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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 8 May 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Water Sector Reform: Consultation

1. **Emma Lewell** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps he is taking to consult the public on reforms to the water sector. [903988]

4. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps he is taking to consult the public on reforms to the water sector. [903992]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I start by acknowledging, on VE Day, the debt that we all owe to that great generation who sacrificed so much for our freedom. We will remember them and their sacrifice forever.

The Independent Water Commission, led by Sir Jon Cunliffe, will make recommendations to transform our water system and clean up our waterways. The recommendations will form the basis of further legislation to fix our broken water system. A public call for evidence that ran for eight weeks and closed on 23 April received a very high number of responses. Those will be shared in detail when the commission publishes its recommendations. Sir Jon and the commission have held more than 130 meetings, including with regulators, environmental groups, campaigners, investors, water companies and consumer bodies. Engagement will continue ahead of the commission's recommendations to the Government in a few weeks.

Emma Lewell: I echo the Secretary of State's initial comments. South Shields has a long-standing problem with sewage being dumped in the sea at Whitburn. Just this week, Little Haven beach was handed a brown flag, and myself and local campaigners are completely fed up. The Environment Agency, Ofwat, Northumbrian Water, the council and the last Government all completely ignored our concerns. We have already requested a meeting with the Water Minister, and I hope she will confirm today that the meeting will happen very soon.

Steve Reed: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her tireless work to represent the concerns of people in South Shields about those terrible problems with water pollution. Of course, my hon. Friend voted for the

Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which has given the regulator many more powers, including the power to ban undeserved multimillion-pound bonuses. I am sure she will be interested to read, as will I, the findings from the Independent Water Commission led by Sir Jon Cunliffe when they come forward in a few weeks' time.

Liz Twist: As we act to protect our rivers and waterways from pollution, regulation will be important. The Environment Agency's resources were decimated under the Conservatives. How will the 2025 Act give the Environment Agency the powers it needs to hold polluting companies to account?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The previous Government cut resources for regulation in half, and that is one of the ways water companies were able to get away with so much pollution. We have changed the law to allow regulators to recover prosecution costs so that they can carry out further prosecutions and stop those who have been polluting our waterways.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Can I make an appeal to the Secretary of State, and indeed his whole Front Bench, not to make farmers a scapegoat in any water reforms? Clearly, where farming and farmers are involved in bad practice, they should be penalised, but social industrialists, other employers, and indeed those in the public sector, might also pollute rivers. Water is a critical part of the food supply chain and agriculture. Farmers look after the environment on all our behalf—in the right way most of the time. My appeal to the Secretary of State is to please get the National Farmers' Union and farmers involved and not let them become scapegoats.

Steve Reed: I of course agree with the right hon. Member. We are supporting farmers, many of whom were affected by very severe flooding recently, with the farming recovery fund. I am engaging constantly, and will be again today, with the National Farmers' Union about those issues and many others.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): By 2050 we will need more than 4,000 additional megalitres of water a day, with rising temperatures resulting in a fivefold increase in drought risk. That is concerning news for farmers in Glastonbury and Somerton, given the necessity of water for livestock and crops. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to consult farmers about reforms to the water sector, and does he know how important water is to food production?

Steve Reed: We recognise the importance of that point. The hon. Lady will be aware that, at the close of the price review process, we secured £104 billion of investment now and over the next five years to improve water infrastructure and ensure that we get water to where it needs to be. We have also increased flooding funding so that we can take the water away from where it should not be. All of that will support food production as well as many other sectors of the economy.

Monitoring Sewage Overflows: Scotland

2. **Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on best practice on monitoring sewage overflows. [903989]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): Officials and I continue to maintain regular engagement with the Scottish Government on many issues. While sewage overflow monitoring is a devolved matter for Scotland, we continue to share best practice wherever appropriate. The SNP Government should follow this Government's lead and introduce robust legislation to clean up their waterways.

Chris Murray: The beautiful beaches of my constituency are marred by sewage-related debris. In Scotland, under the SNP, we do not even properly monitor sewage overflows. Meanwhile, in England, the Labour Government are making great strides to improve water quality—how I wish we had that in Scotland. Will the Secretary of State commit to working as constructively as possible with his counterparts in the Scottish Government so that they can learn from here how we can improve water quality in Scotland?

Steve Reed: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for highlighting the pollution and sewage on beaches that so concern his constituents. It is deeply disappointing that the SNP Government in Edinburgh are not following the UK Government's lead in tackling sewage pollution. I agree with my hon. Friend that his constituents, like mine, and everyone else in Scotland and right across the UK deserve to enjoy sewage-free lakes, rivers and beaches. Sadly, that does not seem to be what they are getting from the SNP.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): My constituents in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton have been subjected to an enormous increase in their water bills. Will the Secretary of State reassure the House that his water review will seek ways to prevent the costs of water companies' mismanagement being passed on to their customers?

Steve Reed: I am sure that the hon. Lady will be reassured to hear that the Government have ringfenced money that is earmarked for investment in water infrastructure so that it can no longer be diverted for payments on bonuses and dividends. If water companies attempt to do anything of the kind, the money will be refunded to their customers through a discount on their bills.

Water Bills: Limiting Increases

3. **Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op):** Whether he is taking steps to limit increases to water bills. [903991]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I add my voice to all those paying tribute to the greatest generation as we all remember VE Day. I know that many of us will be travelling back to our constituencies to join in celebrations up and down the country.

It is no wonder that the public are angry about paying the price for Conservative failure. By allowing water infrastructure to decay on their watch, the previous Conservative Government not only failed to ensure proper regulation of the industry but drove up costs of essential repairs, resulting in increased bills for customers. While I cannot undo the damage of the past, I can

ensure that it never happens again. That is why funding for vital infrastructure has been ringfenced by this Government so that it can never be diverted for bonuses or dividends.

Rachel Blake: Roberto, one of my constituents, has seen his water bill go up by nearly 45% in the last two years, and other constituents have contacted me to say that their bills have nearly doubled in that time. I am pleased by what the Minister said about holding the previous Government to account for their failure to invest in infrastructure. What more can the Government do to hold Thames Water to account for its failure to invest in infrastructure, its poor service and these rip-off charges for consumers?

Emma Hardy: Roberto is right to feel angry about his bill increase, the past performance of water companies and the toothless regulation under the previous Government. We have already taken action to deliver our manifesto promise to hold water companies to account, ban unfair bonuses and introduce criminal liability with up to two years in prison. We have also created the water delivery taskforce to ensure that all water companies, including Thames Water, deliver on their promised infrastructure improvements. The Government will always support those struggling with their water bills. Indeed, this Labour Government and water companies are more than doubling the social tariff support over the next five years.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): What assessment has the Minister made on the cost of water bills from increases to regulation 31 laboratory testing capacity? I wrote to her in December about that and she replied in January. I am thankful for her answer, although it was slightly on the complacent side because she said that regulation 31 does not cause a problem to water quality just now. That is true, but the industry is burning down its assets to chemicals and equipment that have been regulation 31-tested, so a problem is coming. What assessment has the Minister made of when the solution will be delivered, and what effect will that have on water bills?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his important question. Everything relating to regulation of water is supported and looked at through the Drinking Water Inspectorate, which carries out an assessment to make sure we have the best water quality in the whole country. If he requires any further detail, he is welcome to write to me again and I will make sure I find it.

Fishing Quotas

5. **Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con):** What plans he has for future fishing quotas. [903993]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): On VE Day, it is important that we remember the huge contribution made by fishermen, fishing communities, farm workers and agricultural workers during the last war to keep the country fed. Later today, I shall unveil a plaque to the members of the Women's Land Army, one of whom was my aunt, Jean Mead. They made a fantastic contribution during that period.

We negotiate a range of fishing quotas, and any future quotas will be agreed only if that is in the national interest. I am pleased that we are engaging closely with industry, trialling new methods to shape future allocations that will both protect stocks and support communities.

Harriet Cross: A recent poll by the Scottish Fishermen's Federation showed that 87% of Scots believe the UK should control access to our fishing waters. Two-thirds of seafood landed in the UK comes into Scotland and it is vital to our economy and to many of our coastal communities. Will the Minister show the House and rural and fishing communities across the country that the Prime Minister will not negotiate away any control of our waters during his EU reset later this month?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the hon. Lady for her important question, and I recognise the importance of the Scottish fishing fleet and its contribution. She will have to wait a little longer to hear the full details of the outcomes of any negotiations, but I have to remind her that the sense of betrayal across fishing communities came under her Government's watch.

Surrey Hills National Landscape

6. **Sir Jeremy Hunt** (Godalming and Ash) (Con): What recent progress he has made on the Surrey hills national landscape—area of outstanding natural beauty—boundary variation project. [903994]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): On this 80th anniversary of VE Day, I pay tribute to the city of Coventry, which suffered so grievously in the blitz. The commemoration was marked at the old and new cathedrals with the lighting of the torch for peace, a brilliant initiative from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to mark the contribution of my city to the war effort.

Natural England's work to consider the Surrey hills national landscape boundary variation has reached the conclusion of the second statutory consultation phase. The responses received will be completed shortly and the analysis of those and the results will be published in early summer.

Sir Jeremy Hunt: On VE Day, I remember the role of Dunsfold aerodrome in my constituency, which played a vital role in the battle of Britain.

I thank the Minister for her response. She knows that the proposed expansion of the Surrey hills national landscape will have a huge impact by improving biodiversity and natural protection in villages such as Dunsfold, Tongham, Bramley, Wonerish and Shamley Green in my constituency. Before she makes the final decision on whether to go ahead, will she spare the time to meet me so I can explain to her just how important the expansion is to my constituents?

Mary Creagh: I am always happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman. This and the Yorkshire wolds are under active consideration, as I am sure he is aware. There is a legal process to be followed ahead of that, but I know his constituency and will be very happy to meet to discuss the matter further.

Flooding: Protecting Vulnerable Communities

7. **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What steps he has taken to help protect communities vulnerable to flooding. [903995]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): After 14 years, the Conservatives left our flood defences in the worst condition on record. We are investing a record £2.65 billion in a thousand projects to better protect 52,000 properties by March 2026.

Mr Barros-Curtis: Following the recent storm season, serious flooding damaged the foundations of Radyr cricket club and exposed electrical cables, which forced the club to close and cancel practice until the site was made safe. The club is also situated next to important electricity infrastructure, which means up to 930 customers could be put at risk of disruption. I have been working with Councillor Helen Lloyd Jones to try and find a way forward between National Grid and Natural Resources Wales to establish who will take responsibility for securing the river bank and the electricity infrastructure. Unfortunately, we are at an impasse, and my constituents continue to be vulnerable to further flooding. Will the Minister meet me to establish what the UK Government can do to try and help break that impasse before the next storm season hits?

Mr Speaker: I am sure they have got a meeting already.

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue, and I am sorry to hear about the issues his constituents are facing with flooding—I know at first hand how disruptive and awful flooding can be. As I am sure he knows, flooding is a devolved matter in Wales, but I would of course be happy to work with him and to facilitate the meeting that he requested.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Next month, a planning application for a biodigester near Haverhill and Withersfield in West Suffolk will be decided. It is the wrong location for many reasons, not least the risk of flooding as the proposed site is on flood risk zone 3 land. What are the Government doing to prevent development on land susceptible to flooding?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Of course, the national planning policy framework is clear that where development in areas at risk of flooding is necessary, local planning authorities and developers should ensure that the development is appropriately flood resilient and resistant, safe for the development's lifetime and, importantly, will not increase flood risk elsewhere. We are also looking at other measures, such as sustainable urban drainage systems, to be included in planning as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): On the 80th anniversary of VE Day, I thank those who fought for our and Europe's freedom and, indeed, those who worked our land and kept our nation fed.

Our peatlands store 26 times more carbon than forests. They improve water quality and protect communities up and down the UK from flooding. The Nature Minister rightly called peatlands our “country’s Amazon rainforest” and launched a consultation to protect them. She is right, because once they have been destroyed, they can never be replaced. At the very same time, the Energy Secretary plans to rip up 2,000 hectares of protected peatland on historic land in West Yorkshire for a vast wind farm development, opening up communities to flooding and destroying the peatlands that Labour says it wants to protect. How can the Government claim to be protecting our irreplaceable peatlands when the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is actively considering destroying one of our most environmentally important landscapes in the country?

Emma Hardy: I pay tribute to the hon. Member’s ability to weave a question for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero into a question on flooding. He will have heard from the Nature Minister how important peatlands are and how essential they are for this country and heard our commitment to protecting them.

Foot and Mouth Disease

8. **Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): What steps he is taking to help prevent foot and mouth disease entering Northern Ireland. [903997]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): We have discussed this serious issue in the Chamber before, and I know how seriously Members on both sides of the House take it. The Government make it an absolute priority to protect farmers from the dangers of this awful threat. The Government have stepped up measures to prevent the spread of foot and mouth disease following confirmed cases in Slovakia and Hungary. Imports into Northern Ireland of live animals and susceptible meat products are prohibited from within the restriction zones surrounding the affected premises in Hungary and Slovakia.

Robin Swann: I join in the Secretary of State’s words on VE Day, especially regarding Northern Ireland’s contribution to our armed forces and through the armaments we supplied.

When I contacted the Agriculture Minister in Northern Ireland about his responsibilities, he actually told me that the issue no longer sits within his ministerial responsibility, but comes directly under the control of the Environment Secretary. What practical steps is the Minister taking to protect Northern Ireland farmers, especially in regard to the recent announcement of a case of African swine fever on 2 May in Slovakia, within the same geographical area as those foot and mouth outbreaks?

Daniel Zeichner: We work closely with the Minister in Northern Ireland for exactly the reasons that he would expect. We take this extremely seriously. There are a range of threats in Europe, and that is why we have not only put in place the long-established and well-trialled measures, but added additional protection measures to ensure that we are properly protected.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Farmers in Northern Ireland who fear foot and mouth, and even dog owners like me, rely on good veterinary support, but this is no longer the world of James Herriot; a number of large companies dominate the market. The Competition and Markets Authority says that remedies are needed. Does the Minister agree, and will he commit to reviewing the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, which is clearly no longer fit for purpose?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I can assure him that I and Baroness Hayman, who leads on this in the Department, are very well aware of the recent reports and the antiquated nature of the legislation. We will come back with proposals in due course.

Nature-friendly Farming

9. **Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): Whether he plans to improve support for nature-friendly farming. [903998]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The hon. Lady and I have discussed these issues before. I know that she shares my passion for achieving the transition to the nature-friendly farming that we all want. The Government are investing £5 billion in farming over the next two years—the highest budget for sustainable food production and nature recovery in our history. Through a range of measures delivered through the Government’s environmental land management schemes, we are supporting farmers to implement nature-friendly farming practices. We now have more farmers than ever in nature-friendly farming schemes, and reform in the sustainable farming incentive will target funds fairly and effectively towards food, farming and nature priorities. We will announce further details later this year.

Ellie Chowns: On behalf of the Green party, on this special day of commemoration, I join colleagues from across the House in paying tribute to all those who sacrificed so much to resist and defeat fascism 80 years ago.

I thank the Minister for his response. We have indeed discussed these issues before and will continue to do so, I am sure. At the weekend, I spent time on two farms in my constituency—at both I met groups of farmers, including members of the Nature Friendly Farming Network, who told me of their huge frustration at being let down by the Government’s policy on farming and the lack of support. They recognise how vital farming is, including the transition to nature-friendly farming, for this country’s food security, nature protection and climate action. Does he agree with the farmers in my constituency about how vital the transition to nature-friendly farming is for those issues, and will he give us a date for when he will introduce such policies—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a lot to get through today—come on.

Daniel Zeichner: I am always interested to hear reflections from farmers. I have spoken to other members of the Nature Friendly Farming Network who are very pleased with the progress being made, but of course we want to

go faster and further. We have over 50,000 people in the schemes and more money is being spent than ever before. We must recognise the important progress being made.

Avian Influenza

10. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent the spread of avian influenza. [904000]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising this extremely serious issue. To prevent the further spread of disease and manage the risk of avian influenza, DEFRA and the Animal and Plant Health Agency have implemented well-established outbreak structures to control and eradicate disease, restore normal trade and support recovery in local communities. Avian influenza prevention zones are in force across the UK. To further protect farmers and help communities, we are currently investing £208 million in the future of the biosecurity labs at Weybridge.

Sir John Whittingdale: Does the Minister agree that avian influenza remains an existential threat to the poultry industry, and—now that the French have decided to vaccinate their ducks—will he agree to the National Farmers Union request that we introduce the vaccination of seasonal turkeys in order to protect the entire industry?

Daniel Zeichner: As ever, the right hon. Gentleman makes a well-informed point. Vaccination has been considered for some time. There are trade issues, but as he says, the fact that the French are changing their position is useful. The Government are committed to exploring options for vaccination, and a cross-Government and industry avian influenza vaccination taskforce has been established. It published an initial statement on 7 March and will report more fully this summer.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Avian influenza, sadly, is still very much with us, having devastated both wild and domestic birds in recent years. With bluetongue still here, African swine fever on our doorstep and, alarmingly, foot and mouth outbreaks this year in Germany, Hungary and Slovakia, we face significant threats to our biosecurity. Disease surveillance, vaccination and control are crucial, centred with the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which I thank in these challenging times. When will this Government finish the work that we Conservatives started when we committed £1.2 billion in 2020 to redevelop the APHA headquarters in Weybridge? Labour's repeatedly re-announced £208 million is a start, but when will it commit the further £1.4 billion for this critical national infrastructure, for the sake of UK agriculture and our national security?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words and his praise for the APHA. These are extremely important subjects. We face a range of threats. That is why the Government have increased security in terms of personal imports through the short straits in particular. On his point about Weybridge, we have had this discussion before. There is a major programme under way, which

will take a number of years. It is already a world-leading facility, and this Government are committed to providing the funding that Weybridge needs to do its job. We are absolutely committed to that, which is why we have announced £208 million this year.

Climate Resilience Plans

11. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): If he will publish updated climate resilience plans. [904001]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The Government are committed to strengthening the nation's resilience to climate change. We are developing stronger climate adaptation objectives and improving the framework for action.

Tom Gordon: With the effects of climate change already being felt, the Institution of Civil Engineers and others have urged the Government to prioritise infrastructure resilience. Following the Court ruling on the third national adaptation programme, the Government pledged to strengthen the approach, but the Climate Change Committee called this "ineffective". When will the Department publish its updated plans, and how will it strengthen them?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his important question. Of course, we welcome the Climate Change Committee's assessment. The Government recognise the need to go further and faster to prepare for the impacts of a warmer world. For example, we are already taking active steps to include climate adaptation in our flood programme. For the first time, the Environment Agency's flood risk modelling integrates potential impacts of climate change on flood and coastal erosion risk. The investment of £2.65 billion into maintaining flood defences will help to better protect 52,000 properties by March 2026.

Fly-tipping

12. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping. [904003]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Under the previous Government, fly-tipping skyrocketed by 20%, leaving communities buried under an avalanche of rubbish. This Government are clearing up their mess, tackling the waste cowboys, closing the loopholes that allowed waste crime to flourish and cleaning up Britain. We will hunt down the fly-tippers with the latest technology, including drones and mobile CCTV, introduce new powers to seize and crush vehicles and increase prison sentences to up to five years for those transporting waste illegally.

Gregor Poynton: I thank the Minister for that answer. I recently had the pleasure of meeting with the West Lothian Litter Pickers, who are doing so much in my Livingston constituency to reduce the causes and symptoms of fly-tipping and littering, but it is scandalous that their work is needed. In Scotland, the latest figures show that only 1.2% of fly-tipping incidents have resulted in a fixed penalty notice and a mere 0.2% in a criminal prosecution. Does the Minister agree that, in sharp

contrast with this UK Labour Government, who are taking a zero-tolerance approach and cracking down on fly-tipping, the Scottish Government's record in this area is, quite frankly, rubbish?

Mary Creagh: I am sorry to hear that the SNP Government are not taking firm action, but perhaps where we have led the way, they would like to follow. I congratulate West Lothian Litter Pickers and pay tribute to Keep Britain Tidy, whose Great British spring clean, backed by the *Daily Mirror*, helped to tackle the 30 million tonnes of litter discarded on our streets each year, including 5 billion cigarette butts. Each cigarette butt can poison 1,000 litres of water. If we are serious about marine litter, we have to pick up our butts—and perhaps a little less talk and a little more action from the SNP.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I recently met with the Philpot family at the diverse and successful Barleylands farm in my constituency. Fly-tipping is a major concern for them and other local farmers, and they are working together to address it. They told me that, although fly-tipping is a major issue, it is not the existential threat that the tax increases this Labour Government are imposing on them are, with the national insurance tax increases and the massive rises in agricultural property relief and business property relief. They are right, are they not?

Mary Creagh: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on weaving in a farms question on fly-tipping, but he is right—[*Interruption.*] Calm down.

Mr Speaker: Please, let's calm down; this is a very important day. I am the decision maker on whether questions are right or wrong anyhow.

Mary Creagh: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We know that fly-tipping is a very big problem for farmers. I have visited fly-tipping sites near Watford in the last month and spoken to farmers about what they have to do to clear them up. It is clear that many Tory-run county councils are not playing their part in cleaning up fly-tipping and making the prosecutions that act as a disincentive to these criminal businesses and their business models.

Arable Farms: Cost of Materials

13. **Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help reduce the cost of materials for arable farms. [904004]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): Annual variations in farm input costs are driven by global markets. UK fertiliser farm gate prices are tied to movements in the international markets, and UK fertiliser suppliers compete for market share, providing the best price they can for farmers.

Graeme Downie: Farms in my constituency and across Fife produce some of the highest quality grain in the world. However, many farmers are struggling to make a profit as imported grain is often produced at a different standard. That can undermine or undercut cereals grown in Scotland, which are produced to the highest standards.

Scottish grain is a vital ingredient for high-quality Scotch whisky, and with the news this week of the trade deal with India, welcomed by the Scotch Whisky Association, demand for Scottish grain is likely to rise. What steps will the Minister take to increase standards for imported grain, and ensure profit for farmers in my constituency and a consistent supply for sectors including Scotch whisky?

Daniel Zeichner: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will always maintain our high standards. All imported products will continue to be subject to clear controls, including limits for pesticide residues. I join him in sharing the really good news on that trade deal: it is good news for Scotch whisky and good news for British producers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My farmers in Northern Ireland and Strangford, and farmers across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, produce some of the best products. Prices are rising, sometimes due to things we cannot prevent, but farmers need better prices from the supermarkets. What is being done to ensure that our farmers, who produce a quality product, get the right prices for the effort they put in?

Daniel Zeichner: I am always grateful for a contribution from the hon. Gentleman. As he will know, a series of fair dealing clauses were included in the Agriculture Act 2020; they are being brought into effect at the moment and we expect to see more progress made in that regard. He is absolutely right to raise the point that farmers should get a fair deal.

Topical Questions

T1. [904005] **Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): Fly-tipping scandalously shot up by over a third under the previous Conservative Government, and the public are rightly furious when they see their communities buried under an avalanche of rubbish. This Government will clean up our streets, towns and villages. We will support councils to identify, seize and crush waste criminals' vehicles by closing the Tory fly-tipping loopholes that prevented tough action. We will increase sentences for dumping waste to up to five years, and we will make fly-tippers pay the cost of impounding their vehicles before they are crushed, because we believe that the polluter, not the public, should pay. This Government will call time on fly-tippers so we can restore people's pride in their neighbourhoods.

Ben Maguire: The River Camel multi-use trail in my North Cornwall constituency attracts more than half a million users every year and brings over £3 million to the local economy. Will the Minister please meet me to discuss a river trail extension to Camelford as part of this Government's manifesto pledge to create nine new river walks and connect thousands more people to nature?

Steve Reed: I am delighted to hear that people are enjoying the River Camel trail. It is wonderful to visit and we want to extend more of these walks across the country so that more people can enjoy them. I will of course make sure that the hon. Gentleman can meet the appropriate Minister to raise his concerns.

Mr Speaker: I call Diane Abbott—not here. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): As we mark the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe, I remember the great role that my constituency played, including 617 Squadron, flying from RAF Woodhall Spa; we must also remember and thank those women and men who formed the Land Army in order to feed our troops and our nation. Many of their descendants still farm the same fields that their ancestors farmed in the war, but that tradition is under threat from this Government.

Before Christmas, I warned the Secretary of State that a farmer had taken their life because they were so worried about the family farm tax. The Secretary of State responded with anger, and later stopped the farming resilience fund, which helped farmers with mental ill health. This week, I have received the devastating news that several more farmers have taken their life because of the family farm tax. That is the Secretary of State's legacy, but he can change it, because this change is not yet law. Will he set out these tragedies to the Prime Minister and demand that Labour policy be changed, or offer, on a point of principle, his resignation?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a very important matter, but I am bothered that nobody else is going to get in, so I hope the shadow Secretary of State's second question is shorter.

Steve Reed: I express my regret that the shadow Secretary of State would seek to politicise personal tragedy in this way. It is immensely regrettable that she would seek to do that; none of us can know for sure what happens in matters of personal tragedy. It is beneath her to try to weaponise the issue in the way that she has done. This Government take issues of mental health very seriously indeed. We are setting up mental health hubs in every community, so that we can support farmers and others who are suffering from mental ill health. I gently remind her that this was a problem that escalated during her time in office as Secretary of State for Health, when she failed to address the problems that people are facing.

Victoria Atkins: I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but I am simply confronting the Secretary of State with the realities of his policy. Another policy is distressing farmers and other people: the removal of our ancient property rights, first enshrined in the Magna Carta. The Planning and Infrastructure Bill gives a quango, Natural England, powers to seize private land, not for house building but for undefined environmental reasons. It can seize not just agricultural land, but our constituents' gardens, and it does not even have to pay market value for that land. Will the Secretary of State now commit to an amendment to the Bill to save our constituents' gardens, or is this Labour's garden grab?

Steve Reed: As is so often the case from that particular source, that is a complete misrepresentation of the truth. Nothing of the kind is happening. Rather than trying to politicise and weaponise the matter, the right hon. Lady would help herself and people who are genuinely concerned about those issues by sticking to the facts.

T7. [904012] **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I must thank the Land Army, too. I am only here because my grandma met my grandad on his farm when she was working in the Land Army. Cornwall has a successful horticultural industry, specialising in cauliflowers, daffodils, potatoes and courgettes. The industry welcomed the extension of the seasonal worker visa scheme until 2029, but what metrics are being used to ensure that visa allocations will meet the industry's needs? Without sufficient access to seasonal labour, there is a real risk to Cornwall's horticultural sector.

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and note that even in those times of distress, woe and horror, some good relationships were formed. The seasonal worker visa scheme for 43,000 seasonal worker visas was announced a few months ago. That number includes 2,000 extra for poultry. At the National Farmers Union conference, the Secretary of State announced a five-year extension to 2030. That will provide certainty, but my hon. Friend is right that we need to analyse and assess very carefully what the industry needs to ensure it has the resources required.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrat party.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On behalf of all Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches, I add my tribute to those who fought and died to secure our freedom. I also pay tribute to those in rural communities, like ours in Westmorland, who fed this country and welcomed evacuee children from the cities, and to our community in Windermere, who welcomed the children who had survived the Nazi death camps after the war. We remember them all with deep gratitude.

Has the Prime Minister consulted the Secretary of State on the potential impact on British farmers of the US-UK trade deal? It is a matter of fact that US animal welfare standards are worse than ours, which means that import costs are lower, so allowing equal access is not free trade—it is unfair trade. It is throwing our farmers under the bus, just as the Conservatives did through their deal with Australia and New Zealand. Will the Secretary of State support Liberal Democrat calls for the deal to be signed only if it supports farmers, and after a vote in this House?

Steve Reed: There have been no announcements yet, and I cannot pre-empt them, but we have been crystal clear that we have red lines. We will not allow British farmers to be undercut on environmental or welfare standards in the way that the Conservatives did when they agreed a trade deal with Australia; it undercut British farmers and caused them immense damage. We will never go the way of the Tories; we will stand four-square behind our farmers, and I am delighted to hear that the Liberal Democrats feel the same.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): On a similar theme, I congratulate the Government on securing a good deal for our farmers in the India trade deal, which was welcomed by the president of the NFU, who said it showed that this Government have “clearly listened”, in marked contrast to the previous Government. What assurance will the Secretary of State give me that our farmers will still be included in negotiations on the US trade deal?

Steve Reed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for welcoming the trade deal with India; it is a £4.8 billion boost to the UK economy, and very good news for our whisky and gin producers—and for the producers of salmon, lamb and chocolate, which are all now tariff-free exports to India. This Government will always negotiate in the national interest, and that is exactly the approach we will take with the US trade negotiations.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Solicitor General was asked—

Crown Court: Reducing the Backlog

2. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce the Crown court backlog. [903976]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): Today we mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day. It has been 80 years since the allied victory in Europe that brought an end to the second world war. I pay tribute to the extraordinary courage, sacrifice and determination of our veterans and all who made that victory possible. Their legacy lives on in the freedoms that we cherish and enjoy to this very day.

Let me be absolutely clear: victims are waiting far too long to see justice. That is completely unacceptable. It has hit confidence in our criminal justice system, and this Government simply will not stand for it. That is why we are committed to working with the Crown Prosecution Service and partners across the criminal justice system to slash those backlogs and get cases through the courts more quickly. A review is ongoing of how we can reduce the backlog, and I am confident that what emerges from that review will mean that we can get delays down and set about the kind of reform that will deliver the change that the public deserve to see.

Patrick Hurley: On the topic of backlogs across the justice system, the Ministry of Justice’s successful campaign to recruit more magistrates is stretching the capacity of local training committees to provide sufficient mentors and appraisers to support new appointees. What more can the Government do to fill the gap in training capacity to better serve the interests of justice?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the vital role that magistrates play in our criminal justice system. As we seek to reduce the intolerable court backlog that we inherited from the previous Government, I have absolutely no doubt that magistrates will continue to have a crucial role. It is essential that any new magistrates receive the right level of training,

and I am happy to raise the matter that my hon. Friend has spoken about with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I refer colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Mediation and alternative dispute resolution are critical in reducing backlogs in the courts. I urge Ministers, in addition to holding the review, to look very carefully at the opportunities to use mediation more, particularly mandatory mediation.

The Solicitor General: The right hon. Member is absolutely right. I know from my days in practice that mediation and ADR have a very important role to play. It is critical that we get this intolerable backlog in our Crown courts down, and this Government are taking substantial action to do that. We have increased the number of Crown court sitting days. As I referred to, the Lord Chancellor has asked Sir Brian Leveson to conduct an independent review of our criminal courts, and we are also increasing the sentencing powers of magistrates courts.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The Criminal Bar Association has reported that more than 1,300 cases were adjourned last year due to a lack of available prosecuting or defence barristers—a 20-fold increase since 2019. In the south-west, there are half the number of legal aid providers that we have in London, and my inbox reflects that, with many constituents unable to access legal advice or representation, particularly in housing cases involving rogue landlords and unscrupulous management companies. Meanwhile, Citizens Advice has closed its branches across Cornwall. What assessment has the Solicitor General made of how these regional disparities in legal aid provision are driving Crown court backlogs, especially in rural areas such as my constituency of North Cornwall?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member raises an important issue. It is crucial that justice be accessible for everyone in this country; indeed, access to justice is a fundamental tenet of the rule of law. That is why we have undertaken a comprehensive review of civil legal aid, and in December, we announced a £92 million boost for criminal legal aid solicitors. Starting this year, we will also be introducing free independent legal advisers for victims of adult rape. There is much more to do—we are clear about that. Clearly, there are deficiencies in access to justice, but I can assure the hon. Member that this Government understand the scale of the problem and are committed to addressing it.

Prosecution of Rural Crime

3. **David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of rural crime. [903977]

The Solicitor General: The Government’s safer streets mission is not just about town and city centres; it applies equally to our market squares and rural village greens. Rural crime can have devastating consequences for communities. This Government are committed to

cracking down on crime and disorder in rural areas, with tougher powers for the police to tackle antisocial behaviour and prevent farm theft and fly-tipping. That is why the Crown Prosecution Service works closely with local police forces to tackle those offences.

David Chadwick: According to the latest figures in the National Farmers Union Mutual Insurance Society's rural crime report, in 2023, the cost of rural crime increased by 4.3% year on year to £52.8 million, with criminal gangs targeting farms up and down Wales—including, unfortunately, in my constituency. Prosecution rates for livestock theft in particular are very low—often below 1%, despite the huge financial and emotional toll that this type of crime takes on farmers. What actions are the Government taking to tackle those low prosecution rates?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member raises an important issue. We know that rural and farming communities face acute and bespoke threats from criminals, including highly organised crime groups that are exploiting our rural communities. He has referred to livestock theft, but those communities also face fly-tipping and machinery and fuel theft. We are committed to implementing the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, and are also committed to further funding for the national rural and wildlife crime units. We have announced additional funding for those units, because we recognise just how critical it is to crack down on rural crime. I should also mention policing, because our neighbourhood policing guarantee covers the entirety of this country—not just urban areas, but rural areas too.

Serious Fraud Office: Tackling Economic Crime

4. **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support the Serious Fraud Office in tackling economic crime. [903978]

9. **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support the Serious Fraud Office in tackling economic crime. [903985]

The Solicitor General: This Government are determined to crack down on the scourge of economic crime, and the Serious Fraud Office does crucial work to tackle complex fraud, bribery and corruption. Under its new director, the SFO has opened nine new overt investigations and charged 16 defendants. Just last week, I saw the SFO's crucial work at first hand when I observed a dawn raid carried out in relation to a new multimillion-pound bribery investigation.

Johanna Baxter: The vast majority of UK businesses play by the rules, but fraud is estimated to cost UK taxpayers—including my constituents—between £55 billion and £80 billion per year. What is the Serious Fraud Office doing to encourage businesses to self-report wrongdoing?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the vast majority of businesses do play by the rules, and fraud is so damaging precisely because it undermines everyone who plays fairly. That is why this Government are so determined to tackle it. I welcome

the SFO's recently revised guidance, which aims to drive up the number of corporates that self-report wrongdoing. That is a positive development that will foster good corporate citizenship, and it is an important contributor to this Government's economic growth mission.

Lloyd Hatton: I thank the Solicitor General for her answer. Since their introduction in 2015, deferred prosecution agreements have resulted in the SFO raising some £1.7 billion in fines, yet those DPAs have dried up—the last DPAs that the Serious Fraud Office signed were some four years ago, in 2021. I welcome the SFO's new strategy to ramp up enforcement, including new guidance to make it simpler to report crimes, but I believe we can and must go further. Can the Solicitor General outline what steps the Government are taking to support the SFO in ensuring that whistleblowers are also incentivised to come forward?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The director of the SFO has expressed strong support for the financial incentivisation of whistleblowers, and the SFO's five-year strategy commits to exploring options, working with partners in the UK and abroad. Reform would require careful assessment, and it is right that any suggestions that could enhance the SFO's efficiency and our ability as a country to tackle serious fraud, bribery and corruption are properly considered.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One thing that concerns me in Northern Ireland is criminal gangs and former paramilitary gangs being involved in all sorts of crime, now including economic crime. They see business as a way of creating more wealth for their criminal activities. What is being done to take on these criminal gangs, whose tentacles reach right across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and, indeed, further afield, which we also have to address? Criminal gangs have to be taken on and have to be taken out of operation and put in jail. Do the Al Capone on them—put them in jail for economic crime.

Mr Speaker: Your problems are solved, Solicitor General.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member is absolutely right that fraud does not stop at national borders, so it is vital that enforcement activities do not stop at national borders either. That is why the SFO takes co-operation with international partners extremely seriously. In fact, most recently, the director launched a new international anti-corruption prosecutorial taskforce with Swiss and French partner agencies to strengthen existing ties between these countries and to lead to greater joint working on cases, as well as the sharing of insight and expertise. I would argue that we need more of those agreements and greater international co-operation to tackle the issue that he raises.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Solicitor General.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I wish to add my own tribute to those who bravely fought for our freedom.

Marks & Spencer is a much-loved cornerstone of the Great British high street and an important part of our economy. Many Members right across this House will

be shocked to learn that over half a billion pounds has been wiped off its value following a serious ransomware attack. Harrods and the Co-op have also been attacked, and yesterday the Legal Aid Agency was attacked too. Can the Solicitor General confirm what role the Attorney General's Office has played in ensuring that the criminal justice system treats such attacks robustly? How is it overseeing the response of the Crown Prosecution Service and other relevant agencies to economic and cyber-crime more broadly?

The Solicitor General: The shadow Solicitor General raises an important issue. We know that this type of crime is on the increase, and it is clearly vital that enforcement agencies and the CPS give it due prominence. She refers to some extremely well-known and much-loved brands. It is important that all those agencies play a role in enhancing awareness of this type of crime, such that it can be properly prevented. The SFO in particular plays a role in raising awareness of online crime so as to protect the public as well as businesses.

Helen Grant: I thank the Solicitor General for her response. Can she confirm what assessment she has made of the economic and legal risks posed by ransomware attacks on large UK businesses? Can she give an indication of what steps the Government are taking to ensure that companies of national economic importance are better protected and supported in the aftermath of such incidents?

The Solicitor General: As I said, the shadow Solicitor General raises extremely important issues—issues that the Government are alive to. This is a cross-Government issue, frankly, and it is important to all those partner enforcement agencies. I can assure her that work is ongoing and is being done to protect businesses and the public from these kind of attacks.

