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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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House of Commons

Tuesday 20 May 2025

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Royal Albert Hall Bill [*Lords*]

Second Reading opposed and deferred until Tuesday 3 June (Standing Order No. 20).

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Clean Energy Transition: Spending Review

1. **Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): What steps she is taking through the spending review to support the transition to clean energy. [904229]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): The Prime Minister's plan for change sets out our ambitious but achievable target for clean power by 2030. We have already announced £300 million for offshore wind supply chains, in addition to the significant uplift for the clean industry bonus scheme. These measures support clean energy and growth in the UK's industrial heartlands, and further details will be set out at the spending review.

Pippa Heylings: Successive Governments have failed to deliver a fair energy transition for workers and communities. We have seen the devastating closure of the Grangemouth oil refinery, and now we are seeing uncertainty around the gas storage facility off the east coast. Just seven out of 87 offshore oil and gas companies are planning to invest anything in renewable energy by 2030, so the Government must be the ones in the driving seat to ensure that our North sea oil and gas workers do not meet the same fate. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero on new financial support to create recruitment and retention pathways for workers moving into the clean energy pathway?

Darren Jones: Our skilled workforce in the oil and gas industry will be important for the continued role of oil and gas in the energy mix, but also for the transition to renewable and net zero energy, as the hon. Lady has pointed out. That is why we have invested significant sums of money in carbon capture and storage, working with exactly those companies, and we will set out details of further support for the industry at the spending review in the coming months.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I welcome the £200 million commitment to Grangemouth and clean energy through the national wealth fund, and I also welcome the Department's confirmation to me recently that that money will not be fettered exclusively to the Project Willow proposals. The need for investment is urgent, with jobs lost and the broader economic impacts impending. We need to move further and faster, so what conversations are Treasury Ministers having with their Cabinet colleagues to encourage them to act on the Project Willow policy recommendations and deliver investment in Grangemouth?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a champion for his constituency and for industry. As he has alluded to, the Government have already made hundreds of millions of pounds available through the national wealth fund for the company in question. We are working to ensure a just transition, harbouring the skills of people in Scotland and across the country. We are now in active discussions as the spending review comes to an end, and we will be able to present more detail to the House on 11 June.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Climate Change Committee says that we will need oil and gas until at least 2050, but rather than maximise North sea production, the Government are taxing it out of existence. Harbour Energy has just announced hundreds of job losses as a result of the Chancellor's 78% windfall tax. Instead of costly transition imports, will Ministers use the spending review to think again and focus on an energy policy that will deliver cheaper and cleaner energy that is affordable for consumers and businesses?

Darren Jones: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's encouragement. That is why we are investing in home-grown secure energy, including renewables, nuclear and other forms of energy. In yesterday's UK-EU trade deal—which I am sure the shadow Minister would like to welcome—we have enhanced our arrangements with the European Union on electricity trading, enabling us to export energy we produce in the UK to the European Union and vice versa. That will ensure energy security, as well as good jobs and good businesses in the energy sector, for decades to come.

Lifetime Mortgages: Support for Older People

2. **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Financial Conduct Authority on the adequacy of support from mortgage lenders for older people with interest roll-up lifetime mortgages. [904230]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): Lifetime mortgages have been regulated by the FCA since 2004. Those rules provide robust consumer protections, including requiring lenders to engage and provide tailored support to all their customers.

Harpreet Uppal: One of my constituents, a 96-year-old man, took out in 1990 what he thought was a £15,000 loan, but what was actually an interest roll-up lifetime mortgage. Despite paying £40,000 over the years, he now owes over £52,000 due to compound interest. He has been

denied redress by the financial ombudsman due to time limits, and my team has also contacted the FCA and the lender without success. My constituent is now left to deal with the consequences. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this case, and how we can better support other people who have been mis-sold those products?

Emma Reynolds: I am really sorry to hear about the circumstances that my hon. Friend's constituent is facing, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the issue further. Lifetime mortgages are complex financial products, and I suggest that anyone considering equity release seeks independent financial advice to help ensure those products are suitable for their needs.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): An increasing number of pensioners are reaching the end of their mortgages with outstanding borrowing and finding themselves unable to meet later-life lending criteria, and this is likely to become even more prevalent in years to come as house price rises continue to outstrip earnings. What discussions is the Minister having with lenders and the mortgage industry about expanding those criteria and giving hard-working pensioners who might otherwise be forced to seek council support the opportunity to remain in their own homes?

Emma Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. I discuss mortgages with lenders and, indeed, with the Financial Conduct Authority on a weekly basis, and I will ensure that I pass on his comments.

Business Costs: Impact of Autumn Budget

3. **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on costs for businesses. [904231]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Government considered all the policies in the autumn Budget carefully, in the context of the difficult fiscal inheritance that we had received from the Conservative party. The decisions to increase employers' national insurance contributions and reduce the secondary threshold were taken to stabilise the public finances and ensure that money was available for our crucial public services, especially the national health service.

Graham Stuart: Johnson's of Hedon, a DIY store, has traded successfully for 56 years, but its owner Mike Brooke, who has run it throughout that time, says that the national insurance hike introduced by the Chancellor has finally made the business unviable. Was the cruel destruction of Johnson's of Hedon, and the jobs that it provides, deliberate or an accident?

Rachel Reeves: The money from national insurance—which, of course, only came in last month—is being used to fund investment in the national health service. Since the general election we have delivered 3 million additional NHS appointments, which benefits constituents in East Yorkshire and throughout the country. As for supporting business, the trade deal that we secured with the European Union was welcomed yesterday by the Confederation of British Industry, the Food & Drink Federation, the Institute of Directors and others, because it will add about £9 billion to the size of the UK economy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Only last week the right hon. Lady was trumpeting that the economy had turned a corner, but, as she has just said, it is barely a month since her disastrous jobs tax started to bite. May I ask her precisely which business confidence survey—just one—she can point to which supports her assertion that everything is coming up roses?

Rachel Reeves: According to PwC's global CEO survey—that is just one of the surveys—Britain is the second-best place in the world in which to invest, and that is what this Government are doing. The shadow Chancellor simply is not serious, and his party is becoming completely irrelevant. He talks about jobs; 200,000 jobs have been created since the general election. He talks about economic growth; the UK is now the fastest-growing economy in the G7. He talks about business; we have secured three trade agreements which are backed by British businesses and British trade unions, and the Conservative party opposes every single one of them. No wonder even George Osborne has said that the shadow Chancellor has "no credible economic plan". While the Conservative party plummets into irrelevance, this Labour Government will deliver in the national interest.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): In the Budget the Government reduced business rates relief, which is hitting small businesses hard. Under current plans, in the next financial year small independent businesses could see their rates go up by 80% and chains could see theirs go down by 40%. I have shared that analysis with Ministers; will the Chancellor please promise that she will look at it personally to ensure that this—I think—unintended consequence does not come to pass and independent businesses do not close, leaving even more of our high streets looking the same?

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Lady will know that in the Budget, at a cost of about £1.5 billion, we were able to extend business rates relief, which was due to end entirely under the plans we had inherited from the Conservative party. As she will also know, we are reforming the way in which business rates work so that there are permanently lower rates for hospitality and retail sectors, particularly on our high streets.

Public Spending: Value for Money

4. **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): What progress she has made on updating the Green Book. [904232]

12. **Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): What comparative assessment she has made of the potential impact of rules for assessing value for money in public spending on levels of funding allocated in the south-east and the north of England. [904241]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): In January, I announced a review of the Green Book to ensure that it is supporting fair, objective and transparent advice on public investment across the country, and I am working closely with our mayors, particularly Steve Rotheram, who has championed this issue. Since January, the Treasury has been in conversation with over 70 different organisations and individuals regionally and nationally to identify areas where we can make changes to the Green Book and champion investment in the north of England.

Lisa Smart: Bear with me on this, Mr Speaker. The previous Conservative Government did not get absolutely everything wrong. They rightly identified that Treasury spending was a powerful tool to rebalance our economy in favour of areas like ours in the north of England. They then failed to deliver, and voters delivered their verdict at the ballot box. This Government have the opportunity to use this powerful tool and ensure that regional disparities are not further entrenched when they look at the Green Book. What reassurance can the Chancellor give my constituents that projects such as repairing Stepping Hill hospital, or bringing the tram-train to Marple, will get a fair crack of the Treasury spending whip?

Rachel Reeves: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. The plans that we inherited from the Conservative party saw capital spending decline as a share of GDP, which is totally the wrong decision if we want to grow the economy and improve prospects in towns and cities across the north of England. Over the course of this Parliament, we are putting £113 billion more into capital spending so that we can build the road and rail infrastructure, the energy infrastructure, the digital infrastructure and the housing that our country desperately needs. Under our reforms to the Green Book, we will make sure that we get more investment to the places that need it, including towns and cities in the north of England.

Markus Campbell-Savours: I am grateful to have secured Thursday's Adjournment debate on the A66 road improvement project—a key transport link between Cumbria, the north-east and North Yorkshire. Cumbria is a long way from Westminster, and many of us fear that the economic case for major projects is stacked in favour of the economically active south-east. Can the Chancellor reassure me that Cumbria will not be disadvantaged when key public spending decisions are taken?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend is a staunch defender of his constituency and region. We will make decisions at the spending review, which we will publish on 11 June, but as a proud northern MP, I am absolutely determined that the north gets its fair share of investment.

Night-time Economy

5. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support growth in the night-time economy. [904233]

7. **Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support growth in the night-time economy in Essex. [904236]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): The night-time economy, and the hospitality sector more widely, is the beating heart of our cultural life, bringing to life the places we all call home. That is why this Government have cut draught duty and introduced a fairer, permanent business rates system. We all want our pubs, clubs and restaurants to thrive.

Jessica Toale: Last month, I met representatives of Bournemouth town centre's night-time economy at one of the newest additions to our high street, Barbara's Bier Haus. The sector is incredibly resilient but is grappling with a number of challenges, such as changing consumer behaviour and rising costs. One issue that is common across our hospitality and retail sectors is prohibitively high business rates. Can the Minister update us on the progress that we are making towards business rates reform, and tell us how this will give the night-time economy the security it needs to be prosperous?

Torsten Bell: I completely recognise my hon. Friend's point. Last autumn, alongside announcing immediate support for retail, hospitality and leisure properties, the Government published a discussion paper setting out our priorities for wider reform, and I know the Exchequer Secretary has met a wide range of businesses on this subject. We are delivering permanently lower business rates for these sectors, and we will announce further policy details at the Budget in the autumn.

Mr Alaba: The Kursaal in Southend—the site of the first theme park in Europe—and the Freight House in Rochford were once iconic venues in my community and central to the night-time economy. Over the last 14 years, venues have been forced to close and heritage buildings have been left empty. What steps are the Minister and his Cabinet colleagues taking to protect the iconic heritage and cultural venues that are the backbone of our evening and local economies?

