to act on small platforms, too.

Thirdly, the new regime was created when the major complaint against platforms was that they were failing to heed their own rules. Now, powerful platform owners are ditching rules and firing compliance officers, and

are themselves pumping out disinformation. There are no minimum standards in the new regime for platforms' terms of service. I urge the Government to look again at that, with the care that I know the Minister always displays.

Finally, we must work more closely with others seeking to protect their democracies, from Helsinki to Rio, Tallinn to Ottawa, and Chisinau to Berlin. In that vein, paralleling the Prime Minister's push for a UK-EU defence partnership, we surely also need a UK-EU structured dialogue on digital policy and the defence of our democracies.

In conclusion, I remain grateful to the Prime Minister and my party for providing me with eight months where I could seek to serve my country as a Minister of State. That was only possible because my constituents in Oxford East afforded me, through their free choice, the opportunity to represent them. Voters' free choice, taken for granted so often in our country but so precious, is what is ultimately at risk if we fail to defend our democracy.

2.15 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for an excellent opening speech. It almost made me feel like putting down my own speech, because I thought there was nothing more I could contribute. I thank her so much for that introduction.

It is worth saying that the people who will be speaking in this debate are probably not fearful of technology itself. I consider myself a digital native: I grew up with MSM and Myspace, and I enjoy the connectivity that social media brings to us all. It has transformed our society in ways that are for the good, but without a doubt we do have a problem: we have a big problem with content, we have a big problem with addiction, and, as the hon. Lady articulated so clearly, we have a problem with power.

I will begin with content. There has been a huge rise in the level of hate, misogyny, violence and pornography we are seeing on our social media feeds. I am certain that I am not imagining that. I am sure that the stuff that pops up on my "For you" feed on X was not there a few years ago, prior to Musk's ownership. The sorts of things that have been pushed towards me as a youngish man are an absolute disgrace. A few months ago, there was a knife crime incident in my community, just yards away from my office. The footage of it circulated online within minutes. Again, I am sure I am not kidding myself that a handful of years ago that piece of content would eventually have been taken down. Today, Meta-Facebook has shown no interest in taking that down. That shocking footage is still circulating around my community, and shame on them for that.

That sort of content rises to the top of algorithms because it is emotionally charged: it disgusts, it enrages and it sparks fear. That works for social media companies, because that is how they generate their profit. When we apply that kind of emotionally charged content to news, it is no longer judged by its veracity or the insight it provides, but by its ability to provoke, with the result that misinformation travels much more quickly than the truth.

On addiction, we have to understand that this form of emotional engagement is new. There are people out there who say that we have always had emotionally engaging content via TV, radio and newspapers, but the

type that happens on these platforms is genuinely new because it is addictive by design. Once upon a time, the brightest minds in the world all wanted to work in law and medicine. Now many of them are working for big tech companies, trying to work out the circuitry of our brains to keep us addicted to their platforms. They do that because we do not pay for those platforms, but we do pay for them with our attention. The more we look at their platforms, the more ad revenue they generate. That is new, and we need new regulation to address it.

The second, interrelated element of addiction is the way it interacts with algorithms. We funnel people down echo chambers and reduce their exposure to the other person's view. Ultimately, that damages critical analysis and leads to the kind of polarisation that I believe we are seeing in our politics today. With unregulated content full of misinformation being supplied to people incessantly, as we remain addicted to our devices and stuck in bubbles, we think to ourselves, "Just imagine how dangerous this could be if the technology got into the wrong hands." But, of course, it already has.

As a liberal, I am always sceptical of concentrations of power, because we know how vulnerable it leaves society. We have somehow allowed big tech to make the argument to us and to Governments across the world that its oligopolistic power over this industry is justified—a natural order, somehow, and something we should make an exception for in our global economy. In doing so, we have allowed a handful of firms to dominate the digital world. They control huge amounts of our personal data, and now they control our discourse, too.

As has been mentioned, the vast majority of 18 to 24-year-olds use social media as their primary news source. As each generation passes, the role of TV, newspapers and radio will only continue to diminish. I was at a careers fair at a local school the other day, and a young kid came up to me—he must have been about 13 years old. Almost immediately, he started talking to me about Donald Trump in a positive way. When I asked him where he was hearing all this stuff, he of course answered, "TikTok". His mates all giggled, because they were all doing exactly the same thing. I do not think we are treating this with the seriousness that we need to.

I will make just one more remark about the media environment. Lots of the more clickbait outlets generate their revenue not by the quality of their content, but by how many people they manage to get on to their website. That is how they get ad revenue. Many of the more considered—and, perhaps, critical—publications are often behind a paywall. This situation is driving a lot of our public conversation at the moment, because of what media is available to people for free. If most people are getting their news from these digital platforms, we are left at the whim of those in charge of those platforms. Those people not only have control of their platforms to manipulate our discourse, but have huge amounts of personal wealth, and can, sadly, interfere with politics in a way that people have always been able to: through donations and the influence of their personal wealth. This is a double-edged sword for us.

As we have seen, this kind of wealth and influence has had real-world impacts. Most recently, we have seen Elon Musk's role in the US elections; if we think back a bit further, there was a kind of intransigence from Facebook over the dark ads that ran during the Brexit campaign, when nobody knew who was responsible for

[Bobby Dean]

running those campaigns for some time. As was explained earlier, the organised pile-ons and everyday disruption attempt to silence politicians in their contributions to everyday debates.

Over the past few years, it felt like we were starting to make some progress in society on this topic; we had the formulation and introduction of the Online Safety Act, and it felt like greater efforts were being made to check the power of social media giants. However, right now, it feels like we are about to go backwards again. In reaction to the election of President Trump, we saw Meta rolling back its moderation capabilities. In the UK, legislation such as the Online Safety Act and the Digital Services Act—some of the few tools we have in our toolbox to tackle these social media giants—are up for discussion as part of a wider trade negotiation with the US. We must fight hard to keep those tools in our toolbox and keep those protections, but we are kidding ourselves if we think those alone will be enough.

A free press is a fundamental pillar of a liberal democracy, and these digital platforms are threatening it. As well as protecting the legislation we already have, this House needs to start talking about what further action we can take. Without it, all our places are under threat.

2.23 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for bringing this debate to the Chamber.

Throughout history, from the printing press to social media, technological advancements have often outpaced the laws meant to regulate them. Today, digital platforms evolve at a speed that outstrips Governments' abilities to fully understand or regulate their impact—especially concerning for democracy, which depends on informed citizens making choices shaped by debate. Yet democracy is increasingly undermined by bad faith actors, misinformation and manipulation.

As digital natives and future voters, young people face particular risks, and Governments owe them a duty of care to help them to develop in an informed and safe way online. However, older citizens with less experience of social media and newer tech platforms can also face difficulties in how they interact and interpret information or disinformation. In addition to the risks of early forms of digital platforms for democracy, such as the spread of misinformation, contemporary digital platforms now possess novel risks such as deepfakes, AI bots and short-form video content. I will focus my speech on how this situation relates to our democratic engagement.

In Scotland, 16-year-olds have the right to vote in local and national elections; with the Government's manifesto promising votes at 16 in UK elections, it is important to consider the impact of digital platforms on young voters and the younger generations who will one day become voters. It will not surprise many to hear that young people are extensive users of digital platforms and that their online habits are evolving rapidly. According to Ofcom, 86% of 9 to 16-year-olds use social media, and even among children as young as 5 to 7, a third are now active online. Platforms such as TikTok and Discord are increasingly shaping young people's understanding of the world, including politics. Ofcom reports that

children aged 5 to 15 are now spending an average of five hours and 24 minutes a day engaged in social media activity.

It is right to note that there are benefits to the use of digital platforms by young people in our political system. These platforms allow young people access to the entire sum of human knowledge, and therefore have real scope as a great source of education and knowledge. They can not only provide helpful information and analysis on our politics, but act as a new means of getting young people engaged and interested in our democratic system.

Despite these benefits, it remains the case that there are real risks and harms associated with children's use of social media and their outlook on democracy. Recent TV shows such as "Adolescence" have highlighted that digital platforms can act as echo chambers where extremist communities can influence young people's ideas and opinions. A recent survey published by the University of Glasgow's John Smith centre, based in my constituency, found that nationally, 57% of 16 to 29-year-olds would prefer to live in a democracy; that said, 27% of those surveyed would prefer to live in a dictatorship. The fact that more than a quarter of this age group would prefer to live in a system completely juxtaposed to our own democracy should be a warning to us all. In difficult times globally, with uncertainty and disruption to previously accepted patterns of international, national and local environments, the lure of simplistic but dangerous solutions promoted by bad faith actors can be all too persistent.

I welcome the actions taken to address these challenges by committing both to making the digital world a safer place for young people and to delivering real, tangible improvements in their lives through other policy initiatives, but we must work harder as we move forward to respond to the ever-changing environment of online activity that we face. Social media giants must be held accountable for the role their platforms play in shaping public discourse, and no tech executive should be above the law.

I commend the efforts of the hon. Member for Lagan Valley in securing this Backbench Business debate and introducing it today. We must not only protect young people—and, in fact, all citizens—from harm online, but equip them with the tools to shape their future, assuming they are not just passive consumers of digital content, but informed and engaged citizens in our democracy.

2.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), first for securing this debate and giving us all an opportunity to participate, and secondly for her passion for the subject matter. I am pleased to be here to represent my constituency—the two of us are representing the entirety of Northern Ireland here—and I commend her for her courage, her speech and her determination to be a spokesperson for many.

The rise of digital platforms and their use has been of concern for many years, recently more than ever. I am probably the oldest person in this Chamber, and we are talking about issues that I never faced in my youth, but my children face them, and my grandchildren will. Information is distributed online so readily, and it is easily accessed by anyone, whatever their age. The spread of false, damaging and vile information shapes how the public form their opinions, and there is so much

work to be done on this matter. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) referred to that in her introduction.

In a survey just last week, Members of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland, both male and female, were asked whether they had been subject to high levels of abuse. Some said that if they had known that the abuse would be so bad, they would never have entered politics. If that does not tell us about the amount of abuse and vile comments targeted at both men and women, nothing does.

I have recently seen numerous disgusting comments on social media about many politicians, including me and others in my party. They were written by keyboard warriors—heroes who hide behind their keyboards—of all ages and backgrounds. In the past week, I have had nothing but admiration for my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart). She has been an inspiration not only to Members, but to young women across the United Kingdom who have faced personal online abuse. She has been so courageous. I watched her and Naomi Long, the Minister of Justice in the Northern Ireland Assembly, on “The View” last Thursday night when I got home. Both of them were excellent. They epitomise the sort of people who are at the receiving end of vile abuse. Families have to read abuse about a loved one. There must be zero place in society for that abuse. I hope the Minister will acknowledge how much work there is to be done on this matter.

We have seen the rise of social media over the past 10 to 15 years, and its impact on children. As a grandfather of six, I very much understand why we must protect our children. I look to the Minister, who is a mother, to reassure us on this matter. I know that she appreciates how big an impact social media has on our children and grandchildren. Although social media has obvious benefits—it teaches digital skills and gives us the ability to communicate, which are good things—the mental health issues that flow from it are shocking. Anxiety and depression are at an all-time high among children. When I saw the stats for Northern Ireland, I had to question them. I am sure the figures are similar for the United Kingdom. Children as young as eight, nine and 10 are suffering from anxiety issues and depression. We see more suicide and thousands of instances of cyber-bullying. I heard the hon. Member for Lagan Valley comment on the new Netflix show “Adolescence”. The traction it has gained is incredible, and she should be commended.

There are lessons to be learned on mental health, the dangers of social media and friendships and relationships. Perhaps there could be more onus on our schools to deliver such material. When the Minister responds, perhaps she can tell us what discussions she has had with Education Ministers to ensure that the issues are directly addressed at school.

I agree with what the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) said about mobile phones. I am convinced that the issue has to be addressed directly. I know that schools in Northern Ireland are running pilot schemes in which phones are removed from the children and put in pouches, and then returned at the end of the day. If our Education Minister, Paul Givan, can see that this has to be done, then, with the greatest of respect, it should be done here as well.

As an elected representative, I can say that, yes, it is important to have an online presence to engage with local businesses and constituents, but I have very limited

engagement with social media. That may be because it is a generational matter, or because I have seen the devastation that social media can cause. There is no secret about the misinformation that is out there. I am probably fortunate that I have limited social media contact, and that I understand the dangers of it.

Freedom of speech is important, but there is a difference between healthy debate and disagreement on the one hand, and the vile and unnecessary comments that we see on social media on the other. In this House, I have always tried to engage with everyone in a suitable way, and to be friendly and respectful of others who have a different opinion.

I have spoken in debates in the Chamber numerous times, including in debate on the Online Safety Bill, about the need for greater regulation of social media. There is a responsibility on the Government, in conjunction with social media companies, to ensure that people are safe, especially our youth; adults should know better, but unfortunately that is not always the case. Young people are impressionable and are inclined to go with crowds. Not only that, but they are growing up in a world where social media is massive, so the correct provisions need to be in place, and I look to the Minister for a response on these matters. I know that I will not be disappointed in her, because she understands the issues; she faces the same issues with her family.

To conclude, there is a huge amount of work to be done. There is a responsibility on us personally, on teachers, on social media companies, and on parents to ensure that online safety is accorded the utmost priority. Addressing this matter is not simply down to the parents. This is a joint effort, and we must work harder together to resolve the issues. I look forward to working closely with colleagues from all parts of this Chamber on this matter, because we all have the same connection and the same goal. I hope the Minister will commit to working with her counterparts in the devolved nations to ensure that we can apply the same strategy everywhere.

2.36 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for securing this debate; I know how important this matter is to her and to all of us. We are all representatives of our democracy, and it is crucial that we as a Government address the concerns about the impact of digital platforms on our democratic process.

Sadly, faith in our democracy is being withered away in today’s age of misinformation and disinformation. Even more concerning is the rise of threats and abuse received online by MPs across this House. The abuse takes unique forms for female MPs and for MPs of colour, who are too often the targets of sexist or racist threats of violence. I am not sure whether a declaration is necessary in this case, but I would like to make it known that I am member of the Speaker’s Conference on the security of candidates, MPs and elections, and I commend Mr Speaker for his work in this space.

The anonymity granted to users by online platforms makes perpetrators feel especially confident in their abuse. It also makes it harder to track and identify the worst offenders. Additionally, with the rise of artificial intelligence, bots can be directed to abuse MPs and political candidates en masse. These bots are even more

[Leigh Ingham]

difficult to trace. Directing abuse and threats at MPs is not only hateful; it deliberately undermines our political system. As the hon. Member for Lagan Valley says, this is about threats against this House. When we must fear for our safety, the most valuable link in our democracy—that between us and our constituents—is strained. An MP should feel safe in their own community, as should anyone else.

Threats and abuse are not the only issue; online platforms are privy to hordes of personal, sensitive information about their users. For many people, social media is their main source of news. Around 72% of my constituents in Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages use Facebook, but we know that Facebook has a troubling history of endangering democracy. We all remember the outrage when Facebook breached the personal information of millions of users, sharing it with the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica. This data was then used to target political advertisements in the US presidential campaign of 2016. The breach was not discovered until two years later. For me, this was the first time that I realised just how seriously the political process could be undermined by digital platforms.

Very recently, Meta stated that it would no longer use independent fact checkers. As a result, misinformation runs even more rampant. I am sure that we have all experienced family members sending us posts that present themselves as facts but are often complete nonsense. Sadly, since I became an MP, these have been really targeted at me, so my family and friends will send me pictures of me at the back of rooms looking shadowy. Members will be pleased to know that apparently I recently banned banter. Allowing misinformation to run rife leads directly to a loss of faith in our democratic institutions, and to a rise in extremism. To reiterate the point I made about me looking shadowy in the corners, it is a problem for all political parties when individuals are personally targeted, particularly women and people of colour, as those groups face specific attacks.

It is obvious that social media has the capacity to influence elections, and that it can be a medium for abuse and threats. I know that many friends from across the Chamber will have experienced this at first hand. It is therefore crucial that action is taken to curb abuse and misinformation.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a compelling case about the risks associated with social media platforms. Companies too often seem to have all the agency and none of the accountability for what we see on their platforms. We see these platforms pushing more and more extreme content to people through their algorithms. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time we saw checks and balances applied to the social media giants?

Leigh Ingham: My hon. Friend reminds me of something my sister-in-law recently told me. She saw a story on Instagram about a girl's experience in a relationship. My brother received a completely separate version of the story. It was targeted by gender. There was a disparity in the narratives being pushed. My sister-in-law mentioned how weird it was that they both got the story on the same day, but with different narratives being pushed.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent, emotional speech—its excellence is her trademark—highlighting this problem, and I am sorry to hear about the issues she has faced. Does she agree that when Members of Parliament are targeted in this way, it affects not only them but their families? As the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) said, that puts people off getting involved in politics, which cannot be a good thing for democracy.

Leigh Ingham: I thank my hon. Friend for his point, and I completely agree. I am particularly passionate about getting more women into politics. It is something I will constantly bang on about. A number of women have said to me, “I don't want to put myself in that position.” In fact, when I was considering standing for this place, it was one of the things I was most nervous about. I am not a huge user of social media platforms, and have never really put my life out there in that way, so I was incredibly nervous about standing for a political role, because I did not want to expose myself or my family in that way. My hon. Friend makes a very valid point.

In the old days, we had coffee shops and pubs in which to disagree over politics, but the rise of social media has meant that, today, people often get their information online, and have political conversations online. A quiet conversation in a pub or a coffee shop does not reach thousands of people within seconds. Social media has meant that the very nature of political discourse has changed, because the medium has changed.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I apologise for not being here in the early part of the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am so moved by what the hon. Lady says. The truth is that the discourse she describes has been brutalised. Complex ideas have been made simple—or at least apparently simple—and malignance has been given licence, exactly as she said. My advice to any new Member of this House is: do not get involved. I am not involved in social media at all, but I have an immense profile in my constituency, because I occupy the real world, not the virtual world. Real-world contact with people is always more valued and more valuable.

Leigh Ingham: I agree with the right hon. Member. I host a lot of community coffee mornings in my constituency, in which we discuss complex ideas, rather than three-word solutions to very complex problems.

Social media is here to stay. The next thing we do must be to regulate it appropriately. It is our duty as Members of this House to ensure that our constituents still have an avenue through which to share their opinions. I agree with the hon. Member for Lagan Valley about disagreeing with people—it is an incredibly important feature of our democracy—but we must enforce guidelines that protect users from harmful content, misinformation and abuse. Ultimately, we must restore faith in our political process. By improving the discourse, we can improve our democracy. I look forward to hearing the Minister outline the Government's plans to tackle this issue.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am imposing an immediate five-minute limit. I call Manuela Perteghella.

2.44 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) on introducing this timely and urgent debate.

As we know, the digital age has brought about an unprecedented opportunity for campaigns of any kind, including campaigns of nefarious origins and by malign agents who seek to undermine democracy and the safety of our people. Digital platforms are proliferating at a rapid pace and reaching an unprecedented number of British citizens. They have become the most powerful communication tool of our age and are able to absorb vast amounts of detailed personal information about their users. Further, the platforms can apply complex algorithms to create tailor-made campaigns and personally targeted advertisements and content. That can include spreading conspiracy theories, extreme content and abuse towards citizens and elected officials.

Regrettably, successive Governments have not been proactive in tackling the threat. They have been complacent with inertia and inaction, while tech and social media giants have spread misinformation and outright lies. They have let their digital platforms incite hatred and digital and physical violence, and they have caused riots on our streets. The digital world is the last frontier—wide open for exploitation by domestic and foreign powers who do not have Britain's best interests at heart.

The Russian Government have been accused of orchestrating a widespread campaign of interference and disinformation that seeks to undermine the global order. Last autumn, the head of MI6 warned that the international order is under threat in a way not seen since the end of the cold war, accusing Russia of a reckless campaign of sabotage across Europe. Likewise, Elon Musk recently used his platform to suggest that America should liberate the people of Britain and overthrow the UK Government.

As we have heard, it is not just our democratic processes that are under threat and being targeted but our children too. With violent misogyny, online abuse, radicalisation and sexualisation on these platforms, who is keeping our children safe? The Online Safety Act 2023 must not be watered down in any future trade deal negotiations with the US. Further, the spread of misinformation online has the power to dramatically alter the outcomes of our elections and referendums, and in doing so change the course of this country. Who will take responsibility for the regulation of digital political campaigns? The Electoral Commission says that its focus is on campaign finance, the Information Commissioner's Office says that its focus is on personal data, and the Advertising Standards Authority says that it does not regulate political adverts.

When we do not regulate to protect our democracy and our children and young people, we rely on companies to regulate themselves. We hope that Facebook's three-part strategy to target misinformation is robust enough, that Google's centre for content responsibility takes its job seriously, and that the EU's fine levied against tech companies for spreading disinformation has any real impact. Unfortunately, our hope will be in vain.

In these unsettling times of global challenges, we must take the protection of Britain and its people into our own hands. We cannot rely on our safety being a priority for any other nation or for unelected tech billionaires. We need regulation and legislation to protect

the people of Britain and ensure that our democracy is not affected by lies propagated by groups and individuals who do not have Britain's best interests at heart.

Effective tech regulation for digital platforms would result in radical real-time transparency for political advertising—for example, on donations and spending. It should result in strong laws on digital safeguarding, especially for young people and children. As America, influenced by its tech billionaires, withdraws from its role as the protector of the free world, let Britain step up to the mark and become a global leader in digital transparency, regulation and safeguarding.

2.49 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): It is an honour to contribute to this debate on such a critical issue. As the former head of policy for the British Computer Society, this was one of my passion projects. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for bravely bringing this debate to the House, as it affects us all.

As MPs, we have a duty not only to preserve democracy, but to strengthen it. We must safeguard the integrity of public discourse, yet increasingly the conversation is manipulated by a handful of powerful billionaires, unaccountable corporate giants and malicious actors—foreign and domestic—all counting on us to dither and retreat from the scale of the challenge.

Public trust in digital platforms is eroding as the people behind the algorithms that drive the platforms wield unprecedented power and influence over millions without any of the checks and balances by which the rest of our democratic institutions have been shaped for generations. The people behind algorithms that are designed to manipulate or exploit are rewarding sensationalism and division over truth, nuance and meaningful discussion, and doing so with impunity.

Sir John Hayes: The very distinction between fact and fiction is being eroded, and I fear that young people's consciousness of that is being so damaged that we will be unable to navigate the journey to truth that the hon. Gentleman describes. It is about the great internet giants, but it is also about the keyboard warriors. Umberto Eco described the internet as the "empire of imbeciles"; the trouble now is that people cannot tell the difference between imbeciles and experts.

Dan Aldridge: There is rightly a lot of conversation about children in this space, but we often forget that people generally are having huge problems. Just last weekend I was knocking on doors, and grown men were saying they did not believe anything they read online. They did not believe anything I said. There was no justification. It is a real difficulty, so I absolutely take the right hon. Gentleman's point. It is important to talk about the people behind the algorithms.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): It is not only important to make the distinction between fact and fiction; does my hon. Friend accept the distinction between the real and fake people who operate in some of these spaces?

Dan Aldridge: Yes, absolutely. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) mentioned the difficulty of identifying or holding to account the bots and the non-people actors who are causing so many problems.

[Dan Aldridge]

In debates such as this, I talk about the people behind the algorithms and platforms because it is far too easy to lose perspective and characterise algorithms and digital platforms as something intangible and alien to us, when we are actually in control of them. In 2020, the former Member for Uxbridge, when he was Prime Minister, claimed that a “mutant algorithm” was to blame for the 2020 exam fiasco. It was a masterclass in deflecting blame from the egregious human failure, and from the line of responsibility that tracked right back to the heart of his Government. The consequences still impact the thousands of young people, my constituents included, whose life plans and chances were upended by the hubris of a Government who were enthralled by the promise of tech as a quick fix.

Sensationalist headlines about mutant algorithms serve no one other than those avoiding the finger of blame, and it all comes at the expense of a meaningful space to discuss the issues that truly matter to our constituents, such as the cost of living, the housing crisis and the need for better public services. We must do better.

Online disinformation is a persistent and pernicious threat to our democracy. False narratives spread much faster, and they stick much harder than the truth. Populist snake-oil salesmen hawk false hope online and pervert public perception. They sell simple solutions to complex problems to desperate people. They intentionally undermine our institutions to their own ends.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that many of the people who operate in the background do so on the behalf of our foreign adversaries—countries like Russia and Iran—who outsource this sort of work to sow division inside our society? We should work with the Government as hard as we can to tackle that.

Dan Aldridge: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will get on to that.

Disinformation has become a stealth weapon wielded by hostile states and domestic actors alike to destabilise communities and societies and to undermine democratic norms. We saw the real-world consequences of that just last summer when inflammatory content spread online with impunity, fuelling riots and civil unrest. That serves as a stark warning that disinformation does not remain online but has dangerous real-life consequences. In my constituency, I saw how people manipulated fear in our most vulnerable communities using online platforms to promote their own craven political agendas. I will never forgive them for that.

Leigh Ingham: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a responsibility on all of us who are fortunate enough to be in this place to use our voices proportionately, carefully and with respect, because by using such platforms we have the power to inflame and antagonise, which can make situations worse?

Dan Aldridge: As my hon. Friend knows, I am a very moderate human being. I agree with her. One of the things that I want to do in this place and in my constituency is always look for the positive angle in things, to talk with moderation and to calm community tensions rather than inflame them for political gain. I see much more of the former at the moment, and I am grateful for that.

Stronger regulations, greater transparency and real accountability are essential, but so is meaningful and applicable education and training. One will not be fully effective without the other. Platforms must act in the public interest and have greater ethical oversight and governance rather than simply follow the corporate interests of shareholders. The voices of ordinary citizens, not the interests of the few, must shape our national discourse, and the UK has to push for global consensus where it can in an increasingly challenging and complex world.

Emma Foody: My hon. Friend is making an incredibly impassioned speech, which comes from a place of real experience. As has been mentioned, though, we see an incredibly stark divide in the younger generation. Recent research on generation Z has shown that it is more polarised than ever, with over 25% of young people preferring authoritarianism. Does he agree that it is time to ensure that our young people can access nuanced debate?

Dan Aldridge: Absolutely, we need to create spaces in our schools and our communities for that debate. I am really encouraged by the work of my colleagues in government, including my hon. Friend the Minister, who are taking their responsibilities to the British public seriously and showing an openness to engagement that was sorely lacking under the previous Administration in policies around technology. I look forward to working with my colleagues to take the necessary steps to protect and strengthen our democracy in this digital age.

The Government have a moral duty to act in the public interest on this. Let us work together to restore faith in our democracy and our institutions and show that we are still the masters of our own destiny, even in this brave new digital world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am now imposing an immediate three-minute time limit.

2.57 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber and for her courage. As we have heard, the Netflix show “Adolescence” has been a wake-up call for many about social media’s dangerous impact on our world view and beliefs. A young boy groomed online by an incel culture that is hostile to women murders a female classmate for resisting his prejudice against women.

Campaigners have recently warned of this issue. Months before “Adolescence” was released, Zero Tolerance’s “Many Good Men” report highlighted the need to better regulate platforms that spread misinformation and radicalisation. That is of particular importance for young people, including those in my constituency of Mid Dunbartonshire, as nearly 60% of them rely on social media as their primary information source, including for news, as we have heard.

If radical content already fuels violence against women and girls, we must be aware of its effect on democracy. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) referenced research at Glasgow University. Recent work by King’s College London showed that over half of

generation Z think that the UK would improve under a strong leader who is unconstrained by Parliament or elections. More worryingly, when explicitly asked if they would prefer a dictatorship, 6% said yes. Yet, when questioned on that stance, they clarified that they simply wanted a leader who could effect change quickly, as current progress is too slow. This should not come as a surprise. After all, they are bearing the brunt of a mental health crisis, soaring house prices and a brutal jobs market.

It is clear that a poor online environment reflects a poor real-world environment. Individuals of all ages, frustrated by their circumstances, look for something to blame, be it women, immigration or democracy, in sentiment driven by social media giants and the far-right populists who exploit young people's frustrations.

The solutions to social media's erosion of democracy lie in the real world. The John Smith Centre stresses that politicians should be more open and transparent and address young people's housing and employment concerns to reduce disillusionment. If we ignore their challenges, social media will continue to undermine our democracy and draw our young people into increasingly extreme environments.

3 pm

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for raising this important issue.

It is all too tempting to believe that democratic processes were once stronger, more resilient or perhaps more civil, but I do not think nostalgia is a particularly practical strategy. Nor, however, can we assume that progress towards a better world is natural and without setbacks. It is our responsibility as legislators not simply to comment on history but actively to shape it, particularly when we are confronted with new and complex challenges.

The impact of digital platforms on our democracy represents precisely such a challenge. They promised to democratise the debate and give every citizen an equal voice, but the reality has been far more complicated and, I would argue, more destabilising than democratising. Polling by More in Common has revealed that 72% of Britons believe that social media negatively impacts young people, and even more people showed a strong appetite for greater accountability from tech companies, particularly regarding misinformation and online harm. Ofcom's latest findings show that three in 10 children aged eight to 17 encountered harm online in the last month. That is not abstract; just because it is online does not mean it is not a real harm. We do not allow it offline, so we should not allow it online. Social media companies have enormous power to influence the public debate. Their platforms have too often facilitated harmful content—hate speech, misinformation and abuse—and the reality is that they continue to profit from division and outrage. We should expect a lot better from such influential businesses.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism, so I am subjected to a particular kind of abuse that gives me the tiniest glimpse into what it is like to be either Jewish, or indeed any minority, in the UK. I just ignore most of it because it is so widespread, but occasionally I will get something and think, "That is really not acceptable", and I will report it.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): There has been a lot of comment in the debate about the impact on Members' families. My hon. Friend is talking about her experiences of abuse in her role as an APPG chair. Does she agree that her staff are also exposed to that?

Joani Reid: I absolutely agree.

I want to give Members a sense of what I have reported to X, which I have been told does not meet its threshold for action and I can just block the accounts if I want to. Here are some of the comments being directed at me:

"Why are Jews allowed to invest in politicians in the UK?"

"Are you Jewish? Most Jewish children are weak and neurotic and struggle to understand things the way advanced Aryan children do."

"You are not well-bred. You are 1/4 tainted of Jewish blood. This softens the heart and darkens the soul."

In relation to the Holocaust, I have been told it "didn't happen, mate." That didn't reach X's harmful content threshold and was allowed to continue.

These people operate with impunity in this country. Transparency in the algorithms, proactive content moderation and genuine co-operation with regulators such as Ofcom should absolutely not be optional. Tech companies must understand that accessing our markets and citizens carries clear responsibilities and that if they want to operate here, they need to obey the law of our land. This is not about stifling innovation or freedom; it is about—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Noah Law.

3.5 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): The strength of our democracy lies in its people—their voices, concerns and participation. The Labour party that I know has always been a party of the grassroots, particularly in Cornwall, and of real individuals engaging with real communities. We are not the party of faceless bots, anonymous profiles or foreign interference. Yet, as we reflect on last year's general election, we must confront the unsettling reality that the integrity of our democratic process is under threat from hostile actors and unaccountable digital platforms, such as those we have heard about today.