Road Traffic Act 1988

5. Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): If the Attorney General will meet the hon. Member for Swindon North to discuss prosecutions by the Crown Prosecution Service under section 3ZB of the Road Traffic Act 1988. [903979]

The Solicitor General: I am aware of the tragic case to which my hon. Friend refers, and which he has been campaigning on. I would like to take the opportunity to extend my deepest condolences to the family of Harry Parker. Every single death on our roads is completely unacceptable, and increasing the safety of our roads is a priority for this Government.

Will Stone: I thank my hon. Friend for her response. Harry Parker was 14 years old when he got run over. The person who took his life did not have a driving licence or any insurance, and did not stop, yet last November the charges were dropped. This is partially down to section 3ZB of the Road Traffic Act 1988. Will my hon. Friend review section 3ZB and meet me to see how we can close the loopholes?

The Solicitor General: It is fundamental that our roads are safe for all who use them, and that those who break our road safety laws are brought to justice. That is

why we are committed to delivering a new road safety strategy, and the next steps will be set out in due course. The Government keep motoring offences under review, including those for driving unlicensed and uninsured. As my hon. Friend knows, the CPS prosecutes matters independently of Government, but I would nevertheless be more than happy to meet him to discuss this matter.

Stalking

6. Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of people who commit stalking. [903981]

The Solicitor General: Just last month, National Stalking Awareness Week served as a sobering reminder of just how crucial it is that perpetrators of stalking are dealt with robustly. This Government are absolutely determined to protect victims of stalking, which is why we are taking action by extending stalking protection orders so that courts can impose them on conviction and acquittal, giving victims protection when they need it most. We are also conducting a review of stalking legislation to ensure that it is fit for purpose, and we are empowering the police to release the identities of online stalkers.

Olly Glover: I thank the Solicitor General for her answer, which largely anticipated my subsequent question. I recently met a constituent at a surgery appointment who, alongside her family, has experienced significant psychological trauma as a result of stalking, and who has concerns about the police response. In the light of what the Solicitor General has said about strengthening stalking protection orders, what more can be done to ensure that the police are briefed and supported to implement them, so that families can live their lives in safety?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member raises an important issue, and I am glad that I largely managed to pre-empt his question with my first answer. Stalking cases are on the rise. We are seeing more referrals to the police and, indeed, more convictions. This Government are taking strong action on stalking, because we recognise the scale of the issue. We are introducing statutory guidance to empower the police to release the identities of online stalkers, which we recognise is extremely important. I mentioned that we are extending stalking protection orders, which is clearly important too, and the review of stalking legislation is ongoing to make sure that that body of law is fit for purpose. My colleagues will update the House on that in due course.

Mr Speaker: That completes questions. May I just say to the Serjeant at Arms that I am very concerned that Members who had questions on the Order Paper have not been allowed into the House? Can we take this up with the police? They have no right to stop a Member entering this House. I take it very seriously.

Before we proceed to the business question, I should inform the House that the Government have indicated that there will be a statement this afternoon on US-UK trade. The timing of that statement has yet to be established, but it will appear on the annunciator once it has been confirmed.

Business of the House

10.33 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 12 May includes:

MONDAY 12 MAY—Remaining stages of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

TUESDAY 13 MAY—Opposition day (7th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 14 MAY—Consideration of Lords message on the Great British Energy Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by motion to approve the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) Regulations 2025.

THURSDAY 15 MAY—General debate on solar farms, followed by general debate on long-term funding of youth services. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 16 MAY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 May will include:

MONDAY 19 MAY—Second Reading of the Mental Health Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 20 MAY—Second Reading of the Victims and Courts Bill.

WEDNESDAY 21 MAY—Opposition day (8th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 22 MAY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 22 May and return on Monday 2 June.

Jesse Norman: This is of course the 80th anniversary of VE Day, when all Britain rejoiced at the defeat of fascism and the end of the war in Europe. I am sure I speak for the whole House in putting on record once again our profound thanks and our celebration of the immortal memory of that extraordinary generation who—through their courage, their selflessness and their sense of duty—made victory in Europe possible. Let us all pray that we can be worthy of their memory.

If I may turn back from the sublime sweep of history to the mundane business of our politics, the Government have made valiant efforts to crowd the airwaves on trade this week, but the unfortunate truth is that they have had another dire week in office. The financial facts of life have not changed: growth is stagnant, as a nation we have to raise defence spending rapidly and the Government have made themselves a prisoner of their fiscal rules. Before the Leader of the House starts in on the local election results, may I remind her that, for all the horrors of last week, the Opposition still ended up with three times as many council seats as the Government?

Let us look at those cost pressures a bit more closely. Just eight months after a 22.3% increase in pay for junior doctors—an increase described at the time by the British Medical Association as

“a good enough first step”,

the House will recall—the BMA has now announced it will ballot its members to strike for more pay.

Meanwhile, the somewhat unlikely pairing of Tony Blair and Gary Smith, the general secretary of the GMB trade union, have both denounced the Government's decision to ban offshore licences in the North sea. Blair described it as an “irrational” policy “doomed to fail”, the backlash to which threatened to “derail the whole agenda”. He said it was caused by Ministers afraid of being cast as “climate deniers”. He is not talking about the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, of course; he is talking about all the Ministers and MPs on the Government Benches who know better, but are too frit to say so.

Gary Smith said that “climate fundamentalism”—that is the Secretary of State for Energy—would

“accelerate the decline of domestic oil and gas production and increase our dependency on gas imports”,

directly contrary to the Government's supposed growth strategy. As he pointed out:

“Across society, bill-payers will question why they are subsidising a domestic clean power sprint that is offshoring UK jobs and value.”

Only today, we have had the news that Ørsted is mothballing its giant new offshore wind farm, as it has made it clear it is holding out for even greater subsidies, knowing that the Secretary of State has no choice, and has in effect said that he has no choice, if he wants to hit his targets. We all want a just and rapid energy transition, but does the Leader of the House not think that the words of Tony Blair and Gary Smith are simple common sense?

There is one other issue that I think we should highlight. The Leader of the House has received universal condemnation for dismissing concerns about grooming gangs as “dog-whistle politics”. In response, she put out a tweet that conspicuously did not contain an apology for what she had said. The Secretary of State for Health said that her remarks were “indefensible”, but the truth is that she has talked in the same way about grooming gangs from the Dispatch Box, when she accused people of jumping on bandwagons on 9 January this year in business questions.

I hope we can agree now that this is an extremely serious national issue and that no one, whether or not they hold public office, should be deflecting or denying its seriousness. I hope that in her response now, the Leader of the House will put aside party politics, avoid criticising others and speak from the heart. So I ask her: has she now watched the Channel 4 documentary, and if so, how does she feel about it? Does she agree that the dismissal of these entirely valid concerns has been one of the factors behind what even today remains a huge continuing national scandal. Will she now back the call of many victims for a comprehensive national inquiry into grooming gangs. Finally, would she like to take this opportunity to speak directly to the hundreds of vulnerable women involved, and say sorry?

Lucy Powell: Mr Speaker, further to your statement, talks on the US trade deal developments continue at pace. With your permission, the House will be updated later today. I will come on to VE Day shortly, but may I first address the remarks of the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman)?

[Lucy Powell]

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising what I said on an episode of “Any Questions” last week, so that I can be absolutely clear with the House today, and especially to the victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and grooming gangs, that I am very sorry for those remarks, as I made clear over the weekend. I, and every member of this Government, want your truth to be heard, wherever that truth leads. Your truly appalling experiences need to be acted on, for those responsible to be accountable and face the full force of the law, and for justice to be served. I would never want to leave the impression that these very serious, profound and far-reaching issues, which I have campaigned on for many years, should be shied away from and not aired—far from it. No stone will be left unturned.

What the victims want, first and foremost, is for action to be taken and for the many, many recommendations from previous inquiries to be implemented in full, including mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse, for which I have called for nearly a decade. Shockingly, those recommendations remained sitting on the shelf until we came into government last year. Baroness Louise Casey, who conducted the no-holds-barred inquiry into Rotherham, is carrying out an audit on the scale, nature and characteristics of grooming gangs. She will be reporting soon. It will include the questions on ethnicity. Every police force in England and Wales has been asked to look again at historic grooming gangs cases. They will be reopened, where appropriate, to get the perpetrators behind bars. I hope the House is left in no doubt about my commitment to these issues and my apology to those victims for any distress I have caused them.

I was surprised to hear the shadow Leader of the House try to claim some success in the local elections for his party. I am not quite sure that that is what those on the Conservative Benches are feeling.

Let me address the issue of our need to move to being a clean energy superpower. I am afraid that yet again at the Dispatch Box the right hon. Gentleman and his party are showing a serious misunderstanding of the economics and the reality of the transition to net zero. We face the worst cost of living crisis in generations, because his party left this country exposed to international fossil fuel markets as a direct result of their failure to invest in clean energy. It is only by investing in clean energy that we will bring down bills in future. He might want to remind himself of what his former Prime Minister, Theresa May, said about this issue:

“the sceptics say that the green transition will cripple business, we say they could not be more wrong.”

This is a global race for the jobs of the future, to get bills down, and that is exactly what we are doing.

The right hon. Gentleman should know better than anybody that new oil and gas in the North sea will not take a penny off bills, because oil and gas is traded on the international markets and therefore we are locked in. The only way to decouple that is by investing in cheaper renewable energies, as the Government are doing. It was a previous Conservative Energy Minister who said in 2022:

“more UK production wouldn’t reduce the global price of gas.”

The right hon. Gentleman might want to remind himself of that.

We have all come together in the Chamber today to honour our veterans and all those who played their part in securing peace and victory in Europe and ending the second world war. Today, we mark the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, and will shortly recreate the procession of Members from the Chamber to a service of thanksgiving on 8 May 1945. In addressing the House on that day, Winston Churchill conveyed his

“deep gratitude to this House of Commons, which has proved itself the strongest foundation for waging war that has ever been seen in the whole of our long history. We have all of us made our mistakes, but the strength of the Parliamentary institution has been shown to enable it at the same moment to preserve all the title deeds of democracy while waging war in the most stern and protracted form.”—[*Official Report*, 8 May 1945; Vol. 0, c. 1869.]

As we represent our parliamentary democracy today, these words ring as true now as they did then. We will never forget the sacrifice, bravery and spirit and the millions of lives lost in defeating fascism.

Today, we also remember Her late Majesty the Queen, whose youthful, joyous celebration symbolised VE Day, and whose long reign shaped the peace and prosperity that followed it. Today and every day, we remember the immense contribution of the second world war generation and thank them for their service.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): Women’s Aid reports that 82% of domestic abuse cases go unreported. Reporting and prosecution rates are disproportionately lower for black and minoritised survivors. Does the Leader of the House agree that consistent collection and publication of disaggregated data is key to assessing whether Government actions are working for all women?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely—I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. As she knows, violence against women and girls is a national emergency and tackling it is one of the key missions of this Government. I agree that this data needs to be brought to light and disaggregated.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day by commemorating the sacrifices made not just by those who fought and fell in the second world war, but by those who continue to serve our country in our armed forces and all who support them, including their families, who often spend long periods of time away from their loved ones.

Last week’s local elections were the first time in history that the Liberal Democrats beat both the Conservatives and Labour at the same local elections. We are proud of the trust that voters placed in us, meaning that our party now controls more councils than the Conservatives.

Last week also saw some of the most widely divided results our country has ever seen. The winner of the West of England mayoral election, from the Labour party, took the seat with just 25% of the vote; put another way, three out of every four voters put their cross in somebody else’s box. However, the lowest winning vote share was in Cornwall, where the winner in one race—a Liberal Democrat—was elected with just 18.9% of the vote. Just seven and a half percentage points separated the top six candidates.

It is clear that we are witnessing the end of the traditional two-party system—[*Interruption.*] Like it or not, our antiquated first-past-the-post system simply is not designed to cope with a multi-party system—at

least, not for those who believe in fairness, as I hope the Government do. Will the Leader of the House now grant time for the Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) to be debated in full, and will she encourage all her colleagues across Government to finally support the proposed move to proportional representation?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating all those who were successful in last week's elections and in paying tribute to the many councillors and candidates who were not successful for their campaigning.

The hon. Lady raises some important issues about turnout and engagement in elections. We both have a political challenge to ensure that people are engaged in the debate and feel energised and enthused to take part in elections, but we also need to look at how elections are conducted. This Government are committed to bringing forward an elections Bill in due course, which will address some of these issues.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I am delighted that the United Kingdom stands on the brink of a trade agreement with the United States. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is vindication of the firm, but fair, calm and measured approach of the Prime Minister, in stark contrast to the shrill voices from those on the Conservative Benches that would have landed us in a trade war weeks ago?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. May I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the Prime Minister for his determined, consistent and stoic leadership in this area, which is bringing dividends to this country, and will ensure future prosperity and growth through the trade deals that he has agreed to?

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Let me make some additions to the business that the Leader of the House has announced. Next Thursday, there will be a Select Committee statement from the Work and Pensions Committee. On Thursday 22 May there will be a debate on access to NHS dentistry, followed by a debate on dementia care. In Westminster Hall, on 13 May, there will be a debate on the impact of churches and religious buildings on communities. On Thursday 15 May there will be a debate on funding for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the Global Fund, followed by a debate on World Asthma Day. On 20 May there will be a debate on pensions for people living overseas, and on Thursday 22 May there will be a three-hour debate on the EU-UK summit.

Yesterday, the renowned charity, StandWithUs, published a report on antisemitism on university campuses. Dozens of students have given their testimony to the failure of universities to protect them and their rights. They have come out with a series of recommendations, including sanctions against universities that failed to protect students and an independent inquiry to get to the bottom of why universities are not protecting students. Can we have a statement next week from the relevant Minister on what is going to happen to make sure that Jewish students are protected on our campuses?

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for announcing the forthcoming Backbench Business. I thank him, too, for all his work. He raises an important report that is out this week. This Government stand firm on antisemitism. We need to root it out on all our university campuses, and wherever it exists in our society. I will ensure that he gets a full update from the relevant Minister.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): As the chair of the medicinal cannabis under prescription all-party parliamentary group, I have worked closely with Hannah Deacon, the mother of Alfie Dingley, over the past eight years. This woman has changed the law, but, sadly, she lost her fight with cancer the day before yesterday. Will the Leader of the House pay tribute to her and send condolences to her family, as the work that she has done has changed the lives of so many young children living with epilepsy? Will she join me and Hannah's friends who are here in the House today? This woman was incredible, and I just wanted everybody across this House who has had the opportunity to work with her to know that, and to stand in solidarity and send their love to the family—to Drew, Alfie and little Anni.

Lucy Powell: I am sure the whole House will join me in sending all the love and best wishes to my hon. Friend and to her dear friend, Hannah Deacon, and her friends who are here in the Public Gallery today. I remember my hon. Friend mentioning and raising this campaign many times on her behalf. I can truly say that Hannah has changed the lives of many and she has changed policy. Her life will be long remembered by many, many others and we all pay great tribute to her today.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): Many members of the grooming and rape gangs that systematically abused white working class girls have never faced justice, and neither have the councillors, officials and police officers suspected of collusion and cover-up. Can we have a debate on the need for a national inquiry into these disgusting crimes? Will the Leader of the House tell us please who exactly it is she believes is using these horrors as a "dog whistle"?

Lucy Powell: Everybody up and down this country is horrified about the crimes that have been committed over many, many years by despicable grooming gangs. That is why we are, first and foremost, implementing the very many recommendations from the recent inquiries, most of which sat on the shelf until the general election last year. Those recommendations include mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse, which is something I have campaigned on for many years, as have the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Minister for Safeguarding, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips). We will leave no stone unturned to ensure that the victims of these terrible atrocities get truth, justice and accountability wherever that is needed.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Yesterday I spoke with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about the progress of the treaty on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction—sometimes known as the global ocean treaty. I was assured that, as far as the Department is concerned, the matter had

[Barry Gardiner]

been dealt with and was all done, and I was assured that was also the case with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, but when I spoke to colleagues from the Cabinet Office, they had not heard of it. The Leader of the House will know that the United Nations ocean conference will take place next month, and it is really important that we get ratification of that treaty for the conference. The world is looking at us, and if we want to take leadership on this issue, we need to act.

Lucy Powell: I can assure my hon. Friend that, given my responsibility for the business of this House, I am well aware of the need to ratify the treaty and all that that involves. We are committed to doing so, and I can assure him that we will do so in good time.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Last week the Permanent Court of Arbitration allowed the UK to uphold the ban on sand eel fishing around the UK, including around the Isle of May in my constituency. The ban is doing so much to support the native puffins there. It also affirmed that policies banning sand eel fishing are based on scientific evidence. However, the impact of the remainder of the judgment is unclear, with different rulings in relation to English seas that muddy the waters considerably. Will the Government bring forward a debate in Government time so that the House can fully hear and consider their response to this ruling?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the impact that the ruling is having on fishing in the hon. Lady's area. I am not aware that the House is to be told of any developments, but the Government will ensure that she gets a full ministerial reply, and if the House needs to be updated, it will be.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency has the most leaseholders in the country. I commend this Government's work to give leaseholders the accountability that they should have. Will the Leader of the House support me in inviting the Minister responsible to come and talk to the leasehold action group here in the Cities of London and Westminster about mandatory qualifications and securing accountability against their landlords?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The feudal leasehold system is a plague for many homeowners in our country. Many of the issues she has in her constituency I share in my own, and I know that the Minister responsible for leasehold, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), would be delighted to meet her constituents, as he recently did with hundreds of mine, to discuss this Government's plans for leasehold reform.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): In March the complaints commissioner concluded that the Financial Conduct Authority failed to identify risks relating to the owner of the funeral firm Safe Hands Plans, despite receiving information about breaches and other serious risks connected to the company. As a result, Safe Hands went into administration in 2022, with those who had invested in funeral plans losing thousands of pounds.

Can we therefore have a statement on the role of the Financial Conduct Authority in the collapse of Safe Hands and the need for redress for constituents who have been impacted by this situation?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising Safe Hands, which is an issue for many MPs across the House. I will ensure that he gets a full update from a Minister and that time is found to discuss some of the issues raised by this case.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): On Saturday I will be joining hundreds of people from across Beckenham and Penge at Beckenham Rugby Club for a rugby tournament and beer festival. It is a fantastic example of how our small businesses support and enhance our local communities, and I would like to thank Matt and his team at the Three Hounds for all their work on this event. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing everyone attending a great weekend?

Lucy Powell: I do love the sporting questions from my hon. Friend, for which he gets quite a lot of cut-through. I join him in supporting all those from Beckenham Rugby Club on what sounds like a great day out.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May I welcome the UK-US trade deal and congratulate the Prime Minister on it? It is very much in the national interest, although the devil is in the detail. May we have a debate on that trade deal and the concerns of British farmers about chlorinated chicken, hormone-treated beef and antibiotics in pig farming? Will the Leader of the House assure the House, Shropshire farmers and British farmers that British agriculture is safe with this trade deal?

Lucy Powell: We can assure the right hon. Gentleman of that. There will be a statement to the House later today—these issues are still unfolding—but he is right to praise the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade for the amazing work that they have done to get us to this point. He will be aware that the issues of food standards and agriculture have been red lines for the Government in those trade talks, and he will get the details later today.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): We are currently facing a chronic staffing crisis in adult social care, which has led to increasing recruitment from overseas. Migrant workers now make up 16% of the workforce in England. While many arrive in good faith, they are too often met with extortionate recruitment fees, wage reductions, exploitative working conditions and the ever-present threat of deportation should they raise concerns or lose their jobs. I have been contacted by a number of constituents who have witnessed a shocking litany of failures, negligence and exploitation of migrant workers at the hands of a private company in my constituency of Stockport. Many workers have not been paid or have found themselves in overcrowded, substandard housing, and at times without any work at all. As such, will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on the exploitation of migrant workers?

Lucy Powell: We totally condemn the exploitation of international care workers by rogue employers in the sector. We are taking robust action, including by revoking

sponsor licences where that is deemed to be the case. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets an update on his case.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I was concerned to read reports in the newspaper earlier this week that train stations will not be allowed to have step-free access if they have fewer than 1,000 passengers a day or are within 30 miles of a station with step-free access. People in rural areas will not be able to use the train if there is no alternative public transport and they cannot access a car. Will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time so that we can talk about the importance of people in rural areas being able to access public transport and, in particular, stations such as Whitchurch in my constituency, where there is no step-free access to the southbound platform?

Lucy Powell: The issue of step-free access at stations is always raised with me at business questions. I assure the hon. Member that the Government are committed to the Access for All programme, and the Rail Minister is reviewing what we can do to support it better. I will ensure that the House is updated on that.

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have today announced best value updates for five local authorities, including Warrington borough council. The findings for Warrington have highlighted a number of serious conclusions that must be addressed. However, we should also recognise the pressures that local authorities faced under the last Government, with significant reductions to funding and increased demands on their services. Warrington council must now go further and faster to improve, restore trust and deliver best value for my constituents. Will the Leader of the House make time to debate the important topic of local government finance and the actions that the Government are taking to support local authorities?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising issues in Warrington. She is right that the Government have given record levels of funding to local government—£69 billion this year, I think—and are committed to restoring services and local government in places such as her constituency.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Baby Jack was just 16 months old when, on Boxing day 2022, he passed away from sudden unexplained death in childhood, which was incredibly heartbreaking. It is something that unfortunately we just do not know enough about. I want to commend Jack's parents, Cheryl and Darren from Silsden, whom I have met. They have been fundraising on this issue ever since that fateful day. This weekend they will be taking on their biggest challenge: cycling from Leeds to Liverpool along the canal. I hope that hon. Members across the House, including the Leader of the House, will join me in sending our thoughts to Cheryl and Darren and their eldest son Louis on their fortitude and determination, and wish them the very best of luck in their cycling challenge this weekend.

Mr Speaker: I look forward to seeing them coming through Chorley.

Lucy Powell: I am sure the whole House will join me in sending the very best to Cheryl and Darren with their fundraising activities this weekend. I am really sorry to hear about the sudden death of Baby Jack—what an awful thing for any parent to go through. That they have been able to turn that into fundraising and campaigning is truly commendable. I look forward to them hopefully passing through Manchester on their way from Leeds to Liverpool.

Mr Speaker: That is a funny route for the canal.

Victory in Europe Day: Commemoration

11.4 am

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Mr Speaker, I ask that you now suspend the sitting so that we may attend at Westminster Abbey to give thanks and to commemorate the 80th anniversary of VE Day—the greatest victory in the history of our great nation.

Mr Speaker: We will now follow in the footsteps of our predecessors 80 years ago. On 8 May 1945, hon. Members formed a procession out of the House of Lords, where they had secretly relocated because the House of Commons Chamber had been destroyed during the blitz. Today, we shall again follow the Mace, but this time from our own Chamber, through the bomb-scarred Churchill Arch, which stands as a permanent reminder of the fortitude of those who stood firm through the war.

11.5 am

Sitting suspended.

Green Economy: Natural Capital

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Select Committee Statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now come to the Select Committee Statement on behalf of the Environmental Audit Committee. Mr Toby Perkins will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement; these should be brief questions, not speeches. Questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, and not the relevant Government Minister, and Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.30 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am pleased to present the Environmental Audit Committee's report on the role of natural capital in the green economy. This report was initiated by my predecessor as Chair, the right honourable Philip Dunne, the former Member of Parliament for Ludlow. I wish to pay great tribute to him for his excellent contribution as Chair. Mr Dunne enjoyed what I suspect is an unusual distinction of having both asked questions and answered them in the witness sessions that led to this report. Having originally initiated the report in January 2024 and then seen Parliament dissolve before the report could be published, he was kind enough to return as a witness in December 2024 to brief the successor Committee on the evidence that his Committee had heard and to provide his own insights.

I wish to take this opportunity to place on record my gratitude and, I know, the gratitude of members of the Committee past and present to our former Clerk, Martyn Atkins, who recently left the service of the Committee for a period of absence after many years of service to the House. Martyn has played a huge role in the work of this Select Committee and many others and will be very much missed, as will Chloe Jago, who recently stood down as press officer on the Committee after five years of excellent service to take up a role closer to home.

I thank all those who have contributed to this report, the many people and organisations who submitted written and oral evidence, the Committee staff—particularly Alex Farnsworth, who has worked tirelessly to complete the report—and the members of the current and predecessor Environmental Audit Committee.

Let me turn to the report itself. We were delighted to see that recommendation No. 1—that the Government should produce an impact assessment of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill—was satisfied within a day of our report being published. At this pace, we really could get somewhere. However, we still need to learn more about how the nature restoration fund will interact with biodiversity net gain. I am glad to see that the Minister is here to expand on that in his response.

The Dasgupta review made clear the value of nature. Nature and the services that it provides underpin both our economy and our way of life. In 2022, the Office for National Statistics found that the UK ecosystem's services were equivalent to 3.5% of GDP, or £1.8 trillion. The UK has experienced significant biodiversity loss in recent

decades, with the “State of Nature” report 2023 showing an average of 19% species abundance decline across more than 750 species between 1970 and 2021.

The Committee agrees with the Government that economic and financial decision making should support the delivery of a nature-positive future and we would like to hear a repetition of that commitment and, indeed, to see it actualised in the forthcoming spending review.

The Committee agrees with the assertion of this Government and the previous Government that, in a time of spending restraint, taxpayer money alone is no longer sufficient to deliver the necessary level of environmental restoration, so private finance must play its part. We were pleased to hear from the Minister for Nature that work is ongoing to better quantify the current size of the annual investment in natural capital. The Committee therefore recommends that, within 12 months, the Government provide a report to Parliament on current and projected levels of private investment into nature recovery in England, so that we can see both the progress that has been made and the size of the funding gap.

For the Government to deliver on protecting 30% of land by 2030, they must provide landowners with the confidence to invest in nature restoration. The long-promised land use framework will help, and will give assurance that there is a strategic approach to balance the competing needs for our land in regard to food production, nature restoration, renewable energy, residential and commercial development, and other areas. It will, however, require a natural capital approach to be embedded throughout Government.

The Committee heard concerns that the changes to the agricultural property relief regime had added to uncertainty, although the Government’s decision to give nature investments equal treatment under inheritance tax at least answers the charge that the Government were prioritising nature recovery ahead of food production.

Voluntary drivers of market demand alone will not deliver the demand that the Government need. Compliance mechanisms and the expectation of future compliance requirements will drive market demand, so the Government should look at bringing in increased compliance requirements, such as by expanding biodiversity net gain requirements or mandating corporate disclosure of nature-damaging activities.

The Committee seeks assurances that the proposed new nature restoration fund is an addition to, rather than a replacement for, Government investment in nature recovery. Without clear support for biodiversity net gain, Ministers risk causing uncertainty in nature markets, which could undermine investment in restoring nature. It will be good to hear a full-throated defence of BNG from the Minister in his response to the report—a defence that we heard from him, and indeed from myself, when in opposition.

Although the Committee supports an approach that allows nature recovery initiatives to be pooled, the Government must ensure that we do not end up with nature recovery miles away while there is a further eradication of nature within urban settings. One of the strengths of BNG is that the communities that suffered the nature blight also benefited from the recovery of nature locally. It will be good to get a commitment from the Minister about that principle remaining in place

under the nature restoration fund proposals. Nature can grow hand in hand with our economy, and money from growth should go back into helping nature thrive.

The report provides the Government with a road map to restoring nature by capitalising on our huge national strength as a global financial leader. It cautions the Government not to undermine the progress already made and offers our support for the measures that help nature’s recovery come hand in hand with the economic growth that the Government rightly demand.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in support of the Committee’s report, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee on the way in which he has led the Committee and on how he took up the remnant of this report from the last Parliament as the first report for our Committee in the new Parliament. He is right to recognise that natural capital is the foundation of our economy. With the spending review next month, does he agree that the Government should set out precisely how they have taken a natural capital approach to the evaluation of spending decisions? Does he agree that the new national wealth fund should be empowered to invest in the natural capital project, as highlighted in our report?

Mr Perkins: To return a compliment, my hon. Friend is the only person who was there at the start of the evidence and at the end, and we are very grateful for the continuity he provides. He is right that, as the Committee’s report lays out, we need to see a natural capital approach embedded right through Government. The forthcoming spending review is a great opportunity to see that, and I really hope that we do. He makes an important point about the national wealth fund; it provides a huge opportunity and we look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on that both at this juncture and in his response to the report, which we will get from the Government in due course.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I commend the hon. Member for the quality of the Committee’s first report of this Parliament. The National Trust has warned that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill is a “licence to kill nature” and the Office for Environmental Protection has advised the Government that it is a “regression” in environmental law. Does he share my concern that a nature restoration fund could create risks to the UK economy by undermining our natural capital, and does he agree that without substantial private investment in nature, Government pledges to protect 30% of land by 2030, halt the decline of species and improve people’s access to green spaces could be at risk?

Mr Perkins: I thank the hon. Member for his kind words. I will start at the end of his question. He is absolutely right, and we agree with the Government that we need to be able to attract more private investment if the 30 by 30 aspiration is to be realised. It was notable that when the Government came to the Committee, they made it clear that they did not yet know—as their predecessor Government did not know—exactly how much was being raised by the private sector. The starting point of assessing whether the Government are on track to meet their targets is knowing how well they are doing right now. One of the recommendations in the report is therefore that the Government should get on

[Mr Perkins]

with identifying the full scale of the current level of private sector investment. We will absolutely look to do that.

The jury is still out on whether the nature restoration fund will be a good or a bad thing. It offers real potential. A one-for-one approach on small schemes is sometimes expensive to provide and offers relatively limited value, so there is real value to a pooled approach that enables money to go in so that wider-scale improvements can be delivered. However, as I said, we need to be really sure that that does not mean that urban areas get the blight and rural areas get all the nature gain. We need to see it delivered close to where the initial plans are being delivered.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I welcome the publication of the report, which reminds us all once again that nature is the true foundation of all wealth in our country and around the globe. A wide range of environmental organisations and eminent academics—including Sir Partha Dasgupta, professor emeritus of economics at the University of Cambridge, whose review for the Treasury underpins the Committee's entire report—have publicly written to warn that proposed plans in the Government's Planning and Infrastructure Bill are “not a tool for ecological recovery”

but

“a licence to kill nature, with no evidence to suggest this would in any way help our economy.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that when leading economists, former Government advisers and leading conservationists with decades of collective experience have expressed such deep concerns about Government legislation, Ministers must listen and think again?

Mr Perkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that and for the excellent contribution he is making to the Select Committee. Professor Dasgupta is hugely respected,

and his warnings should be taken very seriously indeed. I think that all Labour Members recognise the need for growth, but we demand that it comes hand in hand with nature recovery. We are one of the most nature-depleted nations on Earth and, as my hon. Friend rightly said, nature is the foundation stone on which all economic growth should be built. A nation that prioritises economic growth over our environment is one heading down a dangerous and foolish path. We have heard some really positive commitments from the Government, but we need to see them actualised. I completely agree with what he said.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and welcome this excellent report, with its focus on the value of natural capital. On such an important day as Sir David Attenborough's 99th birthday, I am sure that Members across the House will wish to join me in expressing many happy returns to him for his important work in this space.

In coastal and rural constituencies like mine in South East Cornwall, the natural world and its biodiversity are both cherished and central to local jobs and to the economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that integrating natural capital into policy through tools like the nature restoration fund and the nature markets framework offers a vital opportunity for the Government and land managers to restore and increase the UK's natural capital in ways that strengthen nature, boost local resilience and improve wellbeing for communities and for future generations?

Mr Perkins: I thank my hon. Friend for her congratulations. As I say, it is not my report; it is ours. I thank her for her contribution to the Committee. She is right about that commitment, and I think all of us on the Committee are driven to make sure that growth is hand in hand with nature, rather than at its expense. I agree with her entirely.

Backbench Business

St George's Day and English Affairs

1.44 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered St George's Day and English affairs.

I am grateful to my colleagues who co-sponsored this debate, and I wish all those right across our island home a belated but very happy St George's day.

The cross-party support for this debate speaks to the power of St George and our collective pride in our Englishness. While the debate brought many colleagues together for all the right reasons, regardless of background or political persuasion, we as a House must be very clear that no political party, politician, region, faith, colour or creed has a monopoly on patriotism or pride in our national identity.

We gather here 80 years to the day since VE Day—the day of victory in Europe, victory against fascism and victory for decency, democracy and all that makes England and our United Kingdom great. As we celebrate 80 years since the end of the most terrible global war in modern history, I will, like many other colleagues who would otherwise be here, head back home to my constituency to celebrate with my neighbours, friends and constituents. I pay tribute to all those who fought so that we could live. I give thanks for their lives and legacies, and on behalf of the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme, I rededicate myself to building a world that is more tolerant, more respectful and, yes, more peaceful. As Churchill said on this day 80 years ago,

“Long Live the Cause of Freedom! God Save the King!”—[*Official Report*, 8 May 1945; Vol. 410, c. 1869.]

From Newcastle-under-Lyme to North Northumberland, from Newquay to North Yorkshire and everywhere in between and beyond, St George's day is a time to celebrate England and our Englishness and to show pride in our country—my country—and in our values, our flag and our history. My Englishness is central to my identity. My family roots are from all over the Commonwealth, and I have spoken in this House before about my grandfather who left the colonies, as they were, to help the war effort here in the United Kingdom. Yet it is in England where I was born and raised; it is England that shaped me and allowed someone of my mixed background to thrive, succeed and get on in life. That is the story of our England.

I have said in the House before that I am proud of my Englishness and my Britishness, and of the simple truth that in our beloved country—“this blessed plot”, as Shakespeare once called it—we can be anything we want to be with the right support, a work ethic, real opportunities and a good heart. There is so much that any, many and all of us could say about our nation home, but the time limits do not allow me that opportunity—although, Madam Deputy Speaker, you are well known for your indulgence.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and thank him for doing so. It is important. I am one of those people—I suspect many of us are—who are proud to be English

and proud to be British; I recognise them as different things that we should celebrate uniquely. Does he agree that those who seek to use Englishness to divide us, rather than bring us together, do a huge disservice to what being English is all about? Does he also agree that those of us who believe that we can have huge patriotism and pride in our Englishness, but who also recognise the values of inclusivity and generosity that our nation has shown over the years, need to do a much better job at defining exactly what it is as we go forward in difficult political times?

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making a very important intervention. There is so much more that brings us together, and it is incumbent on all Members of this House to make that case, and to focus on bringing people together, rather than pushing us further apart.

England's greatest asset is its people. That is nowhere clearer to me than in Newcastle-under-Lyme, the northern corner of the ancient county of Staffordshire that is my home and my constituency. Our people are hardworking, and many are God-fearing, decent folk who do not walk by on the other side, but who turn up to be counted. We see that in our national health service, in our schools, on our railways, in our veterans' centres and in communities up and down England. We saw it during the pandemic and in the struggle alongside the people of Ukraine against Putin's tyranny. We see it every single day.

One of England's greatest features is our countryside, and my home of Newcastle-under-Lyme has plenty of it. Our farmers, who produce food of the greatest quality to the highest standards, deserve real and meaningful support. They feed us, work hard and lead the world when it comes to tending to and caring for our land, and I urge Ministers in this Government to keep that in mind. Where the previous Government failed, we must listen, learn and turn up to be counted.

The contribution of the English language to western literacy is simply immeasurable. England was home to the greatest writer of all time, William Shakespeare, and the works of Shakespeare alone continue to put England head and shoulders above the rest when it comes to influence on global literature. Alongside him, England can claim T. S. Eliot, the Brontë sisters, George Orwell, Jane Austen and many more.

English music is some of the most popular and influential music of all time. Still today, the Beatles—I see the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey)—are considered by many to be the greatest band of all time, but that is a debate for another day. Alongside the Beatles, we have the Stones, David Bowie, Amy Winehouse, Queen, Adele, Elton John, Kate Bush, the excellent Joan Armatrading, Cilla Black, Oasis, the Clash, Pink Floyd and, of course, Robbie Williams—a man of and from north Staffordshire, whose mother lives in my constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme.

England has made some of the most enduring and significant contributions to music of any nation on our planet, and that is without mentioning the many other cultural endeavours mastered by the English. English film remains dominant globally. A new James Bond film is still one of the premier cinematic events, and no tariff will get in the way of that. Christopher Nolan, an Englishman, is arguably one of the most exciting and skilled film directors working today. We give thanks for

[Adam Jogee]

actors like the late Dame Maggie Smith and the late and wonderful Glenda Jackson, formerly of this parish, and to those still going strong like Dame Joanna Lumley and Dame Judi Dench, who I had the pleasure of celebrating my birthday with last year—[*Interruption.*] A story for another day, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As the birthplace of Reginald Mitchell, the designer of the iconic Spitfire plane; home to a university; birthplace of a Prime Minister—albeit that he moved to Australia to serve in that high office—and the home of the founder of the modern circus, Philip Astley; the ancient and loyal borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme has left its mark on English history and culture. If that is not enough, we also have the popular Stoke City clown icon Nello Baldwin—a constituent of mine. Speaking of Stoke City, I could not make this speech without mentioning England as the home of the beautiful game. With the local football landscape back home in mind, I of course also pay tribute to Port Vale.

Today it is important to call for action to ensure that the truths of England's story and potential are preserved. We must work to ensure that people across England, and indeed all across the United Kingdom, continue to feel pride in our flag and our communities, and feel hope for the future and respect for our past. Any talk about love for flag and country must be matched by an investment in the people who make them what they are—investment in our national health service, our education and employment support services, our arts and culture, and our villages, towns and cities.