Torsten Bell: I have missed out on the particular historical gems that my hon. Friend mentions, but my daughter is a big fan of Southend so obviously I agree with him wholeheartedly. And the Government agree with my hon. Friend, which is why last December we announced the largest round of the community ownership fund, awarding £36 million to 85 projects across the UK. In fact, I agree with my hon. Friend so much that my own office is in the rejuvenated Albert Hall in Swansea, which has had previous incarnations as a cinema, a bingo venue and a music venue—but behaviour in that building is much better these days.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Just a few weeks ago, I held a roundtable in my constituency with UKHospitality and hospitality businesses, such as hotels, night-time economy businesses and pubs. It was just after the first national insurance rise payment, which means that those businesses are devastated and are having fewer jobs, fewer apprentices and less investment. What they are worried about, as they look to the future, is whether the Chancellor will be raising taxes again in the coming months. Can the Minister assure my businesses that the Chancellor will not be coming back for more?

Torsten Bell: What the sector is doing is welcoming the trade deals done by the Government yesterday. What it is worried about is a Conservative party that

cannot bring itself to welcome a single trade deal with any country around the world. The party of Robert Peel has turned its back on the entire world.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The Hop Tub in Hurstpierpoint, the Hop Sun in Haywards Heath and the Brickworks in Burgess Hill are three fantastic microbreweries serving the constituents of Mid Sussex. Given the pressures of national insurance and the challenges of business rates, what is the Treasury doing to support these innovative businesses?

Torsten Bell: I think everybody in this House enjoys the proliferation of microbreweries around the country, which is why the Government are supporting draught beer and cider by knocking 1p off the price of a pint at the Budget last year. It is important not only that we support our pubs, but the brewers who produce the content that is sold in them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): Sacha Lord, Labour's former night-time economy adviser, says that it is tougher for the hospitality industry today than it was even during the pandemic, but the Chancellor is ignoring his advice and pushing ahead with a cocktail of costs that the Night Time Industries Association has called a death sentence for our pubs, bars and clubs. Can the Minister and the Chancellor not see that the future of the industry is fatally undermined by their anti-growth taxation?

Torsten Bell: What is anti-growth is the Conservative party, which sat over 15 long years of decline and completely unprecedented economic stagnation. Our job is to support the hospitality and leisure sector more generally. That is why we are reducing red tape through the cross-Government licensing taskforce; why we are permanently cutting business rates, moving away from the year-by-year chaotic system put in place by the Conservative party; and why we are engaging all the time with the Hospitality Sector Council.

UK-India Free Trade Agreement

6. **Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the double contributions convention in the UK-India free trade agreement on levels of tax revenue. [904234]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The trade deal that we have secured with India adds around £5 billion to the UK economy. On social security contributions, if somebody who works for an Indian business is posted to the UK, or someone from a UK business is posted to India, they will not pay two lots of contributions: if you are paying into the Indian provident fund in India, you will not be paying national insurance contributions here; and if you are paying national insurance contributions here, you will not be paying into the Indian provident fund. On top of that, to come to the UK to work from India you will need to pay just over £3,000 for the NHS surcharge to be able to access those services and £769 in visa fees, contributing to the UK Exchequer.

Nick Timothy: I note that the Chancellor did not actually address the point of the cost to the Exchequer of the double contributions convention, which the Government has agreed with India. Indian workers sent here by their employers on intra-company transfers cost more in taxes than British workers, but that flips under this deal: Indian workers will be taxed less and cost less to employ than British rivals for doing the same jobs. That will not only cost the Treasury lost revenue, which the Chancellor did not admit, but displace British workers, suppress wages and increase immigration. Will the Chancellor commit now to monitoring the effects of the agreement and, if the data shows any of that happening, promise to scrap this charter for immigration with India?

Rachel Reeves: This deal is worth £5 billion to the UK economy, and it also benefits British workers being posted by their company to work in India. The Conservatives are now in the absurd situation of opposing the US deal, the India deal and the deal with the EU. They are simply not serious. The India deal reduces tariffs on Scotch whisky by more than half and brings into the UK more good jobs paying decent wages—the Conservatives seem to be against that.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Special steels business Paralloy in Billingham, in my constituency, has told me that uncertainty on international trade has recently left its customers running for the hills. Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer agree that now we have trade deals coming along like buses—with India, the US and the EU—we can offer reliability and confidence to important local businesses such as Paralloy that want to export to the world?

Rachel Reeves: Steel is one of the sectors that will benefit particularly from the trade deals this Government have secured, freeing ourselves of tariffs on steel going into the US. Indeed, the deal we secured with the EU yesterday means that we avoid tariffs on steel being sold into European markets, as well as now being exempt from the European carbon border adjustment mechanism, which is good for steel and good for jobs right across Britain.

Spending Review: Cross-departmental Planning

8. **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure cross-departmental planning in the development of the spending review. [904237]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): The Treasury has reformed the spending review process to ensure that it facilitates genuine collaboration across Departments. As part of this spending review, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I have met Secretaries of State multilaterally in mission clusters, which have brought together Departments to agree cross-departmental priorities, increase transparency, reduce duplication and align spending with mission delivery across Whitehall, while learning every possible lesson from the failure of the Conservatives to ensure that it is never repeated ever again.

Peter Prinsley: Some 9,000 UK medical graduates compete with 15,000 overseas graduates for postgraduate training, meaning that many of our own graduates simply cannot progress into higher professional training, and either go abroad themselves or leave medicine. Does the Minister agree that the Treasury has a crucial role to co-ordinate spending on medical university education by the Department for Education and on postgraduate training by the Department of Health and Social Care, so as to ensure that public money spent on medical student education is not wasted?

Darren Jones: The Government are committed to training the staff the NHS needs as part of our 10-year plan. International staff clearly play an important role in the mix of staff that we have, but we also want to create opportunities for people across the country to work in our national health service. That is why, thanks to changes this Government have made, we have already been able to recruit more than 1,500 additional GPs since October who would otherwise not have been able to seek that type of employment.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): While discussing the spending review, will the Treasury get the Agriculture Secretary and the Energy Secretary together in the same room, and make sure that agriculture receives the funding it needs and that energy is not allowed to charge agriculture, effectively, for its loss of income? In other words, will the Chancellor ensure we are not robbing Peter to pay Paul?

Darren Jones: A meeting of that nature has already taken place as part of our mission-led approach to Government. We continue to engage with the Departments for Energy Security and Net Zero and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on these issues, as the right hon. Gentleman suggests—it is exactly what we mean when we talk about cross-departmental collaboration. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, further details will be set out in the spending review in due course.

Northern Towns: Funding

9. **Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase levels of funding for northern towns. [904238]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): I was pleased to go with my hon. Friend to Darwen to visit the 100th banking hub, which was rolled out just a few months ago. We also visited the thriving Darwen market in one of his local towns. We will set out at the spending review how we will spend the £113 billion extra that we are putting in to capital spending, compared with the plans we inherited from the Conservatives. Of course, we will ensure that towns and cities, including across the north of England, benefit from that investment.

Andy MacNae: I thank the Chancellor for that answer—the Government's commitment to the north is absolutely clear. We very much enjoyed our visit to Darwen market. At the same time, however, history tells us that small towns, like those that make up Rossendale and Darwen, can far too easily get left behind and not feel the benefits of major infrastructure investment, despite being the very communities that need to see and feel change the most. Does the Chancellor agree that as we implement our investment and growth strategy, and deliver the review of the Green Book, we must put our left-behind communities first? As part of every major investment decision, we should ask the question: what does this do for our most deprived and left-behind neighbourhoods? It is only by targeting investment where it is needed most that we can ensure that every community feels the benefit of the growth that this Government will bring.

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend is a proud champion of the towns and villages of Rossendale and Darwen. We will make sure that we use our Green Book review to properly assess the benefit of all this Government's investments. On top of that capital investment, the people of Rossendale and Darwen are benefiting from the 3 million additional appointments that we have delivered, which have led to reductions in NHS waiting lists, and also the increase in the national living wage, which will make working people in his constituency and across the country better off.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The towns and villages of the lakes and the dales in Cumbria are proud to host 20 million visitors every single year—we are the UK's biggest visitor destination outside of London—yet we get almost no support whatsoever for the costs incurred by those visitors on our highways and other infrastructure, health services and police. Will the Chancellor look at funding allocations to make sure that those services that support the residents and the visitors are properly funded?

Rachel Reeves: The Green Book reforms will ensure that we properly assess the benefits of investments in different parts of the UK, but the people of Cumbria and the lakes will benefit from the record investment in the NHS, the roll-out of nurseries and free breakfast clubs at primary schools, as well as the increase in the national living wage, from which many workers in sectors such as hospitality and retail in the hon. Member's constituency will directly benefit.

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): One way to get Treasury officials to start focusing more on northern towns would be to move the Treasury up north. After experiencing our rail networks and our infrastructure, they may very quickly invest more money in the area. Are there any plans to move any Treasury offices to the north?

Mr Speaker: No. 11 Market Street, Chorley? *[Laughter.]*

Rachel Reeves: This Government have committed to increasing the proportion of civil servants who work in the north of England. But we already have a hub that we are expanding in Darlington, where eight Departments work, including officials from the Treasury. The Treasury is very mindful of the importance of investing right across the north of England—in Darlington, Leeds, Cumbria, Rossendale and Darwen and many other constituencies beside.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The prosperity of northern towns is very much dependent on good transport connections. Will the Chancellor ensure that National Highways is adequately funded, so that it can improve access to the port and town of Immingham through improvements to the A180, and

also that the Department for Transport has adequate funds to meet the modest amount that is needed to fund an extension of the King's Cross to Lincoln train service through to Grimsby and Cleethorpes?

Rachel Reeves: I shall make sure that the Transport Secretary hears those requests, but the hon. Gentleman knows that our investment in British Steel, which will save that company, is set to increase the number of jobs there. That will make a massive difference to his constituents, as will the investment in renewable energy in the North sea, particularly around Immingham, creating good jobs and paying decent wages in his constituency and in many others, too.

Spending Review: Economic Growth

10. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps she is taking through the spending review to help increase levels of economic growth. [904239]

11. **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): What steps she is taking through the spending review to help increase levels of economic growth. [904240]

14. **Gill German** (Clwyd North) (Lab): What steps she is taking through the spending review to help increase levels of economic growth. [904243]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): I know that my hon. Friend is working closely with the local Labour council in Southport to regenerate the local town centre, and we will make sure that this Government back him every step of the way.

Patrick Hurley: Whether it is the Marine Lake Events Centre, the Enterprise Arcade or the new Market Quarter in my Southport constituency, my town has benefited from state-led investment in neighbourhoods and the public realm. Does the Chancellor agree that investment policies of this sort are essential to driving economic growth in our regions and nations and will help us to finally turn the page on the failed austerity policies of the Conservative party?

Rachel Reeves: I absolutely agree, and that is why we have reversed the Conservatives' decisions to cut capital spending. Instead, we are preserving that capital investment, which means spending £113 billion more on road, rail, energy, homes and digital infrastructure than would have been spent in the plans we inherited. We are also spending on day-to-day things, such as making sure that we have police on our streets, and working with our mayors, including Mayor Steve Rotheram, to ensure we get investment into the places that most need it.

Jas Athwal: Small businesses are the backbone of our economy. In Ilford South we have many small businesses, ranging from restaurants like Delhi O Delhi, Mr Bunns Bakery, tea shops like Mi Chaii to local shops like the Chopra convenience stores. They make Ilford an amazing place to eat, shop and do business. Will the Chancellor join me in commending the local businesses that make the high street the beating heart of Ilford South, and will she lay out what steps she is taking to support these entrepreneurs?