In my constituency I have seen the manipulation at first hand. The administrators of the local Reform UK Facebook group—supposedly representing my constituency—are not local at all. Not a single one that I can see has anything to do with my constituency. Many cannot even be identified as real individuals. This is not grassroots activism; it is astroturfing—an insidious form of political manipulation where orchestrated campaigns masquerade as spontaneous grassroots movements, misleading and deceiving the public.

That is not an isolated case. Across the UK, our election was tainted by misinformation on an unprecedented scale. These were not spontaneous expressions of a democratic electorate, but the work of malign domestic and foreign actors, deliberately interfering to distort the public discourse. The power of those platforms to spread falsehoods rapidly and without scrutiny undermines trust in our political system.

[Noah Law]

Undoubtedly, the owners of the platforms wield immense influence on our public discourse. Their decisions on content moderation, as we have heard, shape what information is disseminated and trusted. The fact that one such owner has openly endorsed figures convicted of hate crimes, such as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, is appalling, signalling how those with immense digital influence can amplify those voices. These are not neutral platforms but ideological battlegrounds, and right now the scales are tipped in favour of disinformation. Labour stands for a different vision of politics; a politics built on real people, engagement and communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.7 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): A serious allegation was made recently that Liberal Democrats spend too much time in our communities fixing church roofs and are not on Twitter. Well, last night I logged back on, and let me tell the House that Twitter was absolutely brilliant. The quality and depth of political debate really was something to behold. Liberals and authoritarians, nationalists and internationalists, and people from the economic right, left and centre were engaging in well-informed, expansive and thoughtful debate about the most pressing issues of the day. I jest, of course—it was a total waste of time for everybody involved, including me.

Elon Musk has made Twitter useful for some people, though. I refer to those on the hard right of politics, who are profiting by sowing the seeds of division. They are not just profiting politically, but lining their pockets with the money of social media barons. Madam Deputy Speaker, I have already told the Member to whom I am about to refer that I intend to refer to him today, because his entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests is revealing. The leader of Reform, the Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), has declared more than £10,000 in earnings from one particular source since he was elected. The address of the payer is in Market Square. I know what Members are all thinking: "It's the charming covered market in Clacton". No, that closed in 2022. It is Elon Musk's X, based in Market Square in San Francisco, California. He has also declared more than £14,000 in earnings from Google, £98,000 from Cameo, based in Chicago, and more than £2,700 from Meta in California.

One wonders where the Member for Clacton finds the time. As a 2024 intake MP, I encounter colleagues who basically do not have time to go to the loo. On a more philosophical note, for someone who claims to be a patriot, he is certainly taking a lot of money from international sources. That should give us all pause for thought when we consider the impact of digital platforms on democracy. We might conclude at the very least that it distracts some MPs from doing their actual job—and I do not mean the distraction of doom-scrolling; I mean the distraction of the grift.

What of the broader threats presented by social media platforms? We have spoken on many occasions recently about the issues that young men face and the impact on democracy. It is my belief that, at heart, those issues are the symptoms of many problems, including the tone of

debate about the roles and responsibilities of boys as they become men, a lack of routes to secure employment, and ludicrously high housing and rental prices. For someone who is stuck in their childhood bedroom looking for reasons why their life is rubbish, the digital world has no shortage of scapegoats: women, minorities, LGBT+ people, immigrants, foreigners, refugees, disabled people, the weak, single-parent families—the list goes on.

There is also no shortage of snake oil salesmen out there to tell them who to blame and what they can do about it. Andrew Tate tells us it is the fault of women. I can tell any young men listening at home that nobody outside the manosphere wants to see pictures of bald middle-aged men with their tops off—I know from personal experience. My social media followers and, more importantly, my friends left me in no doubt about what a plonker I looked after I posted a photo of myself at Cheltenham Lido. Those who idolise Tate would do well to heed that advice.

Jordan Peterson, another big thinker on the right, gives brilliant advice to young men. He tells them they must make themselves physically strong so that they can find a mate and get rich and powerful, or they will end up dying poor and alone, perhaps with melted brains like crustaceans defeated in a violent fight in the depths of the ocean. I am pretty sure that is not true. The lads should not worry about it, but so many do, thanks to these snake oil sellers online.

Thanks to President Trump and those who argue for a bizarre form of freedom of speech—just not for everyone—the truth is now a contested concept, and it is intertwined with fear and hatred, which are both a threat to our democracy. We all know where the truth goes to die: whichever social media platform you like. You just start posting outlandish stuff. You keep going. You double down. You find a mad and hateful narrative. You tell everyone it is free speech, and before you know it, you might be lucky enough to become a successful online grifter with your top off. Perhaps you will be an MP, or maybe even the President of America.

Two days ago it was April fool's day. I hate April fool's day, because the world is now so ludicrous that we do not know what is a joke and what is not. Even worse, what we post as a joke might end up being shared so many times that it becomes somebody else's truth eventually. In the worst case, that becomes part of a hate-fuelled conspiracy theory. I will not mention it; everyone here knows what it is. There are many increasingly popular conspiracy theories online that have nothing to do with hatred but are plainly bizarre. I will not name them here for the sake of all our inboxes, but every single one of those outlandish claims is a threat to our democracy, and those views are going round the world quicker and quicker thanks to social media.

What should we in this place be doing about it? While digital and social media platforms can be good for democracy, they are inherently vulnerable to misinformation and abuse, and they reduce the quality of public debate. We need look no further than the riots following the tragic Southport attacks. That tragedy for those little girls and their families was compounded for so many by what happened in the following days, when people were whipped up into a frenzy by false rumours leading to more violence. Musk's X, Zuckerberg's Meta and other social media companies facilitate that spreading of misinformation, and they have made it entirely clear to all of us that they do not care.

Let us face it: platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat are making our children sad and depressed, they are putting a check on the development of the adults of the future, and they absolutely cannot be trusted. Musk used his purchase of Twitter to further leverage his influence over the world's largest democracy. He changed the rules to boost his own posts and push aside those he disagrees with—freedom of speech, but for some more than others.

From his own platform, the world's richest man has made several direct interruptions in our democracy. Last summer he sought to further incite disorder, posting that in the UK "Civil war is inevitable". He also called for America to

"liberate the people of Britain"

and overthrow the UK Government, and he has suggested he might bankroll the Reform party. While I have some sympathy for Ministers dealing with Trump, do they really think it is wise to be so gentle with him when his right-hand man, Musk, has called for them to be forcibly ejected from office? I realise that Ministers are limited in what they can say, but I am pretty sure I know what they think. Regardless of diplomatic norms, this is plainly absurd. Worse than that, it makes our once strong nation look weak.

What should we do? Social media companies must take a larger role in tackling misinformation. It is clear that they will not do it without Government intervention, and they need to get on with it. Liberal Democrats believe that stricter regulations must be introduced to ensure that they properly challenge the spread of misinformation on their platforms. We must stand up to them. We must intervene to protect our democracy. As a liberal, I believe that unchecked power and wealth are inherently dangerous, and I often take my whip from John Stuart Mill, who warned:

"the dictum that truth always triumphs over persecution, is one of those pleasant falsehoods...which all experience refutes."

We must heed that warning.

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

3.14 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for securing this important debate. Digital platforms can both enhance and undermine democracy. Social media can increase awareness of elections and candidates, encouraging participation and voter turnout, but it can also lead to the abuse of democratically elected MPs, councillors and politicians. Even more worrying is the threat of electoral interference from malign international actors. I am grateful to Members from all parties who took part in what was an incredibly thoughtful and interesting debate on such an important issue.

For reasons of time I cannot reflect on everyone's speech, but I wish to pay particular heed to three Members who have spoken. I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley for her incredibly powerful speech, and I am sorry about the abuse, attacks and threats she has experienced. Any attack or abuse to an MP is an attack on our democracy. We have brilliant representatives in this place. I am proud to be a Member of this, the greatest Parliament in the world, and there is a duty on

us to stand up for our fellow colleagues, Members across the House, and elected representatives at all levels. I particularly thank her for mentioning Jo Cox and David Amess. I was elected after Jo Cox was murdered, but I did get to meet David Amess before he was murdered, and I still have a letter that he sent me when I was elected as a new MP. I know that he and Jo Cox are very much missed by us all. Sadly, what happened to them clearly drives home the importance of ensuring that we deal with these problems and get this right.

Later in my speech I will pick up on one of the points that the hon. Member for Lagan Valley raised about disinformation and misinformation, as well as digital watermarking. She also raised important points about how social media operates. I have often thought that we need to think about anonymity and privacy separately in terms of people using a platform and its content.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who used her speech, in part, to make some comments regarding her resignation. Principles are not principles unless we act on them, and I hope she has the opportunity to serve in His Majesty's Government again at some point in the future. There have been so many brilliant speeches, and I would like to reference everybody but cannot due to time. However, some remarks by the hon. Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid) jumped out at me, particularly the quote that she read out in this Chamber, and those vile comments. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that when she winds up the debate, and said what reassurance she can give the House that the issue is being dealt with appropriately by the digital online platforms.

Protecting the integrity of our elections and stopping the influence of malign and foreign actors is a critical role for the Government, and it is the Government's responsibility to work closely with the Electoral Commission, and others, to protect the integrity, security and effectiveness of UK referendums and elections. The Electoral Commission has a wide range of investigatory and civil sanctioning powers, and the Government are able to refer more serious matters to the police or the National Crime Agency. As outlined in the previous Government's response to the report on Russia by the Intelligence and Security Committee, the UK's adversaries adapt a whole-of-state approach to hybrid and malign activity. Therefore, tackling it requires a cross-Government, cross-society response.

To respond effectively, the Government need to draw on the skills, resources and remits of different Departments, agencies and non-governmental organisations. Considering the current geopolitical landscape, it is essential that the Government keep all aspects of their approach to protecting democracy under review so that they can quickly adapt to any new threats that emerge.

The UK is not alone in facing this issue; democracies across the western world are facing the same issue. Political parties are successfully harnessing the impact of social media to reach cohorts of voters who are normally uninterested or disillusioned. That is a good thing, but countries are facing interference from other states, including Russia and China, so how should Governments respond?

The previous Government were resolute in defending our country from hostile state activity. The Elections Act 2022, which they brought forward, restricts third-party

[Dr Ben Spencer]

campaigning to UK-based groups and eligible overseas electors, so that only those with legitimate interests in UK elections can campaign at UK elections. It also contains new measures requiring digital imprints on online campaign material and greater transparency in political funding. The previous Government also passed the world-leading Online Safety Act, to which many Members have referred. Its provisions have only recently come into force and I hope this Government will continue to actively monitor what Ofcom is doing to ensure the Act is working appropriately.

There are also threats from artificial intelligence and disinformation, particularly the ability of AI to create realistic videos and images impersonating trusted public figures, including political and religious leaders. The risks of that are clear for all to see. In Committee, we tabled an amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill that would have set up a technological standard on digital watermarks. In part, it was about helping to solve some of the issues around AI and copyright, but it was also about ascribing authenticity to what people are putting on social media. I suspect that, like me, many colleagues from across the House would like to have the ability to put a digital watermark on the material they put out, so that people can be sure that the content they are seeing is from the person who purports to have created it. The Government voted our amendment down, but I hope Ministers will work with us to support such measures going forward.

To conclude, we must ensure that regulations are effective and up to date with the latest technology. We must ensure that the public are made aware of the risks of AI-generated content and deliberate misinformation, and we must tackle foreign interference in our elections. Digital platforms can enhance democracy and it is important that we do not lose sight of that. Like it or not, traditional media is no longer the primary news source for many people; Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat are all part of the news ecosystem. If we, as politicians, want better participation in democracy—I believe that all of us want that—we cannot vacate social media, although if I am honest I am very jealous of the people who do not use it, or vacate the online space. Instead, we must ensure that it works for all of us.

3.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for securing the debate. I join her in honouring the memory of our dear colleagues Sir David Amess and Jo Cox. I am grateful to her and to all the other speakers for their incredibly powerful and insightful contributions to the debate.

The Government share the hon. Member's concerns about the impact that online harassment, intimidation, abuse, misinformation and disinformation have on our democracy. Existing and emerging technologies have led to changes in the information environment and will continue to shape our future, but it is, and will always be, an absolute priority for the UK Government to protect our democracy, and we remain well-prepared to do so with robust systems in place. I was grateful to the hon. Member for sharing her experiences. The House

should hear about the online abuse and hate that she has faced. There is no place for that, and I thank her for sharing it.

The Government are committed to combating violence against women and girls. The Online Safety Act requires Ofcom to develop and enforce guidance for tech companies, which aims to ensure that platforms implement measures to reduce harm to women and girls online. The Act imposes legal responsibility on online platforms, including social media platforms, gaming platforms, dating apps and search engines, to protect users from illegal content and material that is harmful to children and to address issues that disproportionately affect women and girls. Those measures reflect the Government's commitment to creating a safer online environment, acknowledging the unique challenge faced by women and girls in the digital space. In putting that guidance together, Ofcom consulted with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the Victims' Commissioner and experts in the field.

The effectiveness of those measures depends on their robust implementation and enforcement, which we will monitor closely. As the hon. Member knows, the implementation of the Online Safety Act started only in spring this year. While we know it is a landmark Act, it is not perfect, so the Government will continue to keep it under review, and we will not shy away from strengthening it where required. As I said, the Act is already being implemented. We will introduce protections to protect people from illegal content, such as child sexual abuse and terrorist material, as well as to protect children from harmful material. I make it clear to the House and to all Members who raised this issue that that is not up for negotiation.

The hon. Member also raised the issue of banning smartphones for under-16s. The Government will consider all options in pursuit of children's online safety. However, it is important that the Government take evidence-based action in recognition of the need to balance safety with allowing children to use technology positively. I am sure she is also aware that in November last year, the Department announced a study using methods and data to understand the impact of smartphones and social media on children. The study began in December last year and will run for six months until May 2025, and I am sure we will report to the House on that.

I come back to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). I take this opportunity to thank her for all the support she gave me and many of my colleagues when she served on the Front Bench in opposition and when we came into government. I look forward to seeing her on the Front Bench again soon; I hope she does not spend too long on the Back Benches.

My right hon. Friend raised the issue of the unrest last year. During that unrest, the Department worked with major platforms to tackle content contributing to the disorder, which included proactively referring content to platforms that assessed and acted on it in line with their terms of service. Throughout our engagement, we have been very clear that social media platforms should not wait for the Online Safety Act to come into action: they should actively be removing harmful content.

My right hon. Friend also raised the issue of broader international collaboration on online safety, with which I absolutely agree. International collaboration is absolutely crucial in tackling the global threat of online harms,

and we must build consensus around approaches that uphold our democratic values and promote a free, open and secure internet.

As the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said, since 2022, the Elections Act has protected candidates, campaigners and elected office holders from intimidation, both online and in person. It is an election offence for a person to make or publish, before or during an election, a false statement of fact about a candidate's personal character or conduct, for the purpose of affecting the return for that candidate at the election, if the person does not believe it to be true. This provides a reasonable check and balance against malicious smear campaigns.

We also have the defending democracy taskforce, which has a mandate to drive forward a whole-Government response to the full range of threats to our democracy. That taskforce reports to the National Security Council and is comprised of Ministers and senior officials, as well as representatives of law enforcement, the UK intelligence community, the parliamentary authorities and the Electoral Commission. In April 2023, the taskforce set up the joint election security and preparedness unit—JESP, for short—as a permanent function dedicated to protecting UK elections and referendums. It monitors and mitigates risks related to the security of elections, including those posed by artificial intelligence, misinformation and disinformation. JESP stood up an election cell for the 2024 elections, which co-ordinated a wide range of teams across Government to respond to issues as they emerged, including issues to do with protective security, cyber-threats, and misinformation and disinformation.

An election cell has been stood up for the upcoming local elections. Firm steps are being taken to ensure the security of candidates and campaigners. That happened during last year's election, and will happen again for the upcoming local elections. Candidates were issued with security advice, and guidance was made available on gov.uk about the risks they face, including from AI and disinformation. That guidance brought together expertise from across the security community, including from the police and the National Cyber Security Centre, to help candidates implement quick and effective personal protective measures. I have only recently looked at that guidance, and I recommend that all candidates take a look. There was also an investment of £31 million over financial year 2024-25 to strengthen protective security measures for MPs, locally elected representatives and candidates.

As reported by the Electoral Commission, last year's UK general election was delivered safely and securely. Certain novel risks, such as AI-generated deepfakes influencing the outcome, did not materialise. However, in that election, there was unacceptable harassment and intimidation directed at candidates—particularly female candidates—and campaigners, especially online. It is clearly vital that everyone, regardless of their sex/gender or race, feels able to participate in public life. The Home Office is reviewing this activity through the defending democracy taskforce.

We need to better understand the trends, motivations and drivers that cause people to harass and intimidate their elected representatives. That includes identifying gaps and vulnerabilities and developing recommendations to strengthen legislative responses, as well as a clear delineation of online versus in-person activity and its impact. That work will be reported to the taskforce, and my Department has contributed to these efforts to tackle online harms and improve online environments. While the primary responsibility for harmful social media content rests with the individuals and groups who create and post it, social media platforms have a responsibility to keep users safe.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Sorcha Eastwood to quickly wind up.

3.33 pm

Sorcha Eastwood: I thank everybody who has contributed to today's debate, the Backbench Business Committee for giving permission for it, and those who supported the application for it. I also thank the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds)—I was privileged to have her in the Chamber for this debate, and her contribution was really poignant and incredibly moving. I thank the shadow spokespeople, and I thank the Minister for her remarks.

Today should be the start of a conversation and a dialogue. It is clear that everybody in the Chamber is passionate about moving forward on this issue and defending our constituents, our country and our democracy. I look forward to working with everybody across the House on tackling this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of digital platforms on UK democracy.

Access to Sport: PE in Schools

3.35 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to sport and PE in schools.

First, I put on record my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate in the Chamber. I called for this debate because I made a visit to Sir Graham Balfour school in my constituency, where I met one of my young constituents, Tane. After my visit, he wrote me a letter in which he talked in detail about his worries about the impact of covid-19 on his generation. I will start by quoting him:

“Exercise doesn’t just chemically make you feel good, it’s great for socialising, raising self-esteem and coping with losing. All life skills that seem a bit ‘missing’ in kids my age since lockdown.”

His statement was profound in its simplicity, but it is at the heart of my argument today.

Access to sport and physical education is about more than keeping children physically fit; it is about giving them skills, resilience and the confidence to navigate life’s challenges. It is about their mental health, their ability to form friendships and their capacity to overcome obstacles. It is about ensuring that no child is denied the chance to benefit from opportunities because of their background or gender, or any other barriers to opportunity that they face in life.

To begin with, I want to focus on the clear and undeniable health benefits, both physical and mental, of sport and exercise. Sport England’s active lives survey of children and young people provides invaluable insight about physical activity among young people. It confirms what many of us feared: while overall activity levels have remained stable since covid-19, the long-term effects of the pandemic have cast a shadow over children’s engagement with sport, their mental wellbeing and their future relationship with physical activity.

For children who enjoy sport or whose parents can support them in being physically active, things are straightforward, but for those children and young people who do not feel comfortable playing sport, do not have playgrounds to play in, or do not have the physical ability to be active easily, these things become much more challenging. For many children, especially those facing socioeconomic challenges or with limited access to recreational facilities, PE classes may be the only opportunity to engage in structured exercise. By providing structured and comprehensive PE classes, schools not only contribute to the immediate health of students, but equip them with the knowledge and skills to lead active lifestyles into adulthood.

We know that access to sport does not just benefit physical health; as Tane said, it benefits our mental health, too. Engaging in regular exercise releases endorphins, our feel-good hormones that alleviate stress and anger and improve sleep quality. MPs could probably benefit from that, me included. Furthermore, participation in team sports or group activities can foster social connections, which are instrumental to wellbeing and so important in the wake of covid-19.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. She was kind enough to contribute to my debate about

mental health support in education settings. She is well aware that the link between mental health and exercise is so important. Physical exercise can help people manage stress, anxiety and depression. One in five young people report having a mental health disorder or a mental health crisis, so creating and supporting a robust PE curriculum, and giving children the opportunity to take part in outside sport, is more important than ever.

Leigh Ingham: I completely agree. I will come on to discuss this issue further. Individuals who are inactive are three times as likely to face moderate to severe depression than their active counterparts, and we know that regular physical activity can reduce the risk of depression by up to 30%. The benefits are even more pronounced when exercise takes place outdoors; studies indicate that immersion in nature enhances happiness, imparts a greater sense of life’s worth, and diminishes depression and anxiety. In a changing world, in which more and more children struggle with their mental health, we need to support our young people in any way we can.

When it comes to accessing sport, the significant challenges that young girls face include a lack of confidence and a fear of judgment, particularly around body image. They are surrounded by social media and edited, unrealistic images of women’s bodies, which tell them that they need to be perfect to participate. This is compounded by the fact that many sports are still male dominated.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for opening today’s debate. My constituent Olivia recently wrote to me. She and her sister play football for the Stockport County under-8s and under-9s teams, and they are showing clear talent and skill. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is really important that we support young girls to get into the habit of playing team sports? Olivia wrote to me because they are looking for support with bibs and balls, which I am working on. I am sure the hon. Lady agrees that getting young girls playing sport is a really important way of getting them in the habit of doing so for the rest of their life.

Leigh Ingham: I completely agree. I am about to say a little bit about that, because equitable access to sports is so important. Before I was elected as an MP, I worked for an organisation called Plan International, which specialises in working with young people, particularly young women and girls. I was shocked to learn that, on average, two thirds of playgrounds are taken up by boys. They often play football, which means that the physical space that girls have for playing sport is significantly diminished.

I was delighted to learn that four schools in my constituency signed up to take part in a girls’ “biggest ever football session”: Sir Graham Balfour, Flash Ley primary, Stafford Manor high and Church Eaton primary. Change starts at home, so I am proud to have schools in my patch that prioritise the inclusion of young women and girls in sport and football. However, despite the Lionesses’ brilliant 2022 Euros win, many girls still do not feel comfortable playing football. In 2022, the Lionesses brought football home and said that it was only the beginning. I echo their open letter to the then Prime Minister, in which they asked him to make sure that young girls have access to at least two hours of PE a

week, that physical activity among young women is tracked, and that there is accountability for ensuring that takes place. The Government now have the chance to deliver on the Lionesses' ask, which would benefit girls and young women around the country.

From Sport England's research, we know that active children are not only healthier but happier, more resilient and more confident. However, despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the benefits of physical activity, many young people are being left behind, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. I spoke to representatives of Swim England, who told me that only 50% of children from the least affluent families can swim 25 metres by the time they leave primary school. By comparison, 90% of children from wealthy families can.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the impact of covid-19 on children's relationship with physical activity has been profound. Those who were in nursery or early primary school when the pandemic struck, who are now in years 3 to 8, remain significantly less likely than their older peers to have positive attitudes towards sport and physical activity. Worryingly, happiness scores have also dropped among these age groups, as has their sense of resilience. The number of children who keep trying when things get tough is down by 6.9% for those in years 5 and 6, and down by 7% for those in years 8 and 9. In a changing world, we know how important it is that children are able to keep going when things get tough, and sport is one of the key ways that they can learn that resilience. As Tane said, where else can a child learn to pick themselves up and go again?

In preparing for this debate, I wanted to ensure that the voices of children with special educational needs and disabilities were at the heart of the discussion. Walton Hall academy in my constituency is a special educational needs school, and it has told me how crucial the role of sports is in supporting its students by providing an opportunity to develop essential skills, including hand-eye co-ordination and teamwork, while fostering a sense of belonging and confidence.

For many SEND young people in both mainstream and specialist schools, sport is not only an activity, but a powerful vehicle for achieving their education, health and care plan targets, such as promoting communication and building connections, which are areas that can be particularly challenging for SEND young people. However, when I spoke to the Activity Alliance and ParalympicsGB, both shared some worrying information about inclusivity of sports for SEND young people. Nationally, 15% of our young people and children have special educational needs, which is about 1.5 million people, but 75% of them are not active in school, meaning that over one in 10 of our children nationwide are not active. I fear that those numbers are due to a poor understanding of inclusion for disabled children.

Furthermore, accessing sport and play outside school can be financially prohibitive for SEND families, with membership fees and specialised equipment presenting specific barriers. I have been running a campaign in my own constituency for inclusive playparks as places where children can get active for free, but that would need to be rolled out nationwide. That has significant challenges because of the differences when it comes to special educational needs and disabilities. I recently hosted a coffee morning on SEND in my constituency, and many

parents told me that their experience with councils and schools was frequently adversarial and confrontational, which can exacerbate this issue.

No child should be left on the sidelines, and I know how seriously the Department for Education takes its responsibility to SEND children. I strongly encourage the Government to consider adapting teacher training and education to ensure that the next generation of the teaching workforce have the skills and confidence necessary to deliver truly inclusive physical education. That could involve significant disability inclusion training, and introducing subject-specific disability inclusion training to the core content framework for PE specialists, such as special accessible lesson plans and a wide range of adaptive sport. I do not know if any Members have ever played wheelchair basketball, but it is actually the most fun, and it is incredibly competitive.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I recently played wheelchair basketball with the Harrogate Hammerheads, at the Liberal Democrat party conference, with my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey). It was a joyful experience, and what I learned is that it is basically impossible.

Leigh Ingham: I thank the hon. Member for the intervention. I agree that it is definitely a challenge, but what I like about it is that it can provide a level playing field. A class of mainstream and SEND kids can play it together, and everyone finds it really challenging, so it is a great leveller.

Moving on from SEND, the ongoing curriculum review is a rare opportunity to enhance access to PE. Sport teaches teamwork, discipline and resilience, which are essential qualities for both education and employment. Employers seek individuals who can collaborate and persevere, and sport provides such a training ground. A diverse PE curriculum, including activities beyond traditional sports such as football and rugby—no shame; they are both great sports—can engage more students. Options such as martial arts, yoga and dance could be explored to ensure that PE appeals to all.

However, this is not just about access to sport; it is about the social value of sport, and the fact that it gives children and young people more time and energy to focus on other subjects and attain better results. What other subject gives kids focus like PE does? By embedding structured, high-quality PE into the school week, we would be not only improving children's health, but giving them the tools they need to succeed in other subjects and studies. Sport also provides valuable lessons beyond the classroom, such as teamwork, resilience, discipline and leadership. Again, those are essential qualities for most careers.

I make it clear that, perhaps unusually, this debate is not to ask for more money for sports, at a time when our financial situation is so tenuous. What we need are more sustainable funding frameworks for PE, and for the pupil premium and school games organisers. In 2016, school games organisers received a funding promise for each academic year of that Parliament. That was during a process of substantial change under previous Governments, Prime Ministers and Education Secretaries, but that funding commitment did give schools the ability to plan ahead, build structured sports programmes, and invest in the staff and resources necessary to make PE

[Leigh Ingham]

effective. However, in the years since, uncertainty over future funding has left many schools unable to make long-term commitments, forcing them into a cycle of short-term solutions that do not serve students or school communities well.

We need assurances that funding for sport and PE will be protected and given the same security as other areas of education. Without that, we risk losing dedicated school games organisers and vital school sports programmes that have been proven to improve health and wellbeing. Can the Minister please give confirmation that funding for school games organisers will be provided for the next year, and consider the possibility of more sustainable long-term funding commitments?

In conclusion, we know that sport provides a health value in improving physical health. We also know that it provides a social value, in the wellbeing of our children and adults. Finally, we know that it provides an economic value, in reducing mental health service usage, fewer GP visits and preventing illness. Altogether, that value is upwards of £100 billion each year. Sport and PE are not just about fitness; they are about the future. They are about creating a society where young people grow up healthier, happier and more equipped to navigate life's challenges. The benefits of sport are not abstract. They are real, measurable and profoundly impactful. If we want a healthier nation, a more resilient workforce and a stronger society, then investing in access to sport and PE is not just a policy choice—it is a necessity.

I urge the Government to take the issue seriously, to commit to sustainable funding and to ensure that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to thrive through sport. We must listen to young people like Tane, who have articulated so clearly the need for action. We must respond with real change. As Tane said when he wrote to me:

“This seems like quite a simple solution to a lot of problems.”

3.51 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) on securing the debate. I could easily spend my whole speech talking about the challenge of increasing girls' participation in PE and sport in schools. Despite the progress made through initiatives such as the “This Girl Can” campaign, there is still a gender gap, with only 32% of girls aged five to 15 achieving the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day compared to 41% of boys, according to Sport England's “Active Lives” survey in 2023. We have come a long way since my schooldays in the '80s, when girls over eight were not allowed to play competitive mixed football and there were no girls' teams I could join. I have been delighted to see the great strides made in women's football in recent years and it was a joy to join a girls' training session at Pucklechurch primary school recently. The 20-plus girls running around on a very small pitch showed that girls really do like football.

However, I want to focus today on a different area of inequality: the participation in PE of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. I am pleased that the hon. Lady raised this issue in her speech. Children with SEND are one and a half times more likely to be inactive compared to their peers without SEND. We know the benefits that physical

activity can bring: improved mental and physical health, boosted self-esteem, and important social opportunities for SEND students. So, what are the barriers? Only 14% of PE teachers feel fully confident in adapting activities for children with SEND, according to research by the Youth Sport Trust. There is a significant gap in teacher training for inclusive sport. Schools often lack access to the necessary adaptive equipment, making it difficult for SEND students to engage in physical activity on an equal footing with their peers. Provision is inconsistent, with some schools able to offer much more well-developed programmes for SEND students than others.

One consequence of that, which may surprise some, is that it can lead to increased absence for SEND students. The Youth Sport Trust has highlighted that pupils with SEND are more likely to experience disengagement in physical education, which can lead to increased school absences. A report from Scope, a leading disability charity, found that children with SEND who feel excluded from physical activity are at higher risk of developing mental health challenges, which can further exacerbate absence. A study by the National Autistic Society found that students with autism, in particular, are more likely to be absent from school when PE lessons are not adapted to their needs, with absences increasing by up to 20% for those students. To tackle that, Scope calls for more accessible PE facilities and training for teachers on how to adapt physical activity for SEND students. It emphasises the importance of inclusive support, suggesting that schools offer a broader range of activities that cater to different abilities, from wheelchair sports to multi-sensory activities.

The National Autistic Society stresses the importance of clear communication, structured environments and sensory friendly approaches, while Special Olympics Great Britain highlights that a key barrier for children with SEND is the lack of mainstream sports clubs that offer inclusive programmes, urging schools and communities to create partnerships with local clubs, offering pathways to competitive sports for SEND children and fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment. On that, I would like to highlight the work of Yate Acrogymnastics centre. Contrary to the hon. Member for Stafford, I do think this will require some funding for adaptive equipment and the specialist training for staff.