I do not want my speech to focus solely on the past, when there are so many exciting things to say about England's future, but it would be remiss of me not to touch on some parts of our history that fill me with a particular sense of reverence. Our democracy is one of the oldest in the world. An English Parliament has existed in some form since the 13th century, and monumental events, such as the signing of the Magna Carta, have solidified England's position in history as a forebearer of individual rights and freedom of political expression. Those rights were fought for and hard won across centuries by brave women and men who had the vision to see a better country and a better world for all of us.

There are many things I could say about England's relationship to the wider world, but one of the enduring strengths of our country that I always come back to is the courage, tenacity and character of ordinary English people right across history. England is home to people from all over the world, and we are much better for it. Of course, we cannot forget that England, too, left its mark on all corners of the globe.

For some—misguidedly, in my view—talking England up is alien to them. To speak of the exciting future ahead of us in the vibrant country that we have become is difficult for some to do. All they seem able to contribute to our national conversation is a view of England as a nation in decline—a nation once great, now not. I have spent much of my several minutes speaking outlining the incredible successes and achievements of England's past, but for those people, there is nothing more to England than its past. To them I say, "You don't know England." We have faced our fair share of adversity, and today of all days reminds us of that, but as Disraeli said:

"The English nation is never so great as in adversity."

I am never so proud to be English as in those moments. It is when times are toughest that I am blown away by the courage, tenacity and generosity of the good people of this country.

The English have always found a way to get on, persevere, and, as Churchill put it, "keep bugging on", whether after the destruction of two world wars or through the heartbreak of a disappointing Euros final. We will continue to do so. I will continue to look back at our past with the respect and reverence that it deserves, and look forward to our future with hope and optimism, because doing so is part of what makes us English, and things can only get better.

I leave my final words to the last verse of one of my, and my late grandfather's, favourite hymns. He moved to this country in the late 1940s to help ensure that we beat fascism and defended democracy. I shall resist the temptation to sing the verse to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. [*Interruption.*] Disappointing? Not for some.

"I will not cease from Mental Fight,

Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:

Till we have built Jerusalem,

In England's green and pleasant Land."

We have much to do, in this House and in communities right across the country, so let us get on with. Happy St George's day to one and all!

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

1.55 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), who is fast establishing a reputation as an effective parliamentarian and a thoroughly nice chap. His speech was appropriate and excellent in every single way, and I agreed with everything he said. It is not often that Labour MPs quote former Tory Prime Ministers—that was certainly a first, and we all much enjoyed it.

Of course, as we all do, the hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned the famous people from his constituency. Well, I can match that for Lincolnshire. I can talk of Sir Isaac Newton, John Smith of the pilgrim fathers, the great poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Joan Plowright. I can also mention one other person who came from Lincolnshire. I do not want to break the cosy consensus of this debate, but it is a lady whom I greatly admire. I believe that she restored greatness to this country when she was Prime Minister—I need not even mention her name because she is so famous.

St George is a saint. He was not English, of course. When the far right try to capture the flag of St George, they should perhaps try to remember that he was an Anatolian Greek. I think it is quite good that our national saint is not actually English, and that we know virtually nothing about him. What we do know is based purely on legend and is almost certainly wrong. I think that says much about the easy-going nature of the English people.

We are surrounded by saints here. In the Undercroft, we have St Etheldreda, St Edward the Confessor, St Margaret of Scotland, St Edmund and many more. In Central Lobby, we have the four great patron saints of our countries. There is a well-worn joke about St Andrew

being on the way to the bar, St Patrick on the way to the exit, St David on the way to this Chamber, where we all like to talk, and St George on the way to the Lords.

Saints unite; politicians divide. I have many times expressed in this Chamber—it is rather an unfashionable point of view, but I will mention it briefly—the importance of religion in binding people together. Religion, on an ecumenical basis—being proud of one's religion and its social ethos—should be a unifying factor. All the great religions have much the same moral creed, and I think the decline of religion in England has been rather sad.

The theme I want to talk about, so that I do not indulge entirely in clichés, is the essence of a nation being a sense of community—a community in which everybody is in a project together, all doing their bit. Sadly, there has been a decline in that sense of community in our nation. For instance, my parents, although English, were brought up in France. They came here as refugees in 1940 when the Germans invaded France because they had British passports, and they met in Bletchley Park. They had a very mixed upbringing, but they had a complete dedication to this country. When my mother was very old, she would still insist, despite being very infirm, on tottering off to the polling booth. The wartime generation, who we are celebrating today, had an absolute sense of duty and community, and we want to recreate that.

Let me make one or two points that may be more controversial. There are some factors that are breaking our sense of community, and, frankly, we all saw from the results last week that they are fuelling a feeling of disillusion. One, of course, is illegal migration. We have got to understand that this infuriates everybody. It does not just infuriate right-wing people who do not like the idea of migrants. It also infuriates many people who are working hard and feel that some are taking advantage.

I do not want to make any criticism of migrants, and I do not want to attack them personally. Take a Somali migrant—why is he trying to come here? Because for hundreds of years, his family could fish off the coast of Somalia, and then we in the west sent in huge trawlers to take all the fish away and took away his livelihood, so he resorted to piracy. Quite rightly, we then sent in warships to deal with that, so once again, they were starving, and he is now on the way here. I do not think we should approach the issue of migration in a nationalistic way. What I liked about the speech made by the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme was that it was patriotic, not nationalistic, and it tried to heal divisions.

The fact is that illegal migration is an open wound in our society. It is not just the cost of it, with £4 million a day spent on hotels; there is also a sense for many in our country that people who could apply for asylum in the proper, normal way are bypassing that route. We have seen from a study in *The Daily Telegraph* this week how easy it is to pay a people smuggler, come over here, be put in a hotel and act as a courier. That is really infuriating people.

Our fate in the Conservative party, because we are no longer in power, is that we are dependent on the Labour Government solving this problem—and they will have to solve it, because we cannot go on as we are. It is fuelling a great sense of anger in the nation. The Government have to get a derogation from the Strasbourg Court, as I have argued many times, in order to arrest, detain and deport people, and then this horrible trade will stop immediately.

Of course, there is a humanitarian point to be made here: these people smugglers are putting lives at risk, and people are dying. They are feeding on human misery. We cannot do much about it in the Conservative party; Labour is now in power. My advice to the Government is that if they want to resist this sense of disillusion in society, with people turning away from both the Labour party and the Conservative party, they have to do something about it.

They have to do something about legal migration, too. There is a great sense among people who are working hard here that people are pouring in or have poured in. I blame my Government as much as any other; I do not make a party political point here. The Labour party has taken over a difficult issue. We all know the reasons to do with the pandemic and all the other excuses, and about how we had to keep the NHS and our care homes going, but the fact that the Conservative Government allowed 1 million people in legally last year is infuriating people, and it is depressing wages. It might be good for overall GDP, but it is certainly bad for individual wealth. Again, we can do very little about it in the Conservative party, but the Government need to act. I know they are trying to take steps.

This is relevant to the debate about St George because it is about trying to recreate a sense that we are one nation, and that everybody works hard, everybody pays their taxes, and we get benefits such as free education and free health so that when we fall ill we are helped by the state. I was talking to a constituent only today and she is clearly a lady in some distress. She cannot move but has just had her personal independence payment cancelled. She has been told she has to work from home, but she cannot work from home because she does not have those sorts of skills. Ever more people are feeling angry that they have done their bit and worked hard, but when they fall ill or need benefits they are not being helped. We have to all work together to try to again get that sense of the wartime spirit—that is a bit of a cliché, but it is about a time when everybody mucked in, everybody had a job, everybody did their bit and there were, frankly, very few freeloaders.

I represent an agricultural constituency. One might wonder why I am now getting on to that subject, but again there is a sense among people in agricultural constituencies that the Government do not understand their point of view. We are all in favour of green energy in Lincolnshire. We are leading on green energy with wind farms in the North sea; there is no opposition to them, but we are angry that entrepreneurs are importing solar panels from China made by slave labour and covering 10,000 acres in my constituency with no proper local planning. We are not against solar farms and we are not against the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero; we just want a sense of fairness that local communities have a say in this and there is some sense of proportion.

I think I have said my bit. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme and hope we have a very good and worthwhile debate.

2.6 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) on securing this important debate. It is

[Dan Aldridge]

poignant that this debate is happening today, on the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day—a day to commemorate the sacrifice, bravery and resilience of so many, as well as the courage to stand up for what is right. That, to me, is the embodiment of St George's spirit.

Sometimes the magnitude of the privilege of being in this place really hits home, and today is one of those days. Looking around, I am thinking more than I usually do of the sacrifices made by so many veterans and current service personnel from Weston-super-Mare, Worle and the villages, across the country and across the Commonwealth. I have thought more deeply than probably ever before about the sacrifice of my own dear grandparents during the second world war and the sacrifices of my very loved family members currently serving our country in the Royal Air Force. It is such a privilege to stand here in this place and pay tribute to them in the spirit of St George and all the good that he can represent.

In the past, St George's day was marked by grand festivities across the land, with feasts, parades and community gatherings that brought people together in celebration of what it meant to be English. If ever we needed to revive that spirit, now is the time. We should take full advantage and celebrate our shared heritage and rebuild pride in our country and hope for the future, because patriotism is much more than rose-tinted nostalgia, and it is not the preserve of one political party or ideology.

Too often, patriotism is wielded as a weapon, its true meaning lost in the noise of performative gestures and narrow nationalism, but the patriotism I value is showing up for the people, places and principles that define our country. This St George's day, I launched a campaign in Weston-super-Mare to make St George's day a bank holiday. I invited my constituents to add their support to the campaign and was struck by the variety of responses we received. Many embraced it with enthusiasm, while others met it with scepticism and cynicism. It got me thinking again about why patriotism should feel suspect or shameful for some. We need to own it, because this love of our country is not exclusive to any one faction or class. It is deep pride in who we are, our shared values, and the common ground upon which we all stand. True patriotism is not about clinging to an idealised past either; it is about striving for a fairer, kinder, more just future. It is about compassion, decency, the rule of law and a good dose of common sense. And it is not blind loyalty either; it is principled commitment to making this country better for everyone.

For me, patriotism is about the everyday things in life that make England the best place in the world to live. It is walking along Sand Bay beach in my constituency, as the sea breeze whips through the air and the rain bats us in the face, making sure that we feel alive; it is listening to my favourite Frank Turner album, "England Keep My Bones", bursting with pride about the country that I am from; it is fish and chips on the Grand Pier; it is Wallace and Gromit and Victoria Wood on TV; and it is a pot of tea to warm up after taking the dog for a walk around Ashcombe Park.

It is also standing up to injustice and caring enough to say, "We can do better than this." Loving your country does not mean settling for the way things are, but striving for how things could be. It is about people

finding their voice among those loud and vexatious people who seek to dominate with hate and division. Those who show up, do the hard graft, and organise and campaign for a better future are the patriots. So too are the teachers who stay late to help a struggling student, the single parents juggling work and family, and the many volunteers who give up their free time to serve their communities, driven not by a need for recognition but by a deep love for their neighbours and their country. Those are the everyday patriots who are too often left out of the national story.

Meanwhile, there are those who wrap themselves in the flag, while eagerly chipping away at the values it represents: equality, freedom and justice. My grandfather, a proud Dunkirk veteran, who did not like to talk about any of his time during the war, knew who those mendacious charlatans who would wear the flag but not represent any of its values were, and he instilled in each and every one of his grandchildren how to spot them. He gave us a few tips about how to take them down as well.

It is time that we reclaim patriotism as a unifying force for good. We should not shy away from it; we should own it, because what is more patriotic than striving to make this country fairer, kinder and more inclusive? From the suffragettes to striking miners, from steelworkers to civil rights campaigners, our country has always been full of people who love this country enough to demand better. If we abandon patriotism to those who use it as a blunt instrument of exclusion, we allow its true spirit to be distorted. We must champion a different kind of patriotism that is not performative or exclusionary, but principled and inclusive; one that honours and supports our armed forces, but also the carers, the bus drivers and the immigrants working tirelessly in our health and care service to look after our sick and elderly.

Loving England does not mean pretending everything is fine, but caring enough to fix what is not. It means believing in the uniqueness of our communities, the warmth of our people and the promise of our future, and it means making sure that every single one of us, regardless of background, is part of that story. Let us renew that commitment, not just to symbols and ceremonies, but to real, meaningful patriotism—the kind that brings people together, strives for fairness and justice, and dares to imagine a better country for all.

2.12 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I rise to take part in this very important debate on St George's day and English affairs. I commend the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jgee) for securing the debate. I will say a bit more about the hon. Member later on, because I believe that he is a fine addition to this House and that he demonstrates patriotism in all that he does.

Before I do so and before I speak more generally about St George's day, may I say that today we also meet in solemn remembrance and in proud celebration of 8 May 1945, 80 years ago, when the guns fell silent across Europe? Victory in Europe Day marked not just the end of a long and brutal war on our continent, but the triumph of courage, unity and unyielding resolve over tyranny. In Romford, Essex and across England, the church bells rang out, neighbours embraced and families paused to remember those who had lost loved ones, but also to welcome those who had returned.

We remember the generation who faced that unimaginable darkness with unwavering bravery: the soldiers who fought on land, at sea and in the air; the families who endured the blitz; the workers and nurses who kept our nation going; and those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom.

Let us never forget that peace is not simply inherited, but earned, and it must be defended anew by each generation. As we reflect on Victory in Europe Day, we honour our past by committing to a future shaped by democracy, justice and international co-operation.

I pay tribute to my father, Frederick William Rosindell, who was an officer in the Royal Air Force during the second world war and flew transport planes. He also served in the Royal Canadian Air Force, with which he trained in Canada during the second world war. We owe so much to all my constituents and their loved ones who served during that conflict and gave us the freedom that we enjoy today. I was proud to be at the town hall in Romford today alongside the mayor of the London borough of Havering, Councillor Gerry O'Sullivan, to raise the VE flag in tribute to all those who served King, Queen and country and gave us the freedom that we sometimes but should never take for granted.

St George's day runs deep. We should all celebrate the spirit of St George with great pride. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British heritage and of the Houses of Parliament branch of the Royal Society of Saint George—my deputy chair is none other than the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme—I am so pleased that we are able to speak today in this general debate about our Englishness and all that it entails. The hon. Member spoke passionately about flag, country and people, and as far as I am concerned that sums everything up. I again thank him for everything that he does to promote British and English patriotism and respect for our heritage and traditions in this place and across the country. As I said earlier, he is a fine addition to the House of Commons.

Thanks to the kind permission of Mr Speaker, the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme and I hosted a parliamentary St George's day reception in the state apartments in Speaker's House on St George's day on 23 April. That celebration brought together English music, food, wine and politicians to celebrate our country and all that is great about our heritage. I offer a special tribute to the band of the Romford Drum & Trumpet Corps, which played the fanfares on that day, and to Kerrie Kavanagh, who organised that.

I also offer a tribute to the wonderful pianist, Drew Steanson, who played English music on Mr Speaker's grand piano in the state apartments, and to the outstanding opera singers, Terry Bosshard and Marie McLaughlin, who sang "Jerusalem" and the national anthem for us. I cannot possibly forget the Silverhand Estate winery in Kent, which donated the magnificent English sparkling wine. I also offer a tribute to all those who volunteered their time and effort to make it such a special annual occasion, which Mr Speaker hosts for us here in Parliament. I am pleased to let Members know that they will be able to avail themselves of the opportunity again next year, as Mr Speaker has already invited us to host another St George's day reception.

I pay tribute to Nick Dutt, the chairman of the Royal Society of Saint George, for the work that he does, and to Cliff Trowse, the co-ordinator of the Houses of

Parliament branch of the Royal Society of Saint George. I do not think I am meant to show props, but I will do so for one second if you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the foundation charter of our branch of the society here in Parliament, which was inaugurated on 23 April 2009. I invite all hon. Members of all parties and Members of the other place to join the Royal Society of Saint George here in Parliament to show support for England and our traditions and for the magnificent work of the society not only in this country, but throughout the world.

I also pay tribute to Tony Appleton, the magnificent town crier of Romford. He is also a royal town crier—he announces royal births outside Buckingham Palace—but he is the Romford town crier, and he was in Parliament on 23 April two weeks ago to ring the bell and announce the order of service for the day. Finally, of course, I pay tribute to Barry Hearn OBE, who kindly supported this year's event so generously.

The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme mentioned some great people—national treasures, great figures in the culture and history of our country—but he forgot a few. I will mention one or two who regularly attend our St George's day celebrations here in Parliament. Of course, we cannot forget Su Pollard, who comes to our St George's day event most years, or Patti Boulaye OBE, who also attends and regularly sings for us in Speaker's House. Finally, I would like to mention Vicki Michelle MBE—from "Allo 'Allo", of course. What better person to remember on this day of VE 80? I also thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; if you could convey our thanks to Mr Speaker for hosting that wonderful event, I would be grateful. I hope that hon. Members will join us next year.

Although the great feast day of St George, the patron saint of England and Englishness, is now celebrated with zeal in this place and in many towns and villages across our country, it is notable that in wider cultural and civic life the celebration of Englishness can sometimes be frowned on and English culture can even be demeaned by some. That is part of the reason for the existence of the Royal Society of Saint George, under royal patronage. It has the noble object of promoting Englishness and the English way of life, which I am proud to support as both a Member of Parliament and chairman of the society's branch in the Houses of Parliament.

It is, however, important to note that the need for greater recognition and appreciation of England and her people runs beyond the level of culture, deep into the roots of our constitutional and devolutionary arrangements. Under the devolutionary arrangements enacted at the turn of the century, with pieces of legislation such as the Scotland Act 1998 that created the Scottish Parliament, regional parliaments were also created. For the first time in centuries, the unifying linchpin of these islands—the Crown in Parliament—seemed to have been wrenched out of place. It is demonstrably true that this has weakened the national unity of our nation and caused some regional, nationalistic and factionalised tendencies, which I believe run counter to Britain's cultural, institutional and constitutional heritage. However, it is the reality we must operate in today, even if we do not relish it.

Perhaps the most intellectually consistent response would be to advocate for the reversal of devolution, but of course, there is unlikely to be such a political appetite

[Andrew Rosindell]

today to do so. What must be acknowledged is that England, the most populous region with the biggest economy, is the only home nation not to have her own devolved Parliament. This has created a democratic deficit in which the proud people of England—such as those in my constituency of Romford, Essex—are left with the rich cultural heritage I outlined earlier but a rather diminished democratic voice.

Sir Edward Leigh: Please spare us another Parliament.

Andrew Rosindell: My right hon. Friend will know that I am a very strong supporter of this Parliament and this United Kingdom. I was not, of course, a Member of this House when devolution was introduced, but had I been here at the time, I most certainly would not have voted to break up our United Kingdom in the way that we have done by creating different Parliaments and Assemblies across the UK—including the London Assembly, which I would love to see abolished very soon.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I appreciate that the hon. Member is speaking about St George's day and English affairs, but I would just take issue with his use of the phrase “break up” to describe the effect of devolution on our country. We devolved some of the power closer to the people so that they felt more represented. That was not an attempt to break up the country. I say as a member of the party which, along with the Labour party, was instrumental in achieving devolution that it was to hold the country together while allowing people to feel closer to where decisions are made.

Andrew Rosindell: I have the utmost respect for the hon. Lady, and she makes an extremely valid and important point. Nobody wants to break up the United Kingdom, and I did not intend to cause offence by saying that. I believe that all Members of Parliament should be equal. Elected representatives should be equal, but if we create different types of elected representation at different levels, it means that English MPs have a different role from Scottish MPs, because they have MSPs in Scotland, who have another role. By doing so, we are muddling up our constitution, and I regret that that happened, but we have to move on. That is now a quarter of a century ago, and we need to think about the future.

There have been certain attempts to deconstruct that democratic deficit. We had English votes for English laws, also known as EVEL. That procedure was brought into the House. Unitary authorities and mayoralities have been created across England, and we are seeing more being created as we speak. The procedure for creating mayoralities is too remote and the procedure to make them meaningful and to appeal to people who feel ignored is looked at with contempt. These mayoralities are not supported by most people. I think they believe in local democracy at a truly local level, and that is not solved by creating vast regional mayoralities and assemblies that are not in tune with local people in local communities.

There may be merit in the new devolutionary arrangements being considered at local government level, but those will only be effective if they address the cultural, economic and political realities of the localities with which they are concerned. For example, yesterday

I led an Adjournment debate about the London borough of Havering and Essex devolution. Apparently, Havering is not allowed to be considered as part of devolution in Essex. In that debate, I highlighted how successive regional London authorities and the plans for Essex devolution have ignored the local Essex identities of my constituents, particularly in Romford. That has happened under successive Governments.

The historic counties, in the patchwork of traditional England, will play an important part in devolution. I hope the Minister will take back the point that perhaps the historic counties and the ceremonial counties could be aligned to avoid the muddle and confusion. Many Members and I have to debate with people over whether places such as Romford are really Essex or London—what are we? It muddles a lot of people's minds and creates a lot of confusion, and it needs to be resolved. Aligning the historic and the ceremonial counties would go a long way to solving that. It would mean that local government could be purely for administration and the provision of local services, and it would mean that people's local identities were not mixed up.

I therefore request that the Government open up a discussion and a plan for restoring all the facets of the English way of life, so that my constituents no longer feel that they are being ignored. It is an obvious but integral point that any attempt to deconstruct and replace the current devolutionary arrangements can only be successful if hard-working people, like my constituents in Romford, Essex, are listened to and heard. I am sure that all Members of the House would agree that their constituents' voices must be heard. English democracy might then be restored to the place of pride it used to occupy, just as the English cultural repertoire that had pride of place in Speaker's House earlier this year made such an impact on so many of us.

As we reflect on our proud English history, our magnificent British traditions, the Commonwealth of nations, the British overseas territories, the Crown dependencies and the wider British family, and all that our forebears achieved in giving us the magnificent land and magnificent island nation that we have today, I can do no better than to quote the words of Sir Winston Churchill:

“Advance Britannia! Long Live the Cause of Freedom! God Save the King!”—[*Official Report*, 8 May 1945; Vol. 410, c. 1869.]

2.29 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on bringing this debate to the House. I am delighted to join Members from across the House in celebrating St George's day and English affairs, for it is only right that we take the time to celebrate our history, our heritage and our national character, to reflect on what it means to be English, and to come together in unity and pride.

I fondly recall marking St George's day last year as a Minister in Downing Street, where we hosted an event that brought together business leaders, charities, veterans, community leaders and voluntary organisations—outstanding members of the community who all play a vital role in our country. It reminded me just how proud we should be of our country. We must take pride in our history in order to instil the richness of our culture and our values in the next generation, and to reclaim what Britishness means to us all.

For a small country, we have well and truly punched above our weight. We have defended the world not once, but twice, in two world wars—something that must never be forgotten. Before this debate, we rightly marked the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day over in Westminster Abbey. The great-great-grandson of Sir Winston Churchill lit the candle of peace 80 years on from Sir Winston's famous speech, in which he told the nation that the war had ended. Like so many other Members, we will leave the House straight after this debate to go back to our constituencies. I will be going to Comberbach in Tatton to share in the VE Day celebrations this evening.

As we reflect and commemorate VE Day, we must ask ourselves one crucial question: have we lived up to the example set by those great patriotic individuals who fought and died to protect our freedoms and give us peace? For peace and freedoms do not just happen; they are fought for. In pondering that question—and we may have different answers—we need to rethink what our duty is to one another and to our country, to make sure that we do stand up for those same freedoms today, and to protect the legacy of those who stood before us and made the ultimate sacrifice, for we cannot and must not cower to those who deny our great past, or be traduced by those who are embarrassed or who denounce it. The voice of the right-minded majority must remind those detractors of what we stand for and what we have given the world.

Our great country was the cradle of the industrial revolution, and the birthplace of the computer and the internet. We gave the world football, rugby and cricket. We discovered gravity and evolution, and we eradicated smallpox. We have produced literary geniuses such as Shakespeare, Dickens and the Brontës, great composers from Elgar to Britten and, from my home town, the Beatles—those four lads who took music to the world. We have produced artists such as Constable, Turner and, yes, even Banksy. Innovation and entrepreneurialism are in our country's DNA, and that must be remembered and continued.

I know that our English character is to be stoical—to find a queue and wait patiently in it—and not to brag. In fact, we would rather hide our light under a bushel than extol our virtues, but now is not the time for that. In an era of speed and fast communications, when facts can be lost and fake becomes real, we need to remember who we are and what we have given to the world. We are a positive voice in an ever-more complicated and dangerous world, and we need to take heed of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which rightly celebrate their national days. We must do the same, too.

Let us be clear: it is time for the majority of law-abiding, hard-working and patriotic people of England to have their say, to stand up for our values—the values of honour, courage, faith and freedom, which have stood the test of time—and to sing with one voice that we are proud of England, proud of Great Britain and proud to be British. We need to take on the mantle of St George, the warrior saint who is the patron saint of England, as a symbol of strength, conviction and righteous purpose, who reminds us that our nation has never been afraid to stand up for what is right.

In the Chamber where I am delivering this speech, and where we have all spoken so positively today, let me say that I am very proud, as I know we all are, to serve

in this Parliament. It is the mother of Parliaments, and the heart of a thriving democracy that has been the model for so many other countries around the world.

Let us speak with one voice, with pride and unity, and say clearly and unapologetically that we are proud to be English, we are proud of our past, and we believe in our future. Today we stand together to celebrate what makes us all English, to celebrate that we are all British and to remember, today of all days, victory in Europe.

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

2.36 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Allow me to start by thanking the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) for proposing this debate and congratulating him on his excellent introductory speech. He talked about the importance of seeing the flag of St George as a positive, and avoiding the temptation in some quarters to demean it. That point was also made by the hon. Members for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) and for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme also talked about the influence of English language, culture, sport and history all over the world, and highlighted the courage and tenacity of the English character.

Of course, today of all days, I join all Members across the House in paying tribute to the English and British people who fought in the second world war—enabling us to have this debate today—to protect democracy across Europe.

Like the hon. Member for Romford, the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme mentioned singing, and I surely speak for the whole House when I express my disappointment that he opted not to sing to us, but I hope he will rectify that on a future occasion. He also paid tribute to former Prime Minister Winston Churchill—as did the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the hon. Member for Romford and the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey)—who exemplified public service, as do Members of this House to this day.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough took us through a little of the history of St George, and I will do a little bit more of that. Legend has it that St George slew an evil dragon that was plaguing a local town and saved a princess. It is traditionally a Christian celebration, as the story goes that St George offered to kill the dragon only if the town converted to Christianity. However, the historical record points to the fact that George was likely among those who suffered for their faith during the last great persecution of the Church initiated in the year 303 by the Roman emperor Diocletian.

In fact, it was not until the mid-13th century that George became firmly associated with the English nation, especially with the Crown and at times of war, and it was not until the time of Henry VIII that the St George's cross became the national flag. Veneration of George has always had a strong popular dimension, and this was helped along by his dragon-slaying powers. Depictions of the saint in combat with the fearsome serpent date from at least the ninth century. A revival of contemporary St George's day celebrations emerged in the 1990s, with the St George's flag a regular feature at sporting events, in churches and in use by local government and other public bodies.

[Olly Glover]

My Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage has some important contributions to make. We have Dragon hill near Uffington, where legend has it that St George slayed the dragon, and the quintessentially English village of Upton has the recently refurbished George public house, which is very much enjoyed by parishioners of that village and many from further afield. Elsewhere in Oxfordshire there is the St George's tower in Oxford castle, a key battleground of the English civil war, which is key to the foundations of our constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy.

But it is also interesting to note that St George and St George's day has an international dimension to this most English of special days. It is a day of celebration in, among others: Hungary, Portugal, Spain, German, Brazil, Serbia and Greece. The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare mentioned calls for St George's Day to become an English national holiday, calls supported by English Heritage and the organisation in which the hon. Member for Romford is very active, the Royal Society of St George. I am sure that is something that many Members would support.

Contributions to the debate have also reflected on what Englishness means to us today. St George's Day is an opportunity to take pride in our country's achievements, including the pivotal role England and its Parliament played in the birth of modern democracy. England's story is one of community spirit, innovation and compassion; our strength lying in the rich tapestry of rural villages, bustling towns and global cities that make up our country. We believe that patriotism should never mean exclusion. To be proudly English is to embrace the rich diversity of our country, and the rights and freedoms we all share.

Hon. Members, in particular the hon. Member for Romford, talked about what England needs to thrive. The Liberal Democrats support the establishment of a UK constitutional convention to draft a new federal constitution, clearly defining powers at each level of government, based on democratic engagement, liberal values and fair resource distribution. The convention must develop an inclusive structure for government in England, giving all regions a say in how they are governed. Every part of England should have the right to secure a devolution deal that works for local people and is tailored to the unique local dynamics of England's regions. Devolution must come with proper funding. Councils and combined authorities need a sustained increase in funding, reflecting demand and reversing the severe pressures facing local services.

We back the creation of a UK council of ministers, bringing together devolved Governments and English regional leaders to collaborate on national policy and uphold the principles of federal co-operation. Decisions on local government reorganisation must be driven by councils and communities, not imposed without consultation. It is unacceptable for changes to bypass district councils and exclude public input. It is essential that any devolution should promote inclusive economic growth, better public services and democratic accountability, so that we can continue to ensure that England is a great place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

2.41 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): It is a privilege to rise on behalf of the shadow Culture team to mark St George's day. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this important debate.

"With St George in my heart keep me English, with St George in my heart I pray, with St George in my heart keep me English, keep me English till my dying day."

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud to be English and so should we all. Far from being just a nation of shopkeepers, as wrongly claimed, England's accomplishments are vast. We have given so much to the world: from the writings of Shakespeare to football, rugby and cricket, and to parliamentary democracy itself in this mother of all Parliaments. England's history is one of heroes and bravery: Nelson, Wellington, Churchill; good triumphing over evil; freedom overcoming tyranny; and the sacrifices of the greatest generation, which we rightly celebrate this week for VE Day, 80 years on. And we give thanks to our incredible armed forces serving today.

We Conservatives are not ashamed to celebrate England's long and storied history; to remind the world that England is not a sleeping lion, but a proud and great nation ready to roar again. England's culture is living, breathing and shaped by the people who have called this green and pleasant land home in times gone by, and by all of us today. We should never take that inheritance for granted. Culture matters: it binds us together, gives us a common identity and pride, and it provides the foundations for our civic life. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you will agree with me that one of the most important roles of every Government is to protect and promote the cultural fabric of our nation.

St George is more than a figure of legend. As our patron saint, he represents ideals that are woven deeply into the English character: courage, service and honour. His story has inspired generations to stand firm in defence of what is right, and it remains a powerful symbol of national unity and Christian faith. Those values and his inspiration were exemplified by those we commemorate throughout this week with our VE Day celebrations nationwide.

While in this House on the anniversary of VE Day itself, I want to recognise the immense sacrifice those veterans made for us. For our tomorrow, they gave their today. Their courage, service and duty must inspire us all in this House. I am a proud uncle today, as my seven-year-old niece took my great-grandfather Jack's and my great-uncle Bill's medals to her school party.

With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will quote Sir Winston Churchill's words 80 years ago today:

"We were the first, in this ancient island, to draw the sword against tyranny. After a while we were left all alone against the most tremendous military power that has been seen... But every man, woman and child in the country had no thought of quitting the struggle... This is not victory of a party or of any class. It's a victory of the great British nation as a whole."

I am sure that every Member will have seen how these values are preserved and expressed in not only our institutions, but our everyday lives and throughout our history, traditions, literature and music, and in the spirit of local communities around the country.

We must make sure that English culture—both historic and contemporary—is properly supported and celebrated, which means protecting heritage sites, funding grassroots

arts, civil society and music, championing English literature in our schools, and giving local communities a stronger voice in how their stories are told and preserved. This is not about nostalgia; it is about an enduring national pride and having the confidence to tell England's stories, warts and all, and teach the next generation that our past is not to be erased, but to be understood and learned from.

We must be clear: English identity is not exclusionary. It is inclusive, civic-minded and rooted in shared experience. From the village green to the city high street, from brass bands to bustling markets, English culture thrives in our community—not in Whitehall, but in areas such as my home of Bexley, and in every town and city across our great country.

In this House, we rightly celebrate the Union of our United Kingdom. But England, with its unique blends of peoples, cultures and voices, must never, ever be taken for granted. In this St George's day debate, the Conservatives will continue to proudly fly the flag not just for tradition's sake, but for what it represents: an England that is resilient, creative and confident in its future. Let us therefore support and invest in the cultural life of our nation, not only for the obvious economic return, but because our culture is the heart of our nation and we should be proud of it—every field, every hedgerow. Together across this House, let us reaffirm our commitment to telling England's story—rich, complex and full of hope—with a renewed pride.

In closing—if you would indulge me one final time, Madam Deputy Speaker—I will quote Shakespeare's "Richard II":

"This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself...
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England".

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing this important debate, as well as the co-sponsors of this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) and the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). We have heard incredibly heartfelt and powerful speeches today from the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) and the Opposition Front Benchers, the hon. Members for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) and for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French).

The twenty-third of April—the feast day of St George—has been celebrated in England for hundreds of years and remains an enduring symbol of our heritage and national spirit. St George himself was a soldier of the Roman empire who stood up for his beliefs, refusing to renounce his faith even in the face of persecution. His unwavering courage made him a symbol of strength, fairness and perseverance, earning him sainthood and recognition across the world. Those values of courage, strength, perseverance, fairness and decency are a distillation

of what it means to be English—so much of which we see reflected across our society, throughout our history and in our present day.

To be English is to be proudly part of the United Kingdom. We are brought together by our shared values, faith in democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance. As a family of nations, we are stronger together than we are apart—strengthened by our diversity and bound by our common endeavour. It is of course fitting that we reflect on these values, as we mark VE Day today, and remember all those who fought bravely for our nation. On the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe over the forces of fascism, we honour the sacrifices that they made for our freedom.

As we have heard throughout this debate, St George's day gives us the perfect opportunity to celebrate our heritage—to reflect on what makes England great and to unite people under a shared sense of belonging and national pride.

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Lady speaks passionately about the importance of St George's day, but will the Government consider making St George's day a public holiday in England? We can learn from the wonderful example of Ireland where St Patrick's day is a public holiday throughout the island of Ireland. Can we not do the same for England?

Rushanara Ali: The hon. Member makes an important point. I will not be able to respond with a positive answer right now, but as he is a powerful advocate and campaigner, I know that he will continue to make the case to this Government.

England is a nation of invention and innovation, as others have pointed out. From the creation of the world's first vaccine to the invention of the computer and the world wide web, we have been at the forefront of technology, science and healthcare, making a global impact on the challenges that define our times. We have so much to be proud of. We are a nation of creativity and culture. We are the land of Shakespeare, Austen, Brontë, Newton and Magna Carta, and the land of one of the oldest Parliaments in the world. We are the mother of Parliaments. England has given voice to the plays, literature, songs, television programmes and films that have defined the stories that have been told for generations.

Hon. Members have powerfully and beautifully described the rich heritage and culture that defines this nation, but we are also a nation of sporting success, from football and cricket to triumphs in world cycling, Formula One and much else. England has a proud history of entrepreneurial ingenuity, from the pioneering trades of our market towns and historic mills to today's thriving tech hubs, creative start-ups and world-class financial centres. England's spirit of enterprise has adapted, innovated and driven progress, shaping our economy and influencing the world, from the industrial revolution to the digital age.

England is also a place of distinct beauty. From the enchanting Cornish coastline to the rugged wilderness of Northumberland, the tranquil lakes of Cumbria and the majestic cliffs of Dover, our landscape captivates, inspires and is cherished by people who live here and by people who visit.

Beyond the achievements lies something more powerful—our sense of service and community. We see this commitment every day, from the courage and bravery

[*Rushanara Ali*]

of those in the armed forces to the compassion and skill of our doctors and nurses in the NHS, from the dedication of our teachers to the generosity of volunteers in our charities, faith groups and community organisations across the nation. Together, their efforts embody the very best of England and the United Kingdom.

We are proud to be a nation that fosters opportunity and aspiration for all. This is where someone from a working-class background can rise to become Prime Minister, and where a British Hindu can hold the highest office in our country as Prime Minister. On a personal note, it is a great source of pride for me to be responding to this debate as a Minister of the Crown. I say that as someone who was born in Bangladesh, was elected as Britain's first Bangladeshi-origin MP—and whose father was born in 1937, was 10 years old during partition, at the end of empire, and came to this country in the 1960s to work here and make a life for himself. It is a great source of pride that Englishness and Britishness is about all of us, and that I and others in this House can feel that we too belong and are English as well as British, alongside our multiple identities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme demonstrated when talking about his heritage and background.

Closer to home, Members mentioned events in Speaker's House. Events like those and the St George's day festival in Trafalgar Square help to celebrate our rich heritage through music and Morris dancing—I have not tried the latter, but perhaps Members will be inspired to do so after this debate. We have also seen a bustling parade in Manchester, with an array of community groups and local residents coming together to show how proud they are of their local area, local heritage and our identity.