Rachel Reeves: At the Budget, we more than doubled the employment allowance to £10,500 to take many small businesses out of paying national insurance altogether. On corporation tax, we have maintained the small profits rate to help smaller businesses, and to help entrepreneurs raise finance and grow, the Government have extended the enterprise investment scheme and the venture capital trust scheme. I very much add my words of support to businesses across Ilford, and I commend the work my hon. Friend does to champion them.

Gill German: Clwyd North is a proud coastal constituency, home to a dedicated hospitality sector with many small businesses, including the recently opened Bobcats Coffee, where young entrepreneur Bobby is an example to us all. Economic circumstances have been tough after a decade of neglect by the Tories. Will the Chancellor outline the Treasury's plans to support the small businesses that are such a vital part of our local economy?

Rachel Reeves: From the next financial year, this Government will introduce permanently lower rates for high street, retail, hospitality and leisure properties with rateable values below £500,000, and we are doing that exactly to support the sort of businesses that my hon. Friend champions.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Earlier this month, Harbour Energy announced that it would be cutting 25% of its onshore workforce, blaming the Government's punitive fiscal position and challenging regulatory environment. When the news was announced, the Chancellor said that this was just a commercial decision by one company, so how does she explain the other energy sector jobs that have been lost in north-east Scotland in just the last few weeks? Belmar Engineering is entering liquidation, with 48 job losses. Well-Safe Solutions faces 45 job losses. Beam, a subsea technology company, has made all 200 staff redundant. With Harbour Energy's cut of 25% of its workforce—250 jobs—we are talking about 600 jobs in total. How can the Chancellor explain that, and how will she support the industry in the spending review?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is working closely with businesses right across the energy sector. The previous Government increased the rate of tax on energy companies to 75%, and we increased it by three percentage points to 78%, reflecting the fact that energy companies have enjoyed huge profits since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. When people's bills have gone up, it is right that we ask the energy companies making those profits to contribute a little more.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): What changes will the Chancellor introduce in the spring statement to compensate for the growth-threatening sword of Damocles she has just placed over the Scottish fishing industry? She should know, but probably does not, that 70% of revenue from fishing and aquaculture comes from Scotland, and she should know, but probably does not, that the fishing industry in Scotland is 50 times larger for Scotland's economy than for the UK's. Can

she explain what discussions she had with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation or the Scottish Government before making this damaging decision?

Rachel Reeves: I was very pleased that the Scottish salmon association welcomed the trade deal that we secured with the EU yesterday. Some 70% of the fish that is caught in UK waters is sold into European markets. That will now benefit from the sanitary and phytosanitary deal that we have secured within that deal. We have rolled over the deal that the previous Government secured, giving certainty to fishermen in Scotland and across the UK. We have made it easier for them to export into European markets. We have ensured that we can sell shellfish again into European markets, and we announced yesterday the £360 million package of measures to support coastal and fishing industries. The Scottish National party is now in an absurd situation where it supports Reform and the Tories in opposing the deal with the EU.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I welcome the Chancellor's answers on growth. She has been a strong champion of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, but my constituents are concerned to know that she will lend her support to Lord Vallance's efforts to join up across Departments and ensure that there is the social infrastructure to support the growth. My constituents worry that hospitals, schools and roads will not keep up with the ambitious pace that Lord Vallance is proposing.

Rachel Reeves: That is an opportune question, because I will be meeting Lord Vallance this afternoon to discuss the work he is taking forward on the Ox-Cam corridor to bring more good jobs, paying good wages, not only to Oxford and Cambridge, but, crucially, to the towns and cities in between. Some of the extra money we are putting into capital investment will absolutely be going to support the huge growth opportunities in that part of the world.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): Of course, the best way to improve economic growth is for this Chancellor to stop punishing businesses with higher taxes. Within the spending review, the key is to improve public sector productivity. As the Chancellor knows, one of the key aspects in doing that is the use of technology. This Government have substantial advantages over the next few years with major advances in artificial intelligence technology, but those can only be captured if the Treasury sets clear directions for Departments, including incentives and penalties. What directives has His Majesty's Treasury given to Departments to improve productivity through the adoption of artificial intelligence? Specifically, does that advice include a requirement for the use of agentic AI during the multi-year spending period?

Rachel Reeves: I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to welcome the investment of Universal Studios in Bedfordshire, which will be a massive boon to the county's economy.

On supporting the adoption of AI, we are doing two key things. First, we are supporting that sector investing in the UK, and the deal we secured with the US will help bring more investment into our digital sector. Secondly, and crucially, we are improving the productivity of our public services. The hon. Gentleman will see more about that when we publish the spending review on 11 June. We are absolutely determined to boost productivity in the public sector, after the mess in which it was left by the Conservatives.

Vulnerable Families: Tax System Support

13. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What steps she is taking through the tax system to support vulnerable families. [904242]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government are committed to keeping taxes for working people as low as possible. The personal allowance means those earning below £12,570 pay no tax. At our first Budget, we decided not to extend the freeze on personal tax thresholds, which was implemented by the previous Government.

Munira Wilson: I thank the Minister for his response, but what short and long-term assessments have Ministers made of the cost to the taxpayer of the deep cuts in grants for therapy for some of the most vulnerable and traumatised children in our country through the adoption and special guardianship support fund? Given the Treasury's intransigence in putting more money into the fund to meet rising demand, it is likely that adoption and kinship care placements will fail, resulting in more children in the care system in the short term. In the long term, sadly, we know that care-experienced children are four times more likely to end up with a criminal conviction. There is a moral and economic case to support this fund properly.

James Murray: I very much recognise, both as a constituency MP and as a Minister, the importance of making sure that adoptive parents can build a strong family unit with their adoptive children. If I may make a broader point, the only reason we can invest in public services is because of difficult decisions we have taken around taxation. The problem with the Liberal Democrats and other parties on the Opposition Benches is that they are happy to support the extra funding for public spending, but not the tax rises necessary to pay for it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This is not an issue on which to make a party political point. The reality is that a 40% cut to the adoption and special guardianship support fund will be deeply impactful for young people who have experienced significant trauma—abuse, neglect and so much more. Given that our mental health services are not fit for purpose at the moment, it is imperative that we make the right investment so that those young people are not denied a life course opportunity if that fund is cut. Will the Minister review the decision and ensure that we have the proper funding that young people need?

James Murray: As my hon. Friend will know, spending decisions are for the Chief Secretary of the Treasury to discuss with Departments. I make the general point that investment in mental health, for instance, which she mentioned, is possible only because of the decisions we

have taken on taxation to ensure that we can support public spending on mental health services and on support for young people.

Pension Savings: Investment Returns

15. **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase returns on investment from pension savings. [904244]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): That is absolutely the right question. We all understandably hear calls for higher rates of pension saving, but the prior question is this: how do we ensure that savers get the best bang for their buck for every penny they save? The forthcoming pension schemes Bill will help make that happen, with bigger pension schemes and fewer small pension pots, driving down costs and driving up saving rates for pensioners.

Sarah Edwards: Can the Minister share with me, as chair of the reconstituted all-party parliamentary group on pensions and growth, any plans for how counties that are outside mayoral authorities, such as Staffordshire, could benefit from pension reforms to encourage more investment in the UK, to support infrastructure, jobs and local regeneration?

Torsten Bell: I certainly can. Our reforms to the local government pension scheme will support local investment in every part of England and Wales. Our defence spending plans will be felt on the ground—total defence spending in the west midlands totals £1.6 billion a year. We are building reservoirs again, including one in the west midlands. We are also getting the country trading once again, including businesses in Tamworth, where PI-KEM, a specialist chemical supplier, recently won a major export order, with £100,000 in UK Export Finance support. Britain, and Tamworth, are open for business.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to ask about 18-year-olds, who are just starting off, being encouraged to take out a pension. Whenever I was 18, my mother took me down to see John Thompson, the pensions man in Ballywalter, and he said, "You're going to take a pension." I asked, "What for, Mum?" She said, "You're taking a pension." So I took the pension. Does the Minister agree that what everybody really needs is somebody like my mother to encourage them to take a pension?

Torsten Bell: I did not know where that was going, but I know that I speak for everybody in the House when I say that the whole country needs someone like the hon. Gentleman's mother.

Economic Growth: South Yorkshire and Derby

16. **Dr Marie Tidball** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help increase economic growth in South Yorkshire. [904245]

18. **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in Derby. [904248]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Kick-starting economic growth is this Government's No. 1 mission. From the next financial year, South Yorkshire combined authority will receive a single flexible funding pot through its integrated settlement, and the East Midlands combined authority will benefit from a new advanced manufacturing and logistics park, unlocking up to £1 billion of investment. Both areas will benefit from £240 million of investment towards trailblazers to tackle economic inactivity.

Dr Tidball: The speciality steel site at Stocksbridge in my constituency has a strategically significant, highly specialist capability to produce world-leading steel that is crucial to our national defence, aerospace and energy industries. The site employs 650 people and has an excellent skills training centre. I welcome the Government's £2.5 billion commitment to our UK steel industry. What discussions has the Chancellor had with the Department for Business and Trade to ensure that the Government do everything they can to secure the British steel industry by using our domestic steel assets productively, and in particular the Stocksbridge speciality steel site?

Rachel Reeves: Although I will not get into detailed discussions about one individual company, last year the Government set out the £2.5 billion steel fund in the Budget to preserve and grow steel manufacturing in the UK. In the trade deals we have secured with the US and with the EU in the last couple of weeks, we have reduced tariffs on steel exports, which will be good for the British steel industry.

Baggy Shanker: Shockingly, in Derby South 62% of adults in the community are financially vulnerable, which is far above the national average of 38%. To lift people out of this vicious cycle, we need a growing economy, but for those who are worried about how they will make it to the next payday, dreading an unexpected bill or struggling to feed their family, the benefits of growth can feel miles out of reach. Will the Chancellor outline how her plan for growth will put money in people's pockets and deliver change for those in our struggling communities?

Rachel Reeves: We will shortly publish a financial inclusion strategy, as well as extending the household support fund to support some of the most vulnerable. There are huge opportunities in Derby, as my hon. Friend knows. I was at Rolls Royce in Derby just last week. What we are doing on trade deals, particularly with the US, hugely supports our aerospace sector, along with the increased spending on defence to 2.5% of GDP, which helps to invest in Great British firms and, indeed, in Great British steel.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I am aware that Derby's economy was blighted last November by a foul smell said to be emanating from its local water treatment works. Similar is true of my constituency, due to the failure of Southern Water's air scrubbing system. Will the Chancellor ensure that the spending review grants the Environment Agency the resources it needs to crack down on smell nuisances so that the water companies get a grip on the matter, for the benefit of local growth and our economy?

Mr Speaker: Supplementary questions must be relevant to the question on the Order Paper—forget it.

Topical Questions

T1. [904255] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): This Government are securing economic growth. Last week, the numbers published showed that the economy grew by 0.7% in the first quarter of this year, including an 8% increase year on year in investment spending. We are now the fastest-growing economy in the G7. Since the general election, there have been four cuts in interest rates, 200,000 jobs created and three trade deals secured. Britain's economy is stronger, but I will continue to do everything in my power to ensure that working people are better off.