I will conclude by highlighting the work done by the charity Gympanzees, which is currently fundraising to open in my constituency the UK's first fully accessible exercise, play and social centre for disabled children and young people. I had the privilege of visiting its pop-up offerings before I was an MP, where I saw for myself the fantastic holiday activities it provides with an array of specialist equipment and dedicated staff. It has had a massive impact on its users' lives, whether that is the three-year-old laughing for the first time, the 16-year-old who had refused any form of sport at home and school but who rowed a kilometre on their rowing machine, the nine-year-old who held up his head on his own for 10 minutes for the first time, or the 57 children and young people who were able to walk for the first time, using the specialist equipment.

Opening this permanent home for the charity's activities will allow it to offer schemes not only in school holidays but year round, and would give the centre the scope to open up its facilities for other organisations to use, including schools. Gympanzees has already raised more

than half of its £8 million target to fit out the facility. I have previously written to Ministers asking them to consider contributing to the funding of this centre as a pilot facility—a model that could be rolled out across other regions to help to inform provision in and provide training for our schools. I ask them to look again at the huge benefits this project could bring for children with complex needs and the potential it has to deliver access to PE for children who currently miss out.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I do want to try to get everybody in, so we will start with an immediate time limit of four minutes.

3.57 pm

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for securing this debate. She made some fantastic and profound points in her speech.

Like the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young), I will focus on disability sports. In schools across the country, three in four disabled children do not take part in PE regularly, and four in 10 confide that they would like to take part in more sport if it was offered. We should not underestimate the impact this has on these children, with disabled children already facing exclusion and 72% of them reporting feeling lonely.

I know this from my own experience, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have not played sports since I was 13. I had an accident in year 8 where I shattered my hip; I did not walk for four years, and then had a hip replacement in sixth form. A challenge a lot of children who are disabled face in similar situations is that playing football and other sports is how children often build common bonds with their friends; it is what they do together and what they talk about. Being excluded from that has far wider repercussions.

This has been a big priority for me in my constituency. I pay tribute today to the work of ParalympicsGB, the Youth Sport Trust and others; they really recognise this and are doing lots of important local work to improve it. We have some fantastic projects and organisations in Beckenham and Penge that are using their own initiative to increase the participation of disabled people in sport. In Crystal Palace, the National Sports Centre is undergoing a multimillion-pound refurbishment to secure its facilities for future use and, crucially, to make them accessible. I think 19 world records have been set in Crystal Palace, but wheelchair users currently cannot get to the pools and a lot of the other facilities. As Members will know, this issue is close to my heart, and I am proud that this facility in my constituency will be made fully accessible and will be one of the best facilities not just in London but across the country for disabled sport going forward.

I want to put on the record my thanks to Sir Sadiq Khan, the team at the Greater London Authority, including project manager Ben Woods, and Councillors Ruth McGregor and Ryan Thomson, and to the Crystal Palace Sports Partnership, with John Powell and Fran Bernstein, who have really brought people together and made this happen.

Crystal Palace football club and the charity Palace for Life Foundation do genuinely incredible work right across south London, including at the National Sports Centre, to support disabled people and others. As part

of this work, the foundation hosts football sessions for those with Down's syndrome and visual impairments, as well as powerchair football.

One of the points that I often try to make to people is that, of all the protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010, disability is by far the most diverse. We also talk of specific disabilities, such as autism and cerebral palsy, as having spectrums. The challenge for disabled sport is really comprehensive, but we have experts by experience—people with disabilities who understand how best to bridge that gap and make inclusion possible. It is fantastic that the Schools Minister has recognised this. I know that she has spoken about the need for increased PE in schools for disabled children. If I speak to some of the local schools in my constituency, I am told that having other facilities outside school is absolutely essential.

It would be remiss of me not also to mention Kent County Cricket Club in Beckenham, which, alongside managing two disability teams, runs a regular Friday night disability cricket session in Beckenham for children and young people. It has been fantastic to see a renewed focus on access to disability sport both in Government and in my local community, especially following the Paralympics. Increasing access to PE and sport is not something that will happen if we sit back and wait for it. Inclusion is not just an absence of exclusion, and achieving equity will require an active effort from all to get involved. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford for securing this debate.

4.1 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for leading this debate and for the way that she has set out the issues.

Sport and physical education in schools is not only vital for the future of our children, but critical to the health and prosperity of our nation. As we face higher levels of childhood obesity, increasing mental health concerns, and a need to foster a healthier and more cohesive society, it is more important than ever to make physical activity a central part of the school experience.

The benefits of PE and sport extend far beyond childhood. The life skills gained through physical activity, team work, leadership and communication help young people succeed in school and prepare them for their future careers. According to the Youth Sport Trust, 87% of participants in the Set for Success programme said that they know more about how their skills can help them in the future, with 96% of young people reporting an improvement in at least one of team working, communication or leadership since taking part. These skills are crucial to helping young people thrive in their careers and contribute to the future economy, aiding the Government's mission to kickstart economic growth.

I wish to take a moment to recognise the incredible work that is being done in my constituency of Mid Cheshire by organisations such as the Vale Royal School Sport Partnership and Active Cheshire. These organisations are working tirelessly to increase the opportunities for physical activity in schools and communities.

Since 2006, the Vale Royal School Sport Partnership has been instrumental in bringing sport to schools across Northwich and Winsford. School sports partnerships were an early casualty of the coalition Government,

[Andrew Cooper]

with the announcement that ringfenced funding would be removed in a letter to the Youth Sport Trust from the then Secretary of State, Michael Gove, in October 2010, in direct contradiction of what the Conservatives had said when in opposition. In Northwich and Winsford, the schools got together and decided that demolishing an entire infrastructure and proven delivery system that was improving children's lives here and now was not the way to go. So they pooled their funding and saved Vale Royal School Sport Partnership and it is still delivering for children today.

Through well-organised PE programmes, inter-school competitions, and community initiatives, the partnership has helped to increase participation in sport among young people in my area. It offers resources, training and support to teachers, ensuring that every child has the chance to experience the benefits of physical activity, regardless of their background or ability. If the Minister would like to visit my constituency and see the value of the work undertaken by school sports partnerships, I am sure that they would be delighted to receive her.

Similarly, Active Cheshire is dedicated to creating a culture of movement in schools and communities. By providing schools with the tools they need to integrate more sport into their daily routines, Active Cheshire helps foster environments where children feel encouraged and supported to be active.

I cannot let this moment go without mentioning Northwich Rowing Club, which celebrated its 150th anniversary this month. The club has enjoyed huge success in recent years, having produced three Olympians: bronze medallist Emily Ford, and gold medallists Tom Ford and Matt Langridge. What makes me proudest to have them as representatives of my home town is the work they do with schools in partnership with Warrington Youth Rowing to open up access to the sport and break down the perception of rowing as an elitist sport. Every year they give dozens of children across our local secondary schools—all pupil premium children—the opportunity to learn to row, which they otherwise may not have had. Together, these organisations are making a real difference, providing children with the opportunity to develop lifelong healthy habits.

I am conscious of time and so will conclude by highlighting a date for the diary. On 4 June I am sponsoring Youth Sport Trust's national school sports week's parliamentary drop-in. Montell Douglas, who represented Team GB at both the summer and winter Olympics, will be in attendance, and I hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Minister and other colleagues will come along to support this worthwhile event.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I shall certainly do my best. I call Josh Dean.

4.5 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for securing this debate. I will say from the outset that sport and PE was not my favourite part of the school week, and in preparing for this debate many memories of running in the cold on Monday mornings came back. As I am often reminded, it was not that long ago for me. I was the boy at the back of the class, hoping

that the bell would not ring, because I desperately did not want to go and do PE. Members might wonder why I have chosen to speak in this debate, and I am sure some of my PE teachers—blessed to have witnessed my sporting skill—will similarly wonder why.

One of the many joys of this job is the way it helps me to see things in a new light, even in the community I know best, where I grew up and which I call home: Hertford and Stortford. I have had the privilege of visiting almost half of the roughly 50 schools in my constituency since I was elected, and at each one I have been amazed at and impressed by the quality of their sports and PE provision, the positive difference it makes for the young people and their success at it.

To give some examples, it was great to hear how Herts and Essex high school's under-14 girls team recently won silver medals after reaching the national hockey finals. Bishop's Stortford high school pupil Luke Dunham, who is a member of Herts Phoenix Athletic Club, based in Ware, came third in the under-17 race in the inter-counties cross country championships last month. I was also privileged to visit new secondary school Avanti Grange at the end of last year. We have touched on the importance of resilience and mindfulness, and at that high school I saw one of its new yoga classes. Having those built into its curriculum and classes is a way to ensure that their young people are resilient, mindful and prepared for the challenges of school and life. I think that is fantastic.

When young people find a sport that they enjoy at school, they will often progress to one of the many fantastic local sports clubs in our community, such as Hertford Town football club or the Bishop's Stortford Community football club—to say nothing of our fantastic offering in Ware and Sawbridgeworth. Some will go even further, like premier league footballer Oliver Skipp, who, like me, went to Richard Hale school. Without digressing too far from the topic of the debate, for young people it does all start at school. Sport builds our young people's confidence and is good for their mental health and wellbeing. According to Sport England, children who are active are happier, more resilient and more trusting of others.

I would be grateful if the Minister could address two specific points regarding the provision of PE and sport in schools. First, given that the final report on the curriculum and assessment is due later this year, will she ensure that children's mental and physical wellbeing as well as academic achievement is right at the heart of that review? Additionally, in December 2024 Sport England highlighted the impact of the pandemic on young people. Children aged seven to 13 are now less likely to have positive attitudes towards activity, and they have a lower sense of opportunity. Will the Minister set out what the Department is doing to improve and foster positive attitudes towards physical activity and exercise among young people?

I mentioned at the start the many memories I have of not enjoying sports or PE at school, but it has been a privilege to see the amazing provision in my local communities and to know the confidence it is building in our young people and how good it is for their mental health and wellbeing. I want to say a huge well done, not only to the young people representing our schools and communities in competitions across the country, but to all the young people who just want to give sport a go and improve their physical and mental wellbeing—and enjoy it too.

4.9 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and almost constituency neighbour the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for securing this debate on such an important topic. When we talk about access to sport and physical education in schools, it is about not just fitness and physical activity, but opportunity. It is about making sure that every student, no matter what their background, has the chance to find something in which they can excel, or at the very least that they are given the chance to try.

I wish to share a personal story. When I was in school, the sports we were offered were restrictive, to put it politely—or archaic, to be a bit less generous. In autumn and winter it was football for the boys and netball for the girls. In summer it was football and cricket for the boys and rounders for the girls. Sadly, although I enjoy watching both, football and cricket were never my strong suit—and yes, I was always the last one picked for any team, as the bottom of the barrel was scraped. Because of this, I never felt that sport was something that I could excel in, or even enjoy.

However, around the time I reached year 10, I had the opportunity to try sports such as badminton and volleyball—sports that suited me, that I was reasonably good at and, most importantly, that I actually enjoyed and wanted to carry on after I left school. The lesson I took away from that is that sport and PE are not one-size-fits-all. There are so many different sports, each with their own appeal, and it is crucial that children and young people have the chance to explore as wide a range as possible.

According to a Youth Sport Trust report last year, 58% of girls in the UK said that they would like to have more options to choose from. Many girls are not engaged in historically male-dominated sports such as football and rugby. To address this we need two things. First, we need improved access to the alternative sports that girls are missing out on, to give them the chance to discover something they enjoy and excel in, as I did. Secondly, we need to break down the outdated gender taboos around sports. The Lionesses, the Red Roses and campaigns such as This Girl Can are smashing those taboos; I hope that will radiate through our schools so we do not leave such a huge proportion of students behind.

In my constituency last month, Norton Canes primary academy and Jerome primary school in Norton Canes and the John Bamford primary school and Chancel primary school in Rugeley all took part in the biggest ever football session organised by the FA to empower girls to feel like they belong in football. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford said, it is great to hear about such initiatives to make sure that girls around the country have the opportunity to participate.

According to another Youth Sport Trust report, children from poorer backgrounds are the least confident in being active. Only 51% of 11 to 16-year-olds in the D and E socioeconomic groups rate themselves as confident about taking part in physical activity, compared with 75% for higher socioeconomic groups. The statistics show how important fairness and equality of access are. The Government are absolutely taking the right steps, particularly with last month's announcement of £100 million to revamp local sports facilities across the UK, breaking down barriers to opportunity and giving young people the opportunity to build vital skills and connections.

My final point is about the importance of sport and PE for young people's mental health. Because of my uselessness at football and cricket, I often found PE lessons an isolating experience, which contributed to the poor mental health that I experienced at times growing up. The macho culture around football in particular is really hard for a young gay person in school, but I believe that culture is starting to shift.

Happily, I have since found hugely positive mental health benefits in sports. To make sure that children and young people in schools can reap the benefits, I hope that the recruitment and retention of teachers will be made more stable and that, through partnerships with schools, local authorities, academy trusts and the Government, we can make sure that as many PE teachers as possible are mental health first aiders and champions. They have such a pivotal role to play, which perhaps we should value more than we currently do.

I am so grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford for securing this debate, because investment in sport is investment in something that will give children the confidence and mental resilience that they need to succeed both on and off the playing field.

4.13 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for securing this important debate, which was inspired by one of her constituents. By leading the debate, my hon. Friend has shown that she puts the people of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages at the heart of everything she does. In doing so, she is building back trust in our democracy and democratic institutions step by step. I commend her for that. It is also a privilege to speak while I have two of my favourite constituents, Aishah and Samir, up in the Public Gallery. I thank them for coming.

I wish to offer some personal reflections, and I will probably echo some of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury). As someone who lived under the long, dark, damaging shadow of Margaret Thatcher's hated section 28 in the 1990s, school—and particularly PE—was often a violent and miserable place for a gay kid like me who could not fit in, no matter how much I tried or how much I pretended not to be who I was. Thankfully, because of the new Labour Government's commitment to breaking down barriers to opportunity, their repeal of section 28 and the many other legislative and social changes that were delivered, education and sport in school are now far more inclusive.

Sport teaches teamwork, resilience and discipline, excludes less, builds friendships, and gives children the chance to push themselves and—crucially—have fun. It is one of the simplest and most effective tools we have to improve both physical and mental health, yet while so much progress has been made to make sport inclusive, access to PE and sport in schools is far from what it should be. Over the past 10 years, we have seen a decline in the number of PE hours in secondary schools and the gap in sports provision between state and private schools has continued to widen.

However, there are shining examples, especially in places like Weston-super-Mare—and the villages—that demonstrate the incredible difference that access to sport can make to children's lives. Broadoak academy,

[Dan Aldridge]

under the leadership of its principal, Danny McGilloway, and his excellent team, has made significant strides in promoting sports for all. It celebrates its young people with an annual sports personality of the year award. One of the most exciting developments for the school and the town is the introduction of girls' football teams in every year group for the first time this year. That is a huge milestone for the school, ensuring a level playing field across genders. It also ensures that girls can feel part of something bigger and empowering. That is the sort of structural change in schools that I really love.

There is also the hard-fought-for inclusive SEND playground at Castle Batch in Worle; and I pay tribute to Councillor Catherine Gibbons for her tireless efforts to secure support for SEND kids in my patch. Those examples from my constituency show what can be achieved when there is a commitment to sport and physical activity for all. The reality is, however, that too many schools are still struggling with inadequate facilities and limited resources.

I want to take a moment to recognise the incredible teachers, coaches, parents, carers and volunteers in our communities who already go above and beyond to make sport possible for young people. I know that both my sisters, their husbands and all the kids that surround my family have community sport at their heart. I love the joy and confidence that it brings to them all—I probably love it more because of the stark contrast with my experience of sport at school. Whether it is teachers staying late to run after-school clubs, grassroots football coaches giving up their weekends or parents fundraising for new kit, those are people who are making a real difference. They should not have to do it alone.

We can get this right and ensure that sport and PE are available to every child, no matter where they live or their circumstances. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford again for pushing this issue not just on behalf of her constituents but on behalf of all our constituents.

4.17 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham)—my right good friend—for securing the debate. It has been great to hear so many hon. Members talking about the importance of sport in our schools. I had a slightly different experience from some of my colleagues with PE in school, because I loved it; I was right up for it. I had the pleasure of playing for my school's cricket team—once. I had the pleasure of playing for my school's football team—once. I was a little bit better at basketball, so I got to play that twice. It turns out that there is a limit on how far enthusiasm will get you.

Rugby union was my sport in school, and at the risk of the northerners' ire, I will say that rugby union is the correct code. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] That has not gone down well. We only ever had three fixtures when I was at school, but I absolutely loved it. I also loved going to PE lessons.

My background is really academic, but I used to love that break in the school day when we got to go out and do something slightly different. It is important to recognise that. Following that, I went off to university, became a teacher and taught for almost 10 years. I hope to carry that background with me during my time in this place.

We have heard a lot about the health benefits of physical activity, and I absolutely agree with those points. But I have also seen some of the transferable skills that kids I taught picked up from their PE lessons and how that can contribute to a well-rounded education. I taught physics, astronomy and a little bit of maths, mostly at key stages 4 and 5—for older secondary pupils—so my background is in an academic part of the school, but I support the debate, because, on top of all that, I ran a Friday night sports club at my school where kids could come along and play ultimate frisbee: the game I found at university where the ceiling on where enthusiasm gets you is slightly higher.

In schools, too often there is a temptation to play subjects off: some are academic and some are not; some are more important and some are not. Those are binaries that I do not recognise—not personally, not from my experience and not from my experience in the classroom. As much as I support great science provision and great maths teaching, subjects such as music, art, drama and particularly PE are hugely important to every single individual in a school—not just to the kids who will go off to university or the kids who have a more vocational route, but to every single kid, because of the soft skills they pick up, such as teamwork, resilience and just being able to react to anything outside their control. Anybody who has ever tried to chase an egg around a rugby field will know: it is bouncing, you have no idea where you are going and you have to think on your feet, often while being chased by 18 stone of very rare meat. Sport pushes you out of your comfort zone to use skills that we all rely on day in, day out. In fact, I know that the skills I use in my role here come much more from some of the sport I have experienced and some of the soft skills I have developed than my university education, which I paid a lot more for.

Sport in school is also an amazing way to build a community. I see that in my constituency. A couple of weeks ago, I was at the rugby watching Lichfield play Tamworth and it was really great to see some of the old boys and the gentle rivalry between the guys who went to Friary 20, 30 or 40 years ago and the guys who went to King Ed's 30 or 40 years ago, while I was sitting in the corner from Nether Stowe. The community that they have built around there is a community of rugby players, but within that there is a gentle rivalry and it comes from that school experience. It is hard to replicate—although we also see it up the road in Chasetown football club, which is called the Scholars because it was set up by pupils from Chase Terrace high school. There are examples in everybody's constituencies.

It is really important that we keep school and PE at the heart of schools, keep PE in the classroom and keep the classroom on the field sometimes.

4.21 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for bringing this important debate to the House. Being picked last was very much my experience of PE at school. It is interesting that the majority of people who have spoken in this debate are not very good at sport. There is a rule in the parliamentary football team that MPs have to start. I have to say that I am the footballer who has pushed that rule to its limits, leading to the question: "How quickly can we sub Chris off and bring on a better player?"

Before this debate, on the suggestion of my hon. Friend for Stafford, I reached out to some of my local schools in Harlow to hear about their good practice and to find out about some of the challenges they face. People will know that Harlow has a proud history of sporting excellence. It is the childhood town of Glenn Hoddle, the birthplace of Laura Trott—not the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott)—who is now Laura Kenny. I have to mention long-distance runner Michael Casey, because he is now a local journalist, and my sporting hero, the Paralympian Anne Strike MBE.

Two schools were very quick to get back to me about what they are doing in Harlow. I thank Luke Hammond, the PE lead from Purford Green primary school, for his quick response and what he shared from his school and the wider Passmores Co-operative Learning Community, which is a strong advocate for physical education. He told me that they have done up to 70 events in the past year alone. They purchased and lent out bikes as part of a Bikeability programme and created their own sporting event—I believe it is called tchoukball—and a dedicated festival to support SEND students to do PE, as well as a girls-only tag rugby tournament where over 150 students participated. He particularly wanted to pay tribute not just to the staff in his school, but to the staff in primary schools and schools across Harlow who work collaboratively in coalition to support one another.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) mentioned the decision by the coalition Government in 2010. I have to say that I am old enough to have been teaching at the time of that change, although I am pleased that Jerounds primary school in my constituency continues to excel in ensuring students have at least two PE lessons a week. It also invites sports-people into the school, including representatives of Essex cricket club, which we know is the best cricket team in the country—there are not enough people to boo that.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a brilliant case for access to sport. I could challenge him on his last claim, but he is such a doughty champion for Harlow, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), who brought us together for the debate. Does he agree that sometimes school sport can fall off when we talk about elitism, elite athletes, the Olympics and all that? Will he champion the Culture, Media and Sport Committee report that we are working on? We took evidence the other day. It is on community and school sport and the challenges facing sports clubs and under-represented groups. Schools are central to that, and as an ex-teacher, I know he will agree.

Chris Vince: My hon. Friend mentioned that I was a teacher before I did—oh no, I did mention it.

Dr Huq: You look too young!

Chris Vince: Thank you.

My hon. Friend makes an important point, and what is interesting from hon. Members' contributions is that none of us particularly excel at sport—I certainly do not—but we have seen sometimes in later life how important participation in sport is. She is right that it is not just about elitist sport; we could talk about Harlow Parkrun where people come together as a community

and take part in sport every Saturday morning. There are so many examples where sport does not need to be elitist. Of course we want people to excel at sport, and of course we want the next Laura Kenny or Glenn Hoddle, but we want people to enjoy sport: the impact it has on their mental health is huge. I thank my hon. Friend for the work she is doing on the Select Committee to champion that point, and I look forward to that being fed into the curriculum review.

Increased transport costs are among the biggest challenges that teachers have raised with me. For some Harlow parents struggling financially, and low-income families, transporting their children to away fixtures is just not possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford—and the other bits—mentioned the Lionesses. We have all been inspired by Lucy Bronze and others in that team, and young girls in Harlow have been inspired by them as well. However, many girls and young women in Harlow have to leave Harlow to go to Bishop's Stortford, of all places, to access sport, so we clearly need to do more to ensure that sports facilities are readily available and close enough for everybody to go to them.

As someone who is not the most sporty person in the world but appreciates the value of sport, my plea to the Government is to invest in PE in our schools, because it helps develop skills such as resilience and physical and mental health, as mentioned previously. It should not be just for elite athletes; it should be for everybody to enjoy—even slightly over-the-hill former maths teachers.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the Front Benchers, it is important to put on the record that I, too, was always picked last. I call Max Wilkinson.

4.27 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—you would always be my first pick. [*Interruption.*] Sorry, that was a terrible start, wasn't it? Let me do better. Otherwise, my jokes will end up going down like the US stock market.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) mentioned rounders, and the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) mentioned the school that I went to. That took me right back to my GCSE PE assessment, where we were told that we would do rounders because it was the easiest and we would get good grades as a result. I regret to inform the House that I got a three out of seven for rounders. I have no idea how, and that led to my failing to get a C grade at GCSE PE. [HON. MEMBERS: "Aw!"] I know, and I became the Liberal Democrat Culture, Media and Sport spokesperson despite that failure—not that a D grade is a failure.

I will get serious now. We are in the midst of a crisis of sedentary lifestyles and obesity. Almost a third of children and young people are classed as inactive. More than one in four children is either overweight or obese, and the mental health crisis among young people is widely acknowledged to be totally out of control, not least because of the subject of the previous debate on social media. These facts shame our nation and store up huge problems for our economy, our health services and individuals. That is why the debate is timely, and I commend the hon. Member for Stafford—and the villages—for securing time in the Chamber, because instilling a love

[Max Wilkinson]

of sport and exercise in young people can do so much to turn around and tackle the public health crisis, and that starts in school.

For me and for many of us, my earliest memories of taking part in sport are of playing football on the primary school playground, but I know from first-hand experience what happens when schools do not have the facilities to offer proper PE lessons. When I attended Broadoak school in the constituency of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare, it was falling down, and we had one playing field left for the whole time we were there. We were all crammed on to it at break time. That meant we were not able to play as many fixtures as we otherwise might have done. I was too weedy for rugby, and the guy who was captaining the football team just picked his mates and did not like me, so it made little difference to my school experience, but it did have an impact on many others. It probably had an impact on what else went on at the school, which struggled with a difficult catchment area. Although I rarely took to the field for my school teams, I did achieve something brilliant in the fourth division of the Cardiff University intramural games: I scored from the halfway line against the Japanese society—a moment I will never forget, nor will anyone else who was on the pitch that day.

On a more serious note, 42,000 hours of physical education have been lost from the curriculum in the last decade. That is a travesty. State secondary schools in England taught 284,000 hours of PE in 2021, down 13% from 2011. I have many high-performing independent schools in my constituency and many good state schools, but the difference in provision between the independent and state sectors is marked. We need to ensure that the state sector is providing the very best for children.

The proportion of pupils in years 7 and 8 who can swim the standard 25 metres has fallen in the last eight years, with disparities evident among demographic groups, giving rise to concerns about equality. That is not surprising, because 217 school pools have been lost over the last 15 years. Swim England says that the Department for Education cannot even provide statistics due to the number of schools not properly reporting swimming lessons.

Sport England suggests putting PE at the heart of the curriculum by protecting time for it and subjecting it to suitable rigour. It suggests a really important change from traditional school approaches—that we reimagine the PE curriculum, so that it is based on enjoyment and meaning, rather than forcing people to go into a scrum and run into each other on the pitch. That is wise, because not everyone is into that kind of sport; they might be into yoga, dance or something else. Let us be expansive about this. Enjoyment is the single biggest factor that drives up the number of minutes that children spend playing sport.

The Lawn Tennis Association is among the bodies calling for us to enact the chief medical officer's recommendation for one hour of sport and physical activity to be delivered inside and outside school every single day. To do its bit, the LTA is offering free teacher training and a grant for equipment. It is also asking for clarity about the future funding of the park tennis project, and I hope the Minister can provide that clarity or take the matter up with her colleagues.

The medical experts and sports organisations know what is screamingly obvious to everyone else: sport and physical activity is the silver bullet for solving our public health crisis. If we can get it right by instilling healthy habits among people at an early age, and then providing them with opportunities through their life, much of the rest of the challenge we have in the NHS will fall into place. It is not fashionable to say that, because we are supposed to just stand up and shout, "Save the NHS!" but I think we in this place all know that it is much more complex than that.

Facilities are core to the challenge. In my constituency, I am supporting Pittville school's efforts to upgrade its badly outdated sports hall. When the kids play badminton, the shuttlecock hits the ceiling. The school has been waiting for ages to get its application through the planning system. One of the local councils has, remarkably, raised an objection on conservation and heritage grounds. I hope Ministers agree that the planning system should be making it easier for schools to build more sports facilities, not getting in the way. I hope Ministers will also consider designating sports halls and swimming pools as critical health infrastructure. That is a really important idea for Ministers to take forward, because in these straitened times, it costs the taxpayer nothing to do that.

In February 2013—so long ago that I had a full head of hair—Ofsted published a report recommending that schools spend at least two hours a week on PE. All these years on, there is still no requirement for schools to provide those two hours. We want to ensure that every child has access to high-quality PE, as well as extracurricular sports activities. That would ensure that all children had access to some form of physical education, which is not always the case. We need to restore those two hours. Can the Minister confirm that the Government are considering that?

School also serves as an important gateway to sports clubs. The Sport and Recreation Alliance is calling for better links between schools and sports clubs—something the Liberal Democrats passed a policy on as long ago as 2004. Is that one simple change part of the Government's agenda? We all know that the Government are dealing with tight finances, but it is important to note that every pound invested in sport is likely to generate a return on our investment of more than £4. I cannot think of a better investment for this nation to make.

We in this place often talk about the pressures on the NHS, and about making a proper effort to ensure that children benefit from a love of sport and activity. If we can marry those two up, we will ensure that many children who are growing up to be obese, unhealthy, and depressed are saved from that fate. If we fail to get this right, Members from across the Chamber can carry on saying "save the NHS" and complaining about waiting times as much as we like, but it will not make a difference. All we will ever be doing is dealing with an epidemic of chronic physical inactivity, and mental illnesses caused by inactivity. We will be denying generations to come a love of sport and physical activity, which would be a dereliction of duty on the part of us all.

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

4.35 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to today's important debate on access to sport and physical education in schools. I thank

the hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) for securing this debate, and all hon. Members here for speaking about this vital issue, which cuts across our approach to education, health, mental wellbeing and social mobility. At its heart, physical education is about giving every child, regardless of background, the chance to lead a healthy, active life, while learning important life skills such as teamwork, resilience, perseverance and respect for others. Sport is about so much more than just being healthy. It creates opportunity and can transform lives. Indeed, many of our country's most famous sporting heroes began their athletic journey while still at school. Olympic champion Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill wrote about the positive impact that sport had on her:

“Playing sport as a child helped me enormously. I met lots of different people, both teammates and competitors and faced new challenges. The camaraderie and support that you get from sport massively helped build my confidence and my ability to overcome setbacks and defeats both on and off the track.”

It is precisely because sport has the power to do so much good that Conservative Members worked so hard to make real, measurable progress on improving access to sport and PE in our schools when we were in government. Let me start with what we did. The last Conservative Government took a clear stand in favour of equal access to sport for all children, girls and boys alike. In March 2024, the Department for Education published new guidance for schools, making it clear that boys and girls must be offered the same sports, both during curriculum PE and in extra-curricular activities. For too long, some pupils have missed out because of outdated or inflexible provision, and that is no longer acceptable. Our new standards ensure that opportunity in school sport is not determined by sex; it is driven by fairness, aspiration, and choice. That guidance followed the success of the Football Association's #LetGirlsPlay campaign, which aimed to change perceptions and ensure that girls got the chance to play football as part of the school curriculum, as well as at break time, after school, and at local clubs. It has proved very successful; much larger numbers of girls are playing football, inspired by our amazing Lionesses, following their success at the Euro 2022 tournament.

But that is not all we did. Our 2023 school sport and activity action plan set out the clear expectation that schools would provide a minimum of two hours of PE per week. We took that step because we know that exercise is not a luxury or an optional extra. It is fundamental to children's physical health, mental wellbeing, and ability to focus and succeed in the classroom. In addition to considering what happens during school hours, we took decisive action to boost participation across the country. In August 2023, we launched our Get Active strategy, which provided for a new national taskforce, including Government officials, education experts and former sports professionals. The taskforce was given the bold mission of getting 2.5 million more adults and 1 million more children physically active by 2030. Those serious ambitions were backed by serious actions, and they reflected a long-term strategic commitment from the last Conservative Government to increasing participation, promoting inclusion, and tackling the root causes of inactivity. I do not pretend for one moment that the job is done. There is more to do, but I am proud of our record in this field.

However, I regret to say that there has been fallout from this Government's Budget. We are seeing evidence that the decision to end business rates relief for independent

schools is having damaging consequences. Some such schools now question whether they can continue to operate community sports facilities, including school playing fields. Lest we forget, those facilities are used not just by the schools, but by local primary schools, community groups, youth sports teams and families. I see the benefits of that on my doorstep. Many children in my constituency attending local primary schools are learning to swim and getting the benefit of other sports facilities at their local independent school. If this policy ends up forcing the sale or closure of those facilities, it will only have succeeded in reducing access to sports for the very communities who most need it.