Sadly, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, there are some who seek to divide us. It is on all of us to make sure that we fight against the forces of division. Such individuals seek to sow division between us and our communities and to create an idea that English national identity is an exclusive, white-only identity. That is not the case. We see that in this debate today and in the contributions we have all made. Identity is not pure; it is mixed and complex. We must stand up for the values of respect, tolerance and fair play; they are the essence of Englishness and Britishness, and define us as a nation.

The Government are committed to investing in our communities and channelling a spirit of pride, perseverance and positivity that reflects the best of St George's day. Through our plan for change, we are focused on what matters: easing the cost of living, restoring pride in our public services, making streets safer, building the homes people need, expanding opportunities for all and supporting our veterans with real homes for heroes.

We know that this change starts with what matters most to local communities—the places we call home. The “English Devolution” White Paper sets an ambitious new framework for English devolution, moving power out of Westminster. Mayors will have a range of powers across housing, planning, transport, energy, skills and employment, and more, in order to deliver the missions that we have set out to transform our country. The new £1.5 billion plan for neighbourhoods will deliver up to £20 million in funding over the next decade for 75 communities across the UK, including 58 in England. The plan will lay the foundations to kickstart local growth and drive up living standards.

We will also invest in our heritage. English identity exists in our heritage and culture, and this Government will protect the places that form our communities. England's finest heritage buildings are an integral part of our culture. We are allocating £15 million for heritage sites that are at risk, providing grants for repairs and conservation to heritage buildings, with a focus on the sites in most need. This funding will restore local heritage, such as shops, pubs, parks and town halls.

We are also providing just under £5 million for the heritage revival fund to empower local people to take control of and look after their local heritage. It will support community organisations to own neglected heritage buildings and bring them back into good use. As we take pride in these places, we must also protect them for the generations who walk these paths after us. We will also support our businesses and entrepreneurs to thrive, and the Government will publish a new small and medium-sized enterprises strategy later this year.

This Government will protect our shores against external threats and against those who seek to harm our way of life or divide us. We have shown that through our biggest defence investment since the end of the cold war.

Our strength as a nation is measured not just in what we stand against but in what we stand for, which is community, service and a shared belief in a better future. We must inspire the next generation to carry forward the best of England through education, opportunity and the belief that no matter who you are or where you come from, you belong, and you can help shape this country's future.

I thank all hon. Members from across the House for their powerful contributions to this important debate. On VE Day, we honour those who gave their life for our freedom and for a better tomorrow. As the Prime Minister said at the recent St George's day reception at 10 Downing Street, let us take pride in our national identity and in all those who keep the country going.

3 pm

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to all colleagues who spoke in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) had to return home for a family emergency; otherwise, she would have taken part. The same goes for my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson).

I am grateful to the Father of the House for his wise words on immigration, faith and communities. I am grateful for his compliment, which will do wonders for my reputation in the Government Whips Office. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), who gave an excellent speech—that is no surprise because he went to school in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who mentioned English sparkling wine, while I forgot to. That is no surprise, because he is a man who keeps it successful and thriving. The right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) knows that Merseyside has an important role in my family's life. I thank her for her speedy talk on England's character and history. I enjoyed her typically lefty reflection on the power of Banksy, and thank her for that. In all seriousness, she gave an important speech and, like her, I am proud to be British and proud to be English.

I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for his generous comments. He wanted me to sing. I want to get re-elected, so I am not sure that singing would be a good idea. If I did it not here but at home, I suspect that my neighbour, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), would have something to say about it, so I will not take up his invitation. I am grateful to both the shadow Minister and the Minister for their generous remarks and the uniformity of their comments.

This has been an excellent debate, celebrating all that is good about England, all that we have achieved and all that we must do together. It is no surprise, but it is also unfortunate, that there were only three parties represented in the House for the duration of the debate: the Labour party, the Tories and the Liberals. Let that be a lesson to many in our communities up and down England. England is a great country, where so much good has been done, but there is so much more to do, so let us get on with it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered St George's Day and English affairs.

Brain Tumours: Research and Treatment

3.3 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden)

(Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that Brain Tumour Awareness Month took place in March; further notes that there has been no progress in NHS treatment of brain tumours in 20 years and that they are the biggest cancer killer of people under the age of 40; calls on the Government to demand that the National Institute for Health and Care Research take action to spend the £40 million provided by the Government for brain tumour research in 2018 for innovative and meaningful drug trials, following the death of the late Baroness Tessa Jowell; and further calls on the Government to encourage the pharmaceutical industry to undertake research into the repurposing of drugs for brain tumours and to require the NHS repurposing service to consider the repurposing of drugs for brain tumours.

On Saturday 27 November 2021, Margaret collapsed in front of me without warning. She lay on the floor convulsing in epileptic fits. By 4 am, two young doctors at University College hospital told me that she had a brain tumour. On the Wednesday, as I approached her bed on the ward, she said, "Look at that doctor. He can't look at me—the news from that scan must be really bad. Bring him over." Of course, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, she was always right.

My brilliant sister Margaret—the fiercest, strongest, bravest, kindest woman I have ever known—had a glioblastoma brain tumour. When it comes to such brain tumours, there is an average life expectancy of nine months from diagnosis and a five-year survival rate of just 5%; there has been no improvement in NHS treatment in 20 years; and the UK is graded 27th out of 29 comparable countries for its performance. Glioblastoma was the only opponent that my sister had never beaten, but over 18 months, she gave it her very best shot.

Standing here, just six weeks before the second anniversary of her loss, I remain as determined as ever to fight for a cure for this savage cancer in the face of what can only be described as indifference from the NHS, the pharmaceutical industries, the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Medical and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and, I regret to say, most of the cancer charities. In fighting this, I believe that we can find a path to improved treatment for not just glioblastoma but all rare cancers. However, that will happen only if we—Members of this House, cancer campaigners, patients and the bereaved—make it happen, because the system currently conforms to Einstein's definition of madness: it continues to do the same thing but expects different outcomes. Don't get me wrong; the system would like to cure glioblastoma, but it is just proving a bit difficult.

What is laughingly described as the gold standard of NHS treatment has not changed in 20 years. It includes surgery, which does not actually remove the tumour, a brutal eight weeks of radiotherapy, and then as much temozolomide chemotherapy as someone can take, which in Margaret's case was not very much. Then, nothing from the NHS. Those with savings, homes, pensions or the ability to fundraise use everything they have to travel to other countries where people believe that those diagnosed with a terminal disease should have access to all available treatments. In Margaret's case, that person was Dr Sahinbas in Düsseldorf. As for those for whom that is not an option—and there are many—our holy,

[*Dame Siobhain McDonagh*]

revered NHS expects them just to lay down, take their fate and die. Just as I would not let Margaret lay down and die, we should not let anyone in the UK simply lay down and die from a glioblastoma. Here is how we can change things.

First, we need early diagnosis. In the vast majority of glioblastoma cases, the neuro-oncology multidisciplinary teams can diagnose the tumour from an MRI scan. In most cases, they wait for surgery, which could take a full eight weeks from the MRI. Given that developing groundbreaking immunotherapy treatments are based on giving the drugs ahead of surgery, early MRI diagnosis would allow improvement in treatments and outcomes.

Secondly, we need drug trials. The only way to find a cure for glioblastoma and other rare cancers is through drug trials, but as those with such cancers know, there are none. NHS trials have collapsed and the pharmaceutical industry concentrates on the large, lucrative conditions: breast, prostate, bowel and lung cancers. If we believe that no cancer should be left behind in a country with some of the most innovative pharmaceutical companies and a healthcare system as universal as ours, the Government should broker a partnership between that industry and the NHS to make sure that new or repurposed drugs are trialled for all cancers. They should share the early risk; the NHS should run the trials and the drug companies should be expected to provide the drugs. Will the Minister and the Department of Health and Social Care directly support a test case project for glioblastoma treatment, in which a strategy is developed with AstraZeneca, which has set up a rare cancer unit?

Thirdly, we must keep costs down. Costs are always a barrier to more drug trials. However, trials carried out through the National Institute for Health and Care Research are conducted at a reduced cost. To keep costs down, trials into glioblastoma and other rare cancers should automatically be NIHR-badged, and all funded trials should be given access to NHS resources.

Fourthly, the mission of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency should be reviewed. The MHRA is the gatekeeper of drugs licensing in the UK, and it understandably requires that all data on all trials be published, but in my personal experience from speaking with pharmaceutical companies, that is a barrier to them providing their best and most innovative drugs. While I accept that all information should be published, information on drug trials should be published for their respective cancers. If a drug that was originally for lung cancer is trialled on glioblastoma, that should be recorded separately.

Fifthly, we need to change the purpose of the NHS medicines repurposing project to provide existing drugs for trial. Many of our leading medical oncologists believe that there is already a drug in use that could improve and maybe even cure glioblastoma, but it has never been trialled. That is why I am calling for the repurposing of the NHS medicines repurposing programme; we should add the aim of supplying existing drugs for the treatment of glioblastoma and other rare cancers.

I have submitted these five proposed pledges to the Government's consultation on the national cancer plan. They are born out of my personal experience of talking to anybody who moves about glioblastoma over the last two years. I am only one MP, with a GCSE in biology,

but I hope with all my heart that my submission will be taken seriously, and that the Government will grab it with both hands to ensure that nobody else goes through what my sister went through.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for that moving speech. I would like to place on the record my love and admiration for her sister Margaret.

3.12 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh). This is a debate that I wish we were not at. I wish there was no need for us to have this debate, but sadly there is. This is an issue that I have come to know more about personally in the last few months, after a young constituent came to me. Archie is a 22-year-old elite athlete from Edinburgh, training for the Commonwealth games and the Olympic trials. He was diagnosed with an inoperable and terminal IDH-mutant low-grade glioma—a rare form of brain tumour that disproportionately affects younger people. As I say, he is 22 years old.

However, there should be good news, because there is a new highly promising drug—so promising, I am told, that the trials were stopped midway through, and those on the placebo were given the drug, because it was proving so successful in inhibiting the growth of the tumour. It was developed in Edinburgh and is available to eligible patients through a named patient programme, through which it is being administered free of charge, but not everywhere—only, in Scotland, in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Tayside areas.

However, Archie has not been given access to the drug because of the routine blood-testing and the cost to NHS Lothian. I and his MSP have written to NHS Scotland and the Lothian health board, and I have written to the drug company, to ask how we can make the drug available. It seems the cruellest of things that a drug is available, having been partly developed in Archie's own city, but he cannot have it. I know that the NHS is devolved, but drug policy is not. It seems unfair that we live with a situation in which lifesaving treatments are decided by postcode. People are passed from pillar to post only to be told that they cannot or will not have treatments that are available, and that the only options are radiotherapy, chemotherapy and the other interventions that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden described, which could be replaced.

One word covers a lot of the excuses that we have been given: affordability—as if we are dealing with anything other than a human being whose situation is no fault of their own. I understand the pressures on finances, on resources and on the NHS—we all do—but that cannot mean a limit to our ambition in what we can do for those who are suffering. We are all here because we believe that we can make a difference. I certainly did not come here with the intention of sitting back and accepting that I could not help when it comes to health or that we would talk about saving money when we should talk about saving lives.

I count myself lucky to have met so many dedicated and strong people since I was invited into Archie's home to talk with him and his family about the challenges they face and how we could help them. One of those

people is Dawn from the Astro Brain Tumour Fund, whose son Shay was diagnosed with a grade 2 IDH-mutant astrocytoma. He said:

“Chemotherapy and radiotherapy. That’s what the future holds for me. After battling through an awake brain surgery, months of rehabilitation, waking up every day battling this disease in my own head, putting a smile on my face for those around me, just to have to go through another year of turmoil and appointments, only to be left with potential long-term cognitive issues and even further away from the 24-year-old I knew on 9 April 2021. That is not a cure.”

It is no longer good enough to say that treatment is too difficult or expensive. Families are crowdfunding for treatment and looking abroad. This is not the NHS that Bevan envisaged; it is not the NHS that any of us wants. We are letting people down if we do not do as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden suggested by testing such drugs on everyone and making them available everywhere. When such a drug comes up and can save people’s lives, surely we should ensure that it is available throughout the country, without geographical limits.

3.17 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for the way she has pursued this issue seriously and with such emotion. I knew her sister Margaret. She was a Labour party organiser and I knew her for 45 years. She terrified me, to be honest, over the years, but I always admired her commitment to the Labour party and the wider community. I think Margaret would be proud of her sister for the speech she made today and the work that she has done.

I congratulate the Milan group, a women’s group in my constituency—they call themselves a ladies group. It is a group of Asian ladies who came together when one lost their daughter to a brain tumour. They come together every year, including last weekend, when they raised £2,500 for the Brain Tumour Charity. Each year, they get me to do something. This year, I sang in Punjabi, and they had to lock the doors. The previous year, I danced to bhangra music—I tried to purchase the video off them because it was going viral at one point. That raised a large amount of money and shows the commitment in the wider community, as people become more aware of the situation and of the impact of brain tumours, particularly among children. People realise that something must be done.

I want to make a particular point to reinforce what my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden has said. There is a desperate need to look at the mechanisms by which new drugs are brought forward and trialled and people can access those trials. I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours, and we met one family who were desperate to get on to a trial of a particular drug, but the drug was being delayed through the mechanisms we have at the moment. I completely understand the processes we have to go through to ensure that a drug is safe and does not cause harm, but there is frustration at how long that takes and the fact that some people who have no other option are not being allowed to access those trials quickly or effectively enough. On that one occasion, we met the drug company, and as an all-party group, I think we did have a beneficial effect in bringing forward the trials and enabling some of the sufferers to access those trials, which we hope will be successful.

One of the most important points my hon. Friend made is that the system just is not working at the moment. It is producing an element of frustration and a lack of confidence in the NHS, which is disappointing. That is because the treatments are not being brought forward quickly enough, the access to the trials is tortuous to say the least, and there does not seem to be any mechanism by which we are co-ordinating better with the pharmaceutical industry and trying to set priorities for it. My hon. Friend mentioned why the industry concentrates on other cancers—because that is where the big profits are—but there has to be some way in which we can incentivise these companies to focus on this range of conditions.

The problem is that there are so many types of brain tumour, and it is difficult to see a company investing a large amount of money when there might be only a limited impact on a small group of patients. However, that is where Government come in. The resourcing of the experimentation, research and trials is so important, and that falls to the state. My hon. Friend has made the point in previous debates and in meetings of our all-party group that, even where the money is there to enable that to happen, it is not getting out there. We have gone through the different organisational structures to investigate what the issue is. I think it is a lack of leadership, and that needs to come from Government.

One of the suggestions I put to the Minister is that there needs to be a conference—it might be a one-off—where we bring everybody together again. The Government have put forward their proposals in the cancer strategy, and they have looked at the pathways, but a new element of zest is needed. We need to bring the pharmaceutical companies in and have an honest discussion about whether the existing structures are working well enough and whether there needs to be some rationalisation, to ensure that we are more effective and speedy in our actions and to investigate what the pharmaceutical companies need in order for research to be undertaken speedily, more effectively and with greater patient access.

As the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) said, there is an issue with the funding of individual drugs. If there is to be a rationing process, it is better to be open and transparent about how rational the implementation is across England, Scotland and Wales. At the moment, there seems to be a bit of a postcode lottery in people’s ability to access these individual drugs, in particular when they are being developed for trial.

We need a fresh initiative. I am sure the Government will commit to doing all they can in the coming period, and I hope that more resources will be applied, but unless we get the structures right, the application of those resources will be as frustrating as it is at the moment. As I think the Minister can understand, there has been an expression of frustration at each of our all-party group’s meetings, because the structures are not implementing what the Government themselves want: the wise investment of resources and a more effective link-up with private sector pharmaceutical companies. We need some form of breakthrough event to enable us to move forward more effectively and more rapidly.

Finally, I pay tribute to the various charities, including the Brain Tumour Charity, that are doing such hard work to raise funds and to give hope and comfort to

[John McDonnell]

people as their families go through this appalling experience. I thank them for all the support they have given us in the all-party group.

3.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for sharing her story and for all her endeavours in this House on behalf of her sister and others. I hope she will forgive me for saying that she has a big heart, and she expresses that in this Chamber often. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said he was afraid; I cannot believe he would be afraid of anybody, but I am sure she was not too formidable no matter what the case may be.

For any family to receive the news of a brain tumour is instantly worrying, and we think of all who have lost their lives to this dreadful illness. Just recently we mourned with a dear friend of mine whose daughter went to hospital with a suspected stroke and within two months had gone to eternity with a glioblastoma brain tumour. She gave me an image of a red squirrel in the nearby Mount Stewart estate, run by the National Trust, and that will always have pride of place in my office.

In Northern Ireland, 2,043 brain tumour cases were diagnosed between 2017 and 2021—some 409 cases per year. At the end of 2021, there were almost 5,500 people living with a brain tumour, with the diagnoses occurring between 1997 and 2021. During that period, 53.2% of brain tumour cases were among women—as in the case that I know of and in that raised by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden.

If I was to ask for one thing out of this debate today, it would be for extra money to be made available for research and to find the cures, because that is really what we want. Brain tumours are the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40. In the UK, 16,000 people are diagnosed with a brain tumour each year, and incidence rates of brain tumours are significantly higher in Northern Ireland and Wales than in other UK countries. Brain tumour cases are projected to rise in Northern Ireland by some 36% by 2035, which is really worrying. The Minister always endeavours to give us the answers we all seek, and I ask her to work alongside the Department of Health in Northern Ireland to see how all of us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can work together to take on glioblastoma cancer and tumours.

Despite treatments such as surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy, some patients find themselves resistant to therapy and they relapse and unfortunately may face death after some 15 months. Queen's University Belfast is making giant strides in research and repurposing existing drugs to ascertain if they can make a difference to these dreadful statistics. While it is thankful for the funding given by Brainwaves NI and other charities, the Government need to assist those charities and other groups by making funding available to the highly qualified scientists who could find a cure and have a path to take, but have been precluded from doing so due to the lack of money. The statistics are startling: more children and adults under 40 die of a brain tumour than of any other cancer, yet only 1% of national research spending goes on brain tumour research. More research and more spend could make a great difference; this must be rectified.

The difficulty is that no symptoms are unique to brain tumours. Headaches, nausea, vomiting, blurred vision or weakness of the limbs can be due to other pressure effects within the brain. A tumour can also cause seizures due to infiltrative effects on the brain substance. There are many symptoms, including deafness, visual disturbance, and problems with the sense of smell.

I want to give a wee example. My parliamentary aide had been suffering from a 10-day headache. She is the one who writes all these speeches for me every week—a very busy lady. She booked an eye test after she did some research and asked for a further intensive scan, which she paid for herself. Thankfully in a way, it turned out that her eyes had deteriorated but that the headaches were not due to anything that she had feared. There is a good point to make here: how many young people would not think to do this or would say, “I can't afford to do that”? How much awareness is there that a headache is not always down to dehydration? How many people understand that an eye test is an essential part of our healthcare? Perhaps the Minister would consider making eye tests free at source for those who work, as well as those on benefits, to increase the number of people having an eye test who need one but just do not think about it.

In conclusion, ever conscious of time, I understand that money is not unlimited and that the Government must make effective use of funding, but when I stood at the funeral service and watched the heartbreak of my friend, I thought that there is nothing more important than stopping that heartbreak in Northern Ireland and across this great United Kingdom. Research is the key and we must find the promising research as a matter of urgency. I hope that the debate today will be a step in the right direction.

3.30 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this important debate. She is a tireless campaigner on this issue, which is clearly very close to her heart. I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) for co-sponsoring the debate. Their joint sponsorship demonstrates the cross-party nature of support for tackling this issue; no matter which party we belong to, we can all get behind that.

My constituent, Alex, from Horwich, got in touch with me about his story. With his permission, I would like to share some of that with hon. Members today. Alex's powerful testimony reminds us just how important it is that we support efforts to improve treatment for those suffering from glioblastoma and brain tumours more broadly. In June 2023, Alex suffered a seizure at home and was initially diagnosed with epilepsy, but he was later diagnosed with a glioblastoma. Despite going through surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy, a process that must have been incredibly difficult to bear for his wife, Emma, and children, Joseph and Eloise, the cancer returned.

Alex has recently had his secondary surgery at Salford Royal and told me that, though the teams and lead doctors he has dealt with have been outstanding, the treatment available has hardly changed for 20 years, as colleagues have already noted. I will read some of Alex's own words, as they speak much more eloquently than I can to the struggles that he has faced. He says:

“The real challenge was knowing what to say to our loved ones, especially our kids. We chose to drip-feed relevant information, allowing life to carry on, even during GCSEs. Whether that’s right or wrong, I don’t know, but we keep going and that’s what matters.”

One in three people in the UK knows someone affected by a brain tumour. It kills more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, but receives just 1% of the national spend on cancer research. Since his diagnosis, Alex has fundraised vigorously for Brain Tumour Research, and recently arranged for Bolton town hall to be lit up in honour of Brain Tumour Awareness Month.

On Alex’s behalf, I praise the amazing work done by brain tumour charities, such as Brain Tumour Research, for all they do in raising awareness and funding research, and the staff at the Christie and Salford hospitals for their outstanding care, despite the constraints around treatment. Those charities clearly cannot do it all on their own, and the Government must support where they can. As well as increased, better-used funding, I would like to see more clinical trials and faster diagnosis and treatment by the NHS. That is vital given the speed with which the illness can take hold and the challenges associated with diagnoses.

Finally, I echo calls by colleagues and the Brain Tumour Charity for a national brain tumour strategy, and I urge the Minister to give that serious consideration. Such a strategy is vital given the current shortfalls in the research landscape that have held back progress to date.

3.33 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I too thank and commend the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for securing the debate. It has been a pleasure to work with her and we are all in awe of her single-minded relentlessness on this topic, from which we can all learn.

I have a similar story. Two years ago, I received a call from my nephew and my two nieces asking me to come over quickly. I jumped in the car and drove as fast as I could to my sister’s house, where I found her semi-conscious on the floor, which was the start of a journey over the past two years. She was diagnosed with a glioblastoma. She underwent surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. She is somewhere up there in the Gallery now, and she is doing incredibly well. She is an absolute inspiration to everyone who meets her in her raw courage, determination, empathy and joy in the world. We do not know how it goes from here, but she brings home in her thinking how wonderful and beautiful our world is. She has also been a driving force. We have raised £60,000 and counting so far for the Brain Tumour Charity, which does a wonderful job, and she has brought people in left, right and centre who have suffered or are suffering from GBM or have lost loved ones to GBM. She is engaged, thoughtful and determined, and my heart goes out to her.

I will mention the stats. We know that there are 120 types of brain tumours. Some 12,000 people are diagnosed with a brain tumour every year and—the nasty one—5,300 people die from a brain tumour each year in the UK. In May 2018, the Government announced a research fund of £40 million on the back of the death of Baroness Tessa Jowell to encourage new research

into brain tumours, administered through the National Institute for Health and Care Research. On that day, the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), said:

“At this agonising time, I hope her family can draw comfort from the fact that her legacy will be lives saved and heartbreak averted for thousands of other families.”

However, three years later, in May 2021, the then Health Secretary reported that just £8.8 million of that £40 million had been allocated for dedicated brain tumour research. Three years after that, in March 2025, under a new Government, spending to date directly on brain tumour research was just £11.3 million. Concerningly, a little bit of text was added after that, which said:

“plus an estimated £31.5 million in infrastructure”.

I have three key questions for the Minister, which I would love some answers to, because more than 5,000 people dying each year is far too many. This has been going on for far too long. We need to do more and fulfil the promises that this House has made.

The three questions are as follows. Will the Minister confirm that the new wording is not an attempt to include the £31.5 million of infrastructure spend in the £40 million headline number, with a view to getting the NIHR and the Government off the hook on their commitment to spend the full £40 million that they have committed to new research into brain cancers? Will the Government commit to allocating and spending the £40 million within a decade, which is already far too long, of their original May 2018 commitment—by May 2028, which is three years from now? That is doable if we put our minds to it, and we need the Government’s help. Will the Government stand by the May 2018 commitment to host an annual global conference to bring together world experts on brain cancer? That has not been done, and we committed to that as a House. Will we stand by that, commit to it and kick off a conference by the end of the year?

3.38 pm

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I salute the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this debate. Hopefully we can turn her personal tragedy into a national triumph if we work together. She is absolutely correct in saying that individually, certain types of brain tumours are very rare, but collectively they are very common. The simple fact that only 1% of our national cancer research funding goes to them is absolutely unacceptable.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as I am a national health service optometrist. I will speak on that topic, because a simple eye test can detect a brain tumour, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said. I have unfortunately—or fortunately, in certain cases, because we have been able to detect them early—been in the position of seeing people who are completely asymptomatic or people coming in with a simple headache having brain tumours detected. That is why I really want to emphasise that the avenue of using eye tests is undervalued and underutilised. They are completely un-invasive, cost efficient and accessible, and they can save so many lives. Is it at all possible for us to have a national awareness campaign as part of a broader body to ensure that eye tests can be linked to brain tumours, so that they can be detected?

John McDonnell: I pay tribute to Mr and Mrs Atwal in my constituency, who lost their daughter and have been doing fundraising. One of the most effective things they have been doing is ensuring that at local community events there is a stall that provides information about how to access a diagnosis. That has proved to be incredibly effective, as a range of other professionals have picked up on the information. I pay tribute to Mr and Mrs Atwal for their creativity.

Shockat Adam: This is about awareness campaigns. People should be aware that 39%—I think—of children unfortunately diagnosed with a brain tumour experience some kind of sight loss or vision changes, and one in three people diagnosed report a problem with their vision that converts into a brain tumour. An eye test cannot detect all brain tumours, but it is a really valuable tool.

Over 112,000 people have signed a petition demanding that brain tumour research is no longer left behind. These are not just signatures; as we have heard from today's powerful testimonies, they are families, and they are stories of lives cut short and missed chances. We cannot allow that to continue any longer.

3.40 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) for bringing forward this debate. It has been a privilege to sit through such excellent speeches on this very important topic. I am sure that the hon. Lady's sister Margaret would be very proud of her, and I am sure that my hon. Friend's sister is proud of him too.

As the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend have outlined, a brain tumour diagnosis can be utterly devastating and life-changing. Some 12,000 people a year are diagnosed with a primary tumour, while many others are diagnosed with a secondary tumour that has spread from elsewhere in their body. Primary tumours are largely unpreventable, and cause the death of more adults and children under 40 than any other type of cancer. As primary brain tumours do not spread around the body like other cancer types, they do not receive the same staging categorisation.

Current NHS programmes for diagnosing cancers earlier do not include brain tumours, as they focus on targets and improvements for catching more cancers in stages 1 and 2. Nearly half of people diagnosed—49%—are found to have a so-called benign tumour, a grade 1 or 2 tumour that grows more slowly. Those tumours are not technically cancerous, so they are not covered by previous cancer plans or initiatives for improving cancer care. However, the treatment and care for patients with a low-grade tumour has long-lasting impacts and can be life-altering.

I would like to mention the experience of my constituent Madi Ruby, who has tirelessly campaigned and fundraised on this issue. She has experienced both a grade 1 and a grade 2 tumour. She first experienced symptoms of a brain tumour in 1995 with numbness in her right arm, and went on to write backwards and develop headaches. She went for a CT scan when that numbness spread to her foot and she was involved in a minor car accident. Only then was she diagnosed with a grade 1 meningioma measuring 6 cm, which was removed—she was only 23 at the time.

Although that surgery was successful, Madi developed partial epilepsy. She was eventually discharged after five years of clear scans, but as we have heard, tumours still impact lives. She has had poor mental health and become depressed, and in 2013, her brain tumour returned. That tumour has also been removed, but she still deals with partial epilepsy, constant headaches and migraines, and suffers daily. She is also an inspirational person; she has bravely spoken out about her depression, trained to be a counsellor, and is now an associate dean responsible for nursing and allied health professionals at Wrexham Glyndŵr University.

I also want to mention my constituent Shaun Burgess, who raised more than £11,000 for the Brain Tumour Charity and the Meningioma Support Group by running 3,000 miles across Shropshire last year. He was raising money after his wife Mo was treated for a non-cancerous tumour, but not everyone diagnosed with a brain tumour gets that second chance; Shaun has lost a friend to a more aggressive brain tumour.

We must end the tragedy of people losing their lives because treatment for brain cancer took too long to start. As my hon. Friend the Member for Witney has outlined, progress on the treatment of brain tumours has not been good enough. The diagnosis and treatment of cancer should be a top priority for any Government, and the UK should be a global leader in cancer research and outcomes. I urge the Minister to listen to the pleas of Members from across the House on that point today.

For so many people, diagnosis and treatment are too difficult to access. My constituency is a typical example. The major hospitals in Shrewsbury and Telford face a number of challenges and regularly have some of the longest waiting times in the NHS for cancer screening and treatment. In December 2024, just 64% of patients were treated within the 62-day period, despite the target being 85%. The average across England was much better, but still poor at 71%.

Not only do too many people live in treatment deserts, but when they are finally offered the treatment they need, it is hard to access. Anyone living in rural North Shropshire would say that. Having waited anxiously for weeks or months for a scan and the result, they then, if the news is bad, have to travel extremely long distances for the treatment they need. Most of North Shropshire is an hour and a quarter away from a radiotherapy centre on public transport. For patients with brain tumours, public transport is fundamental if they can no longer drive. One of my constituents has faced exactly that problem, having had their driving licence suspended by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency after being diagnosed with a tumour. Apparently that could be remedied if his consultant provided a BT1 form, but he has not been able to get through to the doctor. In the meantime, he is trapped without freedom in a constituency with some of the worst public transport in the country.

Ongoing funding issues, which we know are a huge challenge for the Government, continue to afflict brain tumour patients in a number of ways. Another constituent of mine told me their experience after being referred to a care navigator following their diagnosis. The care navigator's job is to contact patients on a monthly basis, seeing whether they have any problems and concerns and guiding them through an experience that is extremely traumatic. However, the care navigator position has now been cut, and my constituent has been left in the

dark, with growing anxiety and no one to speak to. No one should be going without treatment because there is not enough equipment, and no one should suffer because there are not enough staff to support them.

What would Liberal Democrats do? We would recruit more cancer nurses, so that every patient has a dedicated specialist supporting them throughout their treatment. For brain tumours, we would like to see an improvement in diagnosis, the care people receive and the range of treatment options available. Diagnosis targets need to reflect the fact that brain cancer does not occur in stages in the way that other cancers do—otherwise, we risk brain tumours falling through the cracks of NHS targets and objectives. Low-grade brain tumours, such as that suffered by Madi, need renewed attention, including in the upcoming cancer plan, which we look forward to seeing.

The Liberal Democrats have committed to boosting cancer survival rates more generally by passing a cancer survival research Act, which would require the Government to co-ordinate and ensure funding for research into the cancers with the lowest survival rates, such as brain tumours. We would halve the time for new treatments to reach patients by expanding the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's capacity and ensuring that every patient starts their treatment for cancer within that 62-day urgent referral target. We would replace ageing radiotherapy machines and increase their number so that no one has to travel too far for treatment. Measures such as Margaret's law, which the hon. Members who secured this debate have pressed for, would be an important step in the right direction to improve research in glioblastoma in particular, and I urge the Minister to consider that too.

Do the Government have any future plans for allocating support to research into vaccine treatment for brain tumours, which has reportedly shown remarkable progress against glioblastoma in recent studies? Too many patients with brain tumours have been let down by previous Governments over many years, and I hope that this Government will step up and make brain tumours, cancer and NHS care their No. 1 priority.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

3.48 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I start with a personal apology to my constituents on this VE Day. While I cannot stand there in person among those marking our victory in remembrance in Hinckley and Bosworth in north-west Leicestershire, I am carrying out the very duty that people gave their lives to protect. The sacrifice of those who fought in world war two ensures that the work of this Parliament and democracy itself endures. Their courage lives in every free debate, every vote cast, and every moment we serve the public good. That should never be forgotten or taken for granted. I am therefore privileged to respond on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition to such an important topic that resonates with so many—brain tumours.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) and for Witney (Charlie Maynard) for bringing forward this debate. I was also pleased to hear this important issue raised only yesterday in Prime Minister's questions by the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop), talking

about his constituent's remarkable and inspirational story about overcoming glioblastoma. Although the Prime Minister did not respond with details about brain tumours specifically, these are important opportunities to raise and debate this topic while telling the human stories, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister today.

One such story is an example from my own constituency of Hinckley and Bosworth, involving Katherine and Simon Tansey and their daughter Isla. I have told this story in the House in years past, but it is so poignant that I am not shy about telling it again. We can choose to be affected by the world or we can choose to affect the world, and my constituent Isla chose the latter. In August 2017, seven-year-old Isla Tansey woke up unable to walk. After many horrible treatments, surgery and radiotherapy, she was diagnosed with DIPG—diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma—in January 2018. Isla's mum described the terminal illness as the most traumatic and heartbreaking experience for a family to go through.

Sadly, Isla passed away in July 2018, but not before inspiring thousands around the world with her positivity and creativity through her hobby: painting stones and pebbles. Isla asked others to join her by painting their own stones with any design, but she asked them to include the hashtag #islastones and the words "photo.post.rehide", and then to send pictures to a dedicated Facebook page for her to see. They were subsequently to leave the stones somewhere hidden so that when they were found, they could spread a little bit of the joy that Isla had given them.

Isla's mother Katherine hoped that one day a child might find the stones, learn about Isla's story and become a researcher in childhood cancer. Thousands of people took part, and more than 149 countries were involved. Although Isla could no longer walk, she loved to see where all the stones ended up and where they would travel next. This included the Taj Mahal, New Zealand, Disneyland and America, with one stone reaching Antarctica. Through the stones and the people who made them, hid them and posted their photos, Isla travelled the world.

The hashtag #islastones grew to a community of over 65,000 members from all across the world. In 2019, a year on from Isla's passing, a world record was set at the Celebration of Smiles event in Hinckley for the largest display of painted stones, with 8,542—all in remembrance of Isla. Off the back of that, Simon and Katherine set up the Islastones Foundation to raise research grants, awareness and smiles to help fight childhood cancer. They were awarded the Points of Light award from the then Prime Minister in 2023.

Why does this matter? We have all heard the statistics in this debate, but these are the real stories behind the cases, and our constituents all rightly ask for real understanding, for listening and for something to change. I am reminded of the quote:

"Your life is a message to the world. Make sure it is inspiring."

Isla's message was truly inspiring, and I hope the Government's message on cancer and brain tumours will be the same.

I turn to the substance of the debate. It is clear today that Members are asking for greater priority to be given to accelerating research into brain tumours and treatments. The motion partly focuses on the £40 million of funding provided by the previous Government for research into

[Dr Luke Evans]

brain tumours, and I understand the frustration of MPs from across the House at the speed of allocations to projects since 2018.

At this point, I must pay tribute to the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission for its work with the NIHR. This collaboration has led to the NIHR issuing funding calls for researchers to evaluate treatments for brain tumours and to expand the network of trials for brain tumours, including the national brain tumour consortium. Looking over the debates, I noticed that the Minister said on Second Reading of the Rare Cancers Bill:

“In the five years since 2018-19, the NIHR has invested £11.3 million directly in brain cancer, with a further £31.5 million to enable brain tumour research in 227 studies involving 8,500 people. The commitment remains in place. I can confirm that there is no upper limit on that funding. We are exploring additional research policy options to encourage more clinical trials in early phase research and the development of medical devices and diagnostics.”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 1434.] That is of course encouraging, but campaigners want to see projects up and running as soon as possible. To that end, would the Minister consider the calls from Brain Tumour Research to create a set of dedicated funding streams for early-career researchers, improved access to clinical trials and better integration of brain tumours in cutting-edge cancer initiatives, especially given the proposed abolition of NHS England?

It is that deep desire to get research moving into potential new treatments that led to the Rare Cancers Bill, proposed by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur). The shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), was pleased to support the legislation when it was introduced in March. I was glad to note that the Bill received Government support, and it was endorsed by the Brain Tumour Charity, Brain Tumour Research and other patient groups. I welcome the Bill's intention to encourage industry to concentrate more research on treatments for rare and less common cancers, including brain tumours, particularly through the review of the orphan drug regulations. However, it is vital that there is alignment with the national cancer plan, which is likely to set the direction of cancer policies for the next five to 10 years. Can the Minister confirm whether the key measures in the Bill will be included in the upcoming national cancer plan?

As well as accelerating research into brain tumours, we must take steps to increase participation among those personally affected. One of the aims of the Rare Cancers Bill is to get more patients into clinical trials for rare cancers, including brain tumours. It is sobering that the Brain Tumour Charity's survey found that only 12% of respondents have participated in a clinical trial. We also know from the Institute of Cancer Research that brain tumour clinical trials have the lowest recruitment of any cancer type. This is why the last Government asked Lord O'Shaughnessy to review the barriers to commercial clinical trials in the aftermath of the covid pandemic. I know that the Government have stated that they are committed to implementing the recommendations of the O'Shaughnessy review, but can the Minister provide further details on what progress has been made to date?

On a side note—but a related one—at a recent VE Day celebration in Donisthorpe I met a constituent who raised with me the issue of the acquired brain injury

strategy. That cross-party initiative has been championed by the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), who is now a Labour Minister. Somewhat fortuitously, I was able to tell my constituent that I was taking part in a debate on brain tumours today. She and the likes of Headway and the Child Brain Injury Trust are keen to ensure that they are able to support people through the changes that the Government are pushing through on personal independence payments and disability support, so would the Minister consider reviewing or updating the acquired brain injury strategy in the light of these changes?