Rosie Duffield: Westminster is once again buzzing with the latest U-turns, speculation and briefings over the Chancellor's policies on the winter fuel allowance and the two-child benefit cap. There is less of a buzz for the visitors to Canterbury food bank, however, which last month distributed enough food to make 13,545 meals, in a 47% rise on the same period last year. Will the Chancellor end the serious anxiety of those experiencing fuel and food poverty now and reverse those policies?

Rachel Reeves: The only reason that we have been able to grow the economy and get those cuts in interest rates, which help working families in Canterbury and right across our country, is because we have returned stability to our economy. That means never making a policy commitment without being able to say where the money comes from, which is what got our country into a mess under the previous Government. We have set out the policies that we needed to put investment into the NHS and secure our public finances.

T2. [904256] **Tracy Gilbert** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Last month, Firth Ports officially opened the Charles Hammond berth at the port of Leith, in a £100 million private investment to create Scotland's largest renewables hub. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming that investment in Leith and set out how she is working with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that green manufacturing and supply chain jobs are created in Scotland?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the official opening of the Charles Hammond berth. As she knows, we set up Great British Energy in Scotland, bringing forward £300 million of investment ahead of the spending review to secure jobs and supply chains. Funding for the Port of Cromarty Firth, announced in March, is expected to support up to 1,000 highly skilled jobs, while our uplift to the clean energy bonus will support offshore wind supply chains across the country. That is yet another example of the Government working with business and of a Labour Government delivering for the people of Scotland.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Will the Chancellor explain what the Economic Secretary to the Treasury meant last week when she said that there will be no tax rises on individuals at the autumn Budget? Will the Chancellor similarly confirm that there will be no tax increases on businesses?

Rachel Reeves: In our manifesto, we set out that we would not increase taxes on working people—that is, the income tax, national insurance or VAT that they pay. That is why we also reversed the previous Government's decision to increase fuel duty, which would have had a disastrous effect on working people in our country. We will set out all other tax policy at the Budget.

Sir Mel Stride: What many up and down the country are asking is why that manifesto pledge not to impose taxes on working people was broken. Last week the Pensions Minister confirmed to the House that the Government would never interfere with the fiduciary duty of pension trustees to get the best return for their members, but when the Chancellor was questioned on that topic by Bloomberg the very same day, she said:

"I am never going to say never".

This is chaos. The Government cannot even speak with one voice. It is clear that the right hon. Lady and the Pensions Minister cannot both be right, so will she now put the record straight?

Rachel Reeves: We have secured an agreement with the biggest pension companies to invest on a voluntary basis in UK unlisted equities and infrastructure, which is something the Conservatives never achieved. We are getting investment into British infrastructure and British businesses because that is the way to grow the economy and support working people.

T4. [904258] **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend outline the steps being taken in the forthcoming spending review to ensure that increased defence spending will stimulate economic growth, so that supply chain companies, such as Collins Aerospace in my constituency, can continue to strengthen national defence capabilities while boosting our local economies, jobs and quality apprenticeships?

Darren Jones: As my hon. Friend knows, the Government are committed to increasing spending on defence to 2.5% of GDP, with an ambition to go further to 3% in the next Parliament when economic and fiscal conditions allow. As part of that increase in spending, we are making sure that UK companies and UK workers get the benefit, including in places such as Wolverhampton, through apprenticeships, good jobs and good growth.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Yesterday the Chancellor said that she understands the concerns that some people have about the limit at which the winter fuel payment is removed. Does she therefore now agree that restricting the eligibility so tightly was a mistake?

Rachel Reeves: As the hon. Lady knows, when I became Chancellor last year, we inherited a £22 billion black hole in the public finances—not in some year in the future, but in the financial year that we were already three or four months into. This meant that we had to

make difficult and urgent decisions to put our public finances back on a firm footing—because, unlike the Conservatives, I will never play fast and loose with the public finances.

T6. [904260] **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): Labour-led Ipswich borough council recently announced investment to reopen the iconic Grimwades building in our town centre, which has been left vacant for more than a decade. This local ambition matches the Government's national initiatives, but challenges remain, so what steps are the Government taking to go even further and reform the unfair business rates system for good?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): We are determined to go further and faster to reform business rates, which is why we will publish an update paper in the summer. I am also glad that we can work with councils such as Ipswich to ensure that we can turn around town centres after years of Conservative decline.

T3. [904257] **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): With interest rates still high, what assessment has the Chancellor made of the number of homeowners going into mortgage arrears and the impact that is having on families right across the UK?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): We are in weekly touch with the Financial Conduct Authority, which regulates mortgages, and under this Government we have seen four interest rate cuts since the election, which is bringing mortgage rates down for hard-working people across the country.

T7. [904261] **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Does the Chancellor agree that four interest rate cuts, three trade deals, two successive quarters of growth and almost 1% of growth announced last week show that our plan for change is working? Does she also agree that it is now essential that this House supports the Government's Planning and Infrastructure Bill and other efforts to boost growth and put money in the pockets of my constituents in Ealing Southall?

Rachel Reeves: I very much agree, but what is truly extraordinary is that the Conservatives, Reform and the Scottish National party have voted against or abstained on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, and they do not support any of the trade deals that we have secured to support working people in our country.

T5. [904259] **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): My Hazel Grove constituents are content to pay their fair share of tax, but they are understandably disappointed when His Majesty's Revenue and Customs overcharges and then ghosts them. Gail from Romiley is a foster carer who was owed a tax repayment. She repeatedly contacted HMRC over a nine-month period, but it was only when my superstar casework team got involved that she got a £1,200 rebate. What assurance can Ministers give my constituents that HMRC is adequately resourced to give them the support they need to pay their fair share of tax?

James Murray: I am sorry to hear about the experience of the hon. Lady's constituent. To reassure her and her constituent, one of my priorities as chair of the HMRC board is to improve HMRC's day-to-day performance. We have seen the percentage of telephony adviser attempts handled go from 59% last March to 80% this March. It will remain a priority for me to modernise and digitise the service.

T8. [904262] **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): The European emissions trading scheme has a carbon price that is 50% higher than the UK's. What assessment has the Chancellor made of the impact of joining the scheme on inflation in this country?

Rachel Reeves: As my hon. Friend knows, sometimes the UK carbon price has been higher, but sometimes it has been lower than in the EU. This deal will ensure a bigger market that, on average, brings prices down. We are confident that the deal secured yesterday will bring more good jobs and bring down bills for consumers.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Scottish councils now have the power to introduce a tourism levy. That has gone down extremely badly with the hospitality sector. In particular, they fear a tax on a tax—that would be VAT. Will the Government look at zero rating that in the event that a tourism levy is introduced?

Rachel Reeves: I want to welcome tourists to Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is why we are securing trade deals with countries around the world, showing that we as a country are open for business. In the end, it is up to the Scottish Government which additional taxes they introduce, but as with income tax, the SNP never takes the side of ordinary working people.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Last week I raised with the Minister for Social Security and Disability the case of a local disability charity being hit by increased bank charges, and the Minister committed to work with me on the issue. Will Treasury Ministers do the same so that we can take these banks to task and support fantastic local organisations?

Emma Reynolds: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that issue.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Access to banking services is a particular issue in North East Fife, where the limitations of the access to cash legislation are becoming clear. Will the financial inclusion committee agree to look at the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to ensure that we get the access to banking services that local communities need?

Emma Reynolds: Our Government secured the commitment of the banking industry to roll out 350 banking hubs across the country; 200 have already been agreed and over 150 are open. The financial inclusion committee, which I chair, is looking at financial inclusion, including digital banking and ensuring that people have the bank accounts they need.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I congratulate the Chancellor of the Exchequer on securing the Mansion House accord, which will channel billions into the economy and make a real difference to my constituents. One of the reasons that pension funds agreed to join the accord was because of the strong pipeline of investable projects that the Government are creating. Does the Minister agree that the Government's infrastructure plans and planning reforms, opposed by the Conservatives, will unlock growth?

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Raising investment in the UK is about boosting not just the supply of capital, but the demand for it—the investment pipeline. We are approving infrastructure projects, from wind farms to reservoirs, that the Conservatives blocked for years. By reforming the planning system, we are doing something really radical: building homes.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The roll-out of banking hubs is helping to a small degree, but what plans do the Government have to increase the number of banking hubs beyond those in the pipeline?

Emma Reynolds: As I said in my previous answer, we have secured the commitment of the industry to open 350 banking hubs by the end of this Parliament. The FCA keeps the access to cash rules under review. As legislated for under the last Government, it has the power to make rules to ensure that there is access to cash across the country.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, there was a lot of coverage of the Chancellor's comments about the ISA limit. She pledged to keep it at £20,000 but did not specify how much within that would be cash and how much would be investments. Can the Minister reassure me that she is seriously considering the impact on the mortgage-lending market of changing the cash ISA limit?

Emma Reynolds: As we announced in the spring statement, we are looking for options for ISA reform to ensure that we get the balance right between cash and equities. I can reassure my hon. Friend that we understand that cash savings are a vital tool for people and act as a financial buffer for a rainy day.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I am sure that the Chancellor subscribes to the basic principle that if the cost of something is put up, we will see less of it. That is why Governments have, over many years, put taxes on things like smoking. Does she accept that the principle also applies to employing people—that the more expensive the Government make employing people, with their jobs tax increasing NICs for employers, the less we will see of that?

Rachel Reeves: The Conservative party is a good example of that. The cost of the Conservative party went up, and its number of MPs shrank.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): The recent report by the independent commission on neighbourhoods shows that 98% of Blackpool's population is living in high-need neighbourhoods. With 34 mission-critical neighbourhoods in my constituency, Blackpool is desperate for investment and economic growth. Will the Chancellor outline what the Government are doing to improve growth in our forgotten coastal towns?

Rachel Reeves: Yesterday we announced £360 million of investment in coastal and fishing communities. That will be vital to ensure that those communities continue to thrive.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Dorset and Wiltshire fire and rescue service has suffered a real-terms funding cut, partly because the majority of firefighters are on call so the employer national insurance contributions were not sufficiently compensated. Will Ministers commit to reviewing the funding formula to fit the needs of communities, and to undertaking a local impact assessment on the effect of the funding cuts on public and firefighter safety?

Darren Jones: The Government have already increased NHS spending by £22.6 billion, police funding by £1.1 billion, and fire and rescue authority funding by £65.5 million. Further spending will be set out in the June spending review, but this is another example of a Labour Government delivering on the promise of change.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): To alleviate grinding penury for millions of people, the Chancellor could introduce an annual wealth tax on multimillionaires, which would raise approximately £24 billion per annum, yet she refuses to entertain the idea and considers cuts to welfare acceptable. Why do "tough political choices" always seem to impact the most vulnerable?

Rachel Reeves: At the Budget last year, we increased the rate of tax on non-doms, we increased capital gains tax, we increased the carried interest on bonuses and we introduced VAT on private schools. This Government are ensuring that the wealthiest pay their fair share, because that is a basic Labour principle.

UK-EU Summit

12.38 pm

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): With permission, I will update the House on the three recent trade deals that we have struck in the national interest.