I am disappointed that the Government have chosen to scrap the opening school facilities fund, a programme designed to keep school sports halls and playing fields open over the holidays and outside school hours. That fund enabled schools to support healthy, active lifestyles all year round, not just during term time. In addition, will the Minister end the uncertainty and finally confirm the Government's plans for the School Games network, which is set to end this year? The network supports 2.2 million participation opportunities for children and is hugely valuable. Will she confirm that that has not been scrapped as well?

I want to take a moment to recognise the importance of access to sport for disabled young people, as powerfully set out by the hon. Members for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) and for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young). It is vital that barriers to inclusion are removed, so that disabled young people can benefit in the same way as all other children in school.

I cannot speak about the importance of sport without touching on the subject of sex. The concerning trend of gender ideology threatens to undermine efforts to promote sport among young women and girls. Let me be clear: it is bodies that play sport, not feelings. In women and girls' sports, participants must be separated by sex, not only for safety reasons but for fundamental fairness. Former Olympic swimmer Sharron Davies MBE has been warning about the negative impact of this issue on women's sport for many years, and it is important that she and other advocates for women are listened to. I urge the Minister to ensure that, as soon as possible, we finalise and issue the draft guidance for schools and colleges on gender-questioning children, which was prepared under the last Conservative Government, and which makes it clear that sports participants should be split by sex. Until we act to address the rise in environments where young female athletes feel unsafe or simply cannot ever win, how can we feign surprise when girls are less inclined to participate in sports?

The Conservatives believe that access to sport and PE is a fundamental part of good education for boys and girls. We believe that children should be given the tools to live healthy, active lives, and that sport builds confidence, resilience and teamworking skills, not just health and fitness. Those are beliefs that we put into practice in Government, through new equality standards, mandated PE entitlement and a joined-up national strategy, and by allocating funds to widen access to facilities. That is how we build a healthier, fairer and more active future for every child in this country.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how the Government will seek to ensure access to sport, and to her responses to all the excellent questions asked by Members, including mine.

4.42 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), who represents Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, on securing the debate; I will henceforth refer to her as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford. I thank her for her powerful opening speech. I was hoping that her application for this debate would be granted, as it is a subject that I feel incredibly passionate about, and I know that every Member in the Chamber who has spoken feels that way, too.

Every child deserves an enriching and rounded education, and PE and sport play a key part in achieving that. As many have said, access to sport improves health outcomes, boosts wellbeing and builds resilience. As was shown by Tane, the student my hon. Friend mentioned, that is not just a theory; I know that from personal experience. My experience was the opposite of that of my hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) and for Lichfield (Dave Robertson).

The days from school that I remember best are the days I spent with friends playing hockey, tennis and netball. Those days built my confidence, and got me through the school gates in the morning when, quite frankly, the academic subjects were not appealing. That is why I believe that we need to break down the barriers that prevent children from accessing and enjoying sport and PE; that is key. The importance of accessing and enjoying PE, sport and physical activity at school came out very strongly in today's debate.

I know my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford wholeheartedly agrees, as he went on to explain, because we cannot deliver on our ambitious plan for change as a Government without it. Our mission-led Government have committed to putting children and young people at the heart of our priorities, ensuring that every child can achieve and thrive. As part of the opportunity mission, we will get more children active by protecting time for PE and supporting the role that grassroots clubs play in expanding access to sport.

I have really enjoyed listening to the contributions of hon. Members today, particularly on their personal experiences of sport, including those from my hon. Friends the Members for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) and for Lichfield, who were very honest about their experiences of sport. I agree with them that we have to broaden opportunities so that every child can find an activity they enjoy. We are not alone in that mission, as I have heard so clearly from young people, schools, charities, national sporting bodies and hon. Members.

In recent weeks, I have had the pleasure of meeting with the Sports Minister, with sporting bodies and, just this morning, with Baroness Campbell, who speaks with great passion about ensuring that sporting opportunities are available for everybody, not just the privileged few. In 2023-24, fewer than half of children and young people met the chief medical officer's guidelines to be active for 60 minutes a day. It is clear that there are inequalities and disparities among those less likely to participate, whether they are girls, children from poorer backgrounds or children from black and minority ethnic groups.

I have seen numerous examples of schools and their pupils benefiting from resources, teacher training and exclusive offers provided by sport governing bodies.

There are some fantastic examples, such as the Lawn Tennis Association's youth school portal and Chance to Shine in cricket, which I had the pleasure of joining in with at a school last year—I even got to bat with Ben Stokes. However, we cannot leave this to chance, and that is especially the case for those who face additional barriers, such as those with special educational needs or disabilities. That was rightly raised by a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon), who spoke from very powerful personal experience, and the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young).

The Department has funded the Inclusion 2024 grant programme, which utilised a network of 50 lead inclusion schools to upskill teachers, teaching assistants and other members of staff to deliver inclusive PE and sport. An open procurement for the new grant from April 2025 is in its final stages, and the outcome will be confirmed soon. The school games mark, which is funded by the Government but managed by the Youth Sport Trusts, has introduced mandatory equality criteria for PE, school sport and physical activity participation in 2024-25. Schools get support to review their provision to ensure that they are overcoming barriers that children might face and that best practice will be shared with schools to enhance the equal access of girls to sport.

More widely, high-quality PE must be the starting point to ensure opportunities for all children. PE is rightly compulsory at all four key stages of the national curriculum, which makes PE time a crucial opportunity in a child's lifetime to establish a positive relationship with sport and physical activity and help them to develop the skills we know they need throughout school and in life. As I mentioned earlier, we are committed to protecting high-quality PE time, ensuring that all pupils have the best start on their journey towards leading active and healthy lifestyles. High-quality teaching is essential in that too, in order to harness the energy and attention of pupils and ensure that sport is a vital and enjoyable part of a child's experience at school. It needs to be fun, accessible and beneficial for all, so we need to raise standards and ensure that every child has equal access to opportunities. We also need to start valuing a skilled and qualified workforce that is confident in delivering PE and plays a crucial role in the wider school community.

Many have outlined the lengths to which teachers go to support children to be active both in the school day and beyond. We need to ensure that teachers have the right support and professional development to understand how to develop the movement skills that are the basis for taking part in sport and physical activity safely, confidently and competently.

We also need to make effective use of the networks that exist across sport. Members—particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) and for Harlow (Chris Vince)—referenced the big community that can exist around sport, which also supports its effective delivery within schools. To build on that network, schools have to provide further opportunities to play sport and take part in other activities. The vast majority of schools offer extracurricular sport and physical activity, and the DFE school and college panel survey reported in 2023 that 99% of schools surveyed offered some sort of sport and physical activity.

School games organisers play a crucial role in ensuring that all children can engage in accessible and inclusive sport and physical activity across the country. The network of 450 school games organisers provided 2.3 million sporting opportunities in academic year 2023-24, spanning 40 different sports and activities. It ensures that competitive opportunities are available for young people and empowers them through pupil voice and leadership, offering them the chance to co-create and lead activities as well. The Government recognise the impact of that network and have confirmed funding to the end of the 2024-25 academic year. We are exploring future models for school sport delivery and will publish our findings in the coming months, because we need to make sure that our future investment in sport is used as effectively as possible. However, I can reassure Members that the school games organisers network is a hugely valued part of the sector, and we will announce funding shortly.

More widely, the PE and sport premium should be used by eligible schools to make additional and sustainable improvements. The Government have provided £320 million through the PE and sport premium for academic year 2024-25, with over 18,000 eligible schools and around 3.9 million pupils benefiting from it, and we are very aware of the need to provide as much certainty as possible for schools. We will confirm further information on budgets for the next academic year as soon as we can.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford and everyone who has contributed to what has been a really enjoyable debate, but also a really important one. We all share an appreciation of what PE and sport can do to transform children's lives, whether that is improving their health and wellbeing, instilling a sense of resilience, perseverance and achievement, or building skills such as teamwork and leadership. Only by ensuring that every pupil in every school has access to high-quality PE are we truly investing in their future, and this Government remain committed to breaking down the barriers that we know still exist for far too many children and ensuring that great sporting opportunities are truly available for every child in every community.

4.52 pm

Leigh Ingham: I thank all the Members who have come to the Chamber today to speak on this subject, and also the shadow spokespeople. It has been one of the most fun debates that I have taken part in, even though interestingly, a lot of the Members who spoke—like myself—were not necessarily the most sporty at school. The memories that this debate has clearly evoked in many of us have been a pleasure to listen to.

I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) and the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young)—prior to being elected, the hon. Lady and I were councillors together in South Gloucestershire, and she and I participated in some sports activities. It is nice to be able to recollect that memory. My hon. Friends the Members for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), for Redditch (Chris Bloore), for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean), for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), for Harlow (Chris Vince), for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), and for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) and the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) also brought to this debate powerful memories of how important sports were to them at school. I also thank the Minister for her commitment to the importance of sport within the DFE, and I know that as soon as those funding arrangements can be confirmed, she will be in touch.

As I said earlier in the debate, and as we have heard from Members across the House, this is not just about fitness or fun; it is about the long-term health, resilience, and success of our young people. I thank everyone present for participating in today's debate with that at the forefront of their minds.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered access to sport and PE in schools.

Adoption Breakdown

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

4.54 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I am pleased to have secured this debate on this important issue, which is rarely discussed, yet profoundly impacts thousands of families across the UK: the crisis of adopted children leaving the family home prematurely. I want to highlight this issue of adoption breakdown, which sometimes might be days, months or even years after an adoption order is signed. Adoption is not just a legal process, but a lifelong commitment that demands sustained support from Government. At present, that support is simply not in place.

After meeting a family in my constituency who had experienced an adoption breakdown, I was deeply alarmed by the lack of support available once an adoption order is signed. Since securing this debate, I have been inundated by messages from people and families across the country sharing their lived experience. The overwhelming consensus is clear: adoptive parents feel isolated and forced to navigate the challenges of raising children with trauma and complex needs without sufficient support, often resulting in adoption breakdown.

The reality is that many adoptions face profound challenges. The trauma, loss, and attachment difficulties experienced by adopted children do not simply vanish once an adoption order is granted. Those challenges persist, often surfacing as complex behavioural, emotional and psychological difficulties that demand long-term specialist support. According to Adoption UK, 70% of adoptive families report that their children have significant social, emotional and mental health needs. Many are diagnosed with conditions such as foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder, yet post-adoption support remains inconsistent and inadequate, forcing families into exhausting battles just to access the help they desperately need.

For many adoptive parents, raising children who have suffered early life trauma is an immense challenge. Many endure physical aggression, verbal abuse and school exclusions. They feel abandoned, left without a clear pathway to support, and when crises emerge, the system often responds too late, if at all.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The issues that my hon. Friend raises are spot on. Would he agree that the more trauma-informed training we have within schools, the better these young people will be able to be accepted and supported within schools, rather than potentially demonised?

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I will come on to that important point later in my speech. A major challenge in tackling adoption breakdown is the lack of reliable data. We have little understanding of the true scale of the problem, making it hard to assess the effectiveness of current policies or plan for meaningful improvements. Local authorities, which are meant to provide support, frequently fail to help parents facing those significant challenges in raising children with complex needs, and that is worsened by

the absence of clear, specific policies to prevent or respond to adoption breakdowns. There is an urgent need for better data.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I have met a number of adoption charities and organisations in Beckenham and Penge, and they have told me that adoption breakdown can lead to significant emotional trauma for children and adoptive parents, and many other implications. Does he agree on the need to bring local authorities, Government and families together, first to try to prevent adoption breakdown, but then, where it occurs, to take action to support both parents and children?

Tom Gordon: The hon. Member raises an excellent point. That is exactly the case, and I have heard exactly those points from many adoption charities across the UK.

Our focus must also be on trying to make sure that there are clearer policies and improved support systems, and addressing the gaps is the only way to reduce adoption breakdowns and ensure that every child has the chance to grow up in a loving and stable environment. Our focus must shift to enhancing the support structures available to families post-adoption. While the current framework is well intentioned, it is insufficient. Raising adopted children is made more difficult by barriers to vital special educational needs and disability services and mental health support. Increased investment in services such as counselling, educational support and respite care could significantly improve outcomes.

The most recent Government research and data that I could find on adoption disruption dates back over a decade. It was the Department for Education's "Beyond the Adoption Order" research paper published in 2014. The paper estimates a disruption rate of between 2% and 9%. Since then, there has been no significant follow-up or research, and if we are to address this issue, it is vital that we have that up-to-date information on disruptions to properly assess and respond to the challenges that parents face.

Currently, local authorities and regional adoption agencies record data inconsistently, creating an incomplete picture of the national situation. The Department for Education reports that 170 children entered local authority care after being adopted in the year to 31 March 2024, averaging 0.2 adoptions per constituency. However, I am aware that three adoptions broke down in my constituency of Harrogate and Knaresborough in the same time period, so the data is clearly patchy. The discrepancies highlight significant gaps in our understanding of the prevalence of breakdown. How can the Government possibly expect to adequately support those affected, when they do not fully understand and comprehend the extent of the issue?

In speaking to adoptive parents—regardless of whether they face disruption or not—a clear theme emerges: support often vanishes once the adoption order is signed.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Tom Gordon: While the early stages of adoption may involve training and some resources, the ongoing assistance tends to dwindle after a child is placed. Many adoptive

parents, especially those caring for children with complex needs, report feeling isolated and overwhelmed, as local authorities frequently fail to offer consistent, tailored support.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I have been approached by my constituents about their breakdowns. As we do not have any data, we do not know how many parents are struggling in our constituencies. Does the hon. Member agree that if we do not identify adopters and support them, we will not have any adopters in the future?

Tom Gordon: That is one of the key points about adoption disruption and breakdown, and the hon. Gentleman makes it very eloquently. There is concern that if we do not help people who are adopting now, we will not have a next generation of people who will adopt.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing today's debate. We know from Adoption UK's adoption barometer that 42% of families experience challenges or crisis. It also notes that it can take them an average of five months to get the support they need, and we need to shrink that timeframe. Does he agree that we need to have money reserved for the urgent support that these families need?

Tom Gordon: The hon. Member is exactly right and puts her point eloquently. Far too often, families and children are left waiting, which causes additional pressures that can lead to adoption breakdown, so I completely agree with her. As I said, while the early stages of adoption may involve training and some resources, the ongoing assistance tends to dwindle.

I applied for this debate after meeting some of my constituents at a regular surgery. Ian and Verity experienced this issue at first hand when their adopted child began exhibiting violent behaviour. When they reached out for help, they were shocked to discover just how little was available to them. Unfortunately, like many services, post-adoption support has become a postcode lottery. Available services are often fragmented, underfunded and difficult to access, leaving parents without the necessary help to manage the challenges.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. As he knows, I am an adoptive parent and a foster carer. In the run-up to this debate, I had the opportunity to speak to the social worker who is supporting me and my husband with what we hope will become our second adoption, and I would like to get the hon. Gentleman's view on some of the things she mentioned: the importance of having better access to more holistic support in schools; closer working between psychologists and adoption teams to maximise the use of the adoption and special guardian support fund; therapeutic life story workers to work with children and families, particularly those at greater risk of breakdown; and greater training in social work courses on key issues, such as early trauma and attachment, to widen the knowledge across the workforce and ensure that a wider range of teams can support adoptive families when they come across them. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such measures would go a long way towards keeping adoptive families together?

Tom Gordon: I have had the pleasure of meeting the hon. Gentleman's child and look forward to meeting more in due course. He makes an excellent point. I will come on to everything he said when I set out the wish list from adoptive parents to the Minister, and I am sure she will respond to the best of her ability, within the constraints of what the Government can do.

When Ian and Verity reached out to me, I was shocked by how the local authority and local services had failed them. When they reached crisis point, they requested an intervention from the local authority, but instead of receiving help, they were threatened with police action for child abandonment. Ultimately, they were forced to disrupt the adoption, causing trauma to both the child and the entire family. I have asked people to email me their stories, and a common, repeated theme is local authorities using child abandonment charges as a scare tactic, which is deeply worrying. The advocacy group PATCH has highlighted how families facing adoption crises are often met with punitive approaches that fail to acknowledge the impact of trauma on these children. As a result, families break down because they cannot access the resources needed to address those challenges. I have heard from many families that have experienced breakdowns, and instead of receiving support when they have faced violent and threatening behaviour from their children, they have been met with blame, threats and criticism. A culture of blaming adoptive parents persists, leaving them isolated and without the help they need. Many adoptive parents are not fully informed about the child's needs before adoption.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this very important debate. Does he agree that, under article 20 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, when children cannot be looked after by their own family, they should be looked after by those who respect or represent their ethnicity, their culture, their religion and their language? With BAME children being disproportionately represented—and, unfortunately, very vulnerable—does he agree that this is about not just finding a place for children but finding the right place for them?

Tom Gordon: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. He makes a good point. We have ended up in a situation where local authorities are trying to recruit anyone to adopt, and it is often a scramble to find any place, so places do not necessarily always meet the needs of or provide the best option for those children. I think that is the nature of the situation we find ourselves in, with the service at a crisis point.

Many families that have been in touch have also said that support for adoptive families is often limited to the adoption and special guardianship support fund. This fund seems to have become a bit of a sticking plaster to allow local authorities to claim that they are supporting families with adopted children. While the fund is massively helpful, it is often the only resource that people can turn to.

As the Minister mentioned a number of times during Tuesday's urgent question, local authorities have a legal obligation to support families who have adopted. However, this fund is often inadequate, and it is the extent of support in many areas. It is not an instant fix, and it is often only available to families once they have reached

[Tom Gordon]

crisis point. As the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, families often report waiting for months—six months and upwards—to access funds and support due to delays by local authorities. During this waiting period, crises can escalate, and families are pushed closer and closer to breakdown.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing such an important debate. During the process of putting together his speech, I am sure he read the local government and social care ombudsman report from last November, which details a litany of failures across England in supporting adoptive parents. For me, the most heartbreaking element of reading the report and its recommendations was the number of families who said that they were put off the process, or driven out of it, by the bureaucratic failures and the lack of support on offer.

Tom Gordon: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and that is one of the key points. I will turn to examples of where people try to access that fund, but many people do give up, which is such a shame for the children involved.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; the number of interventions he has taken shows how important this debate is to the House.

I, too, have had adoptive parents come to my surgery who are going through a breakdown, and they have told me that their experience of adoption was better in the past because they used to have a named person supporting them at the council. That council service has merged with those of eight other boroughs, so it is now a nine-borough service. Adoptive parents no longer have a named contact, and they have to go through a central hotline. Does my hon. Friend agree that the adoption breakdown rate is increasing partly because of the funding environment for local government, and that we need to improve that first to get this service fixed?

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The point he makes is one that I experienced at first hand when we had local government reorganisation in North Yorkshire. People have commented that the merging of services leads to an inferior outcome at the end. I agree with his point about needing greater funding for local authorities to help fix this problem.

The Government must ensure swift distribution of the new funding announced earlier this week to prevent future delays. For many families that are already struggling, the support fund is a lifeline. A delay in therapy increases anxiety and distress not only for these children, but for their families as a whole, and it can cause huge disruption to their daily lives. In some cases, families have been left without support for months or even years. The prolonged period of uncertainty around the support fund has caused an exacerbation in woes and fears. Many families feel they have been abandoned by the system and have struggled to navigate a complex and fragmented network of support services.

It is clear that the system is failing the families it was designed to support. The unpredictable nature of service access means children and families are left to fend for

themselves. The Government must urgently address the chronic underfunding of adoption support services, and commit to ensuring that families have timely and reliable access. I have heard countless stories from adoptive parents and children who speak about the deep trauma of what happens when an adoption breaks down. The impact is not just emotional; it can extend to physical and social challenges as well, and leads to behavioural problems, mental health struggles and difficulties in schools in some cases.

A point made earlier by another Member was that a key barrier to providing that support is the lack of training for professionals working with adopted families. Teachers, social workers and healthcare providers all lack an understanding of the unique challenges that adoptive parents and adopted children face. That lack of knowledge results in misguided interventions and insufficient care. Adoptive parents require more than just financial assistance. They require access to specialists, including trauma-informed mental health care, educational support and respite care, too. Lived experiences are at the heart of this issue and countless adoptive parents have shared their stories of pain, struggle and heartache. They are not just statistics; they are real families grappling with unimaginable challenges and receiving little to no support. In the time left, I will try to briefly share some of those stories.

One parent wrote to me about how an adopted child had suffered severe abuse. Despite their best efforts, the child's behaviour became increasingly violent and unmanageable. When they reached out for help, they were met with indifference by the local authority. Eventually, the situation became so unbearable they had no choice but to disrupt the adoption, leaving heartbreak in its wake. Another adoptive parent shared the story of a child who had been through numerous foster placements before being adopted. Despite the child's significant trauma, the family was dedicated to providing a loving and stable home. However, due to a lack of support and the inability of the local authority to help meet the child's needs, eventually another adoption broke down. The parents feel ashamed and abandoned by the system that promised to support them.

As we reflect on those stories, we must remember that behind every statistic is a child who has already endured more than enough and more than most. These children deserve the same opportunity to thrive as any other, but they cannot achieve that without the right support. It is our responsibility to ensure that adoptive families are equipped with the resources, tools and understanding to provide that. We need a system that places support at the centre of the adoption journey: from the moment a child is placed, to the challenges they face during adolescence. It is not enough to provide support just in the early stages and walk away once the adoption order is granted and the child appears settled. We need a cultural shift in how adoption breakdowns are viewed. Parents should never be made to feel guilty for seeking the support they so desperately need.

The lived experiences of families impacted by adoption breakdown serve as a reminder of why change is necessary. Adoptive parents do not want to bear the blame for breakdowns, many of which are caused by systemic failures. They want to be part of the solution. These families have opened their hearts and homes, yet they feel abandoned. We can no longer allow adopted children

and their families to fall through the cracks. Decisive action is required now. I will set out a few things that the Government could do to try to help with this issue.

We need a commitment and guarantee that the adoption and special guardianship fund will be made permanent, and that we will never see a return to the year-by-year situation that has caused heartache and pain for children and parents this time around. We need to mandate regular keeping-in-touch opportunities for all adoptive families. Too many families feel isolated without a clear support network during times of crisis. We must improve local authority support structures. Families must have guaranteed access to crisis intervention services and mental health support before situations become unmanageable.

We must ensure that health and education professionals are trained in early trauma and care experiences. We cannot expect teachers, social workers or mental health professionals to support adopted children without properly training them and giving them the resources. I would like to see an extension of adoption support services to at least the age of 26. Trauma does not end at 18, and young people need continued access to support as they transition into adulthood. We need to provide a targeted support pathway for teens and young adults, including access to specialist advocacy services, mental health care and interventions to prevent exploitation and criminal involvement.

Before I conclude, I would like to share a few other personal stories. There is one which stands out. It is from somebody who got in touch after I put out an appeal for stories:

“I’ve been reflecting on my adoptive son’s life story and wanted to share some statistics with you and the services involved: 13 Social Workers, 15-plus placements with only three regulated, 100-plus carers, innumerable police officers, innumerable fire officers, five care home managers, four headteachers, five teaching assistants, 10 judges including eight High Court judges, three GPs, two dentists, 25-plus class teachers, two behavioural analysts, three play therapists, one psychologist, one children’s guardian...”

The list goes on and on. Adoptive children interact with services across the board, but it is clear that they are being failed and passed from pillar to post.

I heard another story from a family whose adoption broke down in January last year, when their children were aged just 13 and 14. Only six months earlier, they had celebrated their 10th anniversary as a family by going to Paris. Like many other adopters, they had several happy years before things started to go wrong. The family

“believe a combination of inappropriate education, hormones, peer pressure, social media and—possibly most significantly—trauma from childhoods...was the cause of a...dramatic change. To cut a long story short, things got so bad that myself and my husband both suffered breakdowns and the children went into care. We are lucky that we are in regular contact”.

The current system leaves far too many families struggling with inadequate support, which often results in disruptions that could have been prevented with earlier targeted intervention and support. Without accurate data, clear policies and sustained funding, we cannot address the root causes of adoption breakdown or provide the resources needed to ensure successful adoptions.

I call on the Government to make sure further action is taken post adoption to ensure that there is no postcode lottery and that local authorities are held accountable

for providing the support that families need. These children have already faced immense trauma and instability, and they deserve better. Adoptive parents who open their hearts and homes should never be left feeling abandoned when they seek help. We need urgent and meaningful reforms to mental health services and access to SEND, and we need to establish a robust, long-term framework for post-adoptive care.

I will close by thanking everyone who has reached out to share their deeply personal stories, and especially my constituents Ian and Verity. We must reject the idea that adoption is a one-time event; it is a lifelong journey that requires continuous and specialist support. To every adoptive parent struggling in silence, and to every young person feeling abandoned by the system, I say, “You are not alone.” Today we ask those in positions of authority and power to listen, learn and act.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing this important debate. I have indeed listened and heard his many concerns, issues and questions. There have been a great number of interventions from many hon. Members across the Chamber, and I will endeavour to respond to those, too.

The stories that the hon. Gentleman mentioned are heartbreaking. On the back of that, I would also like to say that there are many, many positive stories of adopted children and their successes, where things have gone incredibly well. I just want to give a bit of a balance. I know that when an adoptive parent adopts a child, they want to do their very best for them—to bring them into their family, love them, show them security and help them to thrive, grow and develop in every way possible. I know that people across this Chamber share that view, and that we all want the very best for adopted children and adoptive parents.

Supporting adoptive families and preventing adoption breakdown is a priority that I know all Members across the House support. As the Minister for Children, it is a significant priority for me, too, so I am pleased to be able to respond to this debate. Supporting children through adoption is a manifesto commitment for this Government. Every child deserves and needs a loving and stable family home, which is exactly what adoption can, should and must provide. Improving support for adopted families is a key part of our plan for change, to ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed.

We inherited a system in which far too many families are missing out on vital post-adoption support services. We recognise that we need to improve our knowledge of adoption breakdown and are taking action to improve the statistics, the data we collect and other forms of research. The number of children who return to the care system who have an adoption order has remained between 170 and 180 in each of the past five years. However, these figures are not as robust as we would like them to be, and we will be challenging local authorities to improve the accuracy of their returns.

In particular, we need social workers always to record when a child entering care is living under an adoption order. We do not collect specific information on adoption breakdowns where the child does not return to care. Some adopted young people will go to live with birth

[Janet Daby]

relatives, and others to live independently at the age of 16 or 17 without the knowledge of the local authority. Sometimes this is for short periods, and sometimes they return home.

We know from previous research that around 3% of adoptions disrupt, but this research is 10 years old. To gain more up-to-date information, the Government have been funding the new research “Family Roots”—I am sure Members will be very interested to know more about that—which is looking at adopted children’s outcomes. This will give us new, up-to-date information on adoption disruption and breakdown, and the results will be published later in the year.

High-quality support for adopted children is critical. It can decrease the likelihood of adoption disruptions or breakdowns. Research shows that approximately one third of families are doing well, one third need extra support compared with other families, and one third report that they are in crisis.

Adoptive families often complain that they do not get the support they need when they are in crisis. They often experience blame and criticism of their parental approach and there is a lack of understanding about the impact of trauma on their children’s behaviour. I have asked regional adoption agencies to put in place services this year that can respond quickly and effectively to adoptive families in crisis, including trauma-trained professionals who provide evidence-based support.

We are also ensuring that all social workers work better to understand the long-term impact of trauma. We recently published new post-qualifying standards for social workers, in which we say that all social workers should be trained “to use evidence and best practice to reduce the impact of any trauma, increase the likelihood of secure relationships and ensure improved outcomes for the future.”

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I wonder whether the Minister has heard of the outstanding charity Home for Good, which uses faith-based groups to support families through either fostering or adoption. Does the Minister believe that there are opportunities to give them extra support, so that we can grow a richer tapestry of support for those who adopt or foster?

Janet Daby: Yes, I know Home for Good; I have met the people involved and they do excellent work on fostering and adoption. There is so much more that could be done, so I absolutely take on board what the hon. Member has mentioned.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the Minister for her commitment and for all that she is doing in this area. When young people are placed in adoption, can we look at ensuring that there is more open adoption? We certainly need to look at the data on that. We know that a teenager finding their birth parents can often lead to an adoption breakdown. That teenager might never be able to restore a relationship either with their birth parents or with their adoptive parents.

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. Adoption can be quite complex, especially when children reach their teenage years, as they are able to make contact through different social mediums. Contact and

how it is managed is under constant review. We need to ensure that, where it is appropriate, where it is right and where it is safe, contact continues for adopted children. Again, I stress that is where it is appropriate, where it is right, and where it is with the agreement of the adoptive parents. Much of that takes place during the assessment process and the adoption order itself.

The majority of adopted children will have experienced neglect or abuse, which leads to ongoing and enduring problems. Providing support for families at an earlier stage before needs escalate to crisis point is critical. We are funding Adoption England to develop consistent and high-quality adoption support provision across all regional adoption agencies. This includes implementing a new framework for an early support core offer, which covers the first 12 to 18 months after placement. Adoption England will also be rolling out a new adoption support plan book for all new adoptive families.

This year we will fund Adoption England with £3 million to develop more multidisciplinary teams in regional adoption agencies. These are joint teams with local health partners that will enable families to receive holistic, high-quality support.

Josh Newbury: I thank the Minister for setting out the measures the Government are taking, which are very welcome. Returning to the conversations I had with my social worker, one of the suggestions she had was to have a designated lead within local authorities and adoption agencies, to ensure that support is there for adoptive families. They could also work with teams across the organisation that might not be as familiar with the challenges that adoptive families could face. Is that a suggestion the Minister might take away and look at?

Janet Daby: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his adoption, and I know he is a foster carer as well, which is wonderful. I appreciate what he says, and I will indeed take it away and come back to him.

The adoption and special guardianship support fund provides much-needed therapeutic support for adoptive and kinship families. Since 2015, over £400 million has helped to support nearly 53,000 children, and many have received multiple years of support. Therapeutic interventions help children to deal with difficulties related to their experience of trauma and to form attachments to their new adoptive parents. They can also help prevent adoption breakdowns. Evaluations of them show a statistically significant positive impact on children’s behaviour and mental health. In surveys, 82% of adopters said that the support from the adoption and special guardianship support fund had had a positive impact on their family. Much of that information can be found on the Government website.

I announced on Tuesday that the adoption and special guardianship support fund would continue in this financial year with a budget of £50 million. We recognise the importance of the adoption and special guardianship fund in helping children to have good outcomes and in preventing adoption breakdown.

Bobby Dean: It is great to hear the Minister’s support for the fund, but this year it was allowed to expire before it was renewed. Can we have assurances that we will get much better notice next time about the renewal of the fund?

Janet Daby: I appreciate what the hon. Member says. If he was there during the urgent question on Tuesday, he would have heard my regret about the delay. This Government are committed to ensuring that we continue to support adopted children through funding where it is needed.