Finally, I want to end on a positive note. The discussions between the MHRA and Northwest Biotherapeutics are providing hope that people living with new or recurrent glioblastoma may have access to a new treatment, DCVax-L, which could make a real difference in prolonging their survival from this terrible disease. It is important that we build on these developments, and take steps to reduce barriers to research in brain tumours and access to new treatments as they develop. After all, as one brain tumour survivor said:

“Hope is the anchor that kept me steady through the storm of my diagnosis”.

I hope that this very debate will bring hope to those suffering and their families, and will demonstrate that the Government are listening and working for better outcomes.

3.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) and the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) for securing this vitally important debate. They have both been powerful voices in this place for more research, greater care and better treatments for patients with brain tumours. My hon. Friend spoke so powerfully, as always, and in the name of her sister Margaret. I thank the hon. Member for Witney for sharing his sister's story. I commend her for her fundraising activity and wish her the very best. The hon. Member asked three very clear questions, which I hope my response will cover.

I also thank other Members who made powerful contributions in what has been a very constructive debate. I hope my responses will answer their queries, but if not, I will endeavour to write to all Members following this debate about any gaps that are left. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) spoke about disparity of drug access. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) asked for zest, and spoke about the requirement for it. He expressed the frustrations of the APPG and others at the speed at which we are able to make progress. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the importance of research, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) spoke about clinical trials. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) brought his expertise on optometry to bear, and spoke about how useful an eye test can be. The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, talked about low-grade tumours. I commend her constituents, whom she spoke about, for their work.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), for sharing the story of Isla's stones. What a powerful metaphor and a powerful remembrance. He also spoke about the acquired

brain injury strategy. My remarks will focus on brain tumours, but I can confirm that the ABI strategy remains in play and in development. I will update the House on that as soon as possible. First, I pay tribute to some fantastic charities for their advocacy—the Brain Tumour Charity, Brain Tumour Research, Cancer Research UK and Tom's Trust, to name just a few.

Innovative research is vital in our fight against this devastating disease if we are to offer people the most cutting-edge treatments and the highest-quality care. The Department of Health and Social Care, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, invests over £1.6 billion per year in research. In the past financial year alone, it invested over £130 million specifically in cancer research. That has enabled 261 brain tumour studies to happen in the NHS, involving 11,400 people in potentially life-changing research over the past six years. Since 2018, the NIHR has directly invested almost £12 million in brain tumour research projects; it has also spent around £37.5 million on wider infrastructure investments in facilities, services and the research workforce, making research possible. In addition, over five years, between 2020 and 2024, the Medical Research Council committed more than £18.5 million to brain tumour research.

Our investments are having an impact. NIHR-funded research has shown that a new targeted drug combination treatment can give better outcomes for one of the most common types of paediatric brain cancer, but of course there is still so much more to do. Too little is known about how to prevent, diagnose and manage brain tumours, and they remain one of the hardest cancers to treat and a challenging area for research. That is why we are committed to furthering our investment in brain cancer research and have already taken some steps to stimulate scientific progress. I would like to offer the House just three examples from the past year.

First, in September, the NIHR announced a new package of funding opportunities for brain cancer research for both adults and children. Secondly, in December, the NIHR established a new national brain tumour research consortium. The consortium brings together research from a range of disciplines and institutions to drive faster scientific advancements in how we prevent, detect, manage and treat brain cancer. This complements the NIHR's dedicated funding call on research into wraparound care, rehabilitation and quality of life for patients with brain tumours. It has received a high volume of applications, and those applications are under consideration by an independent expert peer review panel.

Thirdly, the Department is working actively as a member of the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission to fully support the vision of bringing the best care to all brain tumour patients in the UK. Together, we will work with the brain tumour community to accelerate research and bring new insights to the field. This summer, the mission will launch the Tessa Jowell allied health professional research fellowship to train early-career health professionals in conducting vital research on how we improve patients' quality of life.

The commitment to spend at least £40 million on brain cancer remains in place. The limiting factor has not been restrictions on funding, or funds being spent elsewhere, and every research proposal assessed as being fundable has been funded. My Department is now

focusing on how we grow the scientific community working on brain cancer to get more research funded. We are committed to increasing spending on brain cancer research, and the £40 million target is not a funding ceiling—it will not end there. However, it is important that only high-quality applications be funded, so that public funds are invested well and produce impactful and usable research evidence. We will continue to work hand in glove with partners who fund research on new scientific discoveries, such as Cancer Research UK, the Medical Research Council and brain tumour charities. We stand ready to translate these much-needed discoveries as quickly as possible into new treatments for patients via the NIHR.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden raised the issue of partnerships with industry to develop treatments, and I can confirm that we are committed to working with the pharmaceutical industry and others with the common aim of creating a faster, more efficient, more accessible and innovative clinical treatment delivery system. We expect these efforts to attract more commercial investment in clinical research, and to yield a broad and diverse portfolio of clinical trials in the UK, so that we can provide innovative treatment options for patients, including those with glioblastoma. The new brain tumour research consortium, to which I have referred, will bring together people to work on that, and will work to detect, manage and treat rarer and less survivable cancers in children and adults.

Clinical trials are a crucial part of cancer research. They are the key to advanced medical progress, improved patient outcomes and more hope for the future. Britain is already one of the best destinations in the world for clinical trials, but we want to go further. On 7 April, the Prime Minister announced action to accelerate the set-up and delivery of clinical trials; the time taken to set up studies will be cut to 150 days by March next year, down from 250 days, according to the latest data, which was collected in 2022.

The Department of Health and Social Care is committed to being a world-leading destination for clinical trials. Work is ongoing to streamline and reform the set-up and delivery of clinical trials through digitalisation, and by reducing unnecessary bureaucracy. That is driving a “right research, right setting” initiative, and we are moving from reactive to proactive portfolio management, including by supporting the workforce and continuing to embed a research and innovation culture across the health and social care system.

The Government also support the private Member's Bill on rare cancers, brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur). The Bill will make it easier for clinical trials on rare cancers to take place in England by ensuring that the patient population can be easily contacted.

This Government are committed to backing innovative clinical research ecosystems in the UK, so that British patients can be among the first to benefit. We will bust bureaucracy, fast-track clinical trials and give patients improved access to cutting-edge treatments and technologies, including for brain tumours. “Be Part of Research” is our landmark service, allowing people from all walks of life across the UK to find and participate in research relevant to them, which could transform lives. I urge everybody watching at home to sign up to “Be Part of Research” and to get involved.

[Ashley Dalton]

We have spoken about medicines repurposing, whereby medicines approved for a particular condition are used in new ways to treat different conditions. Repurposing drugs may have particular value for rare cancers, such as brain cancers, for which drug development has been limited. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden noted, NHS England has suspended its medicines repurposing programme, but not because it is unimportant; it has shown that opportunities to use existing medicines in new ways can be delivered without the support of a formal repurposing programme, including, for example, through local off-label prescribing. This creates opportunities for NIHR and other funders to support proposals for clinical trials that use repurposed drugs for rare cancers. We will help researchers work with industry and clinicians to strengthen the evidence base for new drugs, and for new uses of drugs, so that we can find out how patients can best be helped.

Helen Morgan: How well will that work be co-ordinated if it is done on a local, sporadic basis, and how will the repurposing of drugs be co-ordinated centrally if NHS England is no longer undertaking that work?

Ashley Dalton: NHS England has found that creating that environment does not necessarily provide new and better ways of repurposing drugs, and that can be done far more efficiently and far less bureaucratically by using local off-label prescribing. We are looking at how we can incentivise researchers and clinical trials to explore repurposing drugs.

We are determined to make the NIHR and other funders grasp opportunities to support those proposals. We will help researchers work with industry and clinicians to strengthen the evidence base for new drugs.

The NHS is working hard to diagnose and treat cancers on time. There is more to do on early diagnosis and faster treatment, in order to improve patient experience and survival. The NHS is focused on improving diagnostic waiting times, and on providing MRI, CT and other tests to reduce cancer waits, because, as Lord Darzi's investigation has shown, we face significant challenges if we are to bring this country's cancer survival rates back up to the standard of the best in the world. We know that the best way to improve survival for those with brain tumours, and with all cancers, is to diagnose patients early and treat them quickly.

In our first six months, 80,000 more patients received a diagnosis or an all-clear within 28 days than did in the previous year, thanks to investment in cutting NHS waiting lists. In March, more than 80% of patients in England referred for cancer had it ruled out or diagnosed within 28 days—it is the first time that target has been met in years.¹ But we must go further, and we will. Our reforms to cancer care will see more than 100,000 people diagnosed faster, and thousands more starting treatment within two months across the NHS.

There is no single solution to this complex challenge. That is why my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, has been clear that there will be a national cancer plan published later this year. This plan will ensure that rarer cancers, including brain cancers, will not be left behind. It is my absolute privilege, as a person with cancer, to be driving that cancer plan. I am delighted

that we have so far received more than 11,000 representations as part of the call for evidence. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden that her contributions and all others will be taken seriously.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson also talked about low-grade cancers. There is a difference between staging and grading, and it is important that we are clear about that. Low-grade brain tumours are considered non-cancerous, and they grow more slowly and are less likely to spread, but although low-grade brain tumours are generally non-cancerous, they can have similar serious symptoms, and require surgery or radiotherapy to treat them. The Government are investing in new life-saving and life-improving research to support people diagnosed with those cancers.

In closing, for those affected by this devastating disease, every discovery, every treatment and every moment matters. We recognise that more needs to be done to stimulate high-quality, high-impact research into brain tumours. Through our targeted package of support, that is what we will do. We completely understand the strength of feeling on this issue, not least because three Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care are cancer survivors. We know how terrifying it is to receive a diagnosis. We have sat in waiting rooms, hoping for good news and fearing the worst—and we have heard the worst. We have had those difficult conversations with our loved ones and seen the devastating impact on their lives. That is why we are committed to making a real difference for patients with brain cancer. We will leave no stone unturned until they get the first-class care that they deserve. I look forward to further discussing how we can achieve this when I meet members of the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours next week.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dame Siobhain McDonagh to wind up.

4.14 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your kind words about Margaret. I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate. I appreciate that they have been taken from their constituencies, where there will be great celebrations for the 80th anniversary of VE Day.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the debate. I suggested to the Committee that I did not want last Thursday because it was polling day, so when I was offered 8 May, I did not really feel that I could refuse. I say to the Minister, the shadow Ministers and all hon. Members that if we rely on the system as it is, there will be no progress. The only way to bring about progress is to intervene and to challenge. To that end, I am delighted to say that in July we will be launching the first drug trial in Margaret's memory, to try immunotherapy on people with glioblastoma. We will be doing that only on one site, at UCL and UCLH. That is because the structure of drug trials in the NHS continues to be so difficult—this was identified by Lord O'Shaughnessy in his report—that going to more sites would take years. People diagnosed with this condition have not got years, so we all have to intervene.

Most Ministers in the previous Government and those in this Government have been incredibly well organised and well motivated. I am grateful to the

1.[Official Report, 2 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

Secretary of State for his intervention, which has made our trial possible at this speed, but unless we personally get involved, no great speeches, wishing or hoping will make a change. The system does not want change. We have to enforce change.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that Brain Tumour Awareness Month took place in March; further notes that there has been no progress in NHS treatment of brain tumours in 20 years and that they are the biggest cancer killer of people under the age of 40; calls on the Government to demand that the National Institute for Health and Care Research take action to spend the £40 million provided by the Government for brain tumour research in 2018 for innovative and meaningful drug trials, following the death of the late Baroness Tessa Jowell; and further calls on the Government to encourage the pharmaceutical industry to undertake research into the repurposing of drugs for brain tumours and to require the NHS repurposing service to consider the repurposing of drugs for brain tumours.

Jim Shannon: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to ask this, but we need to understand what is happening about the trade negotiations and the statement that may be coming. I ask because three of us here—the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), the hon. Member for Dundee Central (Chris Law) and I—have planes to catch. I understand that others in the Chamber have made travel arrangements as well. If the statement is not happening, let us go.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. While Members are aware that a statement is expected on trade negotiations, I have no further information on the timing. His comments are now on the record. I suspend the House until further notice. The Annunciator will give further information, and bells will be rung before the House resumes.

4.17 pm

Sitting suspended.

5.11 pm

On resuming—

Mr Speaker: I believe we are now coming to the statement.

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It had been the intention of the Government to make a statement to the House this afternoon immediately following the scheduled press conference by the US President and the words of our own Prime Minister. Both of those sets of remarks were delayed, with the result that, at this relatively late hour, the Government would now suggest respectfully to you that it would be more courteous to the House to be able to provide all Members with the opportunity for a full statement on Monday. If that does not—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Government have to come forward with a statement. They converted an urgent question to a statement this morning, so a statement has to be made. What the Minister says cannot be done on a point of order, as that would be unfair. I understand that people were going around telling Members to go home as there would be no statement, because Downing Street had decided that. We do not do business like this: it is totally wrong. To give him the benefit of the doubt, I am sure he would like to update the House on the position now, and I would of course expect the details to come on Monday.

Mr Alexander: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and I of course defer to your judgment and will issue the statement—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not my judgment; these are the rules of the House. An urgent question was put in, and it was converted by the Government into a statement, so it is for the Government now to come forward with the statement.

Trade Negotiations

5.12 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let me make the statement, as requested.

Within the last couple of hours, a deal has been announced by the Prime Minister and President Trump respectively. I therefore welcome the opportunity to update the House on the terms of the agreement that has just been reached. Back in February, I stood before the House and said:

“What British industry needs and deserves is not a knee-jerk reaction but a cool and clear-headed sense of the UK’s national interest, based on a full assessment of all the implications of US actions.”—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 182.]

It is this approach, which the Government have taken, that has brought us to the front of the queue today. Indeed, no other country has been able to secure an exemption from the tariffs imposed by the United States until today.

In March, the United States Government announced tariffs on steel, aluminium and autos. This was followed by an announcement of a global tariff, with the UK on the lowest rate of 10%. Throughout this period, the UK Government have been engaged in an intensive and continued dialogue with the Government of the United States to advance the UK’s national interest in this challenging and changing global trading environment. The deal we have agreed is the first step in delivering on the commitment made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister and President Trump in February to reach an economic deal in our respective national interests.

First and foremost, the deal will protect UK jobs, while laying the groundwork for increased transatlantic trade and investment. As the Prime Minister has commented within the last hour,

“This is jobs saved...not job done.”

To that end, I can inform the House that the deal we have secured secures reductions to the 25% tariffs imposed by the United States on the UK car industry. UK exports to the US will face a lower tariff of 10% for a quota of 100,000 vehicles. That is positive news for iconic British luxury brands such as Aston Martin, Bentley and McLaren, but it is also good news for our country’s largest vehicle manufacturer, Jaguar Land Rover, which employs 34,000 employees directly in the UK, with 135,000 further jobs in its wider supply chain. As the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders pointed out, the US is Britain’s second largest car export market. A deal like this was desperately needed to support jobs and economic growth on both sides of the Atlantic.

Furthermore, the deal secures the removal of the new tariffs the US imposed on steel and aluminium in March, through duty-free quotas. It reinforces our commitment to the steel industry, following our swift action last month to protect British Steel and its 2,500 employees.

Turning next to agriculture, for the first time ever, the deal will open up exclusive access for UK beef farmers to the US market. Currently only a few other countries, such as Australia, enjoy such access. This is a major

opportunity for British farmers to increase their exports to the world’s largest consumer market, helping them to grow their businesses. Let me be clear that the import of hormone-treated beef or chlorinated chicken will remain illegal. The deal we have signed today will protect British farmers and uphold our high animal welfare and environmental standards. Any agricultural imports coming into the United Kingdom will have to meet our high SPS—sanitary and phytosanitary—standards.

On economic security, the deal will ensure co-operation on non-market policies from third countries, investment security and export controls. With the United States Government, we will continue to advance the UK’s national interest in key sectors where discussions continue, such as pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, critical minerals, copper, lumber and film production. We will seek the best possible deal and outcome for these vital parts of our economy, and those working on our critical infrastructure. We have also committed to further negotiations on tariff reductions to enhance the UK-US trading relationship. Without this Government’s swift action, the economic impact of US tariffs would, candidly, have been extremely severe.

Following agreement on the outline of the deal today, there will now be a process of formal negotiations with the US on a binding legal framework. The negotiations aim to deliver an ambitious set of outcomes in areas such as digital trade, tackling non-tariff barriers, agreeing mutual recognition agreements for industrial goods and an agreement on domestic services regulation, collaborating on economic security, and upholding standards in areas such as intellectual property and labour practices.

I can, of course, confirm to the House that hon. Members will have the chance to scrutinise the deal we agree with the United States Government, as well as legislation implementing the deal. To reiterate what the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade have told the House, we are not seeking to change existing statutory scrutiny processes. It is vital that Parliament has the opportunity to make its voice heard on this important set of issues.

I am pleased to confirm that the Secretary of State yesterday briefed the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on progress in the negotiations. We will continue to work closely with the devolved Governments throughout the negotiations that will follow today’s announcement.

As a Government, we are grateful to businesses across the United Kingdom for their extensive and continued engagement in recent weeks, and look forward to continuing that engagement through the remaining negotiations.

I would also like to place on record the Government’s gratitude for the work of officials here in London and in Washington for their efforts in securing the first stage of this agreement today.

It will have escaped nobody’s attention in this House that this agreement with the United States has been reached on the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. That victory was secured not simply by the heroism and courage of the British armed forces, but by strong transatlantic alliances that have served us well over the eight subsequent decades. In the coming years, the Government of the United Kingdom will continue to work to secure international agreements that uphold our national interests.

For all those reasons, I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.19 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Thank you for ensuring that the House had the opportunity to hear this statement today, Mr Speaker.

Free trade betters us all. It has lifted billions from poverty and has made us the country we are today, and the country that had the ability to join the fight for Europe's freedom 80 years ago. Unfortunately, this is not the historic free trade deal we were promised. Any reduction in tariffs is welcome, but British businesses are still facing higher tariffs now than they did in February. This is not the deal we were promised, and the Government still have much work to do.

Let us be crystal clear: it is our freedom to make our own trade policy that made even today's deal possible. I hope the Government are now converted to our cause, and regret the 48 times they tried to take us back into the European Union. As the Government limber up for their surrender summit later this month, I ask the Minister to rule out today—once and for all—any form of dynamic alignment.

We are the only party whose position on trade with the United States has been consistent. When the Conservatives published the opportunities for a deal in 2020, the now Prime Minister said he would never countenance an agreement, the now Education Secretary called it foolish, and the now Energy Secretary said it was a spectre hanging over us.

The Conservatives do welcome the news of a reduction in selected tariffs on things like automotive exports and steel today. Any reduction is better than no reduction; jobs and investments were at risk, and all mitigation is to be welcomed. However, if I have understood the Minister correctly, we are still not back to the position as it was at the beginning of February. Perhaps he can clarify that British goods will still be more expensive in the US than they were before—for all the talk of the special relationship, that puts us in the same category as countries like Burundi and Bhutan.

More than what is in this deal today is what is not. From the little the Government have shared, it is clear that it does not go anywhere near far enough. It is a Diet Coke deal—not the real thing. It is not the comprehensive free trade agreement that a true plan for growth requires. What about the film and television industry, which was being threatened earlier this week with a 100% tariff? Can the Minister assure us now that there will be no such imposition?

What is the price of this deal? Will the Minister set out clearly to the House the trade-offs that have been made? I note with concern that two days on, we have still not had sight of the detail of the UK-India trade deal. Will the Minister confirm when we can expect to see the full detail of both deals? How does this deal defend our beef, lamb, pork and poultry farmers, with not just words, but actions? Does it protect the special status of Northern Ireland, and does it cover the British overseas territories?

In the meantime, while businesses continue to suffer and struggle with elevated US tariffs and as they face quotas and uncertainty, will the Minister finally take

steps with his colleagues to ease the burden his Government chose to impose on them? Will he announce a pause of the devastating jobs tax until a full trade agreement can be concluded and stop the surge in business rates so many businesses are facing, and will he finally shelve the unemployment Bill that is already seeing British businesses cutting jobs and choking under 300 pages of incoming red tape? Lastly, will he ask the Prime Minister to sack his Energy Secretary and finally produce a real policy to cut energy prices to globally competitive levels?

If the Government are serious about helping businesses, now is the time. What we see is that once again, when Labour negotiates, Britain loses.

Mr Alexander: Where to begin, Mr Speaker? As I sought to reflect in my statement, and as the Prime Minister remarked only a few minutes ago,

“This is jobs saved...not job done.”

It is significant that two former Conservative Prime Ministers—the former Members for Henley and for Maidenhead, as I recollect—sought and failed to deliver a US trade deal, in the same way that the former Government failed to deliver a deal with India. Important though it is to hear the views of the Opposition about trade deals that were not done, I think it is also important to hear from the Government about trade deals that have actually been done.

I am grateful, none the less, that the shadow Secretary of State found it in himself to welcome the tariff reductions that have been achieved. I think there will be relief at JLR in particular this evening that the calm, cool-headed approach taken by the Prime Minister and the negotiators has yielded a significant reduction of tariffs to a critical supply chain and a critical set of British exporters.

On Brexit, I respectfully say that this House has debated Brexit innumerable times over the years since 2016. I simply observe that we as a Government are more interested in new markets than in old arguments, and that there have been plenty of opportunities to rehearse those old arguments. I can also assure the House that, as we look ahead to the first EU-UK summit on 19 May, having delivered deals with India and the United States, we are now looking to reset that relationship with our friends, neighbours and partners in the EU, not least because three of our five largest trading partners are actually members of the European Union.

On the specific points about the film industry, we continue to negotiate on the UK's behalf—*[Interruption.]* The shadow Secretary of State, who is chuntering from a sedentary position, seems to suggest that we can unilaterally declare the policy of the United States. Negotiations involve two parties. That is a lesson that the Conservatives could have learned when they failed to secure a US trade deal in the past. It is by listening and working together with our partners in the United States that we have been able to make progress today. As the Prime Minister said:

“This is jobs saved...not job done.”

There is further work to be done, and we fully intend to take that work forward.

On agriculture, I think it is important to say that the red line that we maintain consistently in relation to SPS measures has been protected. I am grateful to have the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs on the Front Bench with me. We have maintained those critical

[Mr Douglas Alexander]

animal welfare standards. All of the speculation in relation to chlorinated chicken or hormone-injected beef has turned out to be unfounded.

It is important to recognise what was agreed today. Let me be clear to the House: this agreement will provide the United States with an initial tariff rate quota on beef of 10,000 tonnes, increasing by 1,000 tonnes per year to a cap of 13,000 tonnes. Let me put that in context for the House and for those on the Conservative Front Bench. The previous Government agreed under the UK-Australia FTA to a beef tariff rate quota of 35,000 tonnes per year, which incrementally increases to—wait for it—110,000 tonnes per year, and ultimately becomes unlimited, subject to the safeguard regime. A sense of balance, proportion and understanding is required when discussing not only the safeguards that have been maintained and protected by the British Government, but the deal that has been struck in relation to beef. We need to keep the market access granted to the United States in the context of the wider economic benefits that this deal has secured for the United Kingdom.

On the rather diminishing political points that the shadow Secretary of State sought to make in relation to domestic legislation, I can assure him that the domestic legislation and the programme of the British Government remain unchanged as a consequence of today's landmark deal. As far as I am aware, that is also the case in relation to the membership of the Cabinet. I am very relieved to say that it is the Prime Minister who is in charge of choosing members of the Cabinet, not the Conservative party, although the shadow Secretary of State does have a distinguished record of service alongside Liz Truss in a previous Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for helping to ensure that this moment was possible. Let me add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend and to His Majesty's ambassador in Washington, Lord Mandelson, for getting this deal done. It would appear tonight that a small, common-sense retreat on duties and agriculture have unlocked a major reprieve for tens of thousands of jobs in our car and steel industry.

Will the Minister clarify for us tonight when those tariff reductions will kick in? Will he confirm that there is nothing in this bargain that compromises our ability to strike the boldest of resets with the European Union? It would be a mistake to strengthen transatlantic relationships and then short-change cross-channel possibilities. Can the Minister confirm that he will facilitate a debate in this House, if not a vote on the treaty?

On Tuesday, I will recommend to the Select Committee that we commence a full inquiry into this treaty, so that we can report back to the House, but a vote would help us understand who stands where in standing up and protecting British jobs.

Mr Alexander: Let me begin by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend's long-standing interest in Jaguar Land Rover and the wider west midlands economy and to the diligent and demanding work he does on the

Business and Trade Committee, which makes a major contribution to not only trade policy but business policy here in the United Kingdom.

To clarify the point my right hon. Friend made on the auto industry, the UK exports around 100,000 cars a year to the United States, and this quota will ensure that most manufacturers now pay the preferential rate. The agreement has removed the 25% tariff that the US applied to UK cars on 2 April. The agreement has been welcomed by the UK auto industry in the last couple of hours, including by Jaguar Land Rover, which is the largest exporter to the US. We are committed to continuing to support the automotive industry, which is a point my right hon. Friend has made powerfully in recent days.

On his second point, I can assure my right hon. Friend that notwithstanding the significant progress we have made in relation to the United States—as I said, jobs saved but job not yet done—a great deal of work is continuing on the UK-EU summit that is due to take place on 19 May. He is right to recognise the importance of twin-tracking our approach, as it were, by recognising the salience and significance of the United States as the country that is comfortably our largest single trading partner while recognising the European Union as our largest trading bloc, which covers about 46% of our trade.

Turning to the economic security aspects of the deal, I pay particular tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend, as I know this issue has been of great interest to the Business and Trade Committee. I think he will take a lot of encouragement from what emerges in the agreement, specifically in relation to export controls and investment security. One might almost think that the negotiators had been reading his Substack.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Sadly, the world has changed dramatically in the few months since Donald Trump took office in the White House. We need to reflect on the shared values we have with key countries across the world. We need to look to Canada and stand up to Trump as it has done, and we need to make sure that we build economic relationships with countries such as Canada, Australia and the countries in the European Union—all countries that share our values.

I am pleased that the Minister spoke of scrutiny, because we must ensure that there is scrutiny. We need a vote in this House on these proposals. We need to protect the NHS and ensure that we are not selling our farmers down the river. We must also ensure that there are no cuts to taxes on high-tech industries, which the US may be pushing for. Will the Minister address the matter of a vote in this House? That would be extremely helpful. Donald Trump tends to be a weathervane, and he could come back for more. I also feel for our pharmaceutical industry, so what assurances can the Minister give them?

Mr Alexander: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. On the case he makes for seeing trade as not simply a bilateral issue but a multilateral issue, I think there is a broad consensus across the House. As well as the work we have taken forward in relation to the United States today, we continue to work with friends and partners in a range of different fora, including the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership and the European Union.

On his specific question about scrutiny of trade within this House, I echo the confirmation that the Prime Minister gave in the Commons only a few days ago that we are not anticipating any change to the process of scrutiny for trade matters in the House.

On the two substantive political points, first, it is worth the House recognising that there is no change to the United Kingdom's digital services tax as a consequence of the agreement reached today. Secondly, I know that there has been widespread concern not only on the Liberal Democrat Benches but right across the House about measures to tackle the evil of online harm, but I can confirm again there has been no change as a consequence of the agreement reached with the United States.

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the Minister for coming forward with his statement, but the Table Office has not received a copy of it. I am wondering where it is and when we will see copies of it. Can it be handed in so we can get it printed for Members?

Let us move on to Dame Meg Hillier.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State and the team at the Department as well as our team of officials under Lord Mandelson in Washington. This is a major step forward in a short time. Given how long trade agreements normally take, this is an impressive step.

However, as has been mentioned, we know that President Trump has made rattling sounds about tariffs on the film industry. The creatives and technical businesses in my constituency who contribute to our film industry are obviously nervous about that. Will the Minister reassure us that he is putting his shoulder to the wheel on this issue and not resting on his laurels on the triumphs achieved so far?

Mr Alexander: Mr Speaker, on your point, I apologise again for the statement not being available. As was clear from my initial remarks, there was some confusion within Government as to the best way to proceed, but I hope that through my officials we will provide it to you as a matter of immediacy.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just so that we completely understand, the Government decided they were making a statement, so there was no possibility of anything else. The House was suspended and had to resume; we could not leave it in limbo forever. The point was that there was a statement coming. Thankfully, the Minister made a statement. Hopefully, we can get copies of the statement to everyone. I was bothered about us being in danger of sending people home, saying that there was to be no statement. That was never, ever the case. I am disappointed that Members were advised to leave the building 30 minutes ago on the claim that there was to be no statement.

Mr Alexander: Mr Speaker, the responsibility was ours, and for that I apologise. I hope that through my officials we will be able to furnish the House with the statement that is requested.

In relation to my hon. Friend's question, I assure her that it is not my personal style or the departmental habit to rest on laurels. It will not have passed her notice

that it has been a somewhat busy few months in relation to trade policy, not least given the historic changes in the global trading environment we are experiencing on a daily basis. Notwithstanding that turbulence and the challenges in relation to trade policy, it is a matter of quiet satisfaction that we were able to get the India deal over the line earlier this week. Through that process of quiet, engaged, diligent diplomacy and a great deal of hard work by officials, negotiators and others, we have been able to secure this agreement today. But I assure her that the work goes on.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In the Trumpian philosophy that is "The Art of the Deal", you bully your opponents and then, two months later, withdraw some of the threats, and they kneel down in adoration while they are reduced to where they were before. That is where we are.

We are celebrating the end of the second world war. Before the second world war, people could walk from Lincoln to Grimsby across derelict farms. I want a real assurance from the Minister that he will protect our beef farmers, because this is the start of an attack by America on our beef farmers.

Mr Alexander: As so often in the past, the Government will always act in the national interest in protecting Britain's farmers and our food security. I would rehearse the numbers that I shared. If the right hon. Member is concerned about the volume of access to the UK market, I respectfully suggest that that might be a question for him to direct to his Conservative Front Benchers. Under the UK-Australia free trade agreement, a beef tariff quota of 35,000 tonnes a year was agreed, which increased to 110,000 tonnes after 10 years. In contrast, what has been agreed with the United States today will provide it with an initial tariff quota on beef of 10,000 tonnes, rising by 1,000 tonnes a year to a cap of 13,000 tonnes.

In relation to the right hon. Member's observations on "The Art of the Deal"—there is a great deal of commentary on that in pretty much every newspaper at the moment—my compass tends to be "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu, rather than "The Art of the Deal." Sun Tzu, as the right hon. Member, as a learned and wise individual, will be aware, said:

"Tactics without strategy are the noise before defeat."

I observe that in the eight years since Brexit, the previous Government did not publish a trade strategy.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Like buses, we wait ages—years—for a trade deal with a major global partner, and then two come along at once, within a week. It is a major vote of confidence for the position of Great Britain on the global stage. With a bit of déjà vu, I commend again the Minister, the Labour Government and in particular the Prime Minister for the calm and collected manner in which they have consolidated this agreement when, by the way, others failed for years. While markets are up and tariffs are significantly down because of the announcement of this agreement, will the Minister confirm how this UK-US trade deal will benefit my Slough constituents and lead to economic growth and jobs?

Mr Alexander: As a former Secretary of State for Transport, I am always nervous as to whether buses turn up or not, but I appreciate the analogy.

It has been a busy week for the Government and for the Department for Business and Trade, but it is right to recognise that, by happy coincidence, we have seen both the India and US deals agreed within a couple of days. However, those couple of days were preceded by many months of quiet work and diplomacy, and that is why my hon. Friend is entirely right to recognise the Prime Minister's personal contribution to the agreements, with Prime Minister Modi and now with President Trump.

After the clown show that we had witnessed in recent years and the cavalcade of chaos that we saw under previous Governments, when I saw that image of the Prime Minister sitting alongside President Trump in the Oval Office a couple of months back, I felt what I judge was a widespread sentiment among the British public, which was a sense of relief that we had a serious man in what were undoubtedly serious times. The serious man—the serious Prime Minister—has engaged in serious diplomacy to get to this agreement today, and as he recognised, with the reduction in tariffs that has been secured, not least in relation to the auto industry and the supply chain that stretches to many parts of the United Kingdom, there will be significant benefits for the United Kingdom as a result.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I welcome this deal. The politics and detail aside, it is worth acknowledging that the Prime Minister's strategy towards the US—low-key diplomacy, mediation-led over the past few months—has led the United Kingdom to the front of the queue. In addition to Peter Mandelson, I would thank Varun Chandra, civil servants and others for getting us to this position. What practical support can the Minister provide in assistance for business and farmers in North Yorkshire to take advantage of this deal?

Mr Alexander: Let me pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman. I noticed his tweet—I am not sure if one calls it that or X—earlier this afternoon, which reflected his question and which spoke to a wisdom, maturity and experience in recognising the British Government's work. I genuinely appreciate the graciousness with which he made that public observation, even before doing so in the Chamber.

I echo exactly the sentiment that the right hon. Gentleman has described in relation not just to the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade and Ministers, but to those individuals in the British system, both in Washington and in London, who have been working pretty much flat out to try to secure an outcome to the benefit of the United Kingdom.

On the opportunities for British farmers, the right hon. Gentleman is right to recognise that, far from some of the concerns that we have heard from Members on the Front Bench, there are significant opportunities for the UK given the reciprocal character of the agreement reached today. We will work as the Department of Business and Trade with our colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that British farmers are fully apprised of the opportunities that the new market access potentially offers to them.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his team on the second major trade deal in a matter

of days? Our agricultural sector, our automotive sector and our steel sector will all be grateful. I have learned to be wary of enthusiastic posts from President Trump on the subject of trade, but this really does seem to be a win, win, win.

As my right hon. Friend said, there is more to be done and negotiations carry on. Will he confirm, as the Minister for Future Digital Economy and Online Safety did to my Select Committee, that online harms are not on the negotiating table? Can he say whether the digital services tax is on the negotiating table? Can he also say a little bit about the issues about labour practices that he mentioned in his statement?

Mr Alexander: I thank my hon. Friend for her focus and concern, regarding both the work on online harm and the digital services tax. As I sought to reflect earlier, those remain undisturbed and unchanged by this agreement. We have listened carefully to the concerns from different parts of the House on online harms, and we have worked hard to advance the UK's national interest in the agreement that is reached. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend for recognising the significance of the move in tariffs in relation to steel and aluminium, which, again, represents a significant benefit to the foundations of the UK economy. In that sense, we worked hard in the course of this deal, not just for automobiles and the supply chain, but for steel and aluminium.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): One area that is important to this country and worth billions of pounds is defence. What changes will the deal bring to the proposed defence industrial strategy for the big primes and for small and medium-sized enterprises, which this Government, and all of us, want to support?

Mr Alexander: Only in recent days I have been involved in discussions, notwithstanding the work we have been doing on India and the United States, in relation to the defence component of the industrial strategy. We aim to bring the industrial strategy and its defence component to the public in the coming weeks and months. A huge amount of work is happening within Government. The hon. Member is right to recognise that one of the challenges is how we can have defence procurement in the United Kingdom that does not simply reward some of our outstanding primes, but recognises that the character of modern warfare is changing, whereby we are moving from a small number of large platforms being the central feature to a large number of small platforms. We can look, for example, at drone technology in Ukraine and the transformative effect on the battlespace. We are therefore deeply mindful of the point he makes: we need to ensure, in terms of defence procurement, that we have a whole-economy effort that recognises not least the digital and technological contribution of modern warfare. Digital is a key part of the agreement we have reached today, and we will work closely with the United States to advance our shared interest.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): Thank you for making this statement possible, Mr Speaker. I welcome this statement and congratulate the Minister, the Labour Government and all our officials in the UK and US who have worked incredibly hard on this, as he says, over several months. I said in the statement on the India free trade deal earlier this week that this is in contrast to

the abject failure of the Conservatives, who did not deliver any deal at all. Yesterday, the Mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, published a report prepared by Steve Rigby of the Rigby Group, which detailed a hit of £6.2 billion to the west midlands GDP from US automotive tariffs. The report also said that a deal within 45 days is absolutely essential, and that an imperfect deal is better than a delayed deal. Does the Minister agree that this deal is a total vindication of the Prime Minister's approach to work in the spirit of co-operation with our partners in the USA and Europe to deliver a deal that would benefit the whole of the UK?

Mr Alexander: Let me first pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his tireless efforts in promoting the economic development of and opportunities for his constituency. I last spoke with Richard Parker only two or three weeks ago when we were together. I am fully aware—not least given his background with PwC, as I recollect—that he is deeply invested in economic development and the opportunities for the west midlands, and he has brought that commercial acumen to bear already in office. On the west midlands, perhaps the signature feature of today's announcement will be the benefit accrued to Jaguar Land Rover, as well as to other luxury car exporters to the United States. Given the scale of Jaguar Land Rover production within the United Kingdom and the reliance on the US market, it was critical that we worked under the huge pressure of time to deliver a cut in tariffs affecting autos. In that sense, the quota agreed today and the reduction in the tariff level will be a real and meaningful benefit to JLR and its supply chain.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on this trade deal? It is an historic moment. I believe that it is in the national interest, but of course we will have to see the details, and the devil is in the detail. It appears from the statement that there are lots of details still to be worked out. I also pay tribute to Lord Mandelson, our ambassador in the United States.