First, however, I would like to say something about the horrific situation in Gaza, where the level of suffering, with innocent children being bombed again, is utterly intolerable. Over the weekend we co-ordinated a response with our allies, as set out in my statement with President Macron and Prime Minister Carney last night. I want to put on record today that we are horrified by the escalation from Israel. We repeat our demand for a ceasefire, as the only way to free the hostages; we repeat our opposition to settlements in the west bank; and we repeat our demand to massively scale up humanitarian assistance to Gaza. The recent announcement that Israel will allow a "basic quantity of food" into Gaza is totally and utterly inadequate, so we must co-ordinate our response, because this war has gone on for far too long. We cannot allow the people of Gaza to starve, and the Foreign Secretary will come to the House shortly to set out our response in detail.

Let me turn now to the three deals that this Government have struck. The principles we took into the negotiations are clear and simple. Does it drive down bills? Does it drive up jobs? Does it strengthen our borders? In each case, the answer is a resoundingly yes. These deals release us from the tired arguments of the past and, as an independent sovereign nation, allow us to seize the opportunities of the future—a clear message, sent across the globe, that Britain is back on the world stage.

We have a trade deal with the world's fastest growing economy, India, cutting tariffs for British industries, which is a huge boost for our whisky and gin distilleries—their only concern now is whether they can produce enough to sell—and for our car manufacturers, with tariffs slashed from over 100% to just 10%, and no concessions on visas. We have a trade deal with the world's richest economy, the United States, slashing tariffs, saving thousands upon thousands of jobs in car manufacturing in places like Jaguar Land Rover, protecting our steel and aluminium exports, and safeguarding the interests of our hugely important pharmaceutical sector.

But I can already see that, when it comes to this hat-trick of deals, it is our new partnership with the EU that the Opposition most want to talk about—and given their abject failure to strike a deal with India or the US, I cannot say I blame them—so let me spell out the benefits of this deal, which gives our country an unprecedented level of access to the EU market: the best access of any nation outside the EU or European Free Trade Association.

I will start with our security. When Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine over three years ago, a gauntlet was thrown down, and it is our responsibility to step up. That is what this world demands, and it is what this partnership delivers, strengthening our national security through a new security and defence partnership that paves the way for British defence firms to access the EU's €150 billion defence fund. That will support British jobs, British wages and British livelihoods.

The partnership also increases co-operation on emissions trading, saving UK businesses from having to pay up to £800 million in EU carbon taxes—once again, backing British businesses. The deal will drive down bills with increased co-operation on energy, because the agreement negotiated by the Conservative party left us with a more expensive way of working with our neighbours—a needless rupture, despite our grids being connected by undersea cables. This partnership brings those systems together again, benefiting British bill payers and boosting clean British power in the North sea.

This partnership also strengthens our borders, because again, the previous deal left a huge gap and weakened our ability to work together to tackle illegal migration—the ultimate cross-border challenge. It closes that gap, including joint work on returns, preventing channel crossings and working upstream in key source and transit countries, co-operating along the whole migration route to strengthen our hand in the fight against the vile smuggling gangs. It boosts our co-operation on law enforcement, combating terrorism and serious organised crime with closer operational work with agencies like Europol and better sharing of intelligence and data, including, for the first time, facial imaging.

This partnership helps British holidaymakers, who will be able to use e-gates when they travel to Europe, ending those huge queues at passport control. It delivers for our young people, because we are now on a path towards a controlled youth experience scheme, with firm caps on numbers and visa controls—a relationship we have with so many countries around the world, some of which were even set up by the Conservative party. We should be proud to give our young people that opportunity. And, not for the first time, this Government have delivered for Britain's steel industry, protecting our steel exports from new EU tariffs and backing our steel sector to the hilt.

Last but certainly not least, we have a new sanitary and phytosanitary deal, as promised in our manifesto, which will cut the price of a weekly shop, meaning that there will be more money in the pockets of working people, less red tape for our exporters, no more lorry drivers sitting for 16 hours at the border with rotting food in the back, and no more needless checks—the inevitable consequence of the Conservatives' policies, which made it so much harder to trade even within our own market, between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The deal means that British goods that have long been off the menu in Europe can regain their true place, including shellfish, which are hugely important for Cornwall, Devon and Scotland. Not only does our deal on fish provide stability, with no increase in the amount that EU vessels can catch in British waters, but the new SPS agreement slashes costs and red tape for our exports to the European market. We sell 70% of our seafood to that market, so there is a huge opportunity that Britain's fisheries, in which we have made a £360 million investment, will now look to exploit.

The reaction to this deal from business has been absolutely clear. Mr Speaker, I know you are a stickler for keeping to time, so I do not have time to run through the list of supportive quotes from businesses. [Hon. Members: "Go on!"]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister is correct.

The Prime Minister: This is not the full list, but the new partnership has been backed by the Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI, the British Retail Consortium,

Asda, Morrisons, Salmon Scotland, the Food & Drink Federation, the British Chamber of Commerce, Ryanair, Vodafone and producers of meat, milk and poultry—the list goes on and on. I wonder whether that long list of businesses coming out in support of the deal will temper the reaction of the Leader of the Opposition—but then again, for weeks now, she has been dismissive of the benefits of any trade deal, in defiance, frankly, of her party's history. It is not just the Conservatives that I am talking about; the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who is not here, and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) have both shown, in their own way, that their parties simply do not get it; if your whole approach to our allies is about striking a pose, you do not get to strike a deal. What that means in a world like ours, where deals are ever more the currency of security and justice, is that you do not get to make a difference, and you do not get to deliver for Britain. That is what this partnership means.

For years, we were told that this could not be done. What the Conservatives meant was that they could not do it. We were told that a deal with the US or India was impossible; what they meant was that it was impossible for them. We were told that a choice must be made between the US and EU; what they meant was that they could not do a deal with both. This Government can and will, because we stay in the room, we fight for the national interest, and we put the British people first. These deals represent a signal that we are back on the world stage—a global champion of free trade, playing our historic role on European security—but above all, they are deals that put money in the pockets of working people, because that is what independent, sovereign nations do. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

12.48 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): When Labour negotiates, Britain loses. The Prime Minister talks about a hat trick of deals—they are own goals. In 2020, the Conservatives concluded the trade and co-operation agreement, the largest and most comprehensive free trade agreement in the world. We agreed to come back in five years with improved terms. This renegotiation should have been an opportunity to improve terms for our country, but the terms are improved for the EU. The Prime Minister can dress it up as much as he wants, but he has failed. It is bad for bills; it is bad for jobs; and it is bad for borders.

This is not a deal made for Britain; this deal is made for Labour's public relations, to show Labour on the world stage, but it is a stitch-up for our country in return for short-term headlines. Let us take the Prime Minister's abject failures one by one. First, on fishing, he has given away the prize most desired by EU member states, and he has done so for almost nothing. It is very easy to sign deals if you are prepared to give everything away for pennies. This deal locks out our fishermen until 2038. We are now in a worse position than the Faroe Islands—a set of islands with the population of Scarborough, but which gets to have annual negotiations. The Prime Minister quoted some organisations that welcome his deal—he does not listen to them normally—but he left one out deliberately: the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations has described the deal as a surrender and a giveaway. This is a Prime Minister who would pay to give away his family silver. Why is the Prime Minister selling our fishermen down the river? Is it because they do not vote Labour?

Secondly, on food and agriculture, the Prime Minister is going to pay the EU to abide by laws that we have no say on. While British farmers struggle with the family farms tax that his Chancellor has imposed on them, their regulations will now be made in Paris and enforced in Brussels. It is a total capitulation. We are not in the EU, and we are not at the table, so can the Prime Minister tell us how he will ensure accountability for the hundreds of regulations that he has signed this country up to?

Thirdly, on energy, the Prime Minister has shackled us to the EU's emissions trading scheme. That means that the Government can no longer cut energy costs without the EU's permission. It will also unravel parts of the India free trade agreement that he has just negotiated. This is not a technicality; it is a betrayal. The House should be in no doubt that this means higher bills, more pain and less flexibility.

Fourthly, on the Prime Minister's manifesto promises, he said that we would not rejoin the single market. He promised no new payments, and that he would protect British interests. That promise has lasted about as long as his commitment to protect pensioners' winter fuel allowance. He said whatever was needed to win power, and now he will say whatever is needed to keep it, even if it means selling out our sovereignty, our businesses and the public.

The truth is that most of what was announced yesterday was not a deal. There was no binding agreement on anything. Most of the items outlined are simply agreements to enter into further discussions, which we are already having. The Prime Minister is boasting that we will now avoid airport queues because we will get access to EU e-gates. It sounds great, except it is not true; some airports already allow that, and this deal does not guarantee it anywhere, as each country still has to agree. That sums up this deal perfectly: it is a lot of spin to disguise the terrible substance.

Having previously ruled out a youth mobility scheme, the Prime Minister is now desperately trying to hide his latest U-turn by rebranding the scheme as an experience. That is risible. We have no details on any cap or time limit, which begs the question: why are the Government talking about increasing migration before they have got a grip on the small boats or the legal migration system? I know that the Prime Minister does not like answering questions, but people out there want to know. Can we have some honesty about what has been discussed? How many young European workers does the Prime Minister think would be acceptable, and will they be able to bring dependants?

Even the defence commitments in this deal are hopelessly one-sided. We are making payments, but the EU is offering dialogue and consultation. This is a pitiful return for the country that leads NATO in Europe, and has troops on the ground in Estonia, defending our allies. Can the Prime Minister tell us why there was not a single word in his statement about the money that we will now be sending to Brussels? Can he set out how much those payments will cost taxpayers? In government, details matter, and so does honesty. *[Laughter.]* Labour Members are laughing, but this is a bad deal for the country. Look at them. This is how they laughed at the Budget. They have no idea what it is that they have

[Mrs Kemi Badenoch]

signed up to. The Prime Minister said that he would stay out of the single market; he is going into the single market for agrifood, electricity and energy. He said that he would stay out of the customs union, but he is accepting EU tariff rules. How does he plan to stop the EU changing them to our disadvantage? He has no idea, and neither do any of them.

The British people know when they are being misled. They know that headlines fail. The Prime Minister did not listen to the CBI on the jobs tax, and he did not listen to the Federation of Small Businesses on the family farms tax. This deal has already unravelled. The damage is becoming clear, and the political consequences will be huge, and here he is, trumpeting his success. When he stands up in a moment, he will deflect, dismiss and distract, but we all know the truth. This is a fiction of a speech, a fraud of a deal, and a failure of a Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Oh dear. That was just such an unserious response. The right hon. Lady says that details matter in government; they matter in opposition as well. The SPS agreement cuts red tape and bureaucracy for all food and agricultural products going to the EU. It is a massive boost for our supermarkets, our farmers and others. Why is it that all the supermarkets have come out behind this deal? Because they know how important the SPS agreement is. It is completely in our favour. There is a huge amount of detail there. It is the best agreement.

On defence and security, we have greater operational co-ordination, and the right hon. Lady is against it at a time like this. It opens the gate to the EU defence procurement fund of €150 billion; that was a condition of the deal. She complains about emissions. [Hon. Members: "How much?"] I will tell you how much. Businesses were going to pay £800 million a year in tariffs that they will not now pay. That is why they are coming out in support of the deal. That is how much. The detail matters.