Adopted children should receive support to obtain good educational outcomes. However, many do not do so, with poorer GCSE results than the overall population and higher exclusion rates. The Adoption UK barometer report shows that 58% of adoptive parents in England are parenting one or more adopted children with an education, health and care plan. Adopted children are entitled to priority school admissions as well as advice and support from school-designated teachers and local authority virtual school heads. Schools will also receive £2,630 in pupil premium plus this year for every adopted child in their school, but we do need to go further. We intend to fully update the statutory guidance for virtual school heads, including sections on supporting adopted children's educational outcomes. We will conduct a

public consultation to gain input from stakeholders, ensuring that the latest research and examples of good practice are incorporated.

Local authorities deliver adoption services through 33 regional adoption agencies, working in partnership with voluntary adoption agencies. Evaluation of regional adoption agencies shows that they provide a more strategic approach to delivering adoption support, including by early intervention becoming widely embedded.

I am enormously grateful to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough for raising this issue. He has raised some important concerns, many of which I share. Adoption support is currently not good enough, and we must do better. This debate has given me the opportunity to talk about our plans to ensure that all adopted children get the support they need to experience a full and happy childhood.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 3 April 2025

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Waste Incinerators

1.30 pm

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): I note that Mr Barclay has removed his jacket, so others are permitted to do so if they wish.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered waste incinerators.

I declare my interest as a Derby city councillor of almost 17 years and a former leader of the council. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell.

I pay tribute to the amazing residents of Sinfyn, Osmaston and Normanton; I have campaigned with them against an incinerator in our community for the past 16 years. I promised them that I would take this fight to Parliament, and that is exactly what I plan to do today.

Many present will be all too familiar with stories like that of Sinfyn—and worse. It is a story of broken promises and good money thrown after bad. At its heart is a community that has suffered the consequences of poor planning, poor management, poor decision making, and a lack of transparency and scrutiny. Residents have lived in continuous anxiety and fear that the incineration plant in Sinfyn will become operational. They have endured a protracted planning process, with the incinerator eventually being approved only on a technicality following a High Court ruling. They are rightly concerned about the impact that the incinerator would have on their health, local environment and quality of life.

Unfortunately, so much of the story is not unique to Sinfyn or Derby. Incinerators loom large over so many communities across the UK, so we are here to say that incinerators do not have a place near schools, people's homes, allotments, elderly residents, or spaces where our children grow up and play. We are here to say that enough is enough. Incinerators must be kept to a minimum, especially when they impact local communities.

I recognise that waste must be disposed of responsibly, and we have to accept that some incinerators will be needed to achieve that, but they must be safe, be appropriately located, use proven technology and be kept to a minimum. We do not need local plants that impact the lives of local people in local areas. For the sake of our communities and environment, we must also take bold steps towards increased recycling rates and a circular economy. When we talk about waste disposal, we are also talking about the future that we want to create for our children and grandchildren.

It is important to highlight what it is like to live next to an incinerator. Nobody wants to live next to noise pollution from a constant stream of heavy goods vehicles,

deal with a fly infestation because waste is being left on site, or worry about their health and their children's health because their next door neighbour is an incinerator that is leaking sulphuric acid and damaging air quality. All those are lived experiences from the plant in Sinfyn, which has never operated for a single day, and which failed during commissioning.

It is not just the experiences of impacted residents—the statistics on incinerators speak for themselves, loud and clear. BBC analysis has found that burning household waste in incinerators to make electricity is now the dirtiest way that the UK generates power.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): My hon. Friend and neighbour has spent many years fighting on behalf of residents on this issue, and I thank him for that. Does he agree that, after 16 long years and with no working incinerator, it is time to say that enough is enough and to explore cleaner, safer alternatives for waste disposal in Derby, particularly given that producing energy from waste is as bad for the environment as burning coal?

Baggy Shanker: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that timely intervention. She is absolutely right. Incinerators are right at the bottom of the waste hierarchy, and recyclable material in incinerators is being burnt because it has a higher calorific value. It is time to say that enough is enough. Nearly half the rubbish produced by UK homes is now being incinerated. While we continue to burn waste, recycling rates have stalled over the past 14 years. The message is clear: too many incinerators are not working for our environment or for our communities.

There could not be a better example of a failed incinerator than that in Sinfyn, where poor decision making, exaggerated business cases and hidden truths have landed our community and local authority finances in an absolute mess. This incinerator has been nothing short of a nightmare from the start, and unfortunately there is no finish yet. After a drawn-out planning process, years of opposition from residents and the staggering sum of nearly £150 million of council tax payers' money going down the drain, the incinerator still has never operated and, in my view, will never operate. Let us imagine what the community in Derby could have done with £150 million invested in local projects, delivering real outcomes for our community.

Instead, the incinerator has never processed operational waste and has created minimal employment. It gives me no pleasure today to say, "We told you so," because at every opportunity the community has spoken out against the incinerator, and has been ignored by big business, council officials and decision makers. Clear warning signs were not heeded, at the expense of residents.

As a joint project between Derby city council and Derbyshire county council, the incinerator was intended to be a gasification plant. Gasification is a largely unproven technology with a history of failures and technical challenges, and unfortunately Sinfyn has been no different. The facility has consistently failed commissioning tests, and we now need to say, exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) just did, that enough is enough. The incinerator does not have a place in Sinfyn and we do not want it there.

[Baggy Shanker]

The councils have now selected three potential partners to try again to operate the plant, but huge question marks over the project's viability remain. I urge all involved to do the right thing by our local community and say of this incinerator that enough is enough, because over the past 16 years it is the people of Sinfyn and Osmaston who have suffered the consequences of its shocking mismanagement. Understandably, they have lost trust in politicians and council officials because while residents have been ignored, consultants have made millions on this project.

During attempts to commission the plant, residents have suffered vile smells, despite a promise from operators and officers that there would be no smell off site. In fact, they were told that it was impossible for the plant to emit odours. One resident said:

“Where we are, the stench is really strong and smells like rotting food. We have been getting loads of flies around here as well. The summer has been horrendous, we have had to keep our windows closed in the hot weather because when we open them it is just awful.”

Sitting with the windows shut throughout the summer is no way to live. I am absolutely confident—I wish I was not—that other hon. Members present will share similar stories from their constituents. Whether the concerns relate to health, noise, pollution or the environment, incinerators are not working for too many of our communities. But we know that waste needs to be disposed of responsibly, so where does that leave us?

As the Climate Change Committee states, we need a step change towards a circular economy. That means transitioning away from incinerators and urgently increasing recycling rates, which have been shockingly low in recent years. Data from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs shows that higher rates of incineration mean lower rates of recycling. That is known in the industry as “deliver or pay”, where clauses in council contracts demand that a minimum amount of waste be sent to incinerators for burning. We are facing a climate crisis, and that is not good enough. We do not have time to lose getting it wrong on waste disposal methods that harm our communities and planet.

I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's action to crack down on waste incinerators by introducing stricter standards for new builds, which include tougher local and environmental conditions. It is absolutely right that projects will be required to maximise efficiency and support the delivery of economic growth, net zero and the move to a circular economy. But for Sinfyn residents, sadly, the measures are too late. Residents are stuck with an incinerator that does not and will not work. They can be certain of only one thing: every attempt to get the incinerator working means more of their hard-earned taxpayer money thrown down the drain on this white elephant.

I urge the Minister to instruct senior officials in her Department to investigate this mess and to meet me to discuss better protecting communities such as Sinfyn, whose residents are stuck living a prolonged nightmare with the incinerator looming over their lives. We have to say that enough is enough, so that councils do not throw good money after bad at the expense of local residents. Ultimately, we need to turbocharge our transition to a circular economy, moving away from incineration, which is the dirtiest way to generate power.

Several hon. Members rose—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members who wish to speak to make sure that they bob. I am putting a limit of four and a half minutes on all Back-Bench speeches.

1.42 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I commend the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) on securing this important debate. Huntingdon could be impacted by two waste incinerators just four miles apart from each other, and I rise to express my opposition to them once again.

Warboys incinerator was first proposed in 2022, put on hold in 2023, and then revamped in October 2023. The plant would operate 24/7 and process 87,500 tonnes of waste per year. I commend Councillor Ross Martin in my constituency for campaigning against it. There are many concerns about the significant impact on local residents in Warboys and nearby Pidley of not just the Warboys site but of being slap-bang in the middle of two sites of this scale.

Just four miles away, another plant in Huntingdon has already been approved, known as Envar. I have met the local campaign group POWI—People Opposing Woodhurst Incinerator—and have heard their opposition to the plans that would blight our land with a 26-metre-high chimney, create even more congestion and raise concerns about health risks. There are also concerns about the increase in vehicles, particularly given the proximity to the dangerous Wheatsheaf junction, which still has not been repaired. The incinerator was originally rejected by both Conservative and Labour councillors—the Lib Dem councillors, who did not live locally, voted in favour of it. The rejection was overturned on appeal, and the Labour Government then approved it.

On 30 July last year I was concerned that, in the Deputy Prime Minister's response at the Dispatch Box to my question about her approving the site despite the council rejecting the initial application, she claimed not to have dealt with that decision, deferring responsibility to the Minister of State, and ignored my request for her to meet the people impacted by the decision. That request was further ignored in a letter from a Minister on 13 September.

The Government have updated the national policy statement in order to meet their ideological aims, and I feel strongly that the Government are doing their utmost to silence the opposition of people in Huntingdon to railroad through their plans. Residents across Woodhurst, Old Hurst, Pidley, Somersham, Colne, Bluntisham, Needingworth and the market town of St Ives will likely be impacted by Envar, with residents of Pidley and Warboys being impacted by both the Envar and Warboys incinerators. St Ives is the second largest town in my constituency, and the incinerator is right on its doorstep.

The Deputy Prime Minister did not consider the scheme to be in accordance with the Huntingdonshire local plan, and my constituents need clarification on precisely why the decision was deemed beneficial above and beyond the local plan. Local job creation was given significant weighting in the decision-making process, even though only 22 additional jobs would be created at the site. My constituents want to know the reason for that weighting, given that so few jobs would be created.

The NHS 2023 clinical waste strategy outlines the need to reduce waste incineration, and that the development of in-house capability should be viewed as a strategic priority, so I am at a loss to see how the approval of a privately owned healthcare waste recovery facility can be justified. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain that. I asked the Government the current medical waste incineration capacity in the county, and they did not know, so I do not see how they can know that the additional capacity is required.

I want to hear why the Government seem to be rewriting rules to fit their aims without doing my constituents the courtesy of listening to them. I want clarity about why things such as the creation of just over 20 jobs outweigh the raft of concerns from the affected local residents. Finally, I extend my invitation, for the third time, to the Deputy Prime Minister or any of the ministerial team: I want them to sit down and explain the process to the people of Pidley, Woodhurst, Old Hurst, Somersham, Colne, Bluntisham, Needingworth and St Ives, and explain why the Government have thus far ignored their voices and those of their elected councillors.

1.45 pm

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell.

I want to raise the issue of an incinerator that has received planning permission on Shelton Road in Corby. I believe that, at best, the planning system is being exploited—without a shadow of a doubt, it is being played.

Corby is a growing new town. The site I will refer to is on an ex-ironside site with a sludge lagoon. The planning permission for the Corby incinerator was applied for in 2013 and granted on 7 February 2014—more than a decade ago. The only public consultation lasted for 20 days, and one single notice was placed in the *Northamptonshire Telegraph*, so most residents had no idea about the incinerator.

DEFRA's temporary pause on issuing permits ended on 24 May 2024, and the Environment Agency permit for the incinerator was granted just 11 days later. No community funds—section 106 money—have ever been raised from the project. Planning permission has not expired, despite the fact that it is more than a decade old, because work has started on the site—basically, a pathway has been built, but the site itself has not yet been built out. That leaves residents uncertain about the future.

The planning permission was initially granted because the site was on the outskirts of Corby, but there has been expansion ever since, which has not been taken into consideration. The site is no longer on the outskirts of Corby; it is in the heart of a community, right next to local businesses and thousands of houses. It is 750 metres away from the houses and 1 km away from Priors Hall school and nursery, all of which did not exist when the planning permission was granted.

The traffic impact assessments carried out 10 years ago have not been updated, and even then they estimated that there would be 175 lorries a day carrying waste through Corby. Do Members not think that, after seeing “Toxic Town”, the people of Corby have had enough of lorries with waste being driven up and down its streets? They do not need it anymore.

Ministers have informed us that the Government's crackdown on incinerators will not apply to proposals with existing planning permission, although the fact remains that waste incineration is the dirtiest form of power generation, so councils must now reconsider. That shows that the waste incineration system is broken. The incinerator in Corby must be reconsidered, and we must have a full review of the planning permission that was given for that site more than a decade ago, given that not one brick has been laid and the local circumstances have changed beyond all recognition. That is the least we can do for the people of Corby.

1.49 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), my constituency neighbour, for securing this debate and giving me the opportunity to address this important issue.

I want to voice the concerns of some of my constituents about the proposed new incinerator in Swadlincote. I have met the lead campaigner against it and—for balance—the two companies that want to build and run it, so I want to start by acknowledging that we have a significant waste management challenge in our county. This has been identified and reported on by DEFRA. No campaigner against the incinerator denies this.

Shamefully, the east midlands is the second worst region in the country for the amount of waste sent to landfill. Even more shamefully, Derbyshire is the worst-offending county in our region, with almost 750,000 tonnes being sent to landfill and just over 308,000 tonnes being sent to incinerators. We produce a lot of waste.

A challenge in South Derbyshire is that existing incinerator facilities at Drakelow and in neighbouring Derby have struggled. The latter has rightly been mothballed since 2019, having never worked at all. The former has failed to reach its full potential because it is no secret that gasification technology, as used in these plants, has had a “litany of failures”, as described by experts including United Kingdom Without Incineration Network.

In Derbyshire, the proximity principle—which emphasises that waste should be treated as close as possible to its source—has been undermined by these two existing incinerators not solving the problem. We therefore need to transport waste over long distances to facilities outside of Derbyshire. Sending waste elsewhere not only impacts our carbon footprint but contradicts the very principles outlined in our local waste plan. We are exporting our waste to distant incinerators, including to northern Europe, and in doing so we miss an opportunity to truly address our local waste management issues. That is not to say that we need incinerators in local towns, as is being called out today.

In terms of local economic benefits in South Derbyshire, we have been told that the proposed incinerator promises over £200 million in investment and 39 skilled jobs. However, nothing more of benefit is being offered to the local community, which will have an eyesore to look at for something that does not solve our county's waste problems. It is claimed that it will process 186,000 tonnes of residual waste. That still leaves us with almost 564,000 tonnes of waste going to landfill, so it is hard for people to believe that yet another incinerator is the answer. Are we not better to prioritise reducing waste in our county,

[Samantha Niblett]

region and country? Even when there are claims that new tech mean zero emissions, and when some of the outputs from incinerators can support sustainable practices such as creating sustainable aviation fuel from plastics as the aviation industry targets net zero by 2050, the truth is that where materials are burnt there will always be concern about the release of harmful chemicals and emissions into the atmosphere.

We must challenge ourselves to think beyond incineration and invest in a future where waste is managed sustainably and the environment protected for generations to come.

1.52 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) on securing this debate.

I hope my speech will be a lesson to those hon. Members lucky enough to not yet have an incinerator in their constituency. The Surrey waste transfer station is in my constituency of Spelthorne. For those Members who thought Spelthorne was in Lancashire or Lincolnshire, it is actually the only borough in Surrey north of the River Thames. Why someone decided to put Surrey's eco centre right on its northern boundary remains a mystery to me. It was opposed by the borough council and by the public, although in the face of that opposition it nevertheless went through.

Those Members who represent constituencies to the west of London may subliminally know the centre. As you drive out on the M3—just as it starts and before the M25—all is green and beautiful and then there is this horrific chimney pumping out goodness knows what into the atmosphere. It was planned to be a gasification plant; post recycling, waste would go into the gasifier, which would then produce the electricity to run the anaerobic digestion plant, where food waste would go. The trouble is that, like the provision mentioned by the hon. Member for Derby South, it does not work. The gasifier has never worked to optimum capacity and has continually broken down, and the process does not work because it does not produce enough electricity to run the anaerobic digester. Anyway, Surrey is not diverting enough of its food waste into the anaerobic digester for it to run at capacity and throw off additional electricity on to the grid system.

I hope that that is a lesson for those who want to build their case against further incinerators—come and have a look at the case study. The noise pollution, the air pollution and indeed the water pollution caused by food waste leakages have all plagued local people. That is a source of considerable frustration.

What can we learn from all of this? The first thing that we all ought to learn is that we should all waste far less food. Between a quarter and a third of all food in this country ends up in landfill, which is appalling when so many people are hungry. I am blessed to have in my constituency an amazing charity called Surplus to Supper, which takes in 4 tonnes of food a day from supermarkets within a 7 to 8-mile radius, and produces hundreds of thousands of meals a year for before and after school clubs. I recommend that we look at that model.

There is a second lesson that we can take from all of this. I heard the Secretary of State say that we were in a “sprint to decarbonise” our economy and I heard the Deputy Prime Minister say that, under the planning framework, nimbys were not going to stand in the way of development. Those two things concern me, because they could combine to allow further programmes and plans simply to ignore local concerns. If local concerns had been listened to at the time that the Spelthorne eco park was being built, it would not have been built and would not have become the failure that it is.

We need to have a weather eye on these cutting-edge and bleeding-edge technologies that promise the earth at the time they are developed but cost the earth in the long term.

1.56 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) for securing this very important debate.

On 8 October 2021, a fire broke out in a warehouse at an industrial site near the villages of Cargo and Rockcliffe in my constituency. The fire forced the local primary school to close, residents were advised to keep their windows shut, and for nearly a month the fire burned at the site, fuelled by hundreds of tonnes of plastic, household waste and wood that had been kept in the warehouse. Calls to the Environment Agency show residents complaining of breathing problems, sore throats and headaches from the fumes.

I share this because, just three years later, the owners of that site, on whose watch that fire took place, brought forward a proposal for a gasification facility. As we have already heard today, this appears to be an unproven technology, and it is one that has raised a great deal of concern among residents in Rockcliffe and Cargo. I pay tribute to them for the concerted campaign they have waged for well over a year now in opposition to that application.

The proposed facility would allegedly heat pellets made of plastic, wood and paper, creating a gas of hydrogen and carbon monoxide. It is claimed by the applicant that that gas would be used to fuel the generation of electricity and to power the site, enabling the replacement of the diesel generators now. I would fully support the reduction in carbon emissions that that would bring were it not for the fact that those diesel generators could be dispensed with today if the site owner would only use the grid connection to the site that already exists. It is also worth noting that other emissions from the proposed gasification plant will fall on adjacent farmland, which is used by two local farmers, both of whom I have met in the last month and both of whom have very real concerns about the proposed plant.

I am not opposed to incineration in principle, but in recent years it seems to have become something of a panacea for the challenges of recycling. Over the last 14 years, recycling rates have stalled. Almost half of waste collected by local authorities in 2022-23 was incinerated, with just 40% being recycled. Rather than pursuing recycling, we appear now to have regulations that encourage businesses simply to burn waste, and that unfortunate trend is all too apparent in my constituency of Carlisle and in north Cumbria.

Just a stone's throw from the proposed gasification plant is another site that is the subject of a planning application—for, yes, another incinerator. It should not fall to villages like Cargo and Rockcliffe to become unofficial waste clusters. That is why I am glad that the Government are proposing new, stricter local environmental conditions. Incinerators can have their place, but they must not be allowed to be a means to make a fast buck out of burning resources that we should be recycling.

2 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I welcome this crucial debate, the way it was introduced by the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and the excellent intervention by the hon. Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson).

We have had debates in the past in Westminster Hall in which, unusually, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and I joined forces—[*Laughter.*] Yes, it is true. We joined forces to oppose the expansion of the Edmonton incinerator for a number of reasons: first, that it would create high levels of pollution; secondly, that it is in quite a poor area of north London; and thirdly, that the exhaust gases would descend over Essex and land there, causing all kinds of problems. We opposed it because it was over capacity. The modelling even predicted that it would import waste from Europe to keep the incinerator going, because the design was far too big. I can see hon. Members nodding in agreement, because exactly the same kind of nonsense has been talked elsewhere.

When the Government are represented at the UN plastics treaty convention in Geneva this August, they might, if they have a moment, have a chat with the mayor of Geneva. I spent an interesting evening with him some years ago, and I asked him what problems he had. I complimented him on the levels of recycling in the city, which are very high—it is well run. He said, “Fantastic. The problem is that we are stuck with a private finance initiative-type incinerator that needs a vast amount of rubbish to keep it going.” Geneva has to truck burnable waste from Milan through the Alps to keep the incinerator going. This is the economics of the madhouse.

I recognise that we cannot immediately end all incineration, but the fact is that the Edmonton incinerator, which produces 700,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions every year, is being expanded. The recycling rates of north London boroughs are better than they were, but none of them is very good. The Minister will probably remember the occasion when she and I were both in Islington—she was a councillor—and we discovered that some Islington waste had turned up in Indonesia, which is obviously a handy place to take waste from Finsbury Park. It is utterly absurd. We need a different and better approach to waste in this country.

Incineration is a sort of faux recycling. People say, “It's okay—it's burned; it's gone.” It is not gone. It is burned, and pollution comes from it. Yes, we generate electricity from it and get some road-building materials from the ash, but surely we should look at recycling rates instead. The Government's own estimate is that 55% of all waste is readily recyclable, quite a bit more is partially recyclable and only 8% to 10% is absolutely impossible to recycle. Our society needs a different approach and a different attitude.

I hope that the Minister will tell us that there will be no new licences for new incinerators in this country. I hope that she will look at the existing licences and see where we can reduce incineration to a much lower level, although I recognise that it is difficult to get rid of it straightaway. Finally, I hope that there will be a big Government initiative on recycling rates. That will mean looking at household as well as industrial collections. Too little is recycled, and too much food waste goes into landfill or to incineration when it could and should be composted. But if we have 45 different systems to collect household waste, we are bound to get confusion. Let us have a simpler system, much better composting and recycling, and an attitude that is about working with our environment, not destroying it.

2.5 pm

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) for securing this important and timely debate.

Yesterday, a High Court judge rejected a statutory review into Powerfuel's planning application for a proposed waste incinerator on Portland in my constituency. It follows the granting of an environmental permit by the Environment Agency earlier this year. This week's legal decision is deeply disappointing, but we should never have reached this stage in the first place. Constructing a waste incinerator on Portland makes no sense, for a whole list of reasons.

First, there are serious health concerns about building an incinerator so close to a built-up area and to a prison. The proposed location of the incinerator is only a few hundred metres from the prison. I remain deeply alarmed by the idea that polluting technology should get the go-ahead on the island. Secondly, alongside my community I am deeply concerned about the negative impact on our precious Jurassic coast. Building an incinerator on the edge of a UNESCO world heritage site would be a deeply damaging world first.

Thirdly, I worry about the potential impact that an incinerator would have on our local economy and our status as a hub for sailing and water sports. Countless local business owners have raised objections with me at every stage. They must not be overlooked. You need not take my word for it, Ms Lewell. Portland is the proud home of the National Sailing Academy, where Olympic sailors train, and live nearby. Elite sailors have made it abundantly clear that building an incinerator next door to the academy would be a disastrous decision. Just recently, the Royal Yachting Association has also taken the unprecedented decision to announce that it will independently investigate the potential health impact of an incinerator if it is built.

Finally, there is little need for a waste incinerator to be built on Portland. As the United Kingdom Without Incineration Network—UKWIN—has highlighted in its research, we are at risk of building too many incinerators across the country, which could lead to a problem of overcapacity. I do not want a nightmare scenario in which Britain is importing waste from across the world simply to keep the incinerators running.

To be completely blunt, I am opposed to any new incinerators being built locally or anywhere else across the country at the present time. As has been mentioned, incinerators are the dirtiest way in which Britain generates

[Lloyd Hatton]

power, as underlined by a recent BBC investigation. Regretfully, incinerators across the country have been found time and again to have breached environmental permits by emitting harmful pollutants. That is why I am once again calling for a nationwide ban.

The Government are moving in the right direction, but they must move so much further and faster. They have introduced strict environmental rules for new proposals, but the scope of those rules must be widened significantly. If the crackdown measures were applied to the proposed incinerator on Portland, it would not be built. Taking all these arguments into account, I urge the Minister to reassess the plans and prevent an incinerator going ahead on Portland.

The case against the proposal is strong. Hardly anyone living in Weymouth and Portland wants an incinerator to be built. I find it completely baffling that Portland port and Powerfuel—the firm behind the proposals—are still pushing ahead. I urge them to listen to our community and abandon the proposals. When I look to the future of South Dorset, I see green investment opportunities and well-paid green jobs, not an unwanted and polluting waste incinerator. I believe that we can deliver a cleaner and greener future for South Dorset, but harmful, dirty and outdated waste incinerators are simply not part of it.

2.9 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I welcome the debate called by the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker); it highlights the cross-party consensus in opposing further incinerators.

In terms of the Wisbech incinerator, it is remarkable that an application to build an incinerator half the size was rejected in the local authority next door, so the response of developers was to double the size in order to make it a nationally significant infrastructure project, to get out of the local planning rules; to put it next to the biggest school in the district—only 700 metres away; to take waste from six different counties, all on small roads in a rural market town; and to have a chimney bigger than Ely cathedral in the flat landscape of the Fens. One can understand why so many people share my concern with the proposal.

I do not want to repeat the very good points that colleagues have made. I want to highlight two new points that the debate has not highlighted so far, which I hope will help Opposition and Government Members and support my own case in empowering the Minister. First, I will cite the Government's own figures. On 30 December—quite recently—the Government's own analysis showed that as of 2024 there was already 20.6 megatonnes of residual waste infrastructure capacity in England, of which 14.3 megatonnes was incineration. To put that in plain language, we already have enough incinerator capacity today to deal with the amount of waste that was projected in 2023 to arise by 2035—19.4 megatonnes of residual municipal waste. In other words, our existing capacity, at over 20 megatonnes, is more than we will need in just nine years' time.

My first question to the Minister is whether DEFRA will commit to publishing analysis assessing the environmental damage of building incinerators, such as the huge incinerator at Wisbech, against the fact that

they will be surplus to requirements in as little as nine years' time. In other words, it will three years to build the incinerator, and after six years of operation it will be additional capacity to what we will need. We therefore need to assess how those two things compare.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Does the right hon. Member agree that a sense of where incinerators are located around the country would be helpful, so that we could see the demand for incineration versus the capacity? That might reveal oversupply in certain parts of the country.

Steve Barclay: That is a fair point, which is addressed in DEFRA's December paper. But as my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) highlighted, there are two at Huntingdon, another at Peterborough and two at Boston. There is already a concentration, so I do not accept the point about the east of England in that paper. My point is that we need to see analysis from DEFRA around the bridging issue for the next few years as the Government meet their legal target to reduce the amount of waste by 50% between 2019 and 2042. The amount of residual waste is coming down and we already have sufficient capacity, but there is a bridging issue. There will be short-term options around landfill refuse-derived fuel exports. We need to look at the respective merits of building huge incinerators and the damage that they will do compared with the short-term bridging options.

The second point is that the waste mix has changed. That was a feature of the BBC report that the hon. Member for Derby South highlighted. Burning food waste produces less CO₂ than putting it in landfill, but burning plastics produces 175 times more carbon dioxide than burying it. The reason that that matters—to my first point about bridging—is that the mix going into incineration has fundamentally changed from when the planning rules were initially put in place. What we have seen, and what the BBC highlighted, is an increase in food waste being dealt with through anaerobic digestion. As the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) pointed out, the predominant waste now going to incineration is plastics. It is the burning of plastics that drives the environmental damage, and that is why the hon. Member for Derby South correctly pointed out that it is the dirtiest way that the UK generates power.

My second question is whether the Minister will commit to publishing a composition analysis study of the residual waste treated at energy recovery facilities, as I asked for in a written question on 16 October. DEFRA has confirmed that it is undertaking a composition analysis study, but it was not published with the December analysis. Will the Minister commit to publishing that, so that we can see where the waste is going? Again, that fundamentally changes the environmental case around incineration.

2.14 pm

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) on securing this debate. Much like him, I am going to tell a story about companies using the courts to ride roughshod over local people's opinions.

I rise to speak about a proposal for an incinerator in Calderdale; my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden) and I feel like we have spent months banging our head against a brick wall about it. The incinerator is to be built on the border between our constituencies, and while it will be located in Halifax, I speak with her permission, as Members will be well aware that fumes from such incinerators do not respect constituency boundaries.

The story of this incinerator is also a cautionary tale about the way that wealthy companies can ride roughshod over the wishes of the local community. The Calder Valley Skip Hire company was given an environmental licence by Calderdale council in 2022—a decision made on the basis of the legal advice that the council got about the rules that left it powerless to intervene or refuse. I know this because I was a council member at the time. The local community, however, appealed that decision and reviewed the finding. The planning inspector reversed the decision to grant the application on the basis of the risk to health and the lack of good information about the impact of the valley and vegetation on smoke dispersal. That meant that the company could not go ahead with it.

So far, so good—the system is working as it should and the courts are upholding standards. However, rather than making changes and appealing the decision, the site owners just withdrew the application and resubmitted it as a fresh application, showing no respect for the community or the decisions that had been made. The council, with similar legal advice to the advice that was received last time, then went ahead and granted the application again, and the decision is being reviewed again.

The incinerator in Calderdale has been opposed many times by our local communities and local councillors, particularly Councillor Adam Wilkinson. It has received more than 900 objections and has been objected to by both the local MPs. Unfortunately, when unscrupulous developers wish to seek legal options, they attempt to water down communities' voices and force them into submission. Frankly, there comes a point when our job in this Chamber is to stand up for our local communities, and to say that enough is enough.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South for securing today's debate, and I will continue to speak for my residents in Calder Valley and Halifax on this issue, because, frankly, some things are more important than the profit of a company.

2.17 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) for securing this debate and for all he has done today to represent his constituents. The concept of the waste hierarchy, while not new, remains as relevant as ever. As waste generation continues to increase and risk greater environmental impact, waste management needs to evolve accordingly. We need to prevent, reduce, reuse, recycle, recover and then—and only then—dispose. Sadly, we have seen too much stagnation in driving waste up this hierarchy.

Cleaner technology than incineration is progressing rapidly, and many of the options presented in Project Willow last month for investment in Grangemouth involved novel waste management or bio-feedstock technologies.

Those advancements could help to reduce the demand for incinerators in Scotland, so if anyone is interested in investing in the opportunities in Grangemouth, I urge them to get in contact with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

I served as a councillor for the Falkirk South ward, and I was the Labour group portfolio lead in climate and waste for two years. Waste management issues were at the forefront of my work there, including addressing concerns about waste disposal sites. It is clear to me that what happens to waste after collection is as critical to our constituents as how it is collected. In my Falkirk constituency, the principal landfill site is Avondale. It serves a nationwide need and is currently the only landfill site in Scotland capable of storing hazardous waste. However, the smell from the site can often be a persistent concern for my Polmont constituents.