The Minister mentioned managing to keep red lines around hormone-reared beef and chlorinated chicken, and of course that was mentioned by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith). He also mentioned lamb—I do not think the Minister mentioned lamb—which is important to Shropshire farmers. What has not been mentioned is antibiotics in pigs. This nation eats a lot of pork. A lot of that is reared in Shropshire. Could the Minister assure Shropshire and British farmers that the pig industry in this country is still safe as a result of this deal?

Mr Alexander: I hope I can give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that he seeks. The SPS arrangements were, as I said, an absolute red line for the United Kingdom. We were keen, both in public and in private, to reinforce the Government's continuing focus on upholding animal welfare standards here in the United Kingdom. In relation to his broader points about the deal, I am grateful that he has brought his experience and expertise to bear in the House in his judgment that, going by even this initial setting out of the deal, it is clearly in the national interest that we are in a position to have a quota allowing a reduced rate for the export of UK cars, for example. We would otherwise

have been looking at very serious consequences for major British manufacturers. I am grateful to him for his generous words. I will ensure that Lord Mandelson, as I am now obliged to call him, is made aware of the right hon. Gentleman's generous tributes—he is never averse to receiving compliments.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I commend the Minister for his statement, and I wish to put on record my thanks to him, the Prime Minister and our excellent trade negotiators. The Minister has spoken a lot about tariffs so far, but might he talk about the non-tariff and non-quota trade barriers to further economic development between the United Kingdom and the United States, and about where we will go in the ongoing negotiations?

Mr Alexander: It has been a feature of the last few months, since the President was elected, that people have thought that trade policy and tariffs are synonymous. My hon. Friend is exactly right to recognise that a growing proportion of trade is conducted electronically. The UK is an almost 81% services-based economy. We therefore have a huge interest in non-tariffs barriers—not just barriers at the border but barriers behind the border. That is an area of focus in the agreement, and one that will require further work, as is appropriate and right. We were working under huge time pressure to address the tariff issue, for the reasons I have set out, but he is entirely right to recognise that we will take forward an ambitious agenda on non-tariff barriers.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Although a reduction in tariffs is welcome, the past four months have shown the UK Government that President Trump is an unreliable partner, not just in trade but in defence and security, climate and the international rule of law. In contrast, closer relations with our trusted allies in the EU have never been more important. Given that Trump has previously described the EU as “a foe”, “very nasty” and “an atrocity”, will the Minister provide an unequivocal assurance that there are no conditions whatsoever attached to the deal that will constrain the UK's relationship with the EU, which is the UK's largest trading partner?

Mr Alexander: I can do no better than refer to the Prime Minister's Mansion House speech towards the end of last year, when he said clearly that we do not want to have to choose between our friends and allies—between dealing and working constructively with the European Union and with the United States.

On the hon. Gentleman's broader point, it is important to recognise that the United States is our deepest and strongest defence ally. For the past 80 years—we should remember the day on which we are gathering—the United Kingdom has worked hand in glove with the armed forces of the United States to keep the world safe. I saw for myself, in previous conflicts such as Afghanistan, the extraordinary heroism and courage that American service personnel brought to bear alongside British personnel, so it is right to recognise that, as well as taking forward this economic agreement, there is a strong and enduring security foundation to the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. All that said, of course we stand ready to work with the European Union as we look ahead to the UK-EU summit on 19 May.

[*Mr Douglas Alexander*]

The hon. Gentleman asks whether there are any conditions. The single biggest concern expressed by many commentators related to SPS, given that that was one of the key agricultural areas on which the previous Government foundered in their negotiations with the first Trump Administration. That was a red line for us in these negotiations—a red line that I am glad to say we have protected.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I thank the Minister, the Prime Minister, Lord Mandelson and all involved in this work for getting the deal over the line. Unlike some Opposition Members, who seem intent on talking down the Government's positive work and our country, I find the deal really positive. Does the Minister agree that this trade deal, the one with India and the fall in interest rates announced by the Bank of England are positive signs that the Government's plan for change is working and will start to benefit people in my constituency and across the country?

Mr Alexander: I thank my hon. Friend for his generous roll-call of honour. It would probably do my career prospects in the Department for Business and Trade some benefit if I added the Secretary of State to his roll-call of Lord Mandelson and the Prime Minister.

Of course, the latest cut in interest rates from the Bank of England will be welcomed by hard-pressed families seeking to make their mortgage payments in communities right across the country. As I said earlier, the Prime Minister has commented on today's US agreement that it is

"jobs saved...not job done."

The work goes on in relation to sorting out the fiscal mess that we inherited and raising the trend rate of growth, but I hope that both the US deal today and the cut in interest rates will be welcomed in all parts of the House and the country.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): I am sure the Minister will agree that the economic landscape has changed dramatically since 26 March: we have had the trade deal with India, we have had today's pact with the United States, the Employment Rights Bill will come into law later this year, and there is much more besides. In the interests of transparency to this House, and indeed to the country, will he request a summer forecast update from the Office for Budget Responsibility that incorporates all the latest updates and let us know what the public finance impacts will be?

Mr Alexander: As a mere Minister of Trade, I am not sure the Treasury would look kindly on me telling the OBR when to update its forecasts. I am a Trade Minister, not a Treasury Minister, but I have noted the hon. Lady's observation. She is entirely right that the economic landscape has changed. It is right to recognise that many of the promises that were made in the past about us seeing major trading blocs bringing barriers down have been set aside in recent months and years, and we are seeing major trading blocs putting barriers up. That is why today's deal is so significant.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister and this Labour Government on achieving not just one trade deal but two historic deals in the

space of a week. I am a vegetarian, but many of my constituents like nothing better than a chicken curry on the streets of Southall Broadway. Can the Minister categorically assure the House that this deal will protect our British food standards and, in particular, that chlorinated chicken and hormone-injected beef will remain illegal in this country?

Mr Alexander: First, I am grateful for the catch-all congratulations to the whole Government; it is a sentiment I heartily endorse, and I will ensure it is heard by other colleagues. In relation to my hon. Friend's substantive point, I can assure her that curries are not just a favourite in Ealing Southall; in most of our major metropolitan cities, there is nothing quite as British as a chicken tikka masala. That is a huge tribute to the 1.9 million people of Indian heritage who live in the United Kingdom and the immense contribution they have made over the decades not just to our cuisine, but to our country. She raises a really important point in relation to chlorinated chicken and hormone-injected beef. There was a lot of genuine concern before this agreement was reached today, and I can give the House the assurance she is seeking that there is nothing in this deal that compromises the safety standards of either poultry or beef. We were clear that that was a red line, and we have delivered on that red line.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement. There has been a great deal of reassurance for the car industry and agriculture, but there has been no mention of the Scotch whisky industry or the drink and food industry in general. In Edinburgh, as in much of Scotland, that is a huge concern. Should we expect details next week, or are there assurances he can give us now?

Mr Alexander: The hon. Lady is entirely right to raise the importance of the Scotch whisky industry, and I say that as a Member with a constituency interest: I have the Glenkinchie distillery in my East Lothian constituency, which I am delighted to say the Chancellor of the Exchequer visited this week, in the light of the deal that was struck with India.

In relation to this deal with the United States, it is right to recognise that further work and negotiations will continue, not least in relation to some of the broader sectors that it does not cover. It is also right to recognise, in this week of all weeks, the extraordinary significance of the Indian trade deal that was struck for the Scotch Whisky Association. Members need not take my word for it; they can look at the words of the chief executive of the Scotch Whisky Association, who described in glowing terms the significance of the Indian market and the precipitate decline in the tariffs that we have secured in that deal. We have more to do, but broadly this has been recognised as a very significant and positive week not just for Scottish whisky, but for Scottish salmon and, I am delighted to say, Irn-Bru, which will also benefit from access to the Indian market.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): In the Vatican, in the last hour, the cardinals have elected a new Pope; and we wish the new Holy Father well, and give thanks for the life of Pope Francis. Of course, we send our best wishes to the Catholic community in Newcastle-under-Lyme and up and down our United Kingdom.

I welcome the Minister's statement, and the confirmation that he has given several times to colleagues that imports of hormone-treated beef and chlorinated chicken will remain illegal under this deal. That is good news, and important for my farmers in Newcastle-under-Lyme and farmers up and down the country. Will the Minister expand a little further on what exact engagement took place with farmers and their representatives before this deal was agreed, and what support will be pledged to farmers now, because that is important to my farmers and those up and down the country?

Mr Alexander: I fully appreciate my hon. Friend's observations. I was unaware on arriving in the Chamber that a successor to Pope Francis, who is greatly grieved and missed on both sides of the House, has now been announced, and of course we wish the new pontiff well in the spiritual leadership that role will require—and I say that as a proud Presbyterian and member of the Church of Scotland.

On the broader point about engagement with farmers, I also have a farming constituency, and I was on a farm in east Lothian only last Friday, hearing directly from farmers about the impact of the market challenges faced by farmers not just here but internationally. Through our colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, there is a lot of engagement regularly with farmers. Naturally and appropriately, that Department was involved in the cross-Whitehall processes that led to the negotiators being able to reach agreement today, and I fully anticipate further opportunities for dialogue with farmers in the future.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): We have had huge amounts of tariffs put on the UK, and then a trade deal to reduce them; there have been positive impacts on some industries, and potentially negative impacts on others. Today's announcement of a UK-US trade deal has therefore given rise to more questions than answers. On one side, we have US officials hailing the deal as "dramatically increasing" access to the UK agricultural market, which I am sure will ring alarm bells for many. On the other side, we have the UK Government claiming that the agreement is balanced and fair. First, will the Minister categorically confirm that no reductions to UK food standards, environmental protections—which have not been mentioned yet—and animal welfare rules have been conceded in this agreement? Secondly, what is the true impact of the tariff arrangements on British farmers and growers? We have heard vague claims of reciprocal access, but have the Government conducted any assessment of the economic impact for UK farmers, their practices and their opportunities?

Mr Alexander: I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's comments, and early on he mentioned a trade deal to reduce tariffs; that is exactly the deal we have sought to secure and have secured today. He is right to recognise that there are continuing challenges, not just for the UK but for many countries, in relation to protectionism and higher tariff rates, but today represents significant progress on the terms, as I have described. On animal welfare and food standards, I reassure him about everything I have said on sanitary and phytosanitary measures; we made that a red line and were very clear about it, and were unwilling to compromise. I also assure him that there is nothing vague about the reciprocity I described in terms of the opportunities for beef farmers.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I am grateful to the Minister for his confirmation that this deal will not in any way undermine the nation's SPS rules and regulations, but I am sure that he will acknowledge that there will be a degree of nervousness among British and indeed Welsh farmers, especially beef farmers, for although the tariff rate quota agreed is modest compared with that agreed under the New Zealand and Australia trade deals, it does of course come as an addition, and farmers will be worried about the cumulative impact. I think the Minister has mentioned this, but will he confirm that the 13,000 tonnes represents the maximum tariff quota for beef that has been agreed, and has any tariff quota been agreed for lamb, pork and poultry?

Mr Alexander: Forgive me: I was shuffling through my papers and missed the hon. Gentleman's final point, but I am happy to write to him. He is absolutely right, I can assure him, to recognise that compared to the tariff quotas agreed under the Australia deal, negotiated by the then Prime Minister, the former Member for Henley, there is much more proportionality—a much more modest increase—anticipated under the quota in the agreement reached today. I recognise his point that there are continuing challenges for farmers in the United Kingdom, and we will continue to seek to address those.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I welcome the Minister's clarification on chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-treated beef, but will there be protections in place for egg products? Hens raised in battery cages are illegal in this country, but not elsewhere in the world, so will it be illegal to import egg products from hens raised in those poor conditions elsewhere?

Mr Alexander: We have not compromised our animal welfare standards in any aspect of what we have agreed on behalf of the United Kingdom today.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for dragging the Minister to the House tonight to explain the terms of the deal. After hammering farms with the family farm tax, it now looks like Labour is selling our farmers down the river, allowing cheap, low-quality imports from the United States. President Trump's Secretary of Agriculture has said:

"This deal puts our great American Agricultural Producers FIRST!"

Is she wrong?

Mr Alexander: It is hardly a surprise that a member of the Trump Administration should talk about America first. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the north star by which we have negotiated is the UK's national interest. Today's agreement reflects the quiet but determined diplomacy of a serious Prime Minister to deliver a deal. The hon. Gentleman's party does not have a great track record on serious Prime Ministers, or on beef quotas. To put today's announcement in context, the hon. Gentleman's Government agreed to a UK-Australia FTA with a beef tariff rate quota of 35,000 tonnes per year. That might be a point that he wants to make to farmers in the Borders.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Welsh farmers have been reaping the rewards of high beef prices over the past few years. That has been

[David Chadwick]

the one piece of good news in the industry. They now hear that another Government have signed another trade deal allowing even more beef imports into our country. Why have the Government decided to include beef imports in the deal, and to kick our farmers in the teeth again?

Mr Alexander: I simply do not recognise the aeriated contribution that the hon. Gentleman has made. He has an important and legitimate role in representing farmers in his constituency and more broadly, but I assure him that if he looks at the numbers, including the quota agreed by the previous Government, and the relatively modest shift in the tariff rate quota on beef that has been agreed today, his concerns will be allayed.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I hope that the Minister will recognise why UK farmers might raise an eyebrow at the assurances that he has given to the House. They have been let down time and again since July through this Government's policies on the family farm tax, the sustainable farming incentive, double cab pick-ups and fertiliser tax—the list goes on and on. Brooke Rollins, the US Secretary of Agriculture, said after the deal was announced that

“it can't be understated...how important this deal is”

for American farmers, and that it will “exponentially increase” US beef exports to the UK. The Minister will understand why that raises concerns for our farmers. Will he assure farmers up and down the country that in any further trade negotiations with the US, their interests, livelihoods and futures will not be on the table?

Mr Alexander: It would be remiss of me not to start my answer to the hon. Lady with anything other than humble congratulations on her time in the London marathon. Having run it twice, I would have seen her at the starting line, but that would have been the last time I saw her. It was a minor consolation to me that my time was somewhat faster than that of the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). All that being said, she makes a serious point about British farmers. I assure her that the interests of British farmers, rural Britain and the wider agricultural sector is a constant feature of our thinking in Government.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Despite the reassurances from the Minister, many farmers in Glastonbury and Somerton will feel really anxious about being thrown under a bus yet again as a result of this trade deal, especially after the trade deals agreed by former Conservative Governments with Australia and New Zealand, which undermined British farmers and

food standards. Can the Minister give a cast-iron guarantee that this deal with the US will not undermine British farmers? What measures will he put in place to ensure that low-quality, low-welfare products do not enter the UK?

Mr Alexander: I reiterate the points that I sought to make earlier. Imports of hormone-treated beef or chlorinated chicken will remain illegal. The deal we have signed today will protect British farmers and uphold our high standards of welfare and environmental standards. Any agricultural imports coming into the United Kingdom will have to meet our high and continuing SPS standards. I can put it no more clearly than that.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): East Hampshire farmers will be relieved to hear what the Minister has said about food standards, including on hormone-treated beef and chlorinated chicken, after everything that has happened to them in the last period. Obviously we will have to see the detail, and see what else is in the agreement.

I will ask about online safety. The Minister has said already that there has been no change to the digital services tax and no rowing back on the online safety regulatory regime. Can he confirm that no commitments have been made that would curtail the freedom of this House to make further changes in this area?

Mr Alexander: On today of all days, I will not suggest that there should be any fetters or constraints whatsoever on this House when it comes to introducing legislation on online harm, or any other issue.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say that I never want to be put in this position again? I remind people that before we send Members home, we ought to think to tell them that there will not be a statement. I think that was bad. The Chair of the Select Committee complained to me, because he was told to go away. We should not be doing this. In this House, we need to work together. This House should be respected. I will stand up for the Back Benchers. Please never put me in this position again.

On behalf of this House and all the Roman Catholics across the United Kingdom, particularly in Chorley and Lancashire, I wish the new pope well.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(Keir Mather.)

6.12 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 May 2025

[MATT WESTERN *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Cold and Damp Homes

1.30 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of cold and damp homes.

Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Western; this is the first time that I have served under your chairship. I rise to speak about a crisis that continues to affect millions of people across the UK and goes to the very heart of the inequality, inefficiency and injustice embedded in our housing and energy systems.

I welcome the Government's new warm homes plan, which includes the warm homes social housing fund and the warm homes local grant, through which social housing residents, lower-income householders and renters will receive funded energy efficiency upgrades, including insulation and low-carbon heating. However, there are a number of opportunities to truly protect all from living in cold or damp homes.

As part of its United for Warm Homes campaign, Friends of the Earth published a joint report in 2024 with the Institute of Health Equity, "Left Out in the Cold", which is one of the most comprehensive documents on the issue. It reveals that 9.6 million households in this country—nearly one in three homes—are at risk of living in cold, damp and energy inefficient homes. Many of them are in constituencies like mine.

Leeds is home to a vibrant mix of residents: young professionals, students, families and retirees. It has a range of housing, much of it Victorian and Edwardian stock that is woefully under-insulated. In my constituency, Leeds Central and Headingley, 44.8% of constituents live in private rentals, compared with a national average of 19.4%. Citizens Advice found that one in three private renters could not heat their homes to a comfortable temperature over winter 2024, with millions living in damp and mouldy conditions. Last summer, 40% of renters—4.3 million people, including 1.16 million children—were living in a home with mould or damp. That is very concerning, given the impact that cold and mould can have on people's physical and mental health, as well as the high energy bills that people face when they need to heat draughty homes.

This crisis does not start and end in winter. Cold, damp and poorly ventilated homes cause year-round problems, from exacerbating asthma and bronchitis to increasing anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions. My office frequently receives damp and mould cases and works closely with the private rented sector team at the council to resolve them. All too often, constituents are told that the issue is their fault. They are typically blamed for drying laundry indoors or for not opening windows.

The problems usually worsen over time and become much harder to fix. My constituent Angela reported damp last year, but the issue persisted into this year. By then, water was dripping from the living room and kitchen ceilings. She had been diagnosed with a lung infection, which the GP linked directly to the damp conditions in her home. She was eventually forced to live exclusively in her bedroom, which was the only room that was less affected.

My constituency is home to the highest population of students in England and Wales. Student accommodation is often rife with damp. Large house shares are often the only economical option for full-time students. Student houses of seven or more struggle to balance keeping the house warm with ventilating it from drying laundry, cooking and bathing. I have heard from students in my constituency who are not even given autonomy over their heating, which their landlord controls remotely.

Students are living with year-round cold symptoms that are due to the quality of their housing. As their tenancies run year to year, damp issues are often painted over, both physically and metaphorically, by landlords who know that a fresh cohort of tenants will be in within 12 months. Ongoing respiratory issues, possessions ruined by damp and cold, the feeling of insignificance and being disregarded by the landlord—these are not the standards that we should be setting for students' quality of life in this country.

Indoor air quality is a large part of the problem. Breathe Easy Homes, which is delivered by Care and Repair in partnership with Leeds city council and the integrated care board, works to address issues with indoor air quality that can trigger attacks in children with a diagnosis of asthma or other respiratory conditions. The team is working hard to ensure that all families have safe living conditions, but the battle with damp is relentless.

It is not a new statement that cold and/or damp homes exacerbate existing health inequalities. However, too many people are forced to survive in day-to-day, all-consuming living conditions. Today's debate is an opportunity to focus on how the warm homes plan can go further to ensure that all barriers are removed to securing warm homes for all. That includes the 9.6 million homes that are at risk of being cold, damp and energy-inefficient.

The Government's warm homes plan will be a vital step to delivering home upgrades for millions of people, to make their homes warmer and healthier, and reduce their bills. We also welcome the Government's plans to extend Awaab's law to the private rented sector through the Renters' Rights Bill and to update minimum energy efficiency standards to energy performance certificate rating C in the private rented sector.

A researcher at the University of Leeds, Rebecca Sale, is examining the impacts of poor indoor air quality. Her research shows how we spend up to 90% of our time indoors. Indoor air pollution can be hard to manage; the pollutants are invisible and are produced from everyday products and practices. The quality of the air is important for atmospheric services in the home, which includes the provision of suitable air for respiration, the regulation of heating and cooling, and the state of the air for comfortable living.

Indoor air quality is much less recognised than outdoor air quality. Damp and mould may be particularly prevalent in UK households due to draughty and leaky buildings.

[Alex Sobel]

That partly relates to the legacy of coal burning in homes, which necessitated high levels of ventilation. Rebecca's research explains how it can be hard to achieve a balance between insulating homes to improve energy efficiency while also allowing ventilation to maintain good indoor air quality. New building standards and regulations have meant that buildings are highly insulated and airtight. Although that makes homes warmer in winter, in hotter periods there is an increased requirement for ventilation. Insulating a home or making it more airtight can increase the incidence of mould if moisture is not being ventilated out of the home.

Older people, pregnant women, children and babies are especially vulnerable to the health impacts of indoor air pollution. A well-known and extremely important example is that of Awaab Ishak, the two-year-old boy from Rochdale who tragically died in 2020 as a result of respiratory arrest caused by the damp and mould in his family home. We know how important indoor air quality issues are, so I thank the Government again for extending Awaab's law to the private rented sector, in which many children live.

Many older people still struggle to heat their home during winter, particularly those who are just above the pension credit limit and so no longer receive the winter fuel payment; I have met many people in that situation on the doorstep. It is therefore clear that we need an all-round, holistic and comprehensive approach to overcoming the problem of cold and damp homes.

Upgrading homes is one of the key ways in which the Government can put money back into people's pockets while improving living standards. For the warm homes plan to be successful, it must ensure that upgrades are affordable for low-income households by providing grants tapered by household income and introducing Government-backed low interest rate loans for households that cannot afford to borrow money to carry out the work that is needed.

We also need to overhaul the consumer protections landscape to ensure that people are confident in the process and can easily put things right if they go wrong. We are encouraged by the announcement from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero that it will address the current patchwork of protections that allow rogue traders to operate in this area. The Government need to provide access to free, independent and personalised advice throughout the home upgrade journey, including additional case-handling support for vulnerable households, which may need more support. Additionally, energy-inefficient homes are responsible for some 14% of the UK's carbon emissions. Meeting our net zero targets will be impossible without tackling them.

I urge the Minister and colleagues across the House to join me in calling for a fully funded nationwide warm homes plan; a legal commitment to bring all homes to EPC rating C by 2035; fair support for renters and the most vulnerable, particularly our youngest and our eldest; and recognition that this is not just a housing issue, but a public health issue, an economic issue and a moral issue.

1.39 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel)

on bringing this important subject to Westminster Hall. The state of our private rental properties is an appalling open secret. One in four private renters live in fuel poverty; 1.6 million children are living in privately rented homes that are damp or mouldy. That is a shocking situation.

As we know, the UK has some of the oldest and coldest houses in Europe. More than half of tenants had issues with damp or mould last year. In my constituency of Bath, 31% had problems with hot water or heating, and 21% of privately rented homes do not meet the decent homes standard. These numbers are simply not acceptable. We need tougher inspections and much higher standards.

As the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley has pointed out, serious health risks can arise from mouldy and damp conditions. It was not long ago that a toddler in Rochdale died from prolonged exposure to black mould, yet MPs still hear every winter from constituents who are dealing with terrible cases of damp and mould. A constituent in Bath recently wrote to me that their walls are black with mould. Now, after months of relentless coughing, they have been referred for asthma testing. Another constituent described fungi growing up from the floor. Damp and decay have already damaged their belongings, and now they fear that the place they call home is no longer fit to live in.

Such cases are prevalent across the country. One in four of the complaints that Citizens Advice receives is about disrepair, damp, mould or excessive cold. Is it any wonder that the NHS spends £1.5 billion every year treating respiratory illnesses? There have been small-scale trials in which heating vouchers were given to at-risk households as a preventive measure, helping to avoid illness and reduce pressure on health services. Why not roll it out nationally?

It is not just privately rented properties with unaccountable landlords that have these issues. Many of the cases that I hear about come from tenants in social housing. My largest social housing association, Curo, has made it clear that housing providers face soaring costs. Repairs, decarbonisation, regeneration and new home delivery must all be funded from increasingly stretched social rents. Social rents are set by the Government using a "consumer prices index plus 1%" formula, but successive Governments have capped, cut and changed this model. In 2003, for example, there was a 7% rent cap, despite the CPI reaching 11% that year; meanwhile, the average operating cost per household unit rose by 11%.

The Government have ambitious house building targets, but that mismatch leaves providers struggling to maintain existing homes, let alone build new ones. Because funding is overstretched, increasing numbers of social tenants are not getting the repairs and upgrades that their properties need to prevent damp and mould in the first place. I ask the Government to look at this closely. A fundamental review of the rent and capital subsidy regime will make sure that providers can provide homes that are well maintained and managed, while also meeting their requirements to improve, regenerate and build new social housing.

At the heart of this regeneration must be a programme of home insulation, which is something that Liberal Democrats have been asking about for a long time. Well-insulated homes stay warmer, so insulation is key to reducing energy bills. Much of the housing stock in

Bath is Georgian and grade II-listed. These homes are in dire need of insulation, but listed buildings are more expensive to insulate because of the specific regulatory requirements. For many of my constituents, the cost of insulating their homes is just too high.

The Government have announced the warm homes local grant, aimed at improving the efficiency of low-income, low energy-performance homes. However, in the recent funding award, Bath and North East Somerset council will receive a fraction of the amount that it requested: just 26% of what was felt to be needed to carry out the work following consultation with the warm homes team. The existing consortium was awarded approximately £11 million over two years under the home upgrade grant phase 2. The programme has improved 80 homes in Bath, helping fuel-poor residents to save money on energy bills and benefit from a more comfortable and climate-friendly home, but it has been cut under the warm homes grant. The council is now receiving a reduced budget of just £4.5 million a year over three years.

Thousands of homes in Bath are eligible for the warm homes grant, but a very small fraction will receive it. The programme is likely to be oversubscribed; I understand that there is a waiting list from the previous scheme that will account for the first year of upgrades. The ability to carry out funded work on homes helps to alleviate fuel poverty, improve health and reduce carbon emissions. Reducing the budget will have knock-on effects on all those areas.

The other national awards reflect a similarly bleak picture. Once again, we had a winter in which our constituents suffered in cold and damp homes. I am not aware of any public acknowledgment from the Government that funding for home energy upgrades has been cut. I ask the Minister whether that represents a rowing back on the targets in the warm homes plan, or whether it is a reallocation of resources in the warm homes plan. The Liberal Democrats propose a 10-year insulation programme, starting with free insulation for the most vulnerable homes. If we want to reduce household energy bills, insulating homes is the place to start, so I hope that the Government will sincerely consider that.

The state of our rental housing, both private and social, is simply not good enough. It is one of the many failures of the previous Conservative Government, so the new Government must now step up and deal with the problem. The stories from my constituents in Bath are echoed across the country: damp walls, black mould and cold, unliveable homes. We know the solution—higher standards, proper funding for repairs and investment in insulation—but we continue to see piecemeal action and shrinking budgets. I urge the Government to act fast so all our constituents can live in safe, warm and secure housing.

Matt Western (in the Chair): I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

1.46 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I apologise for my one-minute lateness. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for his excellent opening speech. I recognised a number of the points

that he outlined, because the issue comes up in my inbox from my constituents across Vauxhall and Camberwell Green.

Like the Leeds Central and Headingley constituency, Vauxhall and Camberwell Green is home to a large number of students and young people who are just starting out in work. As we all know, many of them end up at the cheaper end of the housing market, often in smaller, older properties that may be more susceptible to damp and expensive to heat. We must not think, just because a person is young, that such homes are not extremely damaging to their health. Imagine a young person trying to revise for their final exams in a cramped room where damp crawls up the wall. Some will be trying to save for a deposit and get a foothold in a career, all the while knowing that every day after work, they return to a home that will make them physically and mentally ill. That is the reality for so many people across the country.

Many want to tackle the situation directly with their landlords, but they are afraid of being evicted into a housing market where they can barely find somewhere else to live and barely afford somewhere else. That is unacceptable at any age. It is critical that the Renters' Rights Bill is successful not only in addressing the misbalance between landlords and tenants, but in helping councils to ensure that every home is safe and properly fit for habitation.

We must also tackle the stigma around social housing. An attitude is developing that people in social housing are lucky to have a home. It is not a privilege to have a home, or to have a home that is not covered in damp and mould. That is the bare minimum that any of us should expect, yet many tenants have been told that the cold and damp in their homes is their fault. They have been told to open the windows, even in the cold months, to avoid mould. Why should people be expected to freeze because their home is not fit for purpose? Yet that is what we are asking many people to do up and down the country.

We all know there is a housing crisis. That means we have people who simply cannot say no, even when the property they are viewing is filled with damp and mould. There is no excuse for properties to be in that condition.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady agree with my social housing provider, Curo, that it is impossible for social housing providers to both build the new social and affordable homes that are required and maintain homes to a decent standard?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the hon. Member for making that important point, which many registered social landlords and local authorities have raised with the Select Committee in various evidence sessions. They are struggling. Many housing associations are saying that they are spending more on repairs and maintenance than actually building. They all want to contribute and support the Government in their agenda to build 1.5 million new homes, but, frankly, they are struggling. That is why I welcome the Government's commitment to increase rental properties' energy efficiency, so that no tenants end up paying extortionate energy bills in inefficient homes.

What steps has the Minister taken to work with councils to give them not just extra powers, but the real ability to enforce standards in cold and damp homes

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

across the housing sector, as the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) has just highlighted? What support is the Minister providing so that they can maintain their own stock and not leave social housing tenants facing unacceptable conditions?

We are coming into the summer months, when a number of tenants will be able to enjoy their homes, but winter is just around the corner. It is important that the Government lay out the additional work they will do with private rented and social landlords to tackle this important issue.

1.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. Like the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), I apologise for being approximately 55 seconds late, but we were rushing. Thank you for helping us and for letting us take part in the debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for leading today's debate on this important issue. He set the scene admirably. All the detail that he gave helps all of us to focus on what we need to do. This is one of those issues that arise in all parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We all hear of these issues from our constituents. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) referred to her constituents and the information she gets from them; we all can say the same. Cold and damp are among the biggest problems when it comes to housing in my constituency.

As chair of the healthy homes and buildings all-party parliamentary group, I am fully aware of the problems of cold and damp in domestic homes and commercial buildings. I hear about it from my constituents regularly. Some 60% of the housing cases my staff deal with are transfers, and 40% of those are about damp and mould. Some of the pictures that they have seen are extraordinary, so it is good to be here to discuss the issue and see what we can do.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place. He responds to the questions we ask with honesty and clarity. We look forward to the answers that we will get today.

According to National Energy Action, approximately 40% of households in Northern Ireland are classified as being in fuel poverty, meaning that they spend more than 10% of their income on energy costs. That, I think, highlights the issue for many, especially at a time when money is tight and people are not able to stretch it as far as they would like. In addition, social housing stock in Northern Ireland is notably energy inefficient. Many homes lack adequate insulation, leading to higher housing costs and more vulnerability to cold and damp conditions.

A little while back, a constituent who was residing in a Housing Executive property that had excessive damp and mould in both bedrooms came into my office. A little girl of the age of four slept in one of those rooms, and her mother was increasingly concerned about the health issues that can come with cold and damp. That is often forgotten. We tend to focus on the physicality—how it looks and the smell that may come from mould. It is no secret that damp and mould can lead to respiratory issues and exacerbate the symptoms of asthma

and cardiovascular disease. I am also chair of the APPG for respiratory health, and we have worked closely on those issues. With a double chair hat on, as chair of both the healthy homes and buildings APPG and the APPG for respiratory health, those issues have combined to put the focus on these things today.

I want to be respectful to Government, as I always try to be, but 10 million pensioners across the United Kingdom have lost their winter fuel payment, and it is projected that those cuts will push an additional 50,000 pensioners into relative poverty each year from 2024 to 2029. In some years, as many as 100,000 people will be affected. Often, those with chronic illnesses or disabilities face higher energy bills and so are disproportionately affected by the cuts, which ultimately will plunge more people into poverty this winter and make it harder for them to heat their homes. That means more cold homes, more damp and more mould, which the Government will single-handedly allow by removing this payment.

There has been some indication in the past few days that the Labour Government are reconsidering this policy. I hope that they are. It would be a positive step forward. I hope that the final decision will be that winter fuel payments will be reinstated. Elderly people who suffer with health issues like the ones I mentioned are much more likely to become ill as a result of a cold home. I cannot stress enough how important it is that the Government commit to reversing this brash and wrong decision.

NEA has estimated that, across the United Kingdom, on average more than 10,000 people die each year due to living in a cold home. It is important to put the problem into figures, because, unfortunately, such a death toll gives us a better idea of what is happening. In England and Wales, excess winter deaths rose by nearly 20% last winter. That is another indication of where we are going. Those figures are shocking. The Government must work more closely with social housing associations and landlords to ensure that people can afford to heat their homes adequately, and are not forced to decide between eating a meal or putting the heating on.

This is a UK-wide issue that must be given the attention it deserves and tackled alongside the devolved Administrations—back home, the Department for Communities. More must be done to support pensioners who are struggling after the loss of their winter fuel payment, and to help tenants, many of whom are families in social housing, whose housing is not habitable or up to scratch. It is time for change. I think that the Minister is committed to it. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

1.56 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for securing this important debate. As he rightly set out, many of our issues stem from the fact that so much of our housing stock dates to the Georgian and Victorian periods. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) rightly pointed out that the UK has some of the oldest and coldest homes in Europe, and that the NHS is spending £1.5 billion a year on treating respiratory illnesses. Hopefully, investing in warmer homes would bring down that cost. In Wales alone, over 600,000

households—nearly half of all Welsh homes—are estimated to be in fuel poverty, with more than 100,000 in extreme fuel poverty. The crisis is not just about rising energy bills or cold weather; it is rooted in the very buildings we live in. The UK and Wales especially, as we have heard, have some of the oldest housing stock in Europe. Many of the homes in Wales were built before 1919, long before insulation or energy efficiency were even considered. As a result, a huge number of houses are cold, damp and impossible to heat efficiently. Many still rely on outdated boilers, lack double glazing or have walls that leak heat faster than we can generate it.

The consequences are not just physical discomfort or financial strain; cold homes are making people sick. They are contributing to the incidence of respiratory disease, heart conditions, mental health issues and, tragically, avoidable deaths in winter. This is costing every single one of us. The NHS in England alone spends around £1.5 billion a year treating conditions linked to cold and damp homes. In Wales, the annual cost is estimated to be £67 million. That money could be spent on frontline care, rather than on treating problems that could have been prevented by better housing.

The costs go even further. Fuel poverty means lost workdays and reduced productivity due to illness; children underperforming at school because they are too cold or too sick to learn; increased national energy use and demand from homes that haemorrhage heat; growing household debt from people falling behind on unaffordable energy bills; and less money in the economy as a whole as incomes get swallowed up by ballooning heating bills.

We are stuck in a vicious cycle that affects not just the poorest but all of us through higher public spending and lost economic potential. Unfortunately, Government responses have been far too slow. In Wales, the flagship warm homes programme is woefully inadequate. At the current pace, it could take more than 130 years to insulate every fuel-poor household in Wales—a staggering statistic that shows just how far behind Labour in Wales is on this issue.

It does not have to be this way. The Welsh Liberal Democrats have proposed a bold but realistic solution, providing £1.75 billion over five years to retrofit homes, prioritising those in or near fuel poverty. This plan could create 10,000 jobs, generate £2.2 billion for the economy and, most importantly, transform lives. For rural areas and farmers, there are huge opportunities here too, with insulation using Welsh wool now playing a major part in existing insulation programs.

On a recent visit, I saw at first hand the installation of protective loft insulation in Brecon by Loft Boarding South Wales, a local, family-run, green growth business. It was very clear to me that insulation programmes offer economic benefits not only for consumers, but through the skilled jobs that such programmes provide.

Across the UK, the Liberal Democrats are calling for urgent action, including a 10-year emergency home insulation programme to upgrade Britain's cold, inefficient housing stock, and the introduction of an energy social tariff—a targeted pricing structure that would lower heating bills for the most vulnerable. We will of course continue to press the Government to reverse their disastrous cuts to the winter fuel allowance—although current briefings to the media from different Ministers make it very difficult for us all to decipher where the Government are at on that issue.

These measures are not just ambitious; they are necessary, and must be in place before the next winter bites. Fuel poverty is a national disgrace, but it is also a national opportunity. By investing in energy-efficient homes, we can cut carbon emissions, reduce health inequalities, lower NHS costs, boost the economy and improve national security all at once.

The best time to introduce an emergency insulation programme was before Putin launched his brutal invasion of Ukraine. The second best time would be now. Let us start thinking of insulation not as a luxury, but as a public good. Let us stop managing the symptoms of cold homes and start curing the cause. In one of the richest nations on earth, no one should have to choose between heating and eating.

2.2 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I welcome the Minister to his place and congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) on securing this debate.

It was the English Army officer and playwright Guy du Maurier who wrote that every Englishman's home is his castle. In that phrase, he summed up the immense feelings of pride and belonging that people should feel about their home. Whether they are homeowners or renters, it should always be the case that everyone in this country—every child, every parent, every pensioner—can live in a home that is warm, dry and safe. I know that all colleagues in this House will agree that that should be the bare minimum.

The hon. Member's timing in calling this debate is, as usual, perfect—it is almost as good as his timing in arriving at the debate with 30 seconds to spare. Maybe he should think about entering a marathon with sprinting like that—

Alex Sobel: This Sunday!