On energy, we are already connected, but we are not using that energy connection. We have electrical access to the market. On steel, we are getting rid of the tariffs. That will support British steel, but the right hon. Lady is against that, yet again. She says that e-gates access is already in existence; this deal clears the way for e-gates access. That is the huge difference it makes. *[Interruption.]* If any Conservative Members doubt that, they should travel across a border today and see the long queues.

On law enforcement, we have better operational working with Europol, and the right hon. Lady is against it. We have information sharing on facial mapping and dealing with criminal records, and she is against it. She is absolutely unserious. She is also against the India deal, which of course does huge things for trade in sectors such as whisky, where their only concern is whether they can produce enough. They have been absolutely clear about supporting the India deal—a deal that the Conservatives tried to do—and she now says that she is against it.

We have the US deal, which saved thousands upon thousands of jobs in car manufacturing and at Jaguar Land Rover. I do not know whether the right hon. Lady had the chance to make that trip to JLR, but she really ought to before she responds like that again. The US deal reduces tariffs on steel, so that our steel can be sold to America, and supports our whisky and gin, and she is against it. She is against every single deal. She is the only ex-Trade Secretary who is against every single deal. These deals have been welcomed broadly because they are good deals. You do not get a great long list of endorsements from all the business associations and companies for no—*[Interruption.]* The Conservatives are so unserious; they are lost in a descent into the abyss. They used to be a proud party of trading agreements, and they have slid off into the abyss. That is where they are.

On fishing, none of the rights negotiated by the Conservatives have been removed. There is no change in access for coastal communities, which is the same as before. There is no reduction in the British quota or increase in the EU quota; they are the same as before. We have reciprocal arrangements, which are the same as before. What is new is having the SPS agreement for the first time, and it is permanent. They were unable to do that. It reopens the EU market for shellfish and makes it much easier to sell British fish to our largest trading partner. That is hugely significant, because 72% of British fish is traded into EU markets, and it is now easier to do that. We are backing that with £360 million through our fishing and coastal grants. The Leader of the Opposition talks about the youth experience scheme. That scheme is capped, it is time-limited, and it is balanced.

In relation to standards, the truth is this: we are currently aligned in our standards, but we do not get the benefit of that. We want to continue to have high standards; that is what the British public want, and it is what this deal delivers. We will have a role in shaping any future rules, and application of them is specifically subject to our constitutional arrangements. We will have a process in this Parliament to apply the rules, but to be clear, we are already applying those rules at the moment—we are just not getting the advantage. This deal strips that away. It is good for our country and good for our economy, and it is a shame that the Leader of the Opposition cannot stand up and support it.

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

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): This deal is good for business and good for Britain. I congratulate the Prime Minister on embracing a good half of the Select Committee's recommendations, which—if I might say so—were agreed on a cross-party basis. While some in this House are proposing trade barriers, the Prime Minister is building trade bridges, and that is in the national interest.

We have a deal, but we do not have a date. The Office for Budget Responsibility cannot score the gains, businesses cannot plan for the benefits, and we cannot suspend customs checks in Northern Ireland until we know when the new SPS checks will come into force. What timetable has the Prime Minister given his negotiators for when that SPS deal will come into effect? Business needs certainty, and for that, we need clarity.

The Prime Minister: First, let me pick up on my right hon. Friend's point about the cross-party support of the Select Committee. There are Conservative Members

who I think are ashamed by the response of the Leader of the Opposition, and know very well that these are good deals that should be supported. A number of her Back-Bench MPs are already coming out and saying that these deals are good and in the national interest. [Hon. Members: "Who?"] You know who they are.

I assure my right hon. Friend that we have moved at pace to get the deals, and our instruction to our teams now is to move at pace to implement them. That is what we will do. We negotiated these deals in a short number of months, and we will keep moving at the same pace.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the appalling situation in Gaza. When he is working with our French and Canadian colleagues to put pressure on Netanyahu, will he consider, with the French, formally recognising the state of Palestine?

Turning to the EU reset deal, the Prime Minister knows that we do not think this deal goes far enough to fix our broken relationship with Europe, but there are many parts of it that we welcome. We have long been arguing for an agrifood deal to help British farmers export to Europe; for a youth mobility scheme to give our young people incredible new opportunities and British businesses, especially in hospitality, a boost; and for closer alliances on defence in the face of Putin's imperialism and Trump's unpredictability. I welcome the progress on those issues, even if there is only very limited progress on things such as youth mobility.

We have all seen the terrible damage caused by the Conservatives' Brexit deal, and hearing the Conservative leader complain today is like listening to a backseat driver who previously crashed the car. Our country has moved on from the divisive Brexit wars of a decade ago, and some Members of this House need to do the same. However, does the Prime Minister accept that this deal must be only the first step, and that we must be far more ambitious in strengthening our economic and security ties with our nearest neighbours? We believe that a bespoke customs union is a key part of that—not turning back to the past, but forming a new partnership that serves our national interest. I know that the Prime Minister once made that a red line, but he will accept that the world has changed since then, so will he open negotiations on a customs union to get a better deal for Britain—a trade deal to dwarf all other trade deals?

The Prime Minister: On the right hon. Gentleman's question about this deal being a first step, it is intended that this is the beginning of a process to complete what we have already agreed. We also intend to have annual summits so that we can take our co-operation and co-ordination further, step by step, and we will do that while keeping to the red lines in our manifesto.

On the question of a customs union, the problem with the right hon. Gentleman's proposal—as I know he knows—is that we have just struck deals with India and the US. If we now undo that good work, we undo all the benefits of those two deals. For JLR and other car manufacturers, this is the here and now of their jobs at the moment. That is why we had our red lines and kept to those red lines, and I am not prepared to rip up the benefits that we have negotiated in those deals.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I begin by thanking the Prime Minister for what he has said about Gaza. The message he is sending to Netanyahu's far-right Government could not be clearer, and it should have the unanimous support of this House. It is essentially, "This must stop."

Turning to the grown-up EU deal, which comes hard on the heels of the two other recent trade agreements, the Government are rightly confident that those deals will be popular and will provide great benefits to our country. As such, I ask the Prime Minister this: why not take this opportunity to fix a glaring hole in our democracy and simply put those agreements to a vote, allowing them to be scrutinised by this place? I can assure him that they will be passed.

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend knows, there is a process for implementing any agreement. All of these agreements will require legislation, and therefore they will go through the House on that basis.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can I just point out to the Prime Minister that nothing can undo the fact that 17.5 million people voted leave? They voted to take back control of our laws and stop paying money to the EU. That was a considerably larger number than the 9.7 million people who voted Labour at the last election, but now the Prime Minister is submitting to EU regulations without any control and starting to pay money back to the European Union—he is giving up control over our laws and restoring payments to the European Union. He will pay a bitter political price for this betrayal.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that we had red lines about not rejoining the EU—no single market, no customs union and no freedom of movement. We were told that it was impossible to negotiate a better deal with the EU with those red lines, but we have just done it. We have also shown that we are outside the EU, because as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, having deals with India and the US is inconsistent with membership of the EU. There could be no better evidence that we are not going back into the EU; nor are these negotiations on that basis. I know that the hon. Gentleman understands that well, so I am surprised at the way in which he has put his question.

As for control of borders, net migration quadrupled after Brexit to nearly a million. That was not controlling our borders; it was a complete lack of control by the Conservative party. On the question of payments, it is important to appreciate that we have achieved unprecedented access to EU markets without the budgetary payments of member states. That is an incredible achievement. The only payment under the SPS agreement is administrative—to support the relevant costs of implementing and administering the scheme. For schemes and payments where it is in our national interest, we will negotiate proportionate contributions, as already happens under the deal negotiated by the Conservatives—for example, in relation to research and development and Horizon. The hon. Gentleman knows all that very well.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Prime Minister on this achievement, on top of two great trade deals. This is important if we are trying to deliver growth in the economy. Could the Prime Minister outline what he thinks the two or three main gains are to boost the economy in short order, so that we can build the public spending that we so badly need?

The Prime Minister: Our approach has been on the question of bringing our bills down, which is why the SPS agreement is so important, and of protecting and driving up jobs, which is why the EU, India and US agreements are all so important. That is particularly the case for car manufacturing, but equally so for pharmaceuticals, which are protected under our agreement. However, there is a bigger picture: these are three individual trade deals, but taken together they show that other countries want to do deals with the UK now in a way that they did not before.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): With youth unemployment higher in Europe—in countries such as France, Spain, Portugal and Sweden—I can see why the EU pushed for a youth mobility scheme: to help get its youth unemployment figures down. Can the Prime Minister tell the House what impact assessment he has done of his youth scheme? What effect will it have on youth unemployment among young Brits, particularly white working-class boys, who suffer the most? Can he also tell the House today what cap he has put on the number of people coming to the UK? If he cannot, this is a bitter betrayal of British youth.

The Prime Minister: The agreement gives young people in the United Kingdom the opportunity to work, to study and to travel in Europe. It will be a capped scheme of limited duration and with visas. This, again, is something that everyone said we could not negotiate, and we have negotiated it. As for the right hon. Lady's question about what we are doing for young people in this country, she should look to the Trailblazer scheme that we set up to help young people back into work.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister join me in inviting Conservative Members to celebrate the restoration of access to our British shellfishers, and the reduction in frictions on the 70% of our British seafood that is exported to the EU? Will he encourage those Conservative Members to get out there and help us to deploy the £360 million of fishing and coastal community funding that we have unlocked?

The Prime Minister: Under the Conservatives' deal, shellfish was locked out, but it can now be sold back into the market, which is hugely important to places such as Cornwall. That is why their response to this is so uncertain and, if I may say so, un-Tory.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): On six separate occasions since the beginning of the year I have asked the Paymaster General about plans for a youth mobility scheme, and every single time he has told me that Labour has no plans. I realise that I was in error and should have asked about a youth experience scheme, but let me ask the Prime Minister now whether he has a timescale for when such a scheme can be put into operation and we can start to see the benefits that Liberal Democrats know it can bring to young people here in the UK and across the EU.

The Prime Minister: We have moved apace to get this far, but we now need to move apace to implement what we agreed yesterday, so we will be doing that, and we will update the House as we do so.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister and his colleagues on their success at the summit. The Government's hard work has paid off: this is a good deal and a good first step. Businesses will benefit from a reduction in red tape, and consumers will see lower bills in the long run. The announcement on youth experience and Erasmus+ will be welcomed by the many young people in my constituency. I also welcome the recognition of the value of touring artists in both the EU and the UK. I realise that the barriers to touring are complex, but will the PM commit himself to keeping up the hard work so we can begin to reduce and break down those barriers?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important point about touring artists. We are absolutely committed to securing a better deal for them, and that will be part of the ongoing work as we move forward from this summit to the next.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I think the Front Benches need to calm the jets a wee bit. This is obviously not a surrender, just as it is obviously no substitute for membership of the European Union; nor, indeed, is it, as the Prime Minister has said repeatedly today, providing "unprecedented access" to the EU market—that is simply absurd.

The deal does provide for co-operation on carbon storage, so will the Prime Minister build on that good work by committing his Government to providing the financial support that is necessary to take forward the Acorn project in the north-east of Scotland?