Although they are preferable to landfill, my view is that incinerators have served a purpose in allowing the transition away from landfill, but their costs increasingly outweigh the benefits. The BBC report from October revealed that emissions per unit of energy from waste incineration are comparable to those from coal and nearly twice as much as those from gas. Energy from waste now accounts for a fifth of emissions from electricity production in the UK, while generating only 3% of the UK's electricity.

That highlights the need for a strategic approach. Waste incineration is not a viable long-term solution if we are serious about our climate goals. The Scottish Government have accepted recommendations from the "Stop, Sort, Burn, Bury?" review by delivering a moratorium in 2022, but contrary to another recommendation of the review, they have not provided an indicative cap on waste incinerators. That risks entrenching a practice that they are otherwise indicating should be phased out. Many groups have raised reasonable concerns about the prospect of the overcapacity of incinerators beyond the ban on biodegradable waste to landfill, which kicks in later this year in Scotland.

In the meantime, councils continue to commission long-term energy-from-waste contracts. Falkirk council, for instance, announced a 10-year contract for energy from waste in 2023. Luckily, the contractor is now looking at integrating carbon capture and storage on site to mitigate the environmental impact of the site. The reality is that rising emissions from this practice, efforts to build infrastructure to mitigate its environmental impact and the risk of incinerator overcapacity point to the need for a faster push on improving recycling rates, as many colleagues have said.

Recycling rates currently stand at 44% in the UK but at 42.1% in Scotland, with Wales largely leading the way. I welcome the fact that Falkirk's recycling rate is 50.7%. I credit that to the ridiculously hard-working waste and climate change officers at Falkirk council, with whom I had the honour of working when I was a councillor, as well as fantastic community volunteers, including my successor, Labour Councillor Claire Aitken, who has set up regular litter picks in our ward. There is still so much more to be done to drive up recycling rates.

A clear strategy is needed if we are to phase out incineration across the UK. Calm, clear heads are the order of the day. I have three key questions for the Minister. What discussions has she had with the waste management industry and local authorities about phasing

[Euan Stainbank]

out waste incinerators, and how can any transition away from incineration be managed strategically? What targets are in place to improve recycling rates across the UK by the end of this Parliament, and what expectations do we have for our devolved partners? What conversations are taking place regarding integrating carbon capture and storage with any existing or further waste incineration projects?

2.21 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) on securing this debate.

Waste management is a huge issue, which requires the attention of us all in this House. We Liberal Democrats are committed to strengthening incentives to reduce waste and our country's reliance on incinerators. Although incineration of residual waste might be the least bad option available at the moment to handle our unrecycled and unseparated waste, it is far from the long-term solution that we need. Let us be absolutely clear: incinerators are currently an unavoidable solution for many local councils. They are a deeply imperfect solution to a much bigger problem, though. When we get to the point where all of our commercial and domestic waste is avoided, reduced, reused, recycled and composted with no residual waste remaining, I will be at the front of the march to shut down our energy-from-waste facilities, for they will have served their purpose.

As several Members have correctly observed, incineration sits at the very bottom of the waste hierarchy. The energy that incinerators produce for local heat networks will ideally have been switched to air source and ground source heat pumps or perhaps waste heat from server farms, leaving these towering structures finally silent, but we are a long way from that point. Today, well-managed and well-maintained incinerators are an effective and safe method for disposing of our residual waste.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Can the hon. Gentleman clarify whether the parliamentary position of the Liberal Democrats is pro-incinerator? Can he tell me how many incinerators there are in Liberal Democrat constituencies?

Luke Taylor: I am happy to clarify. Incineration and ERFs are the least worst available option for disposing of our residual waste. The hon. Gentleman referred earlier to the ping-pong in approaches to incineration between different Administrations and different political parties. On his question about where the incinerators are, well, my constituency, Sutton and Cheam, is next to Carshalton and Wallington. Our borough, Sutton, has an incinerator in Beddington. It was initially given planning permission by the local council because of legal advice, but it was called in by a fella called Boris Johnson, and what political party did he represent? He was the Conservative Mayor of London, and he reviewed the plans and approved the incinerator in Sutton. We have an incinerator operating in our constituency because it was approved by a Conservative London Mayor.

In his 2022 report, chief medical officer Professor Chris Whitty wrote:

“The ERF is preferred over the use of landfill due to the opportunity to recover valuable and sustainable power.”

But they are not all well maintained and not all well managed. We know that we must move beyond them as soon as possible, but we can do that only by speeding up the changes in the ecosystem of waste management in this country that would enable their extinction.

Let us begin with plastic and packaging. We support the strengthening of incentives to reduce packaging and waste sent to landfill and incineration. In the coalition Government, we pioneered the plastic bag levy, which was exactly the kind of successful societal change that we need. It is almost impossible to remember a time when we were not charged for a plastic bag or did not give a second thought to our need to take one.

The reuse of bags and the growing market for stronger reusable bags is fully normalised—we do not bat an eyelid. It is akin to the removal of lead from petrol. Something that once seemed pervasive and impossible to imagine an alternative for was phased out entirely in such a way that whole generations have no recollection of it ever being any other way. That did not happen overnight. It took a mission-driven Government to step in and lead the way, incentivising the right kind of behaviour in waste management to light a path forward for society to take. I accept that that is already happening in some areas, but we need to go further and faster.

To meaningfully tackle plastic pollution and waste and get Britain as close as possible to full recycling, we have called for a deposit return scheme for food and drink bottles and containers, working with the devolved Administrations to ensure consistency across the UK. We must learn lessons from the difficulties with the Scottish scheme.

To further reduce residual waste, we have been calling on the Government to expedite the complete elimination of non-recyclable single-use plastics within three years and their replacement with affordable, reusable, recyclable or compostable alternatives. That would enable us to set an ambition of ending all plastic waste exports by 2030. The separation of plastic waste for reprocessing is critical to reduce the amount of recyclable plastic that is unnecessarily burned in incinerators. We know that peer group pressure and normalisation of behaviour is critical to that.

The comments made by the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) remind me of the former leader of the Sutton Conservatives, who told residents recently that

“most of your recycling goes up the chimney”

at the local ERF—untrue claims that undermine efforts to increase recycling. If there are efforts to improve recycling and our diversion of plastics from incineration, perhaps he can remind his colleagues of the importance of recycling as often as they possibly can.

Turning to food waste, in this age of food banks, according to the company Waste Managed, the UK throws away 9.5 million tonnes of food every year. That is nearly 24 million loaves of bread. In Sutton borough in my constituency, we recently had a campaign to improve the participation in the recycling of food waste that targeted about 15,000 households. That campaign saw an increase of 17% by tonnage of food waste recycling in the areas targeted and a 10% increase in the number of households participating in the programme. The evidence is clear: targeted programmes can be effective at improving participation rates and getting food waste down.

The previous Conservative Government failed to take the measures needed to support businesses in becoming more efficient and to support communities in moving beyond the throwaway culture. Many private sector enterprises, such as Too Good To Go, are opening up in this space and, frankly, doing a far better job than the Government. That is welcome, but a reminder that there is room for the Government to take steps of their own.

The Government have to look again at the enormous mistake that is their family farms tax, which will undermine any last vestiges of localism in the food chain that remain in this country. If we do not incentivise local produce being sold to local people through local businesses, we stand no chance of getting our emissions down, minimising food waste, encouraging healthier eating or moving beyond incineration.

On air pollution, let us be clear that we do not have to accept that the way incinerators currently operate is the only way in this final phase of their history. A significant amount of the concern around the use and potential misuse of incineration stems from mismanagement and the fact that our regulator, the Environment Agency, is prevented from doing the pervasive monitoring that it should be able to.

In my borough of Sutton, the Beddington ERF, on occasion, exceeds the pollution levels set out in its facilities permit. Although those breaches are minor and often for a very short period, and are often caused by nitrous oxide canisters getting into the waste stream, they are not investigated very often by the Environment Agency. The local council and waste authority lack the powers to compel the operator to address problems in their sorting and filtration systems. We can move towards the managed extinction of this form of waste management and wean ourselves off incineration altogether only if we make sure that existing sites are properly managed and meaningfully regulated.

The Liberal Democrats want the UK to be world-leading in its efforts to improve air quality. We have called for a £20 billion emergency fund for local authorities to tackle the clean air crisis, and a £150 billion green recovery plan. We need to pass a new Clean Air Act based on World Health Organisation guidelines and enforced by a new air quality agency, to codify in law that nobody should be subject to consistently awful levels of air pollution. Not passing those measures makes a mockery of the Government's already opaque plans for meaningful climate action. We were deeply concerned by the finding of the Climate Change Committee's seventh carbon budget that the UK has deliverable plans for only a third of the emissions reductions needed to meet climate goals. If the Government want to rectify that then they should get a grip, with a beefed-up approach to managing waste and dealing with air pollution. We can do a lot more to prevent waste going to incineration in the first place, and better regulate the existing stock of incinerators.

The recent progress report of the Office for Environmental Protection noted that waste generation and incineration rates have continued to increase, but recycling rates have stalled. That is not the case in my borough of Sutton, where we have seen reductions in the tonnage of waste sent to the ERF from residents, but elsewhere more effort must be made. We need an active Government to step up to the plate and reverse that worrying trend. We must take meaningful action to

regulate existing incinerators and look more closely at proposed new incinerators, such as at Canford Magna in the south-west of England, where data suggests that 95% of the required capacity already exists. We must implement a better food waste strategy, eradicate plastic waste and speed up the energy transition to alternative technologies that would hasten the end of residual waste. That would allow us to move away from incineration, and finally consign incinerators to the oblivion of history, to sit in engineering museums alongside Victorian technology as a reminder of how important waste reduction is, and how critical it is at the top of the waste hierarchy.

2.31 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) for securing this important debate, in which we have heard incredibly powerful views from all hon. Members who have participated.

Incineration is a strongly felt issue for many people across the country. I have my own strong feelings on the issue. I am familiar with it from my constituency, where we have staunchly campaigned against the Aire valley incinerator, which is due to be constructed, at some stage, on the outskirts of Keighley. It is not yet built, but it was given the green light by Labour-run Bradford council and the Environment Agency some years ago. I put on record the staunch work that the Aire Valley Against Incineration campaign group has done for a number of years, working with me and many residents to campaign strongly against the Aire valley incinerator. My view remains as it has been since I was first elected to this place: the Aire valley incinerator should not be built. Similar opinions have been expressed by many hon. Members in this House—although, dare I say, not by the Liberal Democrats, who seem to be staunchly warm to incineration. All other hon. Members have staunchly expressed their views against.

We heard from the hon. Member for Derby South about the Sinfyn incinerator, which he has campaigned long and hard to oppose; from the hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron), who is staunchly against the Corby incinerator; from the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), campaigning against the Swadlincote incinerator; from the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns); from the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), no longer in his place, who is campaigning against the Edmonton incinerator; from the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton), who is against the Portland incinerator; and from the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), who raised his concerns about incineration.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) spoke against two incinerators in his constituency, Warboys and Envar. He rightly raised concerns that despite him making valid challenges on behalf of his constituents, not only to the Secretary of State but to Ministers, they have not even had the decency to come back to him. I can only urge the Minister to take those concerns to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and hope that a response is received to the planning challenges that were raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) shared his experiences of a live incinerator in his constituency, giving us the warnings that we all

[Robbie Moore]

need as we continue our campaigns against incineration in our own constituencies. He was right to highlight the challenges with not only the feedstocks going into that incinerator but the wider problems associated with it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) has campaigned consistently against the Wisbech incinerator. The applicants seemingly decided to get around their application being determined by the local planning authority by making the scheme so big that it would cover six different counties, meaning that a national strategic decision had to be made. He rightly raised concerns around capacity, which as he said already exists in the system. He also raised the huge challenge that, by the time a planning application has been approved for incinerators, technology and the feedstocks that are being incinerated have changed dramatically. This happens even in the case of the incinerator in the Aire valley in my constituency, which dates back to 2015. He is therefore quite right to advocate for the Government to look at that.

Members have consistently raised wider concerns to do with planning applications that are in the pipeline—at the local planning authority or the environment agency—relating to noise, smell and odour, insect infestations and topography. In my constituency, Bradford council, a Labour-controlled local authority, approved a planning application for an incinerator to be built at the bottom of a valley that, when temperature and cloud inversions and the significantly low stack height are taken into account, would cause emissions to get trapped in the cloud and have a detrimental effect on those residents who are higher up on either side of the valley. That is a challenge that we have consistently put to not only Bradford council but the environment agency.

Other concerns to do with consultation processes that have been raised include the lifespan of an incinerator, the decommissioning process once that comes to an end, challenges with the number of jobs that will be created as a result of a positive incinerator being approved, and the failure of an incinerator to meet the initial expectations around electrical efficiency that are provided when an application is considered. We have also heard challenges around section 106 moneys coming, challenges associated if schools, nurseries and residents are in close proximity to an incinerator, and challenges relating to highways.

Prior to the general election, the last Government rightly paused new incineration licences due to concerns around there already being capacity in the system and oversupply being prevalent. That moratorium expired during the election, and has not been renewed by the new Labour Administration. The end goal of our waste system must be to reduce the volume of residual waste as much as possible. That means absolute focus on reducing, reusing and recycling, but we must also be realistic in recognising that there will always be waste that must be disposed of. While the Conservatives pledged to stop all new incinerators for good and double down on efforts to reduce waste in the first place, Labour has instead attempted to manage the issue of incineration.

In new regulations announced late last year, the Government said that incineration plants would be granted licences only if they can demonstrate that they are reducing landfill. That is a rather low threshold,

as almost any waste heading to an incinerator would otherwise be landfilled. More importantly, that criterion misses the key point that methane emissions from landfill will simply be replaced with carbon emissions from waste incineration. In fact, greenhouse gases from incinerators are more intense, as landfill releases its carbon much more slowly than incineration plants. I fear that this landfill criterion is merely an attempt by this Government to give a veneer of environmentally friendly credibility to a policy that actually represents a failure to tackle the broader waste challenge.

Another requirement is that new plants be carbon capture-ready, but one wonders how the Government will assess that criterion when carbon capture technology is still in its infancy and remains unproven. This is not the basis for sensible, long-term policy. Incineration is the dirtiest form of electricity generation in the country, and has a huge impact on local air pollution, as has been raised by many Members across this House when challenging decisions that have been made by their local planning authority or the environmental operational licence that is then awarded by the Environment Agency. They are rightly advocating, on behalf of their constituents, that such decisions should not go ahead as planned.

At the same time, Labour has claimed that it has introduced tough new rules to clean up incineration and is considering introducing a carbon tax on councils that incinerate. That reveals a gaping hole in the Government's thinking. I ask the Minister: will the Government's changes to licensing be effective in reducing pollution? If so, why tax cash-strapped councils—or does the tax reveal that the Government expect their licensing policy to fail and are hoping to deter the use of incinerators as a result? Incinerators are dirty and as a result should be taxed as we tax landfill, but clearly a long-term strategy should be adopted to phase out incineration. Why will the Government not commit to that vision?

In its announcement on the new rules, DEFRA explained that the need for new incinerators was small, as waste capacity is now almost sufficient for UK demand. In that case, why will the Government not reassure the thousands of campaigners across the country—many Members on both sides of the House have referenced many who have worked alongside them and I also mentioned the Aire Valley Against Incineration group in my own constituency—and commit to building no more incinerators? Surely we would hope that the existing incineration plants reach the end of their lives, and that we are reducing residual waste sufficiently that we do not require any replacements.

The Government must come forward with a comprehensive vision for the future of UK waste; otherwise, we will be flying blind. I urge the Government to instigate an immediate stop to all new incinerators being built, regardless of whether they have been approved, and whether that approval was through planning permission or an operational licence awarded by the Environment Agency.

2.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): What a pleasure it is to speak under your chairship, Ms Lewell, I think for the second time in a fortnight; we are truly blessed to see each other so frequently. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South

(Baggy Shanker) for raising this important issue and congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House who have taken part in the debate. We have heard some disturbing stories; I was horrified to hear about the fire in Carlisle and the consequent impacts that had, particularly on local children.

As we have heard, the process for extracting energy from waste through incineration is an important issue up and down the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Derby South has drawn attention to the Sinfin waste treatment facility in Derby. He will understand that it is not for me to comment on individual decisions that are for waste authorities to make; however, I am able to say that the operator will need to apply to the EA for a variation to review the permit before it can be recommissioned, which would include a comprehensive assessment of measures to prevent odours and pests. If the recommissioning does happen, the EA would ensure that a robust commissioning plan is in place to prevent any adverse environmental impacts, including from nuisance. He asked whether my officials would meet him to discuss his many concerns; I am happy to offer him that undertaking.

I am sure council tax payers in Derby and across Derbyshire are disappointed that a facility that promised so much and cost so much has yet to treat waste, but I am pleased to set out the progress this Government have made in delivering the long-awaited recycling reforms, our circular economy ambitions and our position in relation to energy from waste. I do not think anyone can accuse us of being slack in those areas. I am sure that through the magic of *Hansard* and the Government processes, the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) will shortly receive a response to the letters that he has written to Government colleagues in the MHCLG.

Let me take you right back, Ms Lewell, to 15 years ago, when the Conservative party was governing in coalition. Basically, over the last 15 years recycling rates have stalled, and in some places gone backwards. Too much waste is still dealt with through incineration or landfill. More than half of waste collected by local authorities in 2023-24 was incinerated, and just 41% was recycled. Incidents such as those that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) raised—he and I go back a long way—have really damaged people's confidence in our recycling system. That incident of litter turning up in Indonesia shows us that there is no such place as away. We only have materials.

In an uncertain and turbulent world, we need to take steps to address this, and we have done so at pace. We have introduced reforms that will create 21,000 green jobs and stimulate £10 billion of investment in our recycling capability. That is what underpins our ambition to recycle 65% of municipal waste by 2035. We will get from 41% last year to 65% in 10 years' time. That is a bold ambition. These are the biggest changes to waste recycling since the last Labour Government introduced the landfill tax back in 2001-02. This is a step change.

I would gently point out that not everybody in this room voted for the deposit return scheme, which is one of the three big pillars of reform that the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) developed when he was the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) was absent for the vote in the House on the deposit return scheme.

I am glad that somehow, despite his absence, he may have supported the reforms that he worked on as a Minister.

Jeremy Corbyn: On recycling, does the Minister agree that one of the problems is that there are too many collection systems that operate differently in different boroughs and different places? Secondly, people living in flats often find it very difficult to store waste for weekly collection, and the levels of compostable waste recycling are very low in those places. Does the Department agree, and is the Minister prepared to take any action to improve those rates of recycling?

Mary Creagh: I have set out the actions that we are taking to drive up recycling rates, one of which is to put paid to the proposal we inherited for up to seven bins through the simpler recycling reforms. We have been really clear that we will have black bin waste and mandatory food collections in every local authority, because that does not happen. It obviously happens in Islington, but it does not happen with uniformity across the country. Mandatory food waste recycling came in for businesses on 1 April this year, and it will come in for local authorities on 1 April 2026. That standardisation of recycling and collections should help us all to do better and play our part.

I take on board the right hon. Gentleman's point about collecting from flats. There are really serious problems. One issue is that recyclable waste is often put into black bins, so they get full very quickly, when actually a lot of stuff could be taken out. The deposit return scheme, the simpler recycling reforms and the extended producer responsibility scheme are really big changes developed under the previous Government and carried on by us at speed, because we have no time to waste. We have to move away from our linear, unsustainable "take, make, throw" model, where we just extract things, make things and throw them away. We want to end the throwaway society, and for things that are made in Britain to be built to last, as they were in olden times.

Steve Barclay: Just to follow the logic of the Minister's point, if more recycling is being promoted by the Government, which is what she has set out, self-evidently both the composition of waste and the existing capacity for incineration will be sufficient. In their December paper, the Government said:

"While there are a number of waste incineration facilities that are consented, but not yet under construction, it is highly unlikely that these will be brought forward."

If that is the Government's expectation, and if the Minister is increasing recycling and the capacity is sufficient, why not give clarity to the public and her own Back Benchers by saying, "No more incinerators"?

Mary Creagh: The right hon. Gentleman asked about a couple of things in his speech, so I will respond to those first. He asked about composition analysis—we are getting into deep technical detail—and it is about what is actually being incinerated. What is being burned? The right hon. Member for Islington North asked why we do not just put plastic in the ground, as it would just sit there, inert. What is going into incineration?

My understanding is that the emissions trading scheme was consulted on under the previous Government—that bringing local authority energy-from-waste facilities into the ETS from 2028 was consulted on in 2024, so it was

[Mary Creagh]

an in-flight proposal—but I am very happy to be corrected if I am wrong. The residual municipal waste composition study, covering the period from May 2024 to May 2025, will be published later this year, and I know we cannot wait. It will be interesting, because it is essentially the baseline. It is where we will see if the changes are going to start feeding through.

We said in our manifesto that we would reduce waste by transitioning to a circular economy, which is one of the Secretary of State's five priorities for DEFRA. I am really proud to be the Minister responsible for that.

The right hon. Member for Islington North asked why we cannot just landfill waste plastics, but there are wider environmental impacts from landfilling plastics than simply carbon emissions, including the issue of microplastics. We do not yet fully understand how plastics degrade in landfill in the long term. Emerging research is exploring the potential of plastic-degrading bacteria in landfills, which could break down plastics and in turn impact greenhouse gas emissions. However, I gently say that we cannot solve today's problems by storing them up for future generations.

The UK emissions trading scheme is minded to expand the scope of the emissions trading scheme to include energy-from-waste facilities. A consultation on this was published in 2024, which included a call for evidence on incentivising heat networks. With the energy-from-waste plants, there is electricity generation, but there is also a massive excess of heat. Most of that heat just dissipates, but it would be much more efficient to use it, as Coventry city council has with its mile-long pipe under London Road, which heats the local swimming pool or Coventry University's buildings. I understand that the authority will respond in due course.

At the end of last year, we set out that we will require proposals for new facilities to demonstrate that they will facilitate the diversion of residual waste away from landfill or enable the replacement of older and less efficient facilities. This position reflects the evidence and analysis we have published. It also reflects the waste hierarchy and is congruent with the transition to a circular economy.

Even after the successful delivery of our recycling reforms, there will be sufficient residual waste capacity to treat forecast municipal residual waste arising at national level. On that point, my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South is correct. However, there are five areas in England where more than half the residual waste collected by local authorities was sent to landfill in 2023-24. Landfill was also still relied on for an estimated 5.4 million tonnes of non-municipal, non-major mineral waste in 2022, which is the most recent year for which data is available.

We know about the waste that goes into our bins, but there is a lot of other stuff coming out of construction sites, and so on. My hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) and I had a chat about this issue in the Lobby, but the analysis the Government published at the end of last year sets out the regional disparities and the regional capacities. It is a good read.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I am listening to the Minister's comments about capacity. I appreciate that she may not have the specific details in front of her, but I would be

interested to know whether Cambridgeshire sits within one of the undercapacity regions, and whether that is why so many incinerators are being built in those constituencies.

My other point—I appreciate this is slightly tangential—is that residents of the village of Pidley in my constituency will find themselves equidistant from two incinerators if both are approved. Is there a minimum distance that a village can expect to be from an incinerator? If so, what is it?

Mary Creagh: In law, as I understand it, it is for local planning authorities to decide on planning applications. The hon. Gentleman will be surprised to hear that I have not memorised the full 60 pages—I do my best, but I am just not that good. I am very happy to write to him about the Cambridgeshire point, but he can see it online.

The consultation proposed aligning the ETS with the extended producer responsibility for packaging to allow local councils to pass the emission trading costs from the incineration of plastic packaging waste to the producers of plastic packaging. It also sought views on how best to support local authorities in managing ETS costs.

It is not for the Environment Agency to decide where an energy-from-waste plant is built, or whether it is the right solution for treating waste. It can revoke environmental permits only where there is clear evidence of ongoing non-compliance.

I have discussed simpler recycling, and we heard some excellent examples from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) about food waste, including Too Good To Go. The Government have set up a £15 million food waste grant to tackle on-farm food surplus.

We have also set up the circular economy taskforce, bringing together experts from the Government, industry, academia and civil society. It will work with businesses on what they want to see to create the best possible conditions for investment. We are developing a new circular economy strategy for England, which will mean an economy-wide transformation in our relationship with our precious materials. It will kick-start the Government's missions to have economic growth, to make us a clean energy superpower and to accelerate the transition to net zero. Through our efforts to tackle waste crime, of which there is a great deal in the waste sector, we will take back our streets.

On our capacity announcement, we know there is a need to minimise waste incineration, but it is still a better option than throwing rubbish into landfill. Energy-from-waste facilities provide around 3% of the UK's total energy generation. They can support the decarbonisation of heating our homes and businesses, helping to cut customers' bills. Energy from waste can both maximise the value of resources that have reached the true end of life and avoid the greater environmental impact of landfill, which creates its own problems.

I will conclude to give my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South time to respond. I encourage investors, financiers and businesses to invest in infrastructure that supports the movement of resources up the waste hierarchy. Our recycling infrastructure capacity analysis, published in partnership with the Waste and Resources Action Programme, alongside our packaging reforms identified forecast capacity investment opportunities of 1.7 million

tonnes a year for paper packaging reprocessing and 324,000 tonnes a year for plastic packaging reprocessing by 2035.

We want to unlock investment, and last week my officials met the Lord Mayor of London, Dutch officials and members of the UK and Dutch financial sectors to agree to form a circular economy finance coalition to boost investment in the transition to the circular economy to which we are committed. That is no small task, but by working together we will keep our resources in use for longer.

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Baggy Shanker, you have one minute to wind up.

2.59 pm

Baggy Shanker: I thank everybody for participating in this really important debate. I thank the Minister for agreeing to my request to ask DEFRA officials to look at the concerns I have had about the Sinfin incinerator for many years.

Right hon. and hon. Members made important points about the industry as a whole. There is a lack of transparency when planning applications are going through and, in certain cases, when the plants are running. The business cases are also not tested when the plants are in operation. Those two things, in my experience, do not marry up, and the Environment Agency and other authorities seem powerless when the incinerators do not perform—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10 (6)).

Thames Water: Government Support

3 pm

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): I thank all hon. Members who were eagle-eyed enough to spot that my name has changed. The nameplate in front of me is correct and accurate.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for Thames Water.

It is again a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this important and extremely topical debate. I also thank hon. Members from across the House for joining me this afternoon. I hope that we are all of the same opinion on the problem, although we might well differ slightly on the solution.

Sixteen million Britons are gaslit daily by Thames Water. The company has unleashed filth in our waterways and homes, while cutting deeper and deeper into our personal finances. When I think about the performance of Thames Water, I imagine the very excrement it fails to manage. Despite all the years of historic under-investment in favour of profit, the business has been run into the ground. It now finds itself on the brink of collapse, counting down its days of cash remaining, as we all saw in the recent documentary. It makes an absolute mockery of the water utility industry that fat-cat shareholders are enjoying obscene payouts and company executives rake in sky-high salaries and bonuses, all while our rivers and our wallets suffer. River ecosystems are dying, and our children are denied the joy of swimming in nature because of the threat of swallowing human waste.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. It is beyond clear that my Slough constituents are not happy with Thames Water—in fact, recent figures demonstrate that this company is one of the worst scoring for customer satisfaction for the fourth year in a row. We all know that the last Conservative Government had a rotten record on water companies: they were laden with debt and there were ridiculous executive bonuses and sky-high bills. That is not a sustainable future. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must ensure that customers and our environment are at the heart of future reform and regulation in the sector?

Luke Taylor: I completely agree that customers and residents, our constituents, must be put at the heart of any solution. We must find a way to ensure that people do not have to endure this anymore. As the hon. Member correctly says, there customer satisfaction ratings have been absolutely awful, which alone gives us a credible excuse to raise their concerns in this place.

To go beautifully back on to the script, just this Tuesday Thames Water customers were slammed with a 31% hike in their bills, in the middle of a cost of living crisis, to pay for this utterly appalling service. I say “customers”, but those of us unlucky enough to call Thames Water our provider are more like prisoners. I say that because choice in this market is an illusion. In this country, taxpayers cannot choose their water utility company. They are trapped. This afternoon I shall argue that the only way this Government can support Thames Water is by saving it from itself.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. My constituents in Bicester and Woodstock are fed up of Thames Water providing a poor service yet continually hiking the charges for it. I am thinking of constituents like Martin, who lives in Bladon, whose toilet floods regularly because of a collapsed sewer and who now has a tanker parked outside his house 24/7 because Thames Water has so delayed making the repairs. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a reset at Thames Water after years of financial and operational failure? Does he further agree that the Government are quite wrong to be resisting special administration, which would be the best way to ensure that the financial mismanagement of the past sits rightly with the vulture funds and bondholders and not with future bill payers?

Luke Taylor: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the burden must lie on the vulture funds, and his comments are as wise as the residents of his Bicester and Woodstock constituency.

We Liberal Democrats have long called for action to reform this lousy company. It has been clear to us for a very long time that the current position is untenable. Recognising that it is fundamentally broken, we have no fear in stating exactly what we need: to rip it up and restructure it, so that it can finally work for our constituents.

To make my argument, I will begin by touching on the sheer mess that the company is in. Naturally, many of the points I make will come as no shock to the hon. Members across this House whose residents are flooding their inboxes as Thames Water floods our rivers with sewage. I will then outline why the Government must, with the utmost urgency, put this failing water company into special administration. Finally, I will argue that the only way that this Government can support Thames Water is by scrapping Ofwat and finally getting a regulator that uses its teeth.

Thames Water is knee-deep in a nightmare of its own making. In 2024, it set a new record by pumping 50% more untreated sewage into our waterways. In 2023, the company was named the worst performer in England and completely failed to meet its own performance metrics. In 2022, it made an extra £500 million in profit despite pipe bursts during a heatwave that caused a regional drought and a hosepipe ban. Untreated sewage now pumps through waterways in southern England like it is part of the furniture.

I fear that, were it not for the new Thames Tideway tunnel, which I was fortunate enough to visit recently, our river would be destined for the unmanageable decline that turns waterways into open sewers, like something straight out of a Dickens novel. Humans can choose not to go in the water, but flora and fauna have no such luxury. We are advised not to let our dogs swim in the river, because they may die from the pollution. Rare chalk stream habitats are being decimated by floods of untreated waste. These precious ecosystems are dying. They have no choice but to endure the toxic chemicals from Thames Water's outflow pipes.

Thames Water's sewage problems stem from a systemic failure to update its outdated, mostly Victorian infrastructure. High-risk infrastructure is given ad hoc fixes, with zero communication to customers. The company's approach to fixing water facilities in Southwark, in London, is a prime example of this reckless approach.

Last year, the chief executive had the audacity to blame excess storm overflows on climate change. Yes, climate change is real, and it is causing more intense rainfall and more regular storms, but let me ask Thames Water this question: how long have we known about this, and why did Thames Water not invest annually in its crumbling infrastructure to handle this well-known challenge?