Paul Holmes: Good luck to him—I hope he sends his sponsorship details to every Member in the House. He outlined a very important case. Whatever party and constituency we represent, we will all have received the bog-standard response from a housing association or council saying that residents who have damp and mould have had their mould wash put in, and they need to keep their windows open and they need to stop using the tumble dryer indoors.

It is not good enough. All Members in this House need to push harder on the sector, and we need to push harder in raising the concerns of our constituents who have those problems. We must all do better, and there is much more to do.

In that spirit, I refer to the fantastic speech of the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). She set out the clear conflict in the social sector between building more homes and ensuring investment to keep standards up in the housing stock. Those concerns have been raised by the sector with me, as shadow Housing Minister. I would not go as far as to say that I agree with the hon. Lady that it is impossible, but it is certainly a lot harder. I myself used to work for the largest housing association in the United Kingdom. We consistently had a line back to the previous Government; we wanted to be ambitious, and we absolutely wanted to commit to making sure

[*Paul Holmes*]

that we had decent homes. The issue is that, with homebuilding targets relying on the old profit model, not-for-profit companies get stuck trying to deliver those targets. We need to do better at making sure that the sector is supported.

I am a great fan of the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi). She said that there is still a taboo around social housing. She is absolutely correct. I am proud to have grown up on council estates in New Cross, Bermondsey and then Lewisham. My parents still live in their council house. In all parties, we should express our support for people who live in council housing. For many, it is a great step up and a security blanket. I would be the first to admit that the last Government did not go far enough in supporting the housing and social sector. I am determined to change that, because I was created and grew up in the sector myself.

Every home should be a place of pride, safety and stability. That sense of pride is shattered when people are handed keys to a new home built with shoddy workmanship, incomplete fittings or insufficient insulation, or when people's homes are not looked after properly, with poor repairs and maintenance regimes of housing associations or private landlords. They need to be supported more. On new builds, the last Government did important work to make new homes fit for the future, including by improving insulation standards, but where insulation is still lacking, we need urgent action. I welcome the new responsibilities given to Ofgem to oversee repairs and remediation in this area.

This debate is not just about building new homes to a suitable standard; it is also vital to legislate for the proper and safe maintenance of the existing and ageing stock. I am pleased that in the last Government we passed the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2024, a landmark piece of legislation that strengthens the powers of the regulator of social housing. The Act introduced Awaab's law, setting strict limits for social landlords to deal with hazards like damp and mould. The tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak—I used to share an office with his MP, before he left this place, so I saw the tragic case borne out in real time—was caused by prolonged exposure to mould in his home and is a heartbreaking reminder of what can go wrong when we fail to act.

Such a tragedy should never have happened, and we must ensure it never happens again. There must be nowhere for rogue landlords to hide—either private landlords or social landlords. While of course holding this Minister and Government to account, I will continue to work with them to build on the progress we have made in protecting tenants from dangerous living conditions.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the shadow Minister for his open and honest speech. I know that he cares passionately about this area. Does he agree that the previous Government could have helped on the really important issue of no-fault evictions? So many tenants were in properties where there was too much damp and mould, did not say anything through fear of being evicted, but then lo and behold, found themselves being evicted through no fault of their own.

Paul Holmes: The hon. Lady is correct to say that there are areas in which we could have gone further. Some of that could have been met by actions we brought forward, such as a new housing ombudsman and making sure that regulation was better, but I do not think we worked at pace to do that as fast as we could. We need to learn from that, as I said openly to the Minister. I congratulate him on his position, as there is no one in the House who knows more about the housing sector than him, having prepared the manifesto. We may disagree vehemently about it at times, but I cannot knock his talent and expertise. That is where we will offer to work with the Government on making those great strides.

It is utterly unacceptable in 21st-century Britain that any family should be put in danger because of where they live. Everyone, regardless of background, income or postcode, deserves to live in a decent, safe and secure home. The last Government's consultation on Awaab's law proposed sensible timelines. Landlords must investigate hazards within 14 days, act within a further seven, and complete emergency repairs within 24 hours. I welcome this Government's commitment to implementing the law from October. That implementation must be timely, thorough and enforced, and they will have our support in doing so.

It is important to highlight that providers across the sector continue to invest in their existing stock to drive up standards. The previous Government oversaw the halving of the number of non-decent homes in the social housing sector since 2010, but the cost associated with these new requirements will likely require a rise in rents and service charges, which present their own associated challenges to an overburdened sector. As L&Q Group—not the housing association I worked for, but its rival—noted “providers across the sector invested £37 billion in bringing homes up to a decent standard, at an average cost of £10,000 per home.”

But without additional Government support, this pace will slow, adding more pressure on renters. As the hon. Member for Bath outlined, it will also slow house building in this sector for the people who most need it, and it will harm the Government's 1.5 million housing target.

On that topic, I must turn to the issue of winter fuel support, as the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley did. The Minister knows our views on winter fuel support, which I will not rehash, but it is a lifeline for many, and especially for our pensioners. I know I speak for many colleagues across the House when I say that I am deeply concerned about this Government's decision to scrap the winter fuel allowance, which will impact 10 million pensioners nationwide. Age UK research shows that, in the north-west alone, 1.2 million pensioners are losing support and 300,000 of them are already living in or close to poverty. That is not just a policy failure but a moral failure that we all must bear. Our pensioners have worked in, contributed to and built this country, and we cannot and must not leave them out in the cold.

Energy bills are still going up, and there is the double whammy of removing the winter fuel payment and the energy inefficiency of housing, particularly for pensioners. The Government's promises to freeze energy bills have not been met, which is not only harming those who are vulnerable but stopping them heating their homes when they need to.

I hope that the Minister takes my criticisms, suggestions and support in the spirit in which they are intended. The Government have a lot to reconsider: a settlement for pensioners that exacerbates their strained living conditions; a housing algorithm that abdicates responsibility for the issue to overburdened local authorities; and a faltering ambition to build a record number of homes.

We all want to see more houses built—I have repeatedly said that—and for those houses to be of high quality, but we also want to have a decent standard of homes across the private rented sector, too. There is much more work to be done, and the Government must rethink their approach to benefits for pensioners and vulnerable people while they still have a chance to correct their course, or it will be the general public who suffer the consequences of the Government's mismanagement. I stand ready to offer support to the Minister in a genuine, open and constructive way, and I look forward to his response.

2.12 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Western.

I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) on securing this important debate. As hon. Members will be aware, he has long championed housing issues on behalf of both renters and homeowners in his constituency and across the country. He made a powerful case in his opening remarks for action to tackle the blight of cold and damp homes.

I also thank all the other hon. Members who have contributed this afternoon. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), for his kind remarks, which I very much appreciate. I also thank the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick); the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon); and of course the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi).

I will attempt to respond to all the points that have been raised in this debate, but I hope that colleagues who represent seats in Wales and Northern Ireland will understand that, as it is a devolved matter, I am not responsible for housing policy in their areas. However, I will ensure that comments are passed on to my colleagues in the Scotland Office and the Wales Office.

Everyone, regardless of whether they are a homeowner, a leaseholder or a tenant, has a basic right to a safe, secure, affordable and decent home. Yet, as we have heard from the many cases that have been shared this afternoon, and as I am acutely aware from my south-east London constituency, far too many families live in homes that are cold, damp and often mouldy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley is absolutely right to argue that non-decent housing is not simply a housing issue, and the Government recognise that it is also a matter of public health and can exacerbate existing inequalities. It is imperative that we act decisively to improve the quality of housing in all tenures, and that is precisely what this Labour Government are doing. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the points that have been raised in this debate and to provide the House with more detail on the steps that we are taking.

I will begin by addressing the problem of cold and damp homes, which has been the focus of the debate. No tenant should be forced to live in a home that places their health and safety at risk. Although the proportion of homes with the highest energy efficiency ratings has increased over the last 10 years, an unacceptable number of English homes are not well maintained, and the number of homes suffering from damp has grown over the past five years.

A number of hon. Members mentioned several statistics, and I will give my own. In 2023, 5% of all homes in England had damp in them. The situation is worse for tenants, with 9% of privately rented homes and 7% of social homes experiencing damp. As hon. Members will know, one of the main causes of damp is excess cold, and large numbers of owner-occupiers and tenants are living in fuel poverty. Some 7.5% of owner-occupiers, 13.1% of social tenants and a staggering 21.5% of PRS tenants are fuel poor, with all the implications that that has for their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

It is stating the obvious, but it is worth restating that the social and economic benefits of bearing down on the problem are significant. It has been estimated that remedying dangerously hazardous cold in people's homes would save the NHS over £11 million every year, and that fixing damp and mould would save a further £9.7 million. For those reasons, the Government are taking decisive action to drive up housing standards.

We are clear that when it comes to reducing the number of cold and damp homes, the existing regulatory system is not fit for purpose. Social rented homes must already meet the decent homes standard, but the part that refers to thermal comfort has not been updated since it was developed nearly a quarter of a century ago. Moreover, there is absolutely no obligation for private landlords even to meet that standard, meaning that, as I said, an astonishing 21% of privately rented homes are not decent. That is unacceptable, and it is why we will consult this year on an updated and reformed decent homes standard, which will apply to both the social and private rented sectors. That means that safe, secure housing will be the standard that people can expect in both social and privately rented properties, at no distinction between tenures.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green rightly mentioned enforcement, which is an essential aspect of bringing a new decent homes standard into force. She will be aware—and I give credit to the previous Government for this—that the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 introduced proactive consumer regulations, overseen by the Regulator of Social Housing, which can hold all registered social landlords to account. The regulator has strong enforcement powers, so where there are serious failings it can take effective action, including issuing unlimited fines.

We are also taking immediate action to clamp down on damp, mould and other hazards. Both the shadow Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley mentioned the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in 2020. As we have heard, Awaab died as a result of prolonged exposure to mould in his social rented home in Greater Manchester. It was an avoidable tragedy, and it shames us as a nation. I say that wherever I go; I think it utterly shames us, and it must never be repeated. That is why we have committed to implementing Awaab's law, which was commendably

[Matthew Pennycook]

legislated for by the previous Government. From October this year, social landlords will be required to address damp and mould within fixed timescales and carry out all emergency repairs as soon as possible, within no more than 24 hours.

Florence Eshalomi: Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I will just finish this point, because the sequencing is important for hon. Members to understand. We will then expand the law to include other health and safety hazards in 2026 and 2027.

Florence Eshalomi: As the shadow Minister highlighted, the Minister closes his eyes and sees housing; he cares passionately about this area. Additional enforcement areas will rightly help so many social housing tenants, but does the Minister agree that, because of the number of people caught in temporary housing, the Government need to look at regulation in social housing? We are seeing more and more people stuck in frankly unsuitable temporary accommodation for up to five or 10 years, and 74 children have died because of the conditions linked to their temporary accommodation.

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the situation for lots of families in temporary accommodation is acute, and we are aware that there are real decency problems in that respect. The Renters' Rights Bill provides for the extension of the decent homes standard to temporary accommodation, but we are obviously giving very serious consideration to how we improve standards for those in temporary accommodation and how we very rapidly move people out and into, in almost all cases, a decent, safe, secure and affordable social rented home. I am grateful to the shadow Minister for recognising that we have not done enough on that in the past, so we need to do more in the future.

Through the Renters' Rights Bill, we will extend the requirements of Awaab's law to private landlords. Beyond Awaab's law, we are legislating to introduce electrical safety standards in social housing to bring them in line with requirements in the private rented sector. We are working with the housing ombudsman to ensure that tenants can seek redress when things go wrong, and we are committed to ensuring that social landlords have the right skills and qualifications to deliver housing services for their tenants.

As the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green, said, we are making tenancies in the private rented sector more secure by finally abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions. That will mean that tenants can have the confidence to complain to their landlords about poor conditions and use their right to take their landlord to court if necessary without fear of eviction.

It is all very well increasing the quality of social housing, but many people struggle to afford to heat their homes. That is not just a health hazard but a direct cause of damp and mould. An energy-efficient home is a warm and dry home, which is why we are already consulting on raising minimum energy efficiency standards in the private rented sector, and have committed to do the same in the social rented sector in the coming

months. We have committed an initial £3.4 billion to the warm homes plan funding over the next three years, including £1.8 billion to support fuel poverty schemes. That will reduce annual bills considerably for tenants.

We also recognise the contribution that more energy-efficient buildings will make to meeting our target of net zero emissions by 2050. Future standards, which will be introduced later this year, will set out how new homes and buildings can move away from reliance on volatile fossil fuels, and ensure they are fit for a net zero future. I look forward to updating the House on what those future standards entail in due course.

We know that most landlords, private and social, want to provide high-quality accommodation and work to fix damp and cold conditions as soon as they can, but we also know that our reforms will come at a cost to some. That is why our new warm homes local grant will help the private rented sector, and the warm homes social housing fund will support social housing providers and tenants.

David Chadwick: Does the Minister see a greater role for Welsh wool in insulating our homes? He may not be aware that many Welsh farmers actually lose money from shearing their sheep. Wool is a natural product that can be used to insulate homes. It is organic, and it would bring more money into the rural economy, unlike synthetic products.

Matthew Pennycook: It has been acknowledged that I have some knowledge of housing, but the hon. Gentleman tempts me into an area about which I do not have particular knowledge, not least because the warm homes plan is the responsibility not of my Department but of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. I am sure that Department will have heard all the comments that have been made about the warm homes plan, and I will ensure that the relevant Ministers reflect on them.

There is currently a zero rate of VAT until March 2027 on energy-saving measures such as insulation and low-carbon heating, making it cheaper for landlords to invest in their properties and reduce their energy usage. Other support is available to landlords to improve their properties. An eligibility tool is available on gov.uk to help people find the support available to them via the home upgrade grant and the Great British insulation scheme.

Of course, it is not just rented homes where we need to take action. We are also considering options to ensure a fair, proportionate and affordable approach to improving the energy performance of owner-occupied homes. The warm homes plan will help people find ways to save money on energy bills and will transform our ageing building stock into comfortable, low-carbon homes that are fit for the future. We will upgrade up to 5 million homes across the country by accelerating the installation of efficient new technologies such as heat pumps, solar batteries and insulation.

Before I conclude, I should mention how our efforts to improve standards and quality in homes of all tenures fit in with a wider housing strategy. In many cases, cold and damp homes are a symptom of the wider housing crisis that we inherited. That acute and entrenched crisis will not be solved by raising quality and standards; we need new supply. That is why the Government's plan for change includes a hugely ambitious milestone of

building 1.5 million safe and decent homes in England in this Parliament. We know that is a stretching target, but it is deliverable, in our view, and it is essential.

We have already announced changes to planning policy to support the delivery of affordable homes. We have also provided two immediate one-year cash injections totalling £800 million to the affordable homes programme to deliver an extra 7,800 homes. On 25 March, we injected a further £2 billion into the affordable homes programme from 2026-27 to build up to 18,000 new homes by the end of this Parliament. That funding is a down payment on future long-term investment and will act as a bridge to the future grant programme to be announced in the spending review. In that programme, we want to put particular focus on delivering homes for social rent. These are new homes, built to high standards, that will be warm and dry.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is always assiduous and gives good answers. He has put forward many good ideas to ensure that the issue of cold, damp and mouldy homes is addressed in the United Kingdom, especially in England. The hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) and I would be keen to ensure that the Minister shares those ideas with the Governments in Northern Ireland and Wales.

Matthew Pennycook: We speak regularly with our counterparts in the devolved authorities, but I will make a special point of ensuring that the comments that have been made today are passed on to the relevant Ministers within those authorities and, as I said, with colleagues in the Scotland and Wales Offices.

Once again, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley on securing this important debate, and thank all those who have contributed to it. We all know the detrimental impact that non-decent housing has on the lives of our constituents, and that more must be done to drive up standards across housing tenures. I hope that this afternoon I have provided hon. Members with reassurance that the Government are working with determination to drive a transformational and lasting change in the safety and quality of housing in this country.

Matt Western (in the Chair): I call Alex Sobel to wind up.

2.26 pm

Alex Sobel: Thank you, Mr Western; your chairing this afternoon has been excellent, and I hope to serve under you in many more debates. I thank all Members who have taken part: the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi); the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon); the Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Members for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) and for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes); and most of all the Minister. I have contributed to a number of debates in which he has been exceedingly gracious and generous in what he has offered. It is very clear that he recognises the scope and scale of the issue that we face, and I am really pleased with the range of measures that he outlined. It is a league above where the previous Government were, but we need a driving focus on removing the barriers to providing warm and dry homes for those on the lowest incomes. That needs to be our main priority, because they are the ones who are still suffering the most.

Many Members mentioned the fact that many older people who may be just above the pension credit threshold are struggling to pay their fuel bills. We are only in May, and there are many months until the winter, but I hope that the Government, in addition to introducing measures that will result in lower energy bills in the future, might look again at that issue for the group who are just slightly above the threshold. Perhaps the Government could look again at the taper or threshold for winter fuel payments. As the Minister said, the worst tenure overall for cold and damp homes is the private rented sector. We need to go further and faster on action to ensure that landlords provide warm and dry homes, because everyone deserves a decent home.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of cold and damp homes.

2.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

Small Abattoirs

[SIR DESMOND SWAYNE *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of Government support for small abattoirs.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling this important debate.

The abattoir industry is at crisis point. In 2023, just 60 small abattoirs—those with a throughput of less than 5,000 livestock units per year—were left in the UK. According to a 2022 Food Standards Agency report, small abattoirs are closing at the alarming rate of 10% per year, and within a decade they may well disappear altogether. To give an idea of the scale of the issue, in 2007 there were nearly 100 small abattoirs in the UK. The remaining small abattoirs face immense and multifaceted challenges to keep their facilities open for business. A 2021 National Craft Butchers study found that 59% of small abattoirs expected to shut down within five years unless they received Government support.

The loss of these essential rural businesses poses major problems for local food infrastructure, animal welfare, biodiversity and food security. A resilient, shorter and farmer-focused supply chain requires small abattoirs and butchers who have connections with local restaurants, pubs and retailers. More than ever, local livestock producers need a well-distributed network of small abattoirs that offer private kill services to farmers who wish to add value by marketing and selling their meat directly to consumers, or to farmers who breed rare or native breeds but are often unable to use larger processors. However, two thirds of those farmers have reported issues in accessing appropriate abattoir services. Meanwhile, a third of respondents to a user survey by the Abattoir Sector Group reported that their local abattoir had already closed. That is devastating for so many farmers.

Small abattoirs continue to deal with increased costs, such as rising energy costs and the recent increase in employer national insurance contributions, which threaten the viability of their businesses. However, they are also hampered by an expensive and punitive regulatory system that is not suited to addressing the nuances under which smaller processors have to operate.

Earlier this week, Hugh Broom, a local farmer and an old Harper Adams University friend of mine, invited me to visit Down Land Traditional Meats, a small abattoir in Sussex that processes under 5,000 livestock units per year. It is vital for the local food infrastructure in the area. Luke Smith, who runs the business, served over 2,000 customers in February, with people coming from as far as Essex to access his services. After the closure of Newman's Abattoir in Farnborough earlier this year, farmers on the Isle of Wight are being forced to travel further afield to access abattoir facilities on the mainland, further increasing their costs, as transporting livestock off the island by ferry is very expensive. Many of them are now going to Down Land. Demand has grown so much that many farmers now face long waiting times to get their animals booked in for slaughter. The scenario is replicated across the country.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. As the MP for the Scottish Borders, which is a vast area, I share her concerns. Many of my farmers and food producers face the challenges to which she has referred. I agree with her points about animal welfare and supporting the rural economy. Does she agree that local abattoirs help the environment by reducing the carbon footprint of food production?

Sarah Dyke: I absolutely agree. Reducing food miles is essential, along with carbon sequestration. Small farmers who supply local markets are doing sterling work by reducing food miles.

At Down Land abattoir, Luke is struggling to keep up with demand, for so many reasons. Recruitment is an issue and so is retention of staff, because there has been such a dramatic decline in people opting to work in skilled-labour roles in the food sector, including slaughtering and butchery. The restriction in the size of his facilities is also restricting his output. That is coupled with the fact that much of the facility's ageing equipment was not built to withstand the throughput that he is now driving in his business. It is in desperate need of investment. While I was visiting earlier this week, one of the cold stores had a major fault and had to be closed down. That carcass hanging space could not be used, which had a massive knock-on effect on what was already a really busy day.

Most shockingly, Luke spoke passionately about the challenges that he faces every day because of the framework within which businesses like his must operate. Currently, the Food Standards Agency's charging system is based on hours of onsite vet attendance. Abattoirs are charged a set hourly fee, irrespective of the animals slaughtered; discounts are currently available, depending on how many hours are used. Smaller sites, with a throughput of under 1,000 livestock units, are not required to have full-time OV attendance, so the majority of their hours will be covered by a 90% discount, but those that serve more than 1,000 livestock units will see their fees increased considerably.

In June 2025, the FSA will have to decide whether to launch a public consultation on the discount or accept the Treasury's desire to remove it. The Association of Independent Meat Suppliers has warned that the estimated full costs will lead to the closure of 40% of the small abattoirs left in England and Wales. This comes on top of the FSA's increase in inspection fees of approximately 20% from April this year. I ask the Minister to ensure the continuation of the small abattoir discount on inspection charges so that small abattoirs can remain financially viable.

Many small abattoirs feel penalised by the FSA, with constant inspections bringing up issues that were not found in their most recent audit. Some have received enforcement notices, which cost yet more money, to alter bits of equipment, add a bit of plastic roofing or add a bit of horsehair to the bottom of a door. All the while, the FSA provides no statutory right for abattoirs to appeal. Those in the industry have told me that it acts as judge, jury and executioner. The frustration is palpable.

The FSA's charges are based on a time recording system that provides its inspectors with little incentive to deliver an efficient system. Many invoices are incorrect or fail to match up to the timesheets. The abattoir then

has to re-read them and approach the FSA to get them changed. Then the invoices are reprocessed, and off they go again. It is hugely frustrating for small abattoirs, which simply do not have the number of staff necessary to make such changes or indeed to keep up with the FSA. They are being forced to comply with a system that is not suited to their business model.

Like many farmers and smallholders in Glastonbury and Somerton, I use my local small abattoir to process my lamb. Mine is Strap Orchard, in Wincanton, which is allowed to kill only between 6 am and 12 noon, and only when the onsite vet is present. Monday is its busiest day of the week. I am told that on one Monday, the OV turned up late, as they invariably do, and by 12 noon all but one lamb had been slaughtered. At exactly 12 noon, the OV instructed them to stop immediately, despite knowing that the only reason why the work was not finished was their own late arrival. The lamb was returned to the lairage area and had to be collected by the farmer, who then had to return it on the next slaughter day. The welfare impact was clearly significant, as was the inconvenience to everybody involved.

That is just one small example of the difficult environment in which small abattoirs must survive. I implore the Minister and right hon. and hon. Members across the House to visit a small abattoir and find out more about the difficulties that they face. Fractious working relationships and financial frustrations with the FSA are a significant reason why some small abattoirs have shut down or are considering closing, leaving the local food supply without a critical piece of infrastructure. The resulting impact is felt most heavily by local farmers. The Environment Agency is working with farmers to find solutions to the issues, so it is high time that the FSA started to do the same. There is no question but that food safety must come first. However, that must be achieved by working with small abattoirs, not by punishing them at every turn.

We need the FSA to build positive and mutually beneficial working relationships with small abattoirs to ensure food safety and food security, while enabling them to be as efficient and profitable as possible. The FSA does not seem concerned about the important role that small abattoirs play as a vital piece of local food infrastructure. It appears that it views them as a difficult stakeholder in comparison with larger, centralised processes, so there is a clear conflict of aims and interests.

I believe that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can set a framework that values the contributions that small abattoirs make to local food systems. It has previously noted that it

“recognises the vital contribution a thriving abattoir network plays”

in achieving a resilient food supply chain, and it has said that it will work with abattoirs of all sizes to tackle the challenges that they face. Can the Minister explain where small abattoirs sit in DEFRA's future farming road map? I urge him to set out how he will support small abattoirs as they deal with the difficult challenges that they face. Small abattoirs should be recognised as critical pieces of livestock infrastructure that provide a diverse range of services.

I recently spoke to Gavin Keen of the multi-award-winning Blackmore Vale butchery, which is based in Henstridge in Glastonbury and Somerton. Gavin has carried out a study of abattoirs in the local area. He tells me that there are just six abattoirs that provide private

kill services for farmers who are semi-local to the constituency, and that the closure of any of them would present a major logistical challenge to the local food infrastructure. Concerningly, nearly all these abattoirs, like Down Land in Sussex, are operating at or close to capacity, leaving farmers with long waiting lists to get their livestock booked in.

It is critical that the UK has a network of abattoirs in areas of production offering services and processing, allowing value to return to the farm and allowing farmers to retail their own meat, because that can add a significant mark-up to their produce. The closure of abattoirs that offer private kill can and will hit farm revenues hard and limit farmers' ability to diversify their income. The Liberal Democrats are clear that this network of small abattoirs is an important asset for our rural communities. We have called for a £1 billion package to be added to the farming budget to support the agricultural sector. The Liberal Democrats also passed a motion at our spring conference this year that affirms our commitment to upholding the high animal welfare standards in British farming, including through support for small abattoirs.

Private kill services offered by small abattoirs allow farmers to add value to their produce by enabling them to retail the meat themselves. A survey by the Royal Countryside Fund found that farmers using private kill services in England were able to add significant value—£56 for an individual sheep and up to £3,775 for cattle.

According to the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, the continued existence of small abattoirs is vital for rare and native breed farmers. Breeding rare and native breeds provides significant public good—from increased biodiversity to high-welfare, low-input meat production. However, if smaller abattoirs offering private kill services close, many of those farmers will need to change their business practices, given that 90% of native breed producers rely on those services. Native breeds mature more slowly than commercial ones, and many large abattoirs will not take cattle over 30 months old, while horned cattle and large pigs are regularly banned from large abattoirs. If we want to support agro-ecological farming, we must ensure there is diversity within our livestock.

It is not just about retaining important historical and cultural breeds, but recognising the important role that biodiversity plays in the future of farming. Given the precarious financial position of farmers across the country, the loss of private kill options could be devastating. In fact, a British Farming Union members' survey from March last year found that direct sales are such a critical component of some farming businesses that without them, their business would cease to exist.

Let us be under no illusions. Farmers are still reeling from the hammer blows that were the family farm tax and increased employers' national insurance contributions announced in the autumn Budget. Then, most recently, came the abrupt closure of the sustainable farming incentive scheme, leaving some farmers' business plans utterly devastated. Farmers have been at the receiving end of some terrible decisions, many of them made by the previous Conservative Government. Following the botched transition from basic payments, farmers have just about managed to struggle on.

The last Conservative Government proved themselves inept at supporting British agriculture, while the current Labour Government are proving that they just do not

[Sarah Dyke]

understand the industry. The Liberal Democrats were disappointed to see the Government fail to replace the smaller abattoir fund, which closed in September 2024. I believe if this Government are serious about supporting British agriculture, a great opportunity presents itself today to step up and recognise the crucial role that small abattoirs play in the food supply chain.

I would like to touch on the workforce planning issues that the small abattoir sector faces, the impact of which will only increase over the coming years. Working in a small abattoir is very different from working in a larger processor; in a small facility, employees are expected to carry out a multitude of different jobs, as opposed to a larger abattoir, where employees work in a line system, generally specialising in performing just one task. The lack of skilled labour in the meat sector has dire implications for food security, and makes it harder to reach our environmental and sustainability goals. One in four food and drink workers are due to retire within the next year, while the average age of a small abattoir operator is between 60 and 70 years old. In line with Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy, we must invest in training and education for the food industry.

The Liberal Democrats are clear: we need to invest in workforce planning to ensure that we have enough vets, abattoir workers, slaughtermen and farm workers to meet the UK's needs. That is a crucial element of UK food security. The Government's own review recommends implementing a comprehensive strategy to improve awareness of opportunities in the food supply chain. Currently, the system does not make it easy for abattoirs to take on apprentices, nor is it appealing for those that seek to undertake training. Abattoir apprenticeships only go up to level 2, and apprentices receive a meagre £6,000 a year, which is nowhere near sufficient to cover training, travel and accommodation. That is hardly an incentive to enter the trade.

I would welcome the Minister's comments on the steps his Department is taking to improve workforce planning in this sector. We must focus on the long-term viability of these crucial elements of the livestock infrastructure.

Does the Minister agree that the UK-wide local network of abattoirs is vital for food security, animal welfare and the profitability of our farmers? Could he also confirm that in order to sustain and grow the network of abattoirs, he will ensure that the Government's existing small abattoir working group will have a proactive focus on delivery, working with both local and national Governments? If so, will he commit to meet regularly with the co-chairs of the industry and Government working group to give this crucial issue the attention it so clearly deserves?

To conclude, it is clear that small abattoirs are central to our local food supply chain, and there will be a dire impact if we lose them. We need DEFRA to step up and frame its importance in local food infrastructure. We need long-term workforce planning, and a system that meets the needs of livestock producers and proactively works with stakeholders throughout the supply chain. If not, farming businesses and the supply chain will suffer.

3.21 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): Over the past 50 years, abattoirs have rapidly vanished. More than 90% of them have closed. Across the country, family

farms that once relied on local slaughterhouses now face round trips of over 100 miles just to kill a handful of animals to provide the meat for our tables. That drives up costs and, ironically, increases the stress on livestock that our welfare laws seek to mitigate.

Alongside Labour's family farm tax, the closure of the sustainable farming incentive and the end of the fruit and vegetables aid scheme, this additional burden is pushing many of our farmers to the financial and mental brink. Small abattoirs are essential to our regional supply chain. They enable the sale of high-welfare local meat. They underpin farmers' ability to add value and differentiate themselves in the market. They are also vital to preserving native rare breeds, small-scale mixed farming and the rural way of life that defines my constituency, Weald of Kent.

Let us consider for a moment what a small farmer in the Weald—someone rearing Romney sheep, say—actually has to do simply to sell meat from the animals they breed and raise. First, they must register their land with the Rural Payments Agency for a county parish holding number, and then register their animals with the Animal and Plant Health Agency. Every animal must be marked with official identification tags, and all livestock movements must be recorded and reported using approved forms. If animals are moved for sale or slaughter, or even between farms, it triggers further paperwork. Transporting them over 65 km, as many farms must as more abattoirs close, is another special authorisation and haulier certification.

If the animal is to be slaughtered for sale, the rules multiply. The farmer must log all medicine use and vaccines as per the Veterinary Medicines Directorate standards, complete food chain information forms for the Food Standards Agency, and potentially have the animal inspected in advance by an authorised vet. Slaughter itself can be carried out only by someone holding a certificate of competence under the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015, and the carcass must then be health-marked after inspection by an FSA official vet, for which the processor is charged by the hour. Even after all that, offal, hides and other by-products are regulated separately under animal by-product rules, often with disposal costs that exceed their market value.

That is the regulatory burden on a small-scale producer: multiple agencies, overlapping rules and no distinction between a local farm shop and a multinational meat processor. This is not proportionate regulation; it is bureaucracy for bureaucracy's sake. It is not only putting small farmers and small abattoirs out of business, but putting our rural culture and heritage at risk of extinction. Small abattoirs do not need favours; they need fairness. Given all the pain that the Government have inflicted upon the agricultural community, it is time our farmers were finally given a chance to succeed. I beg the Minister to ease these regulations before the final small abattoirs close and it is too late.

3.24 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing this very important debate. We have heard about the situation for abattoirs in general, and in Wales it is just as stark. The number of operational red meat abattoirs in Wales has dropped from some 60 in 1990 to just 17 last year.

As other Members have eloquently outlined, the importance of small abattoirs to our rural economies cannot be overstated. The hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton underlined how important they are as a cog in a vital supply chain for the rural economy. We should not forget that if we were to lose more of our small abattoirs, many of which face extinction, we would also see the demise of the surrounding agricultural industry. In areas such as Ceredigion Preseli, in which agriculture is a key pillar of the local economy, there would be an economic hit for the wider population, so it is urgent that we maintain the network of small abattoirs and hopefully expand it through Government support.

The hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) mentioned the disproportionate regulatory burdens that small abattoirs face. That complaint and that experience is echoed by some constituents of mine who run a very small abattoir near Tregaron, Cig Oen Caron. They provide an invaluable service to local famers. They not only provide private kill services of a kind that larger operators do not offer, which allow them to diversify their income and build their business, but ensure high animal welfare standards and cater to a variety of farming models. It has already been said that larger operators seldom offer multi-species or rare breed services. Small abattoirs fill that gap in the market. If we were to lose small abattoirs, a number of business models that are so important in all parts of the United Kingdom, including my own, will become unviable.

It is also important to note that if we lose more small abattoirs, the distance that farmers must travel to take their animals to slaughter will increase. Average journey times are already unacceptable, given the added stress, the animal welfare concerns and the carbon footprint.

In Wales, we need to ensure that the existing very small network of proud and, in many cases, family-run small abattoirs is supported. The Welsh Government have responsibility for infrastructure development, so I will not ask the Minister to help us in that regard, but the UK Government can help small abattoirs in Wales with the cost of regulation and the inspection regime undertaken by the Food Standards Agency. The owners of Cig Oen Caron have approached me in recent years to explain the pressure that that added cost places on their business. More recently, there has been an 18% increase to their costs, so the importance of retaining the small abattoir discount is pressing. I would welcome any reassurances that the Minister can offer, not only that the discount will be retained but that the Government will consider with an open mind expanding it for the smallest abattoirs in recognition of the fact that the general costs are increasing.

If we are to maintain a diverse, geographically sparse and accessible network of small abattoirs in this country, the Government need to support it. If they are serious about treating small abattoirs as a key piece of infrastructure—let us not forget that they are critical for our farming businesses and rural economies—Government support through grants to improve infrastructure and with regulatory burdens is well overdue. I, for one, would welcome it if the Government made moves in that direction.

3.28 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this important debate. Several farmers

in my constituency have contacted me to raise concerns about the threat to small-scale abattoirs, to express how vital they are to their business and to ask me to take part in this debate to share the challenges they face as a result of the disappearance of small-scale abattoirs and their fears for their future. I thank the Brighton and Hove food partnership and the Wealden food partnership for their local research on this matter.

Small-scale farms go hand in hand with small-scale abattoirs, which offer the flexibility that small farms need to rear a diverse range of breeds. In Sussex, they support conservation efforts to restore a rare and highly diverse habitat. We are incredibly fortunate in East Sussex to have one of the rarest habitats in the UK—chalk grasslands, which have formed over thousands of years and have created the conditions for a rich, biodiverse ecosystem of rare plants and animals. The South Downs national park authority highlights that we can find up to 40 different species within 1 square metre. Since world war two, however, the UK has seen an 80% reduction in these chalk grasslands, making their conservation an important local issue, as the last remaining areas are under threat from spreading scrub, including nettles, hawthorns and brambles.

Local farmers can support these crucial and rare grasslands through a process known as conservation grazing, which is considered an important tool in local efforts. Conservation grazing is the practice of using primarily native breeds of grass-grazing livestock to selectively graze out problem or invasive species, most often without the need for supplementary feeding. That gives our chalk grasslands the opportunity to start growing, instead of continuing to shrink.

The native breed animals needed to do that, however, are typically smaller and less homogenised than the products we are used to seeing in supermarkets. Most large-scale abattoirs sell directly only to wholesalers and supermarkets, which creates a number of problems. Supermarkets have very clear specifications of what they consider to be an acceptable cut of meat. Often, the native breed animals that farmers would use in conservation grazing will not be accepted by supermarkets, as they produce cuts that are too small or too variable, meaning that large-scale abattoirs will not accept those livestock in the first place. Farmers are then restricted in the breeds they can rear. Large abattoirs usually do not allow farmers to reclaim their meat to sell locally. If farmers are able to sell their own meat, they are also often able to make a small premium, which tells the story of their farm and recognises the slow and sustainable pace at which the animals were grown.

That is where small-scale abattoirs such as Down Land Traditional Meats come in. The abattoir is in Henfield, West Sussex, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who I know has been doing his best to support it. It provides an essential service to local farmers in my constituency and across Sussex. The abattoir is willing to accept those native livestock species and allow farmers to get their meat back.

Sadly, like many small-scale abattoirs, Down Land Traditional Meats faces potential closure due to a range of different factors. Some are specific to its circumstances, but there are pressures outside its immediate control. One pressure, as has been mentioned by other Members, is an uplift in the FSA hourly rates for official vets and

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

meat hygiene inspectors visiting meat premises for the 2025-26 financial year, which on average is close to 20%. It is true that the very smallest abattoirs have discounts on those rates, which have remained, but for those abattoirs in the middle bands, there has been a decrease in the discounts from 26% to 17% and from 14% to 6% respectively. That puts immense financial pressure on already tight margins.

Without small-scale abattoirs, local farmers and businesses will have to start reconsidering practices such as conservation grazing or start looking further afield into other parts of England, but that comes with its own consequences. Whatever their size and make-up, there are good reasons to have a good spread of abattoirs across the country so that all farmers are reasonably close to one. In that regard, the south of England already has a disadvantage compared with the rest of the country, as there are so few abattoirs of any kind—only Scotland has fewer per square mile.