The Prime Minister: The deal does allow us to move forward on renewables and carbon capture as part of the package around renewables, which is why it is so important across the United Kingdom, but particularly in Scotland because of the potential for job opportunities there, so of course we will press on in that regard. I would gently ask the right hon. Gentleman to consider again why he should not support this deal for the benefit of the whisky sector in Scotland, and given that yesterday Salmon Scotland came out hugely in favour of it. He should stand up and support the work that we are doing.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My constituency is home to the world's oldest biscuit factory: Carr's has been making Table Water crackers, ginger nuts and custard creams for many decades, and in about 15 years' time it will celebrate 200 years in business. Can the Prime Minister say more about the importance of this deal to food and drink businesses such as pladis, which owns and operates the Carr's biscuit factory?

The Prime Minister: For food, for biscuits and all the content covered by the SPS agreement, this deal is a massive step forward. It gets rid of the red tape and

bureaucracy that cost each business thousands upon thousands of pounds. This is good for biscuits, good for business.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): May I have a serious answer to a very narrow and specific question? We know how many fishing rights the Prime Minister was prepared to give away for how many years in order to accede to the EU's demands, but how much UK taxpayers' money is he willing to hand over to the EU in order to sign up to its protectionist demands?

The Prime Minister: I remind the right hon. Lady that nothing that was negotiated on fishing by the previous Government has been given away; quite the contrary. On costs—I gave a full answer earlier—we are not paying into the EU budget in the way that EU members do, and that is why this unprecedented access is so important. In relation to schemes and programmes, yes, we will make a proportionate contribution, on the same basis, with the same principles, that the Conservative party—the then Government—negotiated the current arrangements on Horizon and research and development. It is hard to see why, having negotiated those arrangements, it is now suddenly against them.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): The energy industry is central to our mission for growth, but it is also important to our tackling of the generational challenge that is climate change. This is a sentiment felt in my constituency, which is proud to be a regional hub of carbon capture and hydrogen storage. Will the Prime Minister explain how the deal supports the energy industry so that we can pursue the growth, bring down energy bills and tackle climate change?

The Prime Minister: It does so in two ways. It makes permanent the energy chapter in the current deal, and it goes beyond that to allow us to co-operate and co-ordinate more closely on energy; we have the ability for connection already, but we can now take better advantage of it.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Successive Governments and successive Parliaments have caused unnecessary and at times intolerable damage to our Union. We recognise the reductions in some checks on some issues, but can the Prime Minister explain why, if animals and animal products are now suitable to come to Northern Ireland free of checks, the European Union is still intent on banning the very veterinary medicines that are taken by those animals? If standards are the same in the United Kingdom and the European Union—and this Parliament has already decided that CE markings will be retained—why are products and manufactured goods not part of the arrangement? Will the Prime Minister confirm to this Parliament that it is his intention to rid Northern Ireland of the Windsor framework and to get rid of the barriers within our Union?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the SPS agreement that we have negotiated for the UK as a whole is good for Northern Ireland because it complements the current SPS agreement for Northern Ireland that it comes up against. That will be a huge step forward for Northern Ireland, which I know he cares about, and others care about, and I care about. It is among the advantages of the SPS deal that we have struck.

I do understand the issue of veterinary medicines, and we are working to resolve the problem that the right hon. Gentleman has rightly described. I think we are in a better position to resolve it by co-operating and co-ordinating with the EU, which is what we are doing. On the Windsor framework, it is important that we implement the agreements that we have in place, because the blunt truth is that no one will make further agreements with a country that walks away from agreements that it has already put in place.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): The last Tory Government left the British people at the back of the European queue. That was true for exporters, for farmers and for businesses, but most obviously it was true for my constituents who stood and watched other nations skip through the e-gates at airports while they waited for hours. Given that East Renfrewshire holidaymakers are eager to spend more time at the poolside and less time at passport control, can the Prime Minister tell me when he expects to see the benefits of the arrangements involving the use of e-gates?

The Prime Minister: The arrangement we got to yesterday with the EU has absolute clarity: there is no impediment to e-gates, which means that we can now work with member states to get them in place as quickly as possible. We have already started our work with them to get e-gates through. *[Interruption.]* We have now cleared the barrier and are getting on with it. For many years, we have had queues because of the Conservatives' bad deal—so pipe down.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The most pernicious part of this deal is dynamic alignment, by which we become an automatic rule-taker from the European Union. Labour has been briefing journalists that we have an opt-out from that. I have read the document in detail, and we do not. Besides, the ECJ is the ultimate arbiter in a dispute, so the EU will always win. The British people voted peacefully and democratically to leave the European Union, so why has the Prime Minister surrendered that right and made us a rule-taker from the EU once again?

The Prime Minister: I had forgotten about some of the nonsense that is spouted. On the question of how the rules are made, they will go through a parliamentary process in this House.

Mr Francois: After they have been changed.

The Prime Minister: We are already aligned. We are in alignment; we are just not getting the benefit of it. This deal gives us the benefit, which will be counted in business, jobs and bills. In relation to an independent arbiter, under this agreement there is independent arbitration where there are disputes.

Mr Francois: Subject to the ECJ! *[Interruption.]*

The Prime Minister: They all know this. Every trade deal has an arbitration clause to deal with the settlement of disputes. All trade deals have that, including all the trade deals that the Conservatives negotiated.

[The Prime Minister]

On the question of the ECJ, if an issue of European law needs to be referred by the independent arbitrators to the court, it will give a ruling on the interpretation. It will then pass back to the arbitrators to make the final decision. That is how trade deals work, but I understand the Conservatives' new policy. Their new policy is against any trade deals. That has never been the Conservative party's policy before, but it is good that we have clarity now.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): This deal is very welcome, particularly for my farmers in Morecambe and Lunesdale. When I was a young person, I benefited from a year in New Zealand and a year in Spain. Can the Prime Minister assure me that he will do everything he can to ensure that other young Brits get the same opportunities that I did?

The Prime Minister: I want young people in this country to have the opportunity under the scheme to work, to travel, and to involve themselves in volunteering and other activities in Europe.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Thanks to the appalling deal that the Conservatives did with the EU in 2020, we saw farmers lose 34% of their export market into the European Union. That contributed to a 41% drop in incomes for livestock farmers in my constituency and across the country, so we are encouraged to hear about the access to the European market for our farmers. Can the Prime Minister say more about that and when farmers in Westmorland and beyond might avail themselves of those opportunities?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue, which will be of huge interest to his constituents. If I have got his number right, he said there was a 41% drop in trade because of the deal that the previous Government did for farmers, who they claim to champion. As he will appreciate, this deal ensures that food and agriculture going into the EU will, under the SPS agreement, do so without any red tape or bureaucracy. That will make it much easier for his constituents, and for farmers generally, to trade in the EU market and will bring down their costs, which is hugely important for farmers and his constituents.

On the question of timing, we will do it as quickly as possible. We are moving at pace. I appreciate that for farmers in his constituency and across the country, it is hugely important to undo the damage that the previous Government did.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Prime Minister on this deal. Manchester has a student population of over 100,000, many of whom I represent. They will be pleased to hear, as I am, that the UK and the EU will develop a scheme focused on student exchange, supporting young people to study, volunteer, work or travel across Europe. Does the Prime Minister agree that this deal will provide life-changing experiences for our young people and strengthen our broken relationship with the EU for generations to come?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that I want those experiences and opportunities for our young people, and I think the country wants those experiences for young people. I am not even sure the Conservatives are genuinely against better opportunities for our young people to work and travel in Europe.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): In Boston and Skegness, my fishermen are furious that the Prime Minister has surrendered the fishing industry. My constituents are furious that he has surrendered on freedom of movement and on rule taking under the ECJ. But there is good news: does Prime Minister accept that he has also surrendered the jobs of many of his Back-Bench MPs to Reform at the next general election?

The Prime Minister: I will happily explain to the hon. Gentleman's constituents the huge benefits of these deals, measured in jobs that will be saved, jobs that can now thrive, and bills that will come down. It is really important for our economy that we have these deals. That is in the interests of his constituents, and it is in the interests of the whole country.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): When it comes to evaluating the merits of the deal, who would the Prime Minister suggest my Livingston constituents listen to? Should it be the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, NFU Scotland or Salmon Scotland, all of which have welcomed the deal, or should they listen to John Swinney, who is lining up with the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) in a desperate, misguided attempt to create a constitutional grievance over a deal that the Deputy First Minister of Scotland has called "important progress"?

The Prime Minister: I was surprised to see the SNP First Minister line up with Reform and the Leader of the Opposition against a deal that has been welcomed by the likes of Salmon Scotland, a huge exporter from Scotland, because they know it is good for their business. That is a pretty small and miserable club for the SNP to be in.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If the Prime Minister is right that our food standards are already in alignment with those of the EU, why could we not have negotiated the deal on the basis of mutual recognition of those standards, as other countries have done, rather than open ourselves up to having to alter our standards in line with whatever the EU may decide to change in the future?

The Prime Minister: That is a very good question that the right hon. Gentleman should put to Boris Johnson.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I absolutely welcome this deal, which puts us on the map as an outward-looking nation again. Above all, the benefits that it brings young people in Edinburgh South West are absolutely worth noting. We know that the deal will bring lower bills for people shopping for food and buying energy across the UK. Based on that, can the Prime Minister understand why the SNP is uniting with Reform and the Conservatives to take an isolationist approach on international trade?

The Prime Minister: I do think it is really hard to fathom, and I hope that SNP Members reconsider their position, because lining up against better trade and better business opportunities for Scotland is not in Scotland's interest. To be lining up with Reform is not a place that I would expect them to be, but that is where they are.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I admire the Prime Minister's faith that this deal may well end the tired arguments of the past, but judging on today's display, I think we need to end the Conservatives—the tired party of the past to my right—before that is the case. A generation of young people have missed out on the opportunities offered by the Erasmus scheme due to the disastrous Brexit deal negotiated by the Conservatives. We are encouraged by the words in the deal about the Erasmus scheme, but what is the timescale for offering that opportunity to our young people once again?

The Prime Minister: I do not think the Conservatives need any help in retiring from the national stage—they are well on their way. It is obviously important that we take a balanced approach in negotiating access to Erasmus. As with other aspects, we want to move ahead on what we have negotiated as quickly as we can. We have moved at speed to get this far, and the instruction from both sides is to move at speed on the other elements.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the Leader of the Opposition when she says that what matters is whether the terms of the deal have improved for the country, and that detail matters. Some 16,000 firms in this country stopped exporting to Europe under the deal that her Government negotiated and exports dropped by a third, because the price of her Brexit was paperwork. Under this deal, the Government are getting rid of the much-hated export health certificate, which is worth an extra £200 on every single consignment. This Government's deal will help business; her Government's deal hurt business. Can the Prime Minister confirm that as part of reviewing the charges at the border, he will also look at that the Tories' hated border operating model, so we can really get business moving?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend puts her finger on it. Under the Tories' deal, there was huge bureaucracy, huge red tape, huge cost to businesses. The reason businesses have come out to support this deal in huge numbers is because they know it will make life better for them, improve their business opportunities, and drive our economy forward.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I asked the Prime Minister on 7 May to reassure the House that he would not hand over hard-won controls over UK fishing waters in backroom deals with Brussels. In reply, he said:

"a better deal…can be had."—[*Official Report*, 7 May 2025; Vol. 766, c. 679.]