Instead of prioritising the environment and local communities, Thames Water chose to line the pockets of its executives, its shareholders and the vulture funds that owned it. In 2023, the company paid £196 million in dividends, and over the past four years £62 million has been paid out to company executives in bonuses. This has been done at a time when the company is drowning in debt, which currently stands at a whopping £19 billion. Startlingly, more than 25% of customer water bill payments are spent on paying interest on the company's debt. That is our money paying for the company's mistakes.

Now, we are told not to worry; everything is in hand because US private equity group KKR—Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co.—has been selected as the preferred bidder to take control of Thames Water. This is not a British company, and it has no stake in British communities. We have no reason to believe that a private equity group based in the United States will act as though it has any obligation other than to itself. Northumbrian Water, in which KKR has a significant stake, was responsible for more than 40,000 sewage spills in 2024. What will change if it takes over Thames Water? Enough is enough. The Government must step up.

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Member is making a hard-hitting speech. The scale of the water bill increases has left many of my more vulnerable Slough constituents very anxious about how they will pay their bills. As he rightly points out, in recent years, while customers struggle, water companies including Thames Water have pumped record amounts of sewage into our rivers, paid their bosses millions in bonuses and failed to invest adequately in vital infrastructure. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must take firm steps to stop this exploitation of the environment and of our people, and that water companies must now step up to the plate to protect their most vulnerable customers?

Luke Taylor: I absolutely agree, but I fear Thames Water's lack of ability to do that, simply due to the debt pile and the situation in which the company finds itself. The hon. Member's words on behalf of his vulnerable residents clearly come from a deep wish to serve them.

The Government must step up. They must not support Thames Water—the motion is somewhat misleading—but they must support customers throughout the south by finally doing what has long been necessary. Indeed, the first draft of the debate title I submitted to the Backbench Business Committee was, “10 things I hate about Thames Water”—my researcher will appreciate me getting that in—but alas, we were not able to bring it forward.

The Government must place Thames Water under special administration. I do not lay all the blame at the feet of the current Government. We all know that for far too long the Conservative Government stood idly by while Thames Water poisoned our waterways. But with each passing day this Government must surely recognise the growing urgency of action; if they do not, it will become their fault.

Under special administration the state can temporarily take control of this collapsing company. The day-to-day operations would carry on as normal, but the board that has bled the business dry would be gone—restructured and replaced. The greedy executives who have pocketed millions in bonuses while running the company into the ground would be stripped of their bonuses. There can be no more fat pay cheques while they fail customers. Taxpayers would no longer be forced to watch helplessly as their bills rise like the water level, slowly drowning them just to cover the company's massive and foolish debt.

With new leadership there is a chance for a new direction. Under special administration the company could finally implement a meaningful plan to tackle the sewage crisis that has plagued our waterways for far too long. No longer would our streams, rivers and lakes be seen as expendable. The £3 billion debt lifeline that Thames Water has just secured will not last forever. All it serves to do is to preserve a broken status quo. The company has proven time and again that it is not fit for purpose. If this Government do not act now, how much more of our constituents' money will be flushed down the drain? I am begging the Government—literally begging—to listen to our anger, save us from Thames Water's incompetence, and take steps to ensure that the next iteration of Thames Water, and other water companies across the UK, cannot get away with this kind of behaviour.

It all starts with setting up a proper water company regulator that actually does its job. Ofwat is an utter disgrace. It is asleep at the wheel and complicit in the chaos caused by the company. The regulator has sleepwalked through the mess that is Thames Water, now greenlighting a 35% hike in bills over the next five years. It has turned a blind eye to the outrageous profits and bonuses pocketed by Thames Water shareholders. It has sat leisurely by as the water companies refused to properly update their crumbling infrastructure. It has repeatedly refused to set meaningful environmental targets for water companies to improve the quality of our water. The regulator is, through its inaction, helping Thames Water to fleece the taxpayer and carry out its dirty work.

It is time to scrap Ofwat and replace it with a new regulator, one with real teeth that, in the great tradition of anti-trust and community-first capitalism, is not afraid of a fight and will square up firmly to those who benefit most from a broken system. We need a regulator that is not afraid to be bold and ambitious in fighting for the best for the British people. We expect nothing less from the Government, so why should we shrink from demanding it from the regulatory arms of the state? Indeed, if the Government hold themselves to that standard, why should they hold their agencies to anything less?

The fact is that our constituents are being utterly let down. We cannot go on like this. Across the board, the water industry needs wholesale reform, but right at the heart of the scandal, wallowing in a stinking mess of its own making, is Thames Water—a company that was set up to serve the public but has instead become a paragon of failure, debt and daylight robbery. The Government do not have long. They must act swiftly to rescue the idea at the heart of the company—the idea, which I hope has not been fully eroded or caked in sludge, that a utility company, working in collaboration with Government, can be a force for good governance.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I am sure the hon. Member is wondering why a Scottish MP is speaking in a debate about Thames Water. I absolutely agree with his concerns about Thames Water, but the model he seems to be proposing is very close to what we have with Scottish Water, which I am sure he has done a lot of research on. He will know that sewage was dumped into Scotland's rivers and lochs for over 600 hours a day in 2023, and we do not monitor our water discharges anywhere near as closely as England. I therefore urge caution. The model he is proposing does not work in Scotland. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency, despite having the powers, does not use them in the way he might want.

Luke Taylor: I genuinely thank the hon. Member for his intervention. It highlights that there is no silver bullet. The solutions that we propose are complex and difficult; they require monitoring and oversight of infrastructure plans, and properly phased, long-term planning and investment to prevent the discharges that we see under the current system. Only through the proper process—upgrading holding tanks, for example, or upgrading the technologies used to filter and clean the water before the effluence is put back into the river—can we see improvement. His challenge is fair and welcome; the solution not a silver bullet.

To conclude, a utility company, working in collaboration with Government, can be a force for good governance and good management of our environment, and give good value to bill payers. Imagine looking at a water bill and thinking, "This is good value!" I promise that there is a future like that, but that is what is at stake. The Government must act now to sort out the mess and establish that in this country, utility companies can thrive only when they take seriously their responsibilities to the environment and to us, rather than solely the pursuit of profit.

3.17 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing the debate and for not supporting Thames Water; I am very pleased to hear that.

I do not think anyone has been deluded into thinking that Thames Water is doing a good job—certainly not me or my constituents. Since I was elected to this House, hardly a year has passed without another major water infrastructure issue that leaves hundreds of my constituents without water for days on end. That is not to mention the years that I have lived in my constituency and been a victim of Thames Water's extremely shoddy service. Apart from three years in Yorkshire, I have had to endure Thames Water for the entirety of my life, and it has shown very little concern for the impact that it has.

In 2023, a burst water pipe on Brixton Hill left residents without water for three days. Last July, on one of the hottest days of the year, residents of Clarence Avenue had their water shut off without any prior notice. As recently as December, faulty valve pumps in Brixton left homes without water for more than four days. Those are just the most recent incidents—as I said, there have been a number of them since I was elected.

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

The residents of Clapham and Brixton Hill are not the only ones who will have experienced those disruptions in service, so Members can imagine my constituents' outrage when, in the wake of poor service and increased bills, they see Thames Water's shareholders and directors receive millions of pounds in dividends. In October 2023, Thames Water made interim dividend payments totalling £37.5 million to its holding company, Thames Water Utilities Holdings Ltd, while the pipes were literally rotting under our feet. In March 2024, the company made further dividend payments amounting to £158.3 million, from which shareholders received non-cash benefits, all while the quality of water has continued to decline every single year.

Thames Water chairman Sir Adrian Montague was accused of a conflict of interest over the £37 million in dividend payments that were made to shareholders in February 2025. Under his tenure, Thames Water paid £195.8 million in dividends, breaching Ofwat rules. Ofwat fined it just £18 million, but Thames Water paid zero pounds of that £18 million fine. I agree with the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam that Ofwat is also unfit for purpose.

Others may have a better understanding of how such things work, but I do not understand how a company that is in debt and failing, and that has damaged infrastructure, has the money to pay dividends to its shareholders. While my constituents' taps run dry, the fat cats of Thames Water are literally turning theirs on—but not to drink the water of course, because they know better.

The cherry on the sewage-filled cake? On Tuesday, my constituents and millions of Thames Water customers woke up to what would have been the world's worst April fool's day joke—the grim reality of a 31% bill increase. One constituent wrote to me because they are experiencing a 45.8% increase in their monthly bill, from £36.55 to £53.30 a month. The service will remain shoddy, but the price that customers are made to pay will rise. Thames Water is rinsing my constituents, pouring sewage into our waterways and siphoning off money to shareholders, and hiking up bills to pay for it.

It is fair to say that Thames Water's management are comparable with what the company is dumping in the Thames—crap. They are just crap. They are running the company's finances into the ground and relying on the Government to bail them out, all the while leaving my constituents in the vulnerable position of having no running water at times. If they are relying on the Government to bail them out, we taxpayers are literally paying them twice. Clearly, they cannot be trusted to operate such a vital service legitimately, and they certainly should not be allowed to pocket thousands of pounds in the process.

I do believe that the Government should be supporting Thames Water—supporting it back into public ownership. That is the only support that they should give it. Rather than a US private equity firm being allowed to take it over, it should be taken over by the Government and made accountable to its service users, the British public. Those who are against nationalisation on an ideological basis will say that competition is needed to ensure innovation and the best service, but there is no competition for Thames Water. Which other water company can my constituents switch to when the service is poor?

It makes no sense to me that a new private company should be allowed to take over and reap the profits with little incentive to provide a better service. My constituents deserve a better service, and the continued private ownership of Thames Water will not bring that. Public ownership will not solve every single issue with Thames Water, but it will certainly solve more than allowing an American company to take it over and profit off the backs of my constituents.

3.22 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing this debate and for his stirring opening remarks.

The Government have repeatedly referenced the £22 billion black hole that they inherited, but there has been far less reference to the debt accrued by Thames Water, which is comparable with that figure. Company executives have received hefty bonuses, and shareholders have taken billions of pounds in dividends out of the company, but Thames Water customers are seeing their bills rise by an average of 35% over the next five years. During a cost of living crisis, and on top of other mounting bills, this rise is extremely concerning for many of my constituents. What is even more alarming is that Thames Water does not believe that the bill hike is sufficient to meet the targets set by Ofwat, and it has since referred the final determination to the Competition and Markets Authority.

The Liberal Democrats have been calling for Thames Water to be placed into special administration, as it has shown that it cannot be trusted to provide a service that does not degrade our environment or line the pockets of its shareholders. In response to those calls, the Government have implied that Thames Water is not breaching its statutory duties, and therefore that intervention is not under immediate consideration.

Thames Water has repeatedly shown an inability to undertake its basic duties. In my Richmond Park constituency, Kingston Vale residents have had to endure almost constant traffic chaos in their neighbourhood, as Thames Water has repeatedly had to attend to a burst sewage pipe. A constituent reported to my office that sewage spills over the road following a leak. Thames Water recently agreed to replace the pipe, having resisted it for years. I am sure that the Government would agree that people should not have to put up with unfiltered sludge spilling on to their pavements.

Senior managers at Thames Water acknowledge that many departments are understaffed and, by their own admission, do not have the funds to invest in critical infrastructure to prevent leaks and sewage-dumping into our rivers. In a recent BBC documentary, some staff members even admitted to presenting favourable statistics when measuring the concentration of *E. coli* in the Thames. The cleanliness of our rivers should not be a public relations exercise. It is extremely important that Thames Water is held to account for polluting our rivers.

In 2024, Thames Water was responsible for 298,081 hours-worth of sewage spills. A freedom of information request by the Liberal Democrats discovered that Ofwat has collected not a penny of fines for that disregard of our environment. By not replacing Ofwat with a regulator

with teeth, the Government are not installing a sufficient deterrent to ensure that Thames Water takes action to prevent such environmental incidents.

Given Thames Water's current financial situation and operational capacity, as well as recent reports that KKR—which boasts a similarly poor environmental record with Northumbrian Water—plans to buy the company, does the Minister believe that Thames Water has the capabilities to prevent serious environmental hazards from repeatedly occurring?

3.26 pm

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for bringing forward this debate. I am a little surprised that there are only 10 things he hates about Thames Water; my list is significantly longer. It is a really important debate. I wanted to come into it with a balanced view, and not just slate Thames Water, but it is incredibly hard. I feel that Thames Water is systematically failing the public on pretty much every level. We have seen a lack of investment in infrastructure, which has resulted in mass pollution, the needless deaths of thousands of animals and fish and destruction to our natural habitat, which is completely unacceptable. At the same time as not investing, Thames Water has been paying out astronomical fees to its chief executive, and to its shareholders in dividends—that is completely ridiculous, and it is being passed on to my residents. We need to look at changing that.

Let me flip the page to other Thames Water failures and look at its customer service: it was attempting to charge a resident in Swindon North over £11,000, saying he was using an Olympic-sized swimming pool of water weekly. He battled for over a year, getting nowhere. It took one email from me to get Thames Water to come out and look at it—shock horror, he was not using an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Thames Water actually owed him money. It should not take a Member of Parliament emailing to intervene—that is completely wrong and unacceptable. Thames Water needs to be more accountable to the public.

In Swindon we also have flooding, like in every constituency. We have it from Priory Vale to Stratton St Margaret. Thames Water has agreed that it is at fault and that this is its problem, yet has done nothing about it. That is unacceptable. Residents cannot remortgage their house or move on, and are trapped in a situation where they have to accept that every year their house will flood while, once again, Thames Water makes more profit. That is completely shoddy and unacceptable.

We have also heard today about the increase in prices. I urge Ofwat to reject Thames Water's new claim to increase prices. As we have said, Thames Water is not delivering and not accountable. What metric is it actually succeeding on? This is unacceptable. I am sure that everybody in this room would say that Thames Water should not increase its prices. I am pleased that the Government are planning to introduce more regulation, to monitor the sewage systems more and to give Ofwat more power. I just want to see it use that power.

I again thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam. I thought that the debate would be a bit busier so I did not plan a long speech, but this issue is vitally important, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

3.29 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) on securing this important debate. It is being held only a short time after we found out that Thames Water pumped an incredible 298,081 hours-worth of sewage into our waterways in 2024, attacking our natural environment and undermining public trust. All this was at the same time as continuing to pay significant bonuses to its bosses and dividends to its shareholders, while demanding that taxpayers foot the bill. It beggars belief.

The slew of scandals, the lack of trust and concerns about water quality, not to mention the parlous state of Thames Water finances that my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam so eloquently outlined, are exactly why I and local campaigners are fighting Thames Water's controversial proposals to pump treated sewage into the river at Teddington in my constituency. The Government have the power to take that scheme off the table, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), knows from when my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and I lobbied him before the last election. The new Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), also has the power to take the scheme off the table. I will outline why the scheme should not go ahead, which links to the subject of the state of Thames Water's finances.

The river is at the very heart of the community in my constituency, with paddle boarders, rowers and wild water swimmers from not only our local community but from further afield coming to use the river, and residents are extremely worried about the environmental impact of the proposals, including on human health, biodiversity, wildlife, and of course water quality.

Sarah Olney: My constituents in Ham and north Kingston on the opposite bank of the river from my hon. Friend's constituency in Twickenham are particularly concerned about how the construction impacts will affect the Ham Lands nature reserve. We have not heard enough from Thames Water about exactly what its plans are for that. Does she agree that Thames Water needs to be much more up front about what exactly it plans to do?

Munira Wilson: Absolutely. A lot of those environmental and social impacts have yet to be set out in detail. My hon. Friend and I are both eagerly awaiting, as are thousands of our constituents, the environmental impact assessments and the statutory consultation, which I believe will start later this year.

Thames Water keeps telling us that water quality will not be compromised, yet it has failed to assure us that dangerous compounds and chemicals, including PFAS—perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or so-called “forever chemicals”—which I have talked at length to the Minister about, will be filtered out. Its environmental track record tells a different story and residents are understandably sceptical. Thames Water insists that the proposals represent the best value option, yet it has failed to show to the community and elected representatives its workings on how it has got to that best value definition.

[*Munira Wilson*]

The company has a proven history of failing to invest in infrastructure and in the essentials, while pouring millions of pounds of bill payers' money into short-term fixes that do nothing but produce new assets for the company to borrow against. Indeed, that is what many residents are suspicious of the scheme is about: trying to load up its balance sheet to be able to leverage yet more debt.

Just as Thames Water declares itself to be on the verge of collapse, the Government would approve a £300 million infrastructure project that, by the company's own admission, will be used only once every two years and save only one tenth of the hundreds of millions of litres of water that Thames Water loses every day through leaks. This is after Thames Water spent some £250 million on the Beckton desalination plant back in 2012, which was meant to improve water resilience in London, but has barely been used. When I questioned Thames Water's chief executive officer about it, he told me that it did not work as well as it was meant to—I kid you not. This leaves Thames Water customers in my constituency rightly asking why they should pay the price for its mismanagement. If the Teddington direct river abstraction does get the green light from Government, will it deliver the benefits that Thames Water claims it will to warrant the environmental impact, both on our river and indeed on its shores?

It is the issue of trust that is so important to public confidence in our water companies and our water infrastructure. The public ought to have confidence that the companies responsible for our most basic human need, clean water, are acting in their best interests, not in the interests of shareholders and executives. Time and again Thames Water has eroded that trust and proven itself unworthy of the public's confidence, and throughout it has been our constituents who have been asked to pay up for the failures and the mismanagement of the company. Over a quarter of bill payers' money is spent simply on servicing water company debt. Worse still, while Thames Water pleads poverty, its executives slip out the back door with eye-watering bonuses.

Where is the accountability? Where is the justice for those who suffer the consequences of their negligence? As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam has set out, the Liberal Democrats have a strong record on this issue. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) and his attempts to hold Thames Water to account in the courts and challenge it for its horrendous behaviour. He has been absolutely outstanding. I thank him for everything he has done with his tremendous campaign.

We must put an end to the cycle of environmental negligence and financial mismanagement. Thames Water is on the brink, and placing it into special administration is the only way to prevent a full-scale collapse. Meanwhile, Ofwat lacks the authority to hold failing water companies to account, and unless the Government take decisive action, they risk the same weakness. It is time, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam has already said, to replace Ofwat with a regulator that has real enforcement powers and the full backing of the Government behind it.

The bottom line is that we need to crack down on failing water companies, not prop them up. With customers paying ever higher bills and our precious environment at risk, the Government must go much further, much faster, in reining in these companies.

3.36 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing this important debate. Like all of us here today, I have been contacted by dozens of constituents who have been affected by problems with Thames Water's service and, of course, the recent increase in their Thames Water bills. A family of four in my constituency have been in touch to say that their water bill alone has increased by almost £300 a year because of the recent increases. That increase for working families is unsustainable and causes more financial instability for families across my constituency of Bexleyheath and Crayford.

Alongside that increase, as we have heard, the service that has been provided to constituents continues to not be good enough and is affecting residents on a daily basis. Years of under-investment, particularly in infrastructure, due to the previous Government's weak regulations have created an unreliable system for which the public are now expected to foot the growing bill. It is not unusual for Crayford High Street, in the second main town centre in my constituency, to be closed for a month or two due to water leaks, as has happened on several occasions in recent years, diverting hundreds of residents who use that road for the school pick-up, commuting to work, visiting the shops in the town centre and getting on with their lives.

Many constituents, while finding the closure of the road inconvenient, would support the occasional closure if it improved services—but the problems continue. In my 20 years as a local councillor until last year, I saw the situation get worse as that infrastructure got worse year on year. Leaks due to poorly maintained infrastructure are common across roads in each part of my constituency—in Barnehurst, Bexleyheath, Crayford, Northumberland Heath and Slade Green. As a result, we see constant road closures and great inconvenience to residents across the constituency.

I was pleased to support the Government's Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which became law earlier this year, and the announcement of an independent commissioner for the water sector and its regulation will be welcomed by many constituents across Bexleyheath and Crayford. However, I look forward, after the stories we have heard, to hearing the Minister's feedback on what further action can be taken to ensure that Thames Water delivers valuable upgrades to both its infrastructure and its work to stabilise prices, which continue to cause great concern for my constituents across Bexleyheath and Crayford.

3.38 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing this debate on Government support for Thames Water. What does Government support for Thames Water look like? Our current Government support Thames Water by letting it breach the terms of its operating licence, letting Ofwat ignore its own rules, letting consumers take the pain of higher bills for no gain, letting financiers make out like bandits and letting our rivers continue to be filled with sewage. What is shocking about that is that a Labour Government are

doing it. This Government are turning out to be every bit as bad as the Conservatives were at protecting our rivers. They are completely ducking their responsibilities. It is within the Minister's powers to take action: she is the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Water and Flooding at DEFRA, DEFRA oversees Ofwat, and Ofwat issues operating licences to water companies.

Here are some of the key requirements that Thames Water needs to comply with, per its Ofwat-issued operating licence. First, there is an operational requirement to comply with environmental and health standards. Thames Water is failing that requirement. As per Environment Agency data, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) said, in 2024 Thames Water discharged nearly 300,000 hours of sewage, which is 50% up on 2023. It is illegal to dump sewage in dry conditions, but it is happening repeatedly. Professor Peter Hammond, who lives in my constituency, monitored the Stanton Harcourt sewage treatment works in my constituency, and found that there had been 266 illegal spills in just a single sewage treatment works in a four-year period. That is a complete failure of that operating requirement.

Secondly, Thames Water is failing the financial viability requirement, under which it is required to have two licences of investment-grade credit ratings. Currently, it has no credit ratings that are investment grade. Standard & Poor's has the company's debt 12 notches below investment grade, and Moody's has it nine notches below. That is as far deep into junk bond territory as one can get. In the last financial year to March 2024, Thames Water had £19 billion of debt but only £1.2 billion of cash in. Everybody knows that that is not a sensible way to run a company.

By allowing Thames Water to breach that rule, we introduce moral hazard into the water sector and all other regulated sectors. Other water companies take note that there has been no material sanction of Thames Water and realise that they can also likely get away with it. Of the nearly £1.4 billion of funding due to come into the company, £900 million is going straight out in interest expenses, sweet financial goodies for hedge funds, and advisory fees. That is not fair on our bill payers. Customers are being royally stuffed, and Ofwat and the Minister's DEFRA team are standing by.

Thirdly, there is a requirement to demonstrate fairness, transparency and affordability to customers—the fair pricing requirement—and Thames Water is failing at that too. Bills have gone up by a headline of 31%. Many Witney constituents have written to me with increases of 50% and 70%—in one case, it was even 93%. On top of that, to add insult to injury, Thames Water has an application to the Competition and Markets Authority to increase bills even higher, by 59%.

Fourthly, there is the ownership requirement. This one really gets my goat. Thames Water must inform Ofwat of any change to control. Ultimate controllers are defined in Ofwat's papers as being

“in a position to control or in a position to materially influence the company”.

Thames Water's own advisers have publicly stated that the company is de facto controlled by its creditors. Ofwat is ignoring this. Extraordinarily, Ofwat, wrote to me in the last month to say that, despite it being publicly stated in the press that Omers, a shareholder in

Thames Water, had written its stake down to zero and pulled its board representation off last May, it is still actually controlling the company. Why is this going on? What could be going on here? It smells—

Luke Taylor: It smells like—

Charlie Maynard: Yes, it does. I think Ofwat is doing exactly what the company's creditors want it to do, and I wonder why that is happening, because it should not be.

Finally, there is a failure to innovate. There are a host of technologies out there, and far too often we hear the same old lines about Victorian sewers, cameras and how impossible it all is. There is a huge range of leak detection, pipeline monitoring, protective maintenance, trenchless pipe repair and pressure management technologies. I hear from Oxfordshire firms that it is easier to sell sewer technology solutions into the US and Europe than into the UK, so something is going seriously wrong. We could start by looking at whether the incentives are effectively aligned; I do not believe they are.

What are the consequences of this failure to act? It is easy to lay a lot of the blame at the last Government, but the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 was more window dressing than action. I am new to Parliament, but I was particularly dismayed that not a single word of a single proposed amendment from any party was accepted by the Minister. I wish that in Parliament we all had enough confidence to accept good ideas where we found them—I live in hope.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

On that point, the hon. Gentleman is incorrect. Actually, compromise amendments were reached on a few occasions, so I want to gently push back on what he says. Cross-party amendments in the other place, where the Bill began, were discussed and accepted, so it is factually incorrect to say that no amendments were accepted.

Charlie Maynard: None of the 60 amendments in the Commons, or however many there were, was accepted. The rejected proposals included putting flow meters on the outflows of sewage treatment works, which is sort of logical; establishing targets to reduce pollution over time, using existing benchmarks of hours of spilled sewage; making sewage treatment works' calculations more transparent; and bringing environmental experts and consumer representatives on to water boards.

The Labour Government are now allowing a public utility company to line the pockets of bankers and hedge funds at the expense of bill payers. As someone said in the *Financial Times* this week,

“with water, it's a total monopoly and a total shambles. A shambopoly if you will”.

The Government's support for Thames Water essentially amounts to unconditional support for the company's creditors, at a direct and massive cost to its customers.

What do we need to do instead? First, we need to put the company out of its financial misery and put it into special administration. We should allow its debt to be massively written down to something like three times the cash flow or thereabouts. If the debt is reduced, the company will have a sufficiently strong balance sheet to allow it to invest in the infrastructure we desperately

[*Charlie Maynard*]

need and to spend our bill payments on fixing treatment works and pipe networks, rather than paying interest. We should allow water companies coming out of special administration to be mutually owned by their customers and professionally managed. We should set pollution baselines and pollution reduction targets and get serious about putting transparency targets and technology to work to clean up our rivers.

Special administration is clearly the most logical option at the moment, but I believe that the Government are shying away from it because of threats of legal action against them, phantasmagorical scenarios of financial Armageddon, or both. Please do not let Thames Water's lobbyists, including Ruth Kelly, the ex-Labour Minister who is now chair of Water UK, to scaremonger you out of taking the action that 16 million consumers—your electorate—need. Those scenarios are patently not true, and it is best to ask Thames Water about that. As per page 92 of the independent expert report from Thames Water's adviser, Teneo, the net cost to the Treasury of taking the company into special administration, even in the worst-case scenario, is zero—please look it up.

Instead, we now have this bizarre situation whereby a Labour Government are cheerleading the American hedge funds and private equity funds taking over our largest water company and making a massive profit out of its customers. What goes for Thames Water will very likely go for the rest of the sector, so the signal that you and your Government are sending the sector—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. I do not wish to spoil the hon. Gentleman's flow, but we use the same conventions in Westminster Hall as in the main Chamber. You should not use the words "you" or "your" unless you are referring to me.

Charlie Maynard: Many apologies to you, Ms Lewell, and to the Minister.

The signal that the Minister and the Government are sending to this and other regulated sectors is simply terrible. All that customers in my Witney constituency and across the whole catchment really want at this point is reliable, affordable, clean water to our homes. We want local rivers and lakes not to have sewage poured into them on a near-daily basis. We want a Government who are serious about putting the interests of customers and our rivers before the interests of hedge funds and private equity funds. Please stop letting us down.

3.49 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing this really important debate. It was good to listen to all the contributions. As we all know, water is vital and we use it every single day, so it is deeply concerning that we have such great challenges in our water industry, particularly those that have been highlighted with Thames Water.

Under the last Government, we uncovered the true extent of the issues with our water system by increasing the monitoring of storm overflows, which no political party or Administration had previously attempted. Back in

2010, just 7% of storm overflows were monitored, but when we left office, 100% were monitored. That gave the Government and our regulators a proper and true understanding of the way in which those storm overflows were being used by our water companies.

John Lamont: I pay tribute to all the work that my hon. Friend did as a Minister. He has highlighted the percentage of overflows that are now being monitored in England. I am sure he is aware of research by Surfers Against Sewage confirming that 100% of storm overflows in England are now being monitored. In Scotland, the figure is only 4%. Does that not show the huge difference between what is happening here in England, which is not ideal by any stretch of the imagination, and what is happening in Scotland, which is far, far worse?

Robbie Moore: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Yes, that is the point: for any Government, regardless of political colour or make-up, to deal with the challenge, they need to understand the true extent of what they are dealing with.

It is frustrating that north of the border only 4% of storm overflows are being monitored. In reference to what is happening with Scottish Water, and to what the devolved Administration north of the border are doing in the Scottish Parliament to tackle challenges of pollution, how can any proper strategy be put in place with no reference point? That is why it is important to get to the 100% level of monitoring that we now have in England, which resulted in the last Administration being able to roll out the plan for water, which was about stronger regulation, tougher enforcement and more investment.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam mentioned the Thames tideway, which has 25 km of underground capacity that has now been extended from Acton to Abbey Mills. A £5 billion investment has been put into the project, which is now fully operational, having opened in February; I was lucky enough to visit and to go down into it before it was opened. The great thing about the project is that it is now draining about 34 of the most polluting combined sewer overflows in the Thames area, which will help to improve the quality of the water in the Thames.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam rightly raised the concerns about increasing water bills, the lack of trust in Thames Water and the poor level of service that his constituents are experiencing. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) picked up on the same issues and referred to the meeting that I had with her and with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), in the short period for which I was lucky enough to be a Minister in the Department, about the challenges with the Teddington project. I urge the Minister to address those concerns, because challenges arise when there is no proper environmental impact assessment. Concern about the project is rightly being raised—it was certainly a concern that I had—so I urge the Minister to continue to put pressure on Thames Water.

The hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) rightly raised the concerns of constituents on Clarence Avenue and in Brixton, relating to water shortages resulting from Thames Water not carrying out its duty to the level of quality that her constituents expect. She also raised concerns about the bill increases of approximately 30% or 31% for some of her constituents.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park mentioned the statutory duties that a water company is bound to meet and referred to the poor satisfaction levels that Thames Water is delivering. The hon. Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) rightly raised the challenges that his constituents are experiencing with flooding, and Thames Water's refusal to take responsibility. Finally, the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) mentioned challenges relating to Thames Water's bill increases and the poor service that his constituents experience.

Thames Water is probably the most distressing example of our water system going wrong. Bills are rising by about 33% this year, but unfortunately the Government have failed to take serious action and consumers are paying for it. That comes in addition to the pressures of the cost of living, council tax rises and so on. Rightly, there is huge frustration that Thames Water shareholders have simply wrung the business dry of capital, failed to invest to expand its supply, and failed to invest to clean up sewage spills. Thames Water's exceptionally poor level of service deliverability has already been mentioned.

The last Administration took steps to address the challenges that constituents and residents face not only in the Thames Water area, but across England. We blocked bosses' bonuses for water company executives, we ensured that dividends had to be linked specifically to environmental performance and we introduced unlimited civil fines by removing the £250,000 cap. More power was awarded to Ofwat so that it could impose levies on water companies in the circumstances. In August last year, Thames Water was fined £104 million for its failure to avoid sewage overflows. In other instances Thames Water was put under a cash lock-up, which prevents any dividends from being paid out without Ofwat's approval.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: How much of the fine that the hon. Gentleman mentioned has Thames Water actually paid? How was it allowed to pay out all these dividends in previous years, given the measures that he is setting out? I genuinely cannot understand how that was allowed to continue for so long.