Using more distant abattoirs would increase the transit time for livestock. That is a great concern to farmers in my constituency, as their livestock would have to be placed in bigger lorries and travel longer distances. Long journeys increase stress in animals as they are exposed to crowded conditions, noisy vehicles, vibrations, a lack of food and water or space to rest, and fluctuating temperatures. On an economic point for farmers, the cost of increased transportation will further cut into their tight margins, making an already costly business even more expensive and, perhaps for some, unviable.

The last Government recognised the importance of small abattoirs and the role they play in providing a route for farmers to rear rare and native breeds, which is why they launched the £4 million smaller abattoir fund to boost the sustainability and efficiency of red meat and poultry abattoirs across England. The fund awarded capital grants from £2,000 up to a maximum of £60,000 to help smaller abattoirs across England improve productivity, enhance animal health and welfare, add value to primary products and encourage innovation and investment in new technologies.

Six months after the launch, recognising further pressures, the last Government increased the maximum grant value to £70,000. Meanwhile, this Labour Government have instead introduced devastating changes to inheritance tax laws through their cruel family farm tax, which will mean that many small farms will have to sell land to larger so-called super farms, which may not have the same sense of guardianship over the land as our smaller local farmers.

I finish with a number of questions for the Minister. First, given the increased costs, what assessments have the Government made of reforming the professions that can conduct the necessary welfare checks? Are they confident that only a vet can fulfil all the duties currently fulfilled by vets at that increased cost? Secondly, what plans are there for further direct funding support for small abattoirs? Finally, what assessment have the Government made of the impact of the fee increase? Can they commit to freezing fees for next year?

I welcome this opportunity to raise those concerns on behalf of farmers in my constituency, and I look forward to the Minister providing the concrete plans and reassurances that my local farmers seek.

3.34 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this important debate and making such a compelling case for the importance of small abattoirs to the rural economy.

Support for small abattoirs is vital not just in my constituency but in rural communities throughout Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The challenges that these facilities face are symptomatic of broader issues in our food infrastructure, rural economies and national food strategy. The Liberal Democrats reaffirmed our commitment to this cause by passing a motion at our 2025 spring conference that recognised the essential role that small abattoirs play in maintaining high animal welfare standards—standards that British and Welsh farmers are rightly proud of and which consumers increasingly expect.

But we cannot ignore the facts. The number of abattoirs in the UK has plummeted over the last 30 years. Between 2018 and 2022 alone, the number of smaller red meat abattoirs fell by 25% and the number of small poultry abattoirs fell by an alarming 40%. Those closures are being driven by rising costs and mounting regulatory burdens—pressures that smaller facilities are ill equipped to absorb. The decline comes at a tremendous cost to animal welfare, rural economies, local food resilience and consumer choice.

I will begin with animal welfare, a topic that has been raised several times today. Small abattoirs dramatically reduce food miles by offering local slaughter options. That is not a minor detail, as it means that animals spend less time in transit, endure less stress and arrive at slaughter in better condition. Slaughtering animals as close as possible to where they are reared is a principle that should be central to any ethical food infrastructure.

There is also a very strong economic case. Small abattoirs support rural economies by providing jobs and anchoring local supply chains. They keep value within communities and help producers to secure higher value through direct-to-consumer sales. Demand is rising for high-quality Welsh meat. Several farmers in my constituency are doing a roaring trade after setting up their own meat box businesses—I will be picking up mine from Geraint this weekend. The Government should encourage this welcome trend because it helps to address the power imbalance in our food system. Large abattoirs are often contractually tied to supermarkets and cannot return small quantities to individual producers.

In my constituency, W. J. George Butchers in Talgarth exemplifies the value added by independent abattoirs. The family-owned business has been serving our local community for more than 135 years. Its model is rooted in local relationships. Animals are selected directly from trusted farms, processed on-site and sold with full traceability. It is precisely that level of quality, integrity and traceability that consumers want and small abattoirs can deliver.

Beyond the local economy, there are national implications. In recent weeks, we have seen large supply chains, such as those used by Marks & Spencer and the Co-op, hacked and disrupted, which illustrates the fragility of overcentralised systems dominated by the big corporations. Small abattoirs offer resilience in the supply chain. They distribute risk, reduce dependence on long-

haul logistics and provide extra capacity in our food infrastructure. That is good not only for business but for national food security.

The need for support is clear, but recent Government action has fallen short. The previous Conservative Government omitted small abattoirs entirely from their food strategy, and this new Labour Government, despite Labour's manifesto commitment to uphold the highest animal welfare standards, have yet to replace the smaller abattoir fund, which was closed in September 2024.

In Wales, the situation is even worse. The Welsh Labour Government have not provided support for small abattoirs for many years. To compound matters, the Food Standards Agency imposed a 20% increase on meat inspection fees in April 2025. That is a crushing burden on already struggling small operators.

If we are serious about encouraging ethical and sustainable farming, we must stop penalising the very facilities that make it possible. I urge the Government to consider authorising mobile slaughterhouses, which could play a key role in reaching isolated areas and reducing infrastructure costs. I hope that the Minister might offer an update on the progress of such plans with the Food Standards Agency in his response.

There is also scope for smarter regulation. With the help of recent technological advances in monitoring and traceability, it may be time to explore a lighter-touch regulatory framework for small abattoirs—one that maintains safety and quality but reduces compliance costs that disproportionately affect smaller facilities.

Finally, we must improve food labelling. Customers want transparency. Now more than ever, they want to know how and where an animal was raised. That information helps to empower consumers and create a more informed, value-driven market.

In conclusion, small abattoirs are community assets. They support high animal welfare, reduce food miles, sustain rural economies, provide producers with added value and increase our food system's resilience. The Liberal Democrats will continue to champion their cause. I join my honourable colleagues in calling on the Government to replace the smaller abattoir fund, to consult meaningfully with the sector and to back the infrastructure and regulatory reform needed to keep these vital operations thriving. In doing so, we would uphold not just animal welfare but the health and sustainability of our entire food system.

3.41 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this incredibly important debate. As has been indicated in all the contributions, we realise that small abattoirs are a vital part of our food supply chain and, therefore, of our national food security.

The benefits of encouraging a diverse range of abattoirs of all sizes are incredibly important not only for food supply but for supporting the rural economy. Farming businesses rely on them. If they are not there, opportunities for our farmers, our rural economy and our consumers are significantly reduced.

Small abattoirs bring greater market competition, helping our farmers to secure the best price for their produce. They often provide specialist services, such as

slaughter for horned cattle or outdoor pigs, which is not always offered by larger establishments, as we have heard. We do not always hear in this House about how the opportunities provided by small abattoirs are incredibly important for many in our farming community. Private kill services, which farmers looking to diversify increasingly rely on, are also a speciality of our smaller abattoirs.

With regard to animal welfare, smaller abattoirs are well suited to ensuring that each animal receives humane treatment. Reduced travel distances mean that animals arrive less stressed than they would after a longer journey. Those shorter travel distances also cut down on haulage costs and emissions in our meat sector, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) indicated in his intervention.

In rural communities across the country, small abattoirs ensure that more business is done locally by providing jobs and a local supply of produce for businesses further down the supply chain. However, we have unfortunately seen a decline in small and medium-sized abattoirs across the country, with areas such as northern Scotland, northern England and the south-east in particular experiencing a short supply of small abattoirs. A survey of farm businesses recently showed that 51% of respondents had to find new abattoirs after the closure of their original provider. Between 2018 and 2022, smaller red meat abattoirs declined by around 25% and smaller poultry abattoirs declined by around 40%.

A survey undertaken by National Craft Butchers indicated that 59% of abattoirs processing less than 1,000 livestock units a year would close within two to five years without any Government intervention. In 2023, that analysis was unfortunately on track. The previous Government decided to act on that by introducing the smaller abattoir fund. However, the costs to our smaller abattoirs have significantly increased. As has been mentioned, energy costs are often much higher for smaller abattoirs. The employer national insurance increase, the minimum wage increase and the challenges around skills are increasing those challenges.

The previous Government understood the problem and delivered the £4 million smaller abattoir fund, with 42% of eligible businesses applying. It delivered critical investment into the sector, making it more productive and improving produce quality and animal welfare standards. I urge the Government to continue rolling out that fund, which provided funds from £4,000 to up to £60,000. That was increased from an intervention rate of 40% to 50%, with the upper limit increasing to £75,000 to cover off some of the challenges.

Specific issues were picked up by colleagues in their contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) mentioned the challenges in the south-east. I know that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) had specific challenges associated with their abattoir in Henfield. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs met the chief executive of Horsham district council and managed to secure a £300,000 grant to help keep the abattoir open. That illustrates the nature of the challenge. The changes to employer's national insurance have been exacerbated by the additional costs associated with energy and running a small abattoir, so sometimes the Government need to intervene and assist.

We also need to get to a position of fairness throughout the whole of the supply chain, as was rightly suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent

[Robbie Moore]

(Katie Lam). Farmers want fairness, not favours. We must get to a position where there is fairness in the supply chain. Government intervention sometimes helps the small abattoirs that provide a much better level of service to our rural economy, rather than farmers having to rely on larger abattoirs. Sometimes intervention helps, so I reiterate the calls on the Government to roll out the smaller abattoir fund again.

We also delivered the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024, which banned the export of live animals for slaughter. Not only did that end an often inhumane practice, but it provided further reassurance for the sector. The first thing that the Government could do is unequivocally recognise the importance of smaller abattoirs, primarily focusing on the supply chain. The Government should ensure that the supply chain—and abattoirs—are encompassed within their food strategy. Part of the review should include looking closely not only at a second round of the smaller abattoir fund, but at whether there are circumstances in which smaller abattoirs do not need the additional costs of energy.

What plans does the Minister have for regulatory reform in the abattoir sector? At a time when the Government are advocating for greater alignment with Europe, does he recognise that many of the EU directives still in force in this country did great damage to our smaller abattoirs? There is also growing concern about the financial burden placed on our smaller abattoirs by the Food Standards Agency, to which Members have referred. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that smaller abattoirs are not disproportionately affected by the rise in inspection costs? More broadly, what is he doing to ensure that the FSA delivers value for money?

The debate has rightly acknowledged the FSA's rollout of increased charges. The uplift from March 2025, which impacts our smaller abattoirs, will have a direct impact in this financial year and the next. The Opposition agree with the National Farmers Union that the further pressure on the small and medium-sized abattoirs that are struggling with additional costs and regulatory burdens has been exacerbated by the implications of the FSA's additional charging.

Furthermore, we want clarity from the Government about what they intend to do on the 5% rule, which would significantly reduce the regulatory burden for the smallest abattoirs. As we know, if such a rule was in place it would enable smaller abattoirs to slaughter up to 5% of the total national throughput without triggering a full veterinary presence and therefore without the additional costs associated with their going above 1,000 units and having veterinary officers present. Will the Minister indicate the Government's intentions on the 5% rule?

The Government must also consider the benefits to small abattoirs of future food labelling reviews. Will the Minister tell us the Government's intentions? Better consumer awareness through food labelling would help smaller abattoirs to sell their produce as more humane, more local and better placed for the consumer. I would appreciate it if he outlined the Government's intentions in that regard.

To summarise, our rural economy has faced additional pressures not just through the family farm tax and the removal of the SFI but through the dramatic reduction

in de-linked payments to £7,200. It is being further hit by the dramatic reduction in small abattoirs and consequently the reduced ability to slaughter produce at a local facility. I call on the Government not only to roll out additional incentives nationally through the smaller abattoir fund but to take on board the many contributions that have been made in the debate, so they can ensure that our farmers and our rural economy continue to thrive.

3.51 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Desmond.

I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing the debate, and for delivering a thorough and thoughtful introduction to a subject that matters deeply to all those who have spoken today and indeed to many of us across the House. I am also grateful for the thoughtful contributions to the debate from a range of Members. I thank the UK meat processing industry for all it does to provide us with products that meet high human health, environmental and animal welfare standards, and to support our domestic food supply chains and strong export market. In 2024, the sector was worth some £12 billion.

Today, we are obviously concentrating on the small abattoir sector. Over 93% of meat is slaughtered in larger slaughterhouses but, as has been outlined, the small abattoir sector is still very important, particularly in dealing with rare breeds and in achieving the premium outcomes that I think we all want to support. Everyone who has spoken has made a strong case for the importance of small abattoirs, because they contribute to economic growth in rural communities, provide skilled employment opportunities and offer an outlet to market for those who farm rare and native breeds. As has been said, they promote animal welfare by enabling shorter journey times to slaughter.

We are all aware that the situation for small abattoirs has been an issue for a number of years. Of course, over the last few years a number of smaller abattoirs have closed; some of them have been mentioned in this debate. However, it is also worth pointing out that a number of small abattoirs work very effectively, and have shown remarkable adaptability and resilience. We saw that during the covid-19 pandemic and during disease outbreaks, and we have all heard and understand the crucial role that they play in the agricultural community. When one looks at the map to see where they are, one sees that they are still quite spread out, although quite clearly there are areas of the country that are particularly challenged.

Several Members mentioned the Food Standards Agency's ongoing evaluation of the discount scheme for meat inspection charges. Obviously, some elements are for the FSA to consider, but as a Minister I can also have a view. Although it is necessary to review such schemes periodically, I absolutely recognise the importance of the discount scheme to smaller abattoirs and the contribution that the industry can make to the evaluation process. That important point was raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake), who has since had to go to the main Chamber, and by the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton.

After the call for evidence in autumn last year, the FSA has hosted several engagement sessions to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to share their views

on discounts, so there is an ongoing discussion about discounts and how they should be structured in the future. My understanding from those discussions is that there was positive engagement, and that the information that was gathered from those sessions will inform future proposals.

I can assure hon. Members that the Government will continue to engage with the sector on those wider priorities, concerns and opportunities, and we will use some of the well-established forums, some of which were mentioned earlier—the small abattoir working group and the small abattoirs task and finish group. I am very grateful to the members of these groups; they provide a valuable opportunity for Government to collaborate with stakeholders on finding, where possible, practical solutions to the priority challenges they have identified, and to support our shared ambition for future resilience and growth. I checked earlier, and they have had meetings recently, in March and January, and I will look closely at the suggestions that they make.

One of the areas in which we have been working closely with the industry, and the Food Standards Agency, is in looking at how we can reduce regulatory and administrative burdens within the framework within which the wider abattoir sector operates. We have to get the right balance because, clearly, we need to make sure that the proper standards are maintained, but also that the regulation is appropriate and proportionate. I absolutely hear the point that has been made that it often seems that there is a disproportionate impact on the smaller abattoirs, as it can be hard for them to meet because of their size.

Actions have been taken already, and will continue to be taken, including the introduction of the reduced administration initiative, which aims to remove certain daily administrative tasks for food business operators, and the FSA escalation process, which is designed to help abattoirs quickly raise and resolve operational issues. I can pledge that we will continue to work collaboratively with the industry, and focus on evaluating the feasibility of other potential flexibilities, including relaxing post-mortem checks within smaller abattoirs.

I am also aware of the impact that recent disease outbreaks have had on the sector. The spread of diseases means that it is sometimes necessary to implement restriction zones, and abattoirs must be designated to receive animals for slaughter from within those restriction zones. Again, I appreciate and understand the difficulties that that can place on both farmers and processors. We have made this process as simple as possible by working closely with both the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland.

Before turning to some of the other actions that the Government are taking, I want to take the opportunity to use this debate to pose a few questions for us all to consider, some of which have already been raised. How can we raise awareness about the vital role that smaller abattoirs play in maintaining the UK's food supply, and how can we work with local butcherries and farm shops in promoting the added value to primary products, which we have heard about from others? We should also look at the rural employment opportunities that are provided for skilled workers while continuing to innovate and use new technology to drive efficiencies and productivity. I genuinely believe that this is a sector that has a good story to tell.

John Lamont: The Minister is absolutely right to highlight the importance of supporting local food production and ensuring that consumers here in the UK buy local. I just wonder how that stacks up with what President Trump has just said, which is that this new UK-US trade deal

“includes billions of dollars of increased market access for American exports, especially in agriculture, dramatically increasing access for American beef, ethanol, and virtually all the products produced by our great farmers.”

How does that fit in with encouraging people to buy British products?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for taking the opportunity to shoehorn a wider issue into the debate this afternoon. I would encourage him to look more closely at the details as presented by the UK Government, which are a very reliable source of information.

John Lamont: But not President Trump?

Daniel Zeichner: I could not possibly comment. I will return to the issue of small abattoirs, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that this Government are absolutely committed to making sure that we uphold the very high standards that we have in this country, and that is what we have achieved through the agreement.

Returning to small abattoirs, we are working to modernise statutory livestock traceability services, which should make a big difference over the next two to three years and make it less burdensome for all actors in the supply chain to report the movement of animals into their premises. As we advance those opportunities, we have been working with the industry to identify ways of helping to alleviate the pressures that smaller abattoirs face with the disposal of animal by-products and with labour supply—again, points that were raised in the opening speeches. We will continue to work closely with the industry to explore potential solutions.

To further support economic growth, we remain committed to harnessing the purchasing power of the procurement supply chain to set the tone for delivering our wider ambitions on sustainability, animal welfare and health. We have an ambition to supply half of all food into the public sector from local producers or those certified to higher environmental standards, in line with our World Trade Organisation and domestic procurement obligations.

For the first time, as the Secretary of State announced at the Oxford farming conference in January, the Government will review the food currently bought by the public sector and where it is bought from. That work will be a significant first step to inform future changes to public sector food procurement policies, helping to create an equal playing field for British producers to bid into the £5 billion spent each year on public sector catering contracts.

As the Secretary of State also announced, we are committed to streamlining planning processes for agricultural infrastructure through the Government's planned consultation on the national planning policy framework. That will give us the opportunity to consult on reforms to expedite the construction of essential farm infrastructure, such as buildings, barns and other facilities necessary for boosting food production, while also improving environmental sustainability.

[Daniel Zeichner]

As the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, I am absolutely committed to helping smaller abattoirs to succeed and to take advantage of the opportunities available to them by continuing to support the meat industry where and when I can. To support employment in the meat processing sector—a point raised by several Members—the Government are taking firm action to address the challenges we have identified through our engagement with that sector.

We are reforming the apprenticeships offer into a new growth and skills offer, which will provide greater flexibility to employers and learners and will align with the industrial strategy. That will include shorter-duration apprenticeships and new foundation apprenticeships for young people in targeted, growing sectors. That will help more people to learn high quality skills at work and will fuel innovation in businesses across the country. The Government will set out our plans for further steps and detailed information on the growth and skills offer in due course, based on the findings of Skills England's engagement over the autumn with key partners, including employers and training providers.

As part of our commitment to strengthening vital sectors across the agricultural and food industries, we have also announced measures to provide stability to farmers and workers in the UK's poultry sector. In February, the Government announced a five-year extension to the seasonal worker visa until the end of 2030, ensuring a reliable pipeline of workers for farms. As in previous years, 2,000 visas have been allocated specifically for seasonal poultry workers, and annual quota reviews will balance farm support with reducing reliance on seasonal migrant labour, helping farms to grow with stability and confidence.

I turn to funding. Despite the ongoing financial challenges posed by a very tight public purse, we have committed £5 billion to the farming budget over two years, with the largest ever investment directed at sustainable food production and nature recovery. Capital investment will not solve every problem, but we do plan to simplify and rationalise grant funding to ensure that grants deliver the best benefit for food security and nature. We are currently working to agree our capital settlement

as part of the spending review and, once it is agreed, we will consider how best to use capital to achieve outcomes.

In closing, I thank the meat processing sector and smaller abattoirs specifically for their continued commitment to supplying the nation with healthy and wholesome food. The Government stand with them, and I look forward to continuing to work with the sector to build a stronger and more secure future for British agriculture and food production.

4.3 pm

Sarah Dyke: I thank Members for their contributions, which are much appreciated. I heard very clearly their passion for supporting farmers in their areas. They made it abundantly clear that small and local abattoirs form a crucial part of local food infrastructure, but they need support from the Government. Those abattoirs are severely at risk, so it falls on DEFRA to define where they sit in plans for the future of farming and to set out how the Government will ensure that we have a local network of abattoirs across the country.

I thank the Minister for his words and for the nuggets of good news. I hope that we will soon have further clarity on that funding and on what the landscape will look like, because we know that agriculture will face only more shocks. We have to tackle them now to ensure that farming in the future is resilient, with the infrastructure to support farmers so that they can secure their businesses.

I hope that the Minister sees the opportunity to work with the small abattoir sector to safeguard its future and to ensure that local food infrastructure is as resilient as possible. Rural communities across the country—including farmers, retailers, butchers, pubs, restaurants and hotels—rely on small abattoirs, so we must make sure that they are there to serve customers and to feed the nation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of Government support for small abattoirs.

4.6 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 8 May 2025

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Better Care for Veterans: National Training and Education Plan

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): As the nation marks the 80th anniversary of VE Day, we are announcing a new national training and education plan to transform healthcare for the armed forces community across England.

The Government are proud of the courage and dedication of our armed forces. It is our duty to ensure that those who have been injured or are unwell, whether physically or mentally, receive the very best possible care. However, the NHS is not currently set up to provide the best possible services to the armed forces community. Too many veterans still struggle to navigate civilian healthcare systems and may not self-identify as veterans to NHS staff, putting them at risk of missing out on the additional support and bespoke services that are already available. That is why we are rolling out the national training and education plan—to help guarantee that armed forces veterans and their families benefit from the improved and targeted healthcare that they deserve. The plan will train and educate NHS staff across the country to meet the unique health needs of veterans, serving personnel and their families.

NHS staff across England will receive dedicated training to help them identify and support patients with military backgrounds. GPs, NHS doctors, nurses and managers will work with regional trainers to make sure they embed this support into their services. The three-year training programme, backed by £1.8 million, will be rolled out across England from October 2025.

This announcement sits within wider Government commitments to veterans, including putting the armed forces covenant fully into law, and the newly announced Operation Valour, a £50 million boost in funding to ensure that veterans across the UK have easier access to essential care and support. The national training and education plan will ensure that the NHS is set up to fulfil the armed forces covenant, with the appropriate training and education required to develop a skilled, educated and inclusive NHS primary, community and secondary care workforce, to meet the evolving needs of the armed forces community within the NHS in England. This new training is part of our plan for change to fix the NHS and make sure it works for everyone, including those who have risked everything to serve our country.

[HCWS624]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Best Value

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): I have previously updated this House that this Government are committed to reset the relationship between local and regional government,

and to establish partnerships built on mutual respect, genuine collaboration and meaningful engagement. Local councils must be fit, legal and decent and this Government are taking the action necessary to fix the foundations of local government and to support the sector to build to strength. Today, I am updating the House on the steps we are taking in partnership to support five councils to recover and reform: Spelthorne borough council, Warrington borough council, Nottingham city council, Cheshire East council and Newham borough council.

Spelthorne Borough Council

On 17 March, I informed the House that I was satisfied, having considered the best value inspection report, that Spelthorne borough council is failing to comply with its best value duty. Inspectors found that the council demonstrated a limited track record in proactively driving meaningful change and effectively implementing external recommendations. I proposed an intervention package to secure the council's compliance with that duty and asked the council and others to provide representations by 28 March.

I received 12 representations which I considered carefully. I remain satisfied that the council is failing to comply with its best value duty in relation to continuous improvement, leadership, governance, culture and use of resources. I have concluded that it is both necessary and expedient for me to exercise powers in the Local Government Act 1999 as I proposed, with minor amendments. Today, I issued directions under section 15(5) and (6) of the 1999 Act to implement the proposed intervention package.

That intervention package, to be in place until 31 May 2030, comprises four commissioners appointed to exercise specific council functions, alongside specific actions the council is required to take. I am confident that this package will address the failings identified and is necessary for the council to secure compliance with its best value duty.

Given the importance of creating sustainable unitary local government for Surrey, there is a case for urgent and decisive Government action to protect the interests of Spelthorne's residents and taxpayers, and the public purse. I have therefore appointed the inspection team: Lesley Seary as lead commissioner, and Peter Robinson, Deborah McLaughlin and Mervyn Greer as commissioners, due to their extensive knowledge and experience.

I have issued directions which, in summary, require the council to:

- Prepare and agree an improvement and recovery plan within six months and publicly update commissioners on progress after the first three months, six months and thereafter every six months.

- Ensure the council has sufficient skills, capabilities and capacity to implement the plan.

- With support of commissioners, work with Surrey councils on issues in relation to local government reorganisation in Surrey.

- Initiate a full and open recruitment exercise within one month for a suitable permanent appointment to lead the improvement work in the authority and progress against these directions.

- Fully co-operate with the commissioners and undertake any exercise of functions that would avoid further failure, in commissioners' opinion.

The scale of the challenge in Spelthorne means that they must take immediate steps to address their governance, commercial and financial challenges and to make transformative change across its entire operations. Commissioners will be able exercise the following functions:

those associated with the source of Spelthorne's failures—to strengthen the commercial decision-making, regeneration, property management and procurement functions of the authority; those associated with delivering financial sustainability by closing any short or long-term budget gaps and reducing the authority's exceptionally high level of external borrowing; those associated with any changes needed to the authority's operating model and transformation of council services to achieve value for money and financial sustainability, taking account of any decisions relating to proposals for unitary local government in Surrey; and

those that will ensure the council has the right skills and structures to make ongoing improvements across the entire organisation—including governance and scrutiny of strategic decisions, and the appointment, dismissal and performance management for senior and statutory officer positions.

The commissioners' appointments and directions take effect from today. The commissioners will provide their first report in six months, with further reports every six months or as agreed with the commissioners.

As with other statutory interventions led by my Department, the council will meet the costs of the commissioners and provide reasonable amenities and services and administrative support. The fees paid to individuals are published in appointment letters on gov.uk. I am assured this provides value for money given the expertise being brought and the scale of the challenge.

As the council works with other Surrey councils on proposals for sustainable unitary local government for Surrey, creating simpler structures that will deliver the services that local people and businesses need and deserve, the needs of Spelthorne are likely to change throughout this period. Although commissioners will not input into local government reorganisation proposals before submission on 9 May, they will provide their views and oversight for the next stage. I have appointed the commissioners until January 2026: they will provide the requisite oversight, expertise and grip on Spelthorne's position. I will also review at the appropriate time the directions and the commissioners' roles, to ensure that Spelthorne has the support required to accelerate recovery and protect the public purse.

As always, I remain committed to working in partnership with Spelthorne borough council to provide whatever support is needed to ensure its compliance with the best value duty.

Warrington Borough Council

Best value inspection report

A capital review of Warrington borough council conducted by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy highlighted concerns around governance and decision making and following this, on 8 May 2024 the then Secretary of State (the right hon. Michael Gove), commissioned an inspection of the council's compliance with its best value duty. Paul Najsarek was appointed lead inspector and was later joined by Richard Paver and Michael Hainge. The inspectors submitted their report to the Secretary of State, and I am publishing this today. I am grateful to the inspection team for their thorough work, and to the council and all participants for their co-operation.

The report identifies strengths within the council, including within children's services and public sector partnerships and community engagement. However, it documents serious concerns:

On continuous improvement: The report describes "resistance" in the council's response to external challenge processes. The inspectors are not confident the council has the "will and capacity" to make the necessary changes without external intervention.

On leadership: The report identifies a lack of strategic direction and "low challenge culture". The council's priorities are not aligned with its revenue budget and commercial programme challenges.

On governance: The council's commercial programme lacks transparency, with key decision-making "disproportionately influenced by a small group of officers". Despite concerns raised by external bodies, meaningful reforms have not been implemented. The absence of audited accounts since 2018-19 further leaves the council in a precarious position.

On culture: The report highlights that "members are highly respectful of powerful officers and there is a defensiveness to internal and external scrutiny". This culture has contributed to a high-risk commercial programme, leaving the council "in a very exposed position".

On use of resources: The council manages a complex, high-risk borrowing and investment programme without a clear strategy or the required expertise. It faces "an increasingly precarious revenue budget position with rapidly diminishing reserves". The inspectors raise concerns about a potential breach of PwLB guidance.

Compliance with the best value duty

I have carefully considered the report and other relevant material, including the CIPFA review and the Local Government Association's corporate peer challenge. I am satisfied that Warrington borough council is failing to comply with its best value duty in relation to continuous improvement, governance, leadership, culture, and use of resources. I am therefore minded to exercise powers of direction under section 15(5) and (6) of the 1999 Act to implement an intervention package that ensures the council's compliance with its best value duty.

The proposed intervention includes the appointment of ministerial envoys who specialise in leadership, governance, finance and commercial investment. This proposal represents a further evolution of our approach as this Government continue to test and learn how best to support councils to recover and reform. As part of our commitment to reset the relationship with local and regional government, I am seeking to develop the "envoy" model, which prioritises building a council's own capacity to improve, by supporting its recovery primarily with expert advice, rather than taking over functions.

Under this model, my clear expectation is that the council will remain responsible for driving its own improvement with the support, challenge and advice from the ministerial envoys. To safeguard the process, some envoys will have power to exercise certain and limited functions to be treated as in reserve, intended to be used only as a last resort to ensure compliance with the best value duty. The proposed approach balances the evidenced need for government support with the leader's commitment to work constructively so that we see sustained, long-term improvement.

I propose the intervention will be in place for five years, but should there be sufficient evidence of progress, functions will be handed back to the council earlier. The council will be directed to prepare and agree an improvement and recovery plan and progress against the plan must be demonstrated, through regular reports from the ministerial envoys.

Representations

I am inviting representations from Warrington borough council and any other interested parties, including residents, on the inspection report and proposed intervention package, by 22 May 2025. I have taken steps to ensure that this report will be seen by councils who are working together on proposals for devolution.

I will carefully consider all representations before deciding how to proceed. The proposal to intervene is not taken lightly but is designed to strengthen and accelerate improvement to ensure the council delivers for its residents and in partnerships. With council focus and support from the ministerial envoys, I expect the council to demonstrate the swift and sustained progress necessary to ensure compliance with its best value duty.

Nottingham City Council

Nottingham has been in intervention since January 2021; and commissioners were appointed in February 2024, led by Tony McArdle OBE. I am today publishing the commissioners' latest report, received in March, which highlights good progress in planning, including the development of the strategic plan, medium term financial plan, and improvement plan. It is clear that the council continues to work closely with the commissioner team to move itself towards a more sustainable position. It is vital that this continues, with the full support of both officers and members throughout the organisation, and that the full range of reforms at the council must now be embedded alongside the collective work on developing proposals for local government reorganisation. I look forward to receiving the commissioners' update in August.

Cheshire East Council and Newham Borough Council

Finally, I am updating the House on steps we are taking in relation to Cheshire East council and Newham borough council.

After carefully considering the relevant evidence, my Department has today issued these authorities with best value notices. These are not statutory interventions but provide a formal notification of the Department's concerns. We found no evidence of current best value failure at the councils, but significant issues need addressing at pace to avoid future failure.

The councils are expected to continue driving their own recovery and are requested to engage with the Department for assurance of improvement. The notices will be in place for 12 months, after which progress will be reviewed. I am pleased that both councils are already supported by independent improvement boards, established with the LGA. I urge the councils to make full use of their boards' expertise, and the Department will seek updates from them.

Conclusion

I am committed to working in partnership with these councils to provide the necessary support to ensure their compliance with the best value duty and the high standards of governance that local residents expect.

I will deposit in the Library of the House copies of the documents referred to, which are being published on gov.uk today. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS620]

JUSTICE

Judicial Conduct Investigations Office Annual Report 2023–2024

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): With the concurrence of the Lady Chief Justice, I will today publish the 17th annual report of the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office.

The JCIO supports the Lady Chief Justice and the Lord Chancellor in our joint statutory responsibility for judicial discipline.

The judiciary comprises approximately 20,000 individuals serving across a range of jurisdictions. Over the past year, the JCIO received 2,394 complaints against judicial office holders. A total of 58 investigations resulted in disciplinary action.

I have placed copies of the report in the Libraries of both Houses, the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office. Copies are also available online at:

<https://www.complaints.judicialconduct.gov.uk/reportsandpublications>

[HCWS621]

Victims and Prisoners Act 2024: Statutory Guidance on Victim Support Roles

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): In January 2025, this Government commenced the first tranche of victim-related measures in the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024. This was the first step towards ensuring that victims have the right information and the support they need.

I am pleased to announce that tomorrow we are building on these foundations by commencing section 16 of the 2024 Act, which places a duty on the Secretary of State to issue statutory guidance about victim support roles specified in regulations. Tomorrow we are also bringing into force regulations necessary to specify support roles for the purposes of this measure. Commencing this measure and the connected regulations enables the Government to publish statutory guidance tomorrow on two victim support roles: independent domestic violence advisers and independent sexual violence advisers. The provisions also commit the Government to publishing further guidance on independent stalking advocates in the future.

The statutory guidance intends to standardise the IDVA and ISVA roles, with the aim of ensuring that victims of domestic and sexual abuse consistently receive the support they need to recover and, where they have reported to the police, receive the right support to help them navigate the criminal justice system. The guidance aims to achieve this by setting out the support that the roles provide, the required training and qualifications, and how these roles work alongside other professionals who support victims or who work within the criminal justice system. Criminal justice bodies and others with public functions relating to victims and the wider criminal justice system will be under a statutory duty to have regard to the guidance and the best practice within it.

This measure underscores the Government's landmark mission to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade by helping to standardise victim support roles and strengthen multi-agency working to ensure that victims consistently receive the right support.

Copies of the IDVA, ISVA and ISA guidance will be placed in the Library of the House following publication.

[HCWS622]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Online Safety: Statement of Strategic Priorities

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I am today laying before Parliament the Government's draft statement of strategic priorities

for online safety. This statement is a critical document that outlines the Government's areas of focus for online safety, and that the independent regulator, Ofcom, must have regard to as it continues its work to implement the Online Safety Act 2023.

The first duty of any Government is to keep their people safe. My Department's role in that essential duty involves tackling the growing epidemic of online harm that is threatening the health and happiness of people across Britain.

Since we came into government, I have made it my priority to implement the Online Safety Act as quickly and effectively as possible. In March, the illegal codes of practice came into force, obliging firms to take steps to remove illegal content from the services they provide. Ofcom has already begun enforcement investigations.

By summer, the children's codes will be fully in force. Service providers will have to protect children from harmful content, including pornography and the promotion of suicide, self-harm and eating disorders.

The pace of change in the online world means that we cannot afford to slow down. As we confront extraordinary new opportunities and grave new risks, our approach must be anchored in a set of principles about what a good online world looks like.

That is what the statement of strategic priorities sets out to do. It outlines the Government's strategic priorities and desired outcomes across a number of online safety

areas, including safety by design, transparency and accountability, agile regulation, inclusivity and resilience, and technology and innovation.

The statement follows a statutory consultation that ran between 20 November 2024 and 10 January 2025. A range of stakeholders with interest and expertise across the policy areas covered by the Act, including child safety and tackling violence against women and girls, were consulted. I would like to thank all respondents for taking the time and effort to respond.

These strategic priorities have been designed to support the ambitious implementation and delivery of the Act, to ensure that its protections are implemented as effectively as possible, delivering the best safety outcomes for all users. First and foremost, that means putting the safety of children at the foundation of our online world.

Ofcom, as the independent regulator, must have regard to the priorities set out in the statement when exercising its online safety functions. We are committed to working with Ofcom to implement the Act. Together, working with partners across civil society and industry, we will drive forward progress against these priorities to build a better online world for all.

I intend to designate the statement for the purposes of section 172 of the Online Safety Act after the end of the statutory "40-day period", as defined in section 173 of the Act, unless either House of Parliament resolves not to approve it within that period.

[HCWS623]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 8 May 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	819	ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS— <i>continued</i>	
Arable Farms: Cost of Materials.....	829	Topical Questions	830
Avian Influenza	827	Water Bills: Limiting Increases	821
Climate Resilience Plans	828	Water Sector Reform: Consultation.....	819
Fishing Quotas	822		
Flooding: Protecting Vulnerable Communities.....	824	SOLICITOR GENERAL	833
Fly-tipping.....	828	Crown Court: Reducing the Backlog.....	833
Foot and Mouth Disease.....	825	Prosecution of Rural Crime.....	834
Monitoring Sewage Overflows: Scotland.....	820	Road Traffic Act 1988	837
Nature-friendly Farming.....	816	Serious Fraud Office: Tackling Economic Crime ..	835
Surrey Hills National Landscape.....	823	Stalking.....	838

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 8 May 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	21WS	JUSTICE	25WS
Better Care for Veterans: National Training and Education Plan	21WS	Judicial Conduct Investigations Office Annual Report 2023–2024.....	25WS
		Victims and Prisoners Act 2024: Statutory Guidance on Victim Support Roles.....	26WS
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	21WS	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..	26WS
Local Government Best Value	21WS	Online Safety: Statement of Strategic Priorities	26WS

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**not later than
Thursday 15 May 2025**

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CONTENTS

Thursday 8 May 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 819] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Solicitor General

Leader of the House

Victory in Europe Day: Commemoration [Col. 849]

Sitting suspended

Green Economy: Natural Capital [Col. 850]

Select Committee Statement—(Mr Toby Perkins)

Backbench Business

St George's Day and English Affairs [Col. 855]

Motion—(Adam Jogee)—agreed to

Brain Tumours: Research and Treatment [Col. 876]

Motion—(Siobhan McDonagh)—agreed to

Trade Negotiations [Col. 897]

Statement—(Mr Douglas Alexander)

Westminster Hall

Cold and Damp Homes [Col. 333WH]

Small Abattoirs [Col. 351WH]

General debates

Written Statements [Col. 21WS]