Robbie Moore: That brings me nicely to my next point, which is the strength of the regulator. Ofwat has the powers to link dividends to environmental performance—a measure that was awarded to Ofwat—and to ban bosses' bonuses for executives, but those powers are there should Ofwat wish to use them. What is the Minister doing to ensure that Ofwat is using the powers that it has been awarded, and to ensure that it is being robust in its actions as the regulator? Many hon. Members have rightly raised concerns that Ofwat has not been robust enough.

Much has been said in this debate about nationalising our water industry and particularly Thames Water, but it is false to assume that a struggling private company will cease to struggle purely because it changes hands. Indebtedness does not go away because a company is nationalised—not without a taxpayer-funded bailout, which would mean redress for the failures of Thames Water executives coming out of the pockets of working people. I mention again the example of Scottish Water, north of the border. There have been myriad mistakes at Thames Water, but it is the responsibility of the independent regulator, Ofwat, to right those wrongs and use the powers that have been awarded to it.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I have to ask the hon. Member why he is so against the idea of nationalising water. I am sure he agrees that the whole idea of privatisation is that there is some sort of competition, but there cannot be competition with water, and therefore we cannot guarantee a good service. We are seeing that at the moment, and we saw it under the Conservative Government for a number of years. Does he understand why privatisation cannot really work in this instance?

Robbie Moore: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but I simply refer to the fact that since privatisation about £250 billion of private investment has been put into our water companies, not only to improve infrastructure but to help with service delivery—£250 billion that would otherwise have had to come from the taxpayer.

My second point is that the system should work if the regulator is being robust enough. The point that I come back to is that there is a clear argument that the regulator, Ofwat, has not been sufficiently utilising the powers awarded to it by the Government, and therefore it is right that the Government hold it to account to make it as robust as possible. North of the border in Scotland, with Scottish Water, only 4% of storm overflows are even being monitored, and the service and delivery that Scottish residents are facing is in some cases far worse than what we are experiencing from Thames Water. Simply having a nationalisation strategy does not demonstrate better roll-out and service delivery for customers.

There have been myriad mistakes at Thames Water, but it is the responsibility of the independent regulator, Ofwat, to right those wrongs.

Charlie Maynard: Could the hon. Member elaborate a little bit on that £250 billion number and where it comes from?

Robbie Moore: It is a figure that has been referenced since nationalisation initially took place, and has been well recognised as the amount of money that has been invested into our water companies by the private sector, for the benefit not only of Thames Water but of all the water companies across England.

What is the Minister doing to ensure that Ofwat is utilising the powers awarded to it, and does she have confidence in Ofwat being able to exercise its function? If not, what is the Minister doing about it? Furthermore, the Government need to take action to further protect consumers from the Thames Water fallout. The court settlement that Thames Water secured in February is designed to give everyone involved time to come to a sustainable plan, but I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us today that her efforts are firmly going towards ensuring that the plan protects consumers.

Finally, I would like to talk about the broader reforms and support that we can offer our water industry. As I and others have rightly said throughout this debate, our water industry is crying out for further investment. We need to think further about how to utilise the opportunities for the water sector across the country. To that end, what consideration is the Minister giving to providing more opportunities for individuals and organisations outside of major water companies to influence improving the water sector, and has she considered the untapped potential to increase water supply and capacity to the

[*Robbie Moore*]

thousands of people who are utilising water, and the hundreds of landowners out there who, with the right financial and planning incentives, may choose to further invest in the water industry? That may be an avenue that the Minister may wish to explore.

I again thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam for securing this important debate.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a real pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. I wish you, and anybody celebrating, a very happy Easter—I hope that it is a peaceful and enjoyable day. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing this debate and giving us space and time to discuss this important issue.

I hope that I can use this debate as an opportunity to address some of the concerns being voiced around Thames Water and the water industry. Since I am feeling rather positive and getting ready for Easter, instead of “10 things I hate about”, I would rather come up with 10 things that might give us reason for hope and renewal in the water industry. To give 10 reasons for hope, since we have been elected we have: one, introduced the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 to ban bonuses; two, with the Water (Special Measures) Act, introduced criminal liability; three, introduced automatic penalties; four, set up the independent commission; five, changed the articles of association; six, ringfenced money for investment; seven, doubled the compensation for burst pipes, which has come up through the guaranteed standards scheme; eight, created customer panels for water companies; nine, passed bathing water reforms; 10, published storm overflow guidance just last week. And this new Labour Government have not even been in office for a year.

Thinking of fairness and justice, I generally have an aversion to criticising people who cannot be here to defend themselves, so I want to reflect on the comment made about Ruth Kelly. She works for Water UK; she does not work for Thames Water, so characterising her as a defender of Thames Water is not entirely correct.

Charlie Maynard: Will the Minister give way?

Emma Hardy: I am happy to, if the hon. Member wishes to retract his comment.

Charlie Maynard: To be clear, I said that Ruth Kelly is the chair of Water UK—I said exactly that.

Emma Hardy: Perhaps I misunderstood the hon. Member as also saying that she is a defender of, or a spokesperson for, Thames Water. I am happy for him to retract his comment.

Charlie Maynard: I said that she is the chair of Water UK, which is the trade body for water companies, so I think that follows.

Emma Hardy: I am pleased by what I believe I have heard: that no reference was made to Ruth Kelly with regard to Thames Water; instead, the comment was solely about her representing Water UK.

Further to my point about people who are not here and unable to defend themselves, as a trade unionist I want to talk about the people who work for water companies, including those who work for Thames Water and go out to fix the broken pipes, clean up sewage and deal with the sewage overflows. I have had reports from some unions that those people often face abuse for doing so. They are often on the frontline facing people angry with the company. I would like to say—and I hope we have unity on this point—that the people going out, cleaning up the mess and dealing with the difficulties are not responsible. They are not Thames Water; they are people who work for it. I thank them for the work that they do in incredibly difficult circumstances.

Luke Taylor: I think we would all agree on that. It was interesting to see, in the BBC documentary, that the people who work at Thames Water clearly wanted to do a good job. They wanted to improve things for residents—their neighbours, family and friends—but just did not have the chance to do so because of the structure of the company and the difficulties that it is in. This debate is about the need to help not only the customers—our residents—but the workers who want to be doing so much better and find it so dispiriting to be part of that failing organisation.

Emma Hardy: I completely agree. They are trying to do a good job. I add that it is a good industry to work in; the people in it have long careers and, I might add, excellent trade union representation. I am not sure that I will have complete support from everyone in the room on that point—just when I was doing so well—but I want to echo that it is not those people’s responsibility.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who is no longer in his place, was right to say that customers and the environment should be at the heart of reforms. As I mentioned, we changed the articles of association to put customers on to the boards. My hon. Friend is always incredibly caring about his residents, so I wanted to mention to him and to all the other hon. Members that we are holding the water companies to account to end water poverty by 2030. We are just about to consult—we have to wait for *purdah*—on changing the rules around WaterSure to extend eligibility for it.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) enjoyed her three years in Yorkshire. It is a fine and wonderful part of the country, and she is always welcome to come back. She is an incredible champion for her community. I am sure that she will never need my assistance in standing up for that community, but I am always happy to give it if she does.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) highlighted the role that MPs can play. He showed what a good choice was made in the last election to send him here as a representative for his community. I thank him for his support for the Water (Special Measures) Act and for the further work that we are doing on regulators.

The hon. Members for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) talked about the Teddington abstraction scheme. Without going into loads of detail, there will be a consultation, and they will be able to feed in the concerns of their residents and environmental concerns. But if either of the hon. Members

feel that their concerns, or those of their residents, are not being listened to, I am happy to make arrangements for us to sit and have a longer conversation about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) mentioned a family of four struggling with their water bill. I again highlight WaterSure. We are looking to expand eligibility for it, but at the moment, if a family has three or more children under the age of 18 living at the property and they claim child benefit, they will be eligible for WaterSure, so I urge my hon. Friend to pass that information on to his constituents. I thank him for his support for the Water (Special Measures) Act, the commission and our desire to introduce change.

Before turning to Thames Water, I want to emphasise that as a Government we recognise that the water sector is facing many challenges, and we have set out ambitious plans to tackle those challenges head-on, but it is important also to emphasise that resolving them will require long-term and transformative change. One thing mentioned here—I think by the loyal Opposition—is that there is no silver bullet or quick fix for some of the problems that we face.

We recently took the Water (Special Measures) Act through Parliament; it was amended in the other place. It will drive meaningful improvements in the performance and culture of the water industry and act as a first step in enabling wider and transformative change across the water sector. The Act delivers on the Government's manifesto commitments by blocking bonuses for executives who pollute our waterways, enabling the bringing of criminal charges against persistent lawbreakers, enabling automatic and severe fines for wrongdoing, and ensuring monitoring of every sewage outlet.

In October we launched, in collaboration with the Welsh Government, an independent commission on the water sector regulatory system. This is the largest review of the water industry since privatisation. The commission will report in the middle of this year and make recommendations on how to tackle systemic issues in the water sector to help restore our rivers, lakes and seas to good health, meet the challenges of the future and contribute to economic growth. Those recommendations will form the basis of further legislation to attract long-term investment and clean up our waters for good.

I now turn to Thames Water specifically before moving on to the sector as a whole. I will say as much as I am able to about Thames Water, bearing in mind that it is going through a confidential process. I completely understand what has been said. Let me say at the beginning that I am not here as the hon. Member for Thames Water, and I am not here to defend the actions of Thames Water. I want to reassure and, I hope, send a message to the general public that we are monitoring the situation and the company remains stable. In the event of special administration, the taps will still function and the sewage will still be taken—I want that message to be heard by the general public—so there is no need for alarm. The people working for the company will continue to be paid in the event of special administration. As a responsible Government, we are preparing for every eventuality. However, at the moment the company remains stable.

I think it is incorrect to say that we are “resisting” special administration. That would be a total mischaracterisation of what special administration is and the process of entering the special administration regime. It is not that

we are resisting anything. A special administration order is a well-established mechanism to ensure that the company continues to operate and that customers continue to receive their water and wastewater services, so customers need not be concerned about any disruption to their water supply or wastewater services because of the financial position of their water company. The provision of water and wastewater services will continue.

Special administration is the ultimate enforcement tool in the regulatory toolkit, and as such, the bar is set high. The law is clear—this obviously links to insolvency legislation—and states that special administration can be initiated only if the company becomes insolvent, can no longer fulfil its statutory duties or seriously breaches an enforcement order. Only in that scenario does the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs or Ofwat—crucially, with the consent of the Secretary of State—have the power to request the court to place a company in a special administration regime. If that situation arises, the court must be satisfied that there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the water company in question is insolvent, can no longer seriously fulfil its primary statutory duties, or has seriously breached an enforcement order. It will then make a special administration order, appointing a special administrator.

That is a hypothetical situation. It is not, I stress, the situation that we are talking about now, but let us say that somebody said, “We want to put this company into special administration”; the decision then would be made by the court, and the court would need to be satisfied that there is the evidence to put that company into special administration.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I thank the Minister for her attention to this situation, but I have to ask on behalf of my constituents, how much more does Thames Water have to fail before we decide that it is no longer fit to operate? The level of failure is so high that, although I appreciate what the Minister says about following the letter of the law, people simply will not understand.

Emma Hardy: I want to stress that although that is the legal process for entering special administration, that does not mean for one second that we are satisfied with the performance of the company as a whole. But there is a wealth of difference between the court-sanctioned process of going into special administration and the Government taking action. There are many things on which we want to take action. In fact, the whole purpose of the commission is to look at the way in which companies are set up and how we got into this position in the first place. It might interest the Opposition that some of the rules and regulations around Ofwat were relaxed in 2014—under the coalition Government.

It is not as though we are completely satisfied with everything, and that is why we are not doing SA. What I am saying is that SA is an ultimate enforcement tool; it is a serious step to take and it is sanctioned by the courts, but that does not mean that we are not doing anything else in between. We are taking a lot of other actions, but I wanted to address the specific point around why we are not pushing the company into special administration.

Charlie Maynard: I want to play back what the Minister just said. It is up to either Ofwat or the Secretary of State to apply to the court to put the company into

[*Charlie Maynard*]

special administration. As the Minister wrote to me last July or September, one of those conditions is whether the company is unable, or likely to be unable, to pay its debts. Given that the company has come out and said that it has only £39 million, with £19.5 billion of debt, and it is going to run out of money by 24 March, I think that we have passed that benchmark pretty clearly. The idea that we have not is simply not true. It is therefore up to Ofwat or the Secretary of State, who continues to decline—maybe that is a better word than resist—to ask the court to consider.

Emma Hardy: With respect, I think that we have different interpretations of the truth. We are saying that the company can enter SA if it is insolvent. Thames Water is not at the point of insolvency. My message to the public and to people working in the company is that the company remains stable at the moment; however, as a responsible Government, we are preparing for every eventuality.

I want to talk about broader commitments to financial stability and the independent commission. For me, this debate highlights how important it is to address the financial resilience of the water sector. We are talking specifically about Thames Water, but that does not mean that everything else is a bed of roses. Some historical decisions made by companies on debt levels have left them badly financially exposed. Those decisions often coincided with moves towards more complex ownership structures and the involvement of firms with shorter-term horizons.

We recognise that the Government have an important role to play in setting a regulatory framework that encourages a stable water sector. In hindsight, many might question the 2014 changes to make Ofwat a lighter-touch regulator. The Independent Water Commission is exploring how the Government could provide the regulatory structure that most people in the Chamber recognise that we need. The call for evidence is currently live, seeking views from stakeholders on improvements that could be made to economic regulation across a number of areas. As always, we welcome contributions from everybody across the House. The call for evidence closes on 23 April, and I encourage all interested parties to respond to the commission's questions on these topics via DEFRA's online consultation tool, Citizen Space.

I conclude by reiterating that both the Government and Ofwat are carefully monitoring the situation with Thames Water.

John Lamont: I want to pick up on my point about Scotland. Some Members have been advocating for nationalisation. Does the Minister have any thoughts on that, and have the current Government looked at what is happening in Scotland? Scottish Water, by many standards, is performing even less well than Thames Water. But Scottish Water is state-owned. Its chief executive is paid £290,000. The model in Scotland is not something that I would encourage the Minister to look at—I am not saying that she is—but I would be keen to have her reflections.

Emma Hardy: Water is devolved, and I completely respect the autonomy of the Scottish Parliament to make those decisions. The Government have been clear

that we are not looking at nationalisation, simply because of the cost, the time it would take and the legal complications. My focus is quite simply on what I can do to improve the situation that we currently face. There is a lot of consensus around looking at regulation and how effective, or not, it is at the moment, and what can be changed. That is where I have put all my focus. Nationalisation was ruled out of the Independent Water Commission; however, all other forms of ownership are allowed within the terms of reference.

It is for the companies to resolve their financial resilience issues within the context of their licence and broader statutory obligations. However, I must be clear: the Government are prepared for all scenarios across our regulated industries, as any responsible Government would be. This new Government are committed to turning around the water sector—I refer back to my 10 reasons for hope before Easter—which will be achieved through practical measures to clean up illegal sewage dumping and attracting major private sector investment to upgrade infrastructure while prioritising the interests, as we have mentioned, of customers and our beautiful environment.

4.21 pm

Luke Taylor: At a Sutton council meeting before the 2024 election, I made it clear that if two Liberal Democrat MPs were elected in Sutton, we would hold Thames Water to account for its mockery of our residents. I am proud to stand here today to start delivering on that promise.

I thank all hon. Members around the Chamber for their contributions. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) is not in his place, but his interventions about the worries of his constituents show how hard he is working for them. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont); he invites me to make a suggestion about the Administration in Scotland, and how nationalising and giving a toy to the SNP might not be the best idea in any circumstances—a change of Administration might be beneficial for all of us. I thank the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for her reports on the regular leaks and disruptions, and share her anger at the shareholders and financial chicanery used to extract money from our most important utility—although I will try to scrub my mind of the image of the cherry on the sewage cake.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and agree that special administration is needed, as Thames Water is understaffed and utterly demoralised. I also thank the hon. Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) and agree that the company is failing on every level. That highlights the area that Thames Water covers, all the way from my constituency in south-west London to Swindon North. The destruction of natural habitats under Thames Water is heartbreaking, and the story of his intervention for his constituents shows how comprehensive the failures are.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who mentioned how public trust has been undermined as residents see an increase in bills. I note her comments about the Teddington direct river abstraction site, and am also glad to learn that the Ham Lands are safely under Liberal Democrat control once again. I also note her frustration and worry about the

failed infrastructure projects under Thames Water, and I worry about any investment in infrastructure plans that are not doing what they are supposed to.

I thank the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) and share his frustration at his town centre being blocked and closed for months due to the water leaks; I can only imagine the incredible disruption to his residents and his frustration on their behalf. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) and agree that further support would be breaching Ofwat guidance and rules, and that Thames Water is failing on all accounts. I thank him for his hard work on holding Thames Water to account and revealing its astonishing financial situation—it is truly terrifying. I am heartbroken that I am only the second person to get into *Hansard* a “shambopoly”, which I hope will become a new byword for the situation that Thames Water enjoys.

I thank my old friend, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), for his contribution, and acknowledge the efforts of the last Government to monitor sewage outflows. Understanding and quantifying the problem is the first step to resolving it. Once again, I note the discrepancy with the Administration north of the border. I also thank the hon. Member for his welcome words on the Teddington direct river abstraction project.

I welcome the Minister, and thank her for coming to this place and taking part in the discussion. I admire her ability to find 10 things that the Labour Government have achieved with the water industry, but a common refrain on this side of the House will be “We need to do more, and we need to do it faster.” It is good to hear about the consultation on the Teddington project, which will reassure many of my colleagues. I also welcome her reassurance for residents that, whatever happens, their water will continue to flow, as will their sewage.

However, none of the measures implemented fundamentally changes the status quo with Thames Water or puts a permanent fix in place. I recognise that the Government and the Minister are limited in what they can do, but special administration is surely the last throw of the dice to save Thames Water. I repeat the query from around the Chamber: if not now, when?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for Thames Water.

4.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Thursday 3 April 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK-US Trade

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): The planned statement will be delivered orally today by the Secretary of State for Business and Trade. [HCWS575]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Tees Valley Combined Authority: Best Value Notice

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Taxpayers expect and deserve well-functioning local and combined authorities which provide essential statutory services for local residents. This Government's manifesto committed to rebuilding local government and handing control back to local leaders. To achieve this, we must get the basics right and ensure local and regional government is fit, legal and decent. Government will continue to work directly with a small number of authorities in difficulty as a responsible steward for the sector, and this should be done in a way that is based on genuine partnership to secure improvements.

Today, I would like to update the House on the steps we are taking in relation to the Tees Valley combined authority. The people of Tees Valley must have confidence that every penny of their money is being spent appropriately and today's announcement is about ensuring that is the case.

In May 2023, the previous Government commissioned an independent review to consider the specific allegations made and Tees Valley combined authority's oversight of the South Tees Development Corporation and Teesworks joint venture. This review was published in January 2024.

In February 2024, the Tees Valley combined authority Mayor, Lord Houchen, responded to this review. His response was published on gov.uk. The then Secretary of State, the right hon. Michael Gove, requested a further update on progress in six months' time and my Department received this update in September 2024. The authority's auditors then published reports covering financial year 2023-24, which identified significant weaknesses in value for money arrangements, meaning auditors declined to sign off accounts.

After having carefully considered the relevant evidence, my Department has today issued the authority with a best value notice.

This notice is not a statutory intervention. It is a formal notification that the Department has concerns regarding the authority and requests that the authority engages with the Department to provide assurance of improvement. The Department expects authorities that

have been issued with a best value notice to continue leading their own improvement. I note that the Tees Valley combined authority is already supported by an independent assurance panel established with the Local Government Association. I encourage the authority to make full use of the panel's expertise and guidance and to strengthen its role in day-to-day operations, and will be looking to the panel for updates on the authority's progress.

We are committed to removing barriers to growth in the region, as well as supporting the development of new industries and creating new jobs in the region. That is why this Government have confirmed the allocation of up to £21.7 billion of funding over 25 years for net zero clusters in Teesside and Merseyside, and why we are finalising development of the Tees Valley investment zone. This notice today is about rebuilding trust in the combined authority after a long period of uncertainty, so that it can continue its journey towards deeper devolution.

Today's announcement offers the opportunity to provide the foundations for future investment into the area oriented towards the public good, underpinned by good governance and careful management of taxpayers' money. I recognise that today's decision will have implications for the authority's progress towards enhanced mayoral strategic authority status, and the granting of an integrated settlement. We are committed to working closely with the authority to enable swift progression once improvements have been made.

The independent review also made recommendations for Government. I am today publishing non-statutory guidance to address a key recommendation. This guidance clarifies the governance, oversight and legislation of mayoral development corporations. It is relevant to all mayoral combined authorities and mayoral combined county authorities in England. In due course, I will publish an updated version of this guidance to address the relationship between stranded liabilities and mayoral development corporations.

The Government remain of the view that, while the independent Tees Valley review was thorough within its terms of reference, it was by nature not designed to answer all the questions raised, but instead to focus on the governance and finance elements of the best value regime. The residents of Tees Valley cannot afford to live under a shadow of uncertainty for any longer, and investment in the region demands full confidence from both the public and the private sector. I hope that this process will offer the opportunity for a reset, providing the foundations for future investment into the area oriented towards the public good, underpinned by good governance, transparency, and accountability. Authorities must demonstrate robust financial management, effective decision making, and meaningful engagement with communities to uphold best value principles.

The focus now must be to ensure that the improvements needed are not only secured but also sustained, embedding a culture of continuous improvement and responsible stewardship in line with statutory best value obligations.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents I have referred to, which are also being published on gov.uk today.

I will keep the House updated if any further steps are taken.

[HCWS576]

Petitions

Thursday 3 April 2025

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Potential closure of the Gidea Park Library

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Notes that the Gidea Park library provides essential services to local communities; declares that their closure would have an adverse impact upon the local people, specifically the young and elderly; further declares that this library ought not to be closed by the London Borough of Havering; and further declares that community libraries should be protected and enhanced as vital centres of culture, learning, and local service provision by national and local government.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the Gidea Park library in the parliamentary constituency of Romford is not closed, but rather protected and enhanced as a centre of culture, learning, and local service provision for the people of Gidea Park.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Rosindell, *Official Report*, 11 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 230.]

[P003042]

Observations from the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): The Government fully recognise the importance and value of public libraries for all members of the public. Libraries are a vital public resource, helping to inspire, educate, support and entertain people of all ages and backgrounds. The range of outcomes they help to achieve is substantial and varied, and the Government are therefore committed to ensuring that libraries continue to thrive.

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 places a statutory duty on all local authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. Public libraries are funded by local authorities and each local authority is responsible for determining how best to meet the needs of its communities and deliver its statutory duties within available resources. Decisions on whether or not to make any changes to the statutory service, including decisions on library closures, therefore fall to the relevant local authority.

The Act also places a duty on the Secretary of State to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities in England and secure the proper discharge of the duties conferred on local authorities under the Act. To assist this function, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport regularly monitors and reviews changes to local authority library service provision, and engages with local authorities to discuss issues related to their respective statutory library service. However, the decision to close the Gidea Park library is a decision for Havering council, and it is not for DCMS to direct or instruct the council not to do so nor for DCMS to instruct the council to discontinue the implementation of its agreed plans.

Havering council undertook a 12-week public consultation (10 May 2024–2 August 2024) on a draft library strategy which included proposals to close four of its sites leaving six libraries in the borough. The council adopted a range of consultation methods to gather feedback from residents including: an online consultation, a hard copy paper version, 15 public meetings held across the entire library estate, as well as a consultation specifically designed for children and young people. We also understand that there were more than 4,500 responses to the consultation, including five petitions, two of which related to Gidea Park library and were raised by separate local councillors.

Havering cabinet agreed at its meeting on 5 February to close three of its libraries (Harold Wood, South Hornchurch and Gidea Park) with effect from 1 April 2025. Havering council say their proposals and decision were supported by a needs assessment as well as an equality impact assessment, which included a number of mitigations. DCMS officials discussed the proposals for changes to the statutory library service provision with Havering council officers and have reminded the council of its statutory duties.

The Act gives the Secretary of State the power to intervene if, having held a local inquiry, she is of the opinion that a local authority is failing to carry out its duty under the Act to deliver a “comprehensive and efficient” library service for library users. In those circumstances, the Secretary of State can make a remedial order requiring the local authority to remedy the breach. The Act provides that the local inquiry can be commenced either on receipt of a complaint or of the Secretary of State’s own motion.

Should residents consider Havering council to be in breach of their statutory duty set out in the Act then they can therefore complain directly to DCMS. The representations need to explain clearly and in detail what it is believed the impact of the agreed changes will be on users of the library service. DCMS will carefully consider any in order to decide whether to deal with them as a complaint within the scope of the legislation. Further information about this process can be found in this guidance document—“Libraries as a Statutory Service”—which can be found on gov.uk at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-libraries-as-a-statutory-service/libraries-as-a-statutory-service>

DCMS will continue to monitor the council’s statutory library service provision.

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Umana Yana restaurant in Herne Hill

The petition of the owners and supporters of Umana Yana, Herne Hill,

Declares that Umana Yana, an independent restaurant in Herne Hill, has faced serious disruption to their trade due to telecommunication boxes placed immediately outside their premises; notes that Umana Yana has been part of the local community for over fifteen years but has faced a significant fall in footfall as the shop can no longer be seen from the street, and that over 1700 people have signed local and online petitions in support of the restaurant; further notes that the shop has seen a

loss of revenue for this valued community focused business; and further declares that small businesses across the country have faced similar challenges due to telecoms infrastructure placed without due consideration of nearby shops.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons considers this issue and urges the Government to bring forward legislation to ensure small businesses are not blocked from view by telecommunications equipment, to ensure the removal of equipment affecting small businesses, like Umana Yana, and that businesses are duly compensated by the telecoms companies for disruption.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Hayes, *Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 354.]

[P003043]

Observations from the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):

Access to digital services is becoming increasingly important to businesses and consumers throughout the UK, but operators should locate their equipment in a manner that minimises the impact on local communities.

The intention behind the legislative framework currently in place is to strike the right balance between ensuring that network deployment can happen at pace, and that installations are carried out in a proportionate way, with regard to the impacts on communities.

The Electronic Communications Code (the Code) is the legal framework underpinning rights to install, maintain, upgrade and share telecommunications apparatus on public and private land. It regulates the relationship between telecommunications operators and landowners with regards to the deployment of digital infrastructure under, on or over land. For most land, operators must obtain an agreement with the owner or occupier of the relevant land before installing their equipment. However, the Code does give operators certain automatic rights to install apparatus on some types of land.

Under Part 8 of the Electronic Communications Code, specifically paragraphs 56 to 59, code operators have certain automatic rights to install and maintain apparatus on streets and roads. Paragraph 13(2) of the Code states that operators cannot exercise a street work right so as to interfere with or obstruct any means of access to or from other land unless the occupier of the other land has conferred a code right or is otherwise bound by a code right, in accordance with the Code. For example, if the previous property owner had a code agreement in place, the current occupier would be bound by that code right.

When exercising these rights, operators must adhere to duties and obligations contained in: the Electronic Communications Code itself; the accompanying regulations: the Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) Regulations 2003 (the 2003 Regulations); and the relevant conditions and requirements in the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015.

The Cabinet Siting and Pole Siting Code of Practice 2016 provides guidance on ways operators can ensure installations are placed appropriately, and that local authorities and communities are engaged with regarding proposed installations. For example, it sets out that where new

telegraph poles are to be installed the operator should place a site notice to indicate to nearby residents the intention to install a pole, and the proposed location. In addition, the recently published telecommunications poles working group best practice recommendations, which set out expectations for operators deploying telegraph poles, such as circumstances in which requests to relocate a pole should be considered, and how operators can pay due regard to community interests.

As the independent regulator for telecommunications operators, Ofcom is able to take enforcement action and has stated that it would investigate any cases where infrastructure, such as poles, are sited in a way which is not consistent with the requirements and guidelines in place including where they block residents' drives or where operators systematically fail to engage with local planning authorities' suggestions.

In addition, the code of practice for wireless network development in England (the wireless code of practice, distinct from the Cabinet Siting and Pole Siting Code of Practice 2016 referenced above) sets out the considerations that operators should follow when deploying infrastructure, including how infrastructure should be sited and how they should consult with interested parties throughout the development process, particularly with local residents. The wireless code of practice also states that for some applications, it may be appropriate for them to undertake pre-application consultation with local residents. For example, a greater level of community consultation may be considered for a new site or where there is a high-level of community interest in development, though the type of engagement should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Operators should discuss and agree this requirement with the local planning authority.

Planning conditions in legislation require operators to minimise the visual impact of new network development on the surrounding area as far as is predictable, particularly in more sensitive locations, and the wireless code of practice sets out how they should do this. Operators have also committed to place additional antennas and cabinets at existing sites where possible, and only where additional capacity and/or coverage is needed will additional sites be built.

Meanwhile, the wireless code of practice stresses that radio equipment hosted in cabinets should be designed and sited to minimise visual impact and blend with the local environment. It should be safely accessible for maintenance and not pose hazards to the public, while considering environmental factors like noise and emissions. Additionally, engaging with local communities and stakeholders is crucial to address concerns and provide information about the installation.

Where possible, operators are encouraged to use existing masts, buildings and other structures for new wireless communications capability. This is set out in the national planning policy framework for England. The framework states that applications for electronic communications development should also be supported by the necessary evidence to justify the proposed development. This includes evidence that the applicant for a new mast or base station has explored the possibility of erecting antennas on an existing building, mast or other structure. Operators are also required to minimise the visual impact of network infrastructure on the surrounding area as far as possible.

In addition, through the wireless code of practice, the mobile network operators have committed to site sharing wherever viable, in order to minimise the number of new masts and base station sites required. The mobile industry already has extensive mast sharing arrangements in place through which they operate over 40,000 mobile sites across the UK. Also measures introduced in the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act 2022 make it easier for operators to upgrade and share the use of existing apparatus.

Meanwhile, operators must comply with national planning regulations. The deployment of telecoms infrastructure in England requires planning permission. Most telecommunications infrastructure, including masts and radio cabinets, benefit from permitted development rights. However, to ensure that there is appropriate local consideration, prior approval of the local planning authority is still needed on certain matters, such as on siting and appearance. For example, prior approval from the local planning authority is needed on all new ground-based masts, including 5G masts, up to 30 metres in height in non-protected areas, and up to 25 metres in protected areas. This ensures that consideration should

always be given locally on how the impacts of new masts can be minimised. The prior approval process also provides for any person who wishes to make representations about the siting and appearance of the proposed development to do so in writing to the local planning authority, with those representations then needing to be considered by the authority in determining the prior approval application.

Planning legislation also sets out the minimum notification and consultation requirements for ground-based mobile masts. Local planning authorities have discretion about how they might further inform communities and other interested parties about planning applications, though they may set out more detail on how they will consult the community on planning applications in their statement of community involvement.

It is the responsibility of the relevant local planning authority to consider whether any breach of planning control has taken place and whether enforcement action is required. Local residents are encouraged to contact their relevant local planning authority if they have concerns regarding a particular installation.

Thank you for bringing these concerns to our attention.

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