Does he agree that EU access to our waters until 2038 is only a better deal for Brussels and nothing short of a betrayal of British coastal communities?

The Prime Minister: The deal we have struck makes it easier for fishermen to sell into the EU market. Some 72% of their fish is sold into the EU market. Until we came along with the SPS agreement, which is permanent, they had to put up with the red tape, bureaucracy and added cost that the Tory party negotiated with disastrous consequences. This makes it easier for them to sell their fish into the market, which is hugely important to them. On shellfish exports, which were banned by the Tory party, the door is open again and they can sell into the market—hugely important.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I put on the record my thanks to the Prime Minister and the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office for this landmark first step in the Government's reset with the European Union. As the Government remove barriers to trade, what further information can the Prime Minister share with the House about how the deal will bring down the cost of living, including for my Bolton West constituents?

The Prime Minister: I point my hon. Friend to the endorsements from the very many supermarkets yesterday who made precisely that point. It will allow them now to lower the price of goods and food on their shelves. That is good for them and their businesses, it is good for working people, and it massively helps with the cost of living.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): These incremental improvements are welcome as we begin to move on from some of the illusions of Brexit, although we had all this and far, far more 10 years ago. The Prime Minister once argued that

"we should retain the benefits of the single market".—[*Official Report*, 1 May 2017; Vol. 630, c. 879.]

Given his recent tendency to dismiss the views of others, what would he say to his younger self?

The Prime Minister: I think last week I was overly rude and I apologise. I do respect the right hon. Member, and she makes a serious point. We are now outside the EU. We had red lines in our manifesto on the single market. We have kept to those red lines and delivered a very good deal.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on securing this deal. Does he agree with me that the attitude displayed by the Conservatives betrays a fundamental dislike and mistrust of all things European, which makes them totally inadequate to accept any sort of deal whatever with the EU? Can he confirm that no matter where an international trade deal is done, whether through World Trade Organisation rules or with Europe, there is always an arbitration system?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I do not think the Conservatives are just against all things European, because they say they are against the India deal as well. That is a deal they tried for eight long years to negotiate. It is deeply embarrassing for them to say that that was what they were trying to negotiate and now they are against it. They are against the deal with the US, which they said they wanted to negotiate, which saves thousands upon thousands of jobs. Go to Jaguar Land Rover and tell those workers that you are going to reverse the deal, and look at the expressions on their faces. It is further evidence of the

[The Prime Minister]

decline of the Tory party, away from free trade. I never thought I would see that, but we are seeing that now under this Leader of the Opposition. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about arbitration clauses: they are there in every trade deal that has ever been struck.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I do not want to be a dog in the manger, but the Prime Minister's statement appears to be very strong on self-congratulation and very short on detail. I know he does not like answering detailed questions, but the response he gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) was quite simply unacceptable. When will this deal be signed off in a form that this House will be able to debate properly and vote on?

The Prime Minister: The detail of the agreement we reached yesterday was set out in a document which we released during the course of yesterday. If the right hon. Gentleman has not had the chance to see that, I will make sure that he does. On the detailed text that follows, obviously that needs to be drafted in legal form so that everybody can see it, of course, and we can debate and scrutinise it. None of this can go through without legislation, so he will have that opportunity. It is quite right that he presses for it.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): The new UK-EU agreement is a welcome and pragmatic step towards rebuilding a strong trading relationship with our closest economic partner:

"this deal will help reduce costs, cut red tape, and make it easier for Scottish businesses to compete and grow across European markets."

Those are not my words, but the words of the chief executive of the Scottish chambers of commerce. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that when Labour negotiates, businesses and customers in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire South benefit?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are reasons why the Scottish chambers of commerce is coming out in support of the deal. It recognises the huge benefits. It is very important that we do everything we can for working people and businesses in Scotland. That is what we are delivering.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): On behalf of the Green party, I broadly welcome the progress made at the summit yesterday. It is not quite the step change we need, but it is a step forward towards the closest possible relationship with our closest neighbours that we continue to champion. I would gently point out that it is hardly unprecedented, because, of course, up until we left the EU we had a much better relationship. Given that free movement of people, in addition to goods, services and capital, is such an important component of growth and building good relationships, why is the Prime Minister being so timid on the youth mobility scheme, given the huge benefits it would offer to our young people and our country as a whole?

The Prime Minister: We had a clear red line in our manifesto on freedom of movement. We did that because we had a referendum, and at the heart of that referendum, or one of the key issues, was freedom of movement. Everybody made their case and the country voted to leave. We respect that and that is why we put the red line in. What we have now negotiated is a scheme that does not cross our red lines, but is good for young people both here and in Europe.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I would like to turn to the co-operation aspect of the agreement, on which I congratulate the Prime Minister. When I was an international liaison prosecutor, my colleagues and I in the Crown Prosecution Service, Eurojust and Europol were relieved when the trade and co-operation agreement was finally agreed. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that this new deal enhances and improves our ability to tackle cross-border serious and organised crime, and to keep the people of the UK safe?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her previous work. One of the important things I was able to do when I was chief prosecutor was to play a part in Eurojust. Before we left the EU, we could play our full part in Eurojust. That meant we shared evidence, strategy, arrest arrangements and issues about where a case would be prosecuted. We want to ensure that we improve law enforcement by making sure that, wherever we can, we can co-operate better with Europe. That was not possible under the deal that the Conservative party negotiated. I want to make sure that we have better co-operation on criminal justice issues.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The previous deal done by the Conservatives tied up many businesses in red tape, so I warmly welcome the progress on SPS. But advanced manufacturers in my constituency are part of integrated supply chains with the EU and they are still tied up in red tape. In light of the further summits that will be held, will the Prime Minister outline what the Government will do to reduce that red tape and allow them to grow jobs in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman. On SPS, we have taken that step—the red tape goes—but we do want to reduce trade barriers wherever we can, both with the EU and with anywhere else, frankly. At a time when we are moving into a new era on trade and the economy—we certainly are—we need to reduce trade barriers across the country for the reasons we set out.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his work on this deal, which takes important steps in resetting our relationship with the EU. Beyond the lowering of trade barriers, the prospect of a youth experience scheme will excite many of my younger constituents. Does the Prime Minister agree that far from being a concession, a youth experience scheme, mirroring agreements that we already have with countries like Australia and New Zealand, would create fulfilling cultural opportunities for young people across the country?

The Prime Minister: I agree. I would remind the House that we have agreements in place with a number of other countries, some of which were actually negotiated by the Conservatives. I find it hard to believe that

anybody in this House genuinely wants to make it harder for our young people to work, study and travel in Europe.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): We need 15 billion barrels of oil and gas between now and 2050; we are currently expected to produce just 4 billion. New licences would support tens of thousands of jobs in this country and tens of billions in tax revenue. Will the Prime Minister assure the House that the agreement on alignment on climate policies will not stand in the way of common-sense restoration of new licences in the North sea, so that we can produce the oil and gas we must consume in this country?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear about honouring new licences, and there is nothing in this deal that cuts across what we have said previously on that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): A trade deal with the world's fastest-growing economy, which the Tories failed to achieve; a trade deal with the world's richest economy, which they also failed to achieve; and a trade deal with the world's biggest trading bloc, which the Tories and Reform would tear up, despite the enormous benefits for British businesses, consumers and tourists—does the Prime Minister agree that all that, plus financial stability, investment in key public services and our national security and infrastructure, makes the UK the best place to start and grow a business in the world? Would he further agree that given our fantastic quality of living, our great universities and our skilled and passionate people, the north-east should be the destination of choice for such investment?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that the three trade deals taken together do indicate that other countries want to negotiate and deal with the UK because they can see the path that we are on. That is good and it should be welcomed, because there are huge benefits. Of course, the north-east and my hon. Friend's constituents should benefit under all three of those deals.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The people of Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union in 2016, and overwhelmingly support rejoining it today—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps hon. Members might want to listen. That fact has been continuously ignored by successive UK Governments. The limited measures this Government have announced do not come anywhere near to repairing the hammer blow that Brexit will continue to inflict on our public finances. Indeed, the UK Government's own figures show that the cost of Brexit is 20 times greater, or 4% of GDP, compared with this deal. Does the Prime Minister recognise that by continuing to pursue this disastrous Brexit policy, he is demonstrating that Westminster Governments will never work in the interests of Scotland?

The Prime Minister: I find it impossible to follow the hon. Gentleman's reasoning. He thinks we should be in the EU—that was voted on, but he is entitled to his position. However, he is also against a closer relationship. I do not understand why the SNP is against this deal. This is a closer relationship. There is a complete contradiction in the argument that he is making, which is completely out of kilter with Scottish businesses, which are welcoming what we achieved yesterday. On behalf of Scotland, the SNP should be welcoming it.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on securing this sensible, pragmatic deal, which demonstrates that we can respect the result of the 2016 referendum without settling for a bodged Boris Brexit. Does the Prime Minister agree that if the Conservatives and Reform want to rip up this deal, they should have to explain to my constituents why they should pay higher prices for food and energy?

The Prime Minister: I completely agree—the Conservatives and Reform should go around the country and explain to our constituents why they should pay higher prices. I think they would get a pretty universal response.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Our fishermen had been promised, and the EU had agreed, that annual access agreements would be reverted to from 2026, but, seemingly at the 11th hour, the Prime Minister abandoned our fishing communities, our fishing fleets and control of our seas by handing not a three, four or even five-year access agreement, but a 12-year multi-annual agreement to the EU. He sold out our fishermen to meet his self-imposed deadline for announcing the agreement and has shown that he will not stand strong for UK fishermen. Can he confirm that Parliament will have the final say on the fisheries deal, and that it will not be ratified elsewhere by unelected officials in Whitehall or Brussels?

The Prime Minister: The simple fact of the matter is that, under the agreement the Conservatives struck, it was much more difficult for fishermen to sell into the European market. We are making it much easier—it is 72% of their stock. Shellfish can be sold back into that market again, and we have set up a fund for our fishing communities. The alternative, which was to come off the current agreement and then negotiate every year with no certainty at all, would not be good for anyone.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on this deal, which will benefit so many of my constituents; it is exactly what businesses in my constituency asked for when they sent me to Parliament. The youth mobility scheme will benefit local farmers, but I want to know how young people in my area will also benefit from it opening up experiences and opportunities that they would never have otherwise dreamed of. The scheme must not just benefit middle-class kids on their gap year.

The Prime Minister: I agree wholeheartedly. It has to benefit all our young people, whether through work, travel or study, and we will make sure that it does. We want to provide young people with this important opportunity and help them to take advantage of it.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): How will Britain's head start in gene-editing technology be impacted by the rule-taking reversionary measures that the Prime Minister has announced?

The Prime Minister: We are discussing and engaging on that issue, which, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows, is important.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Morrisons has said that the deal will

"ease…pressure on food prices",

Asda has said it

"has the potential to significantly reduce costs and bureaucracy",

and the British Retail Consortium has said it will help to "keep costs down". Does the Prime Minister agree with their assessment that this deal will help families in Bracknell Forest and across the country facing a high cost of living?

The Prime Minister: The deal will massively help my hon. Friend's constituents because it will bring costs down. Morrisons is not the only supermarket that has come out in support of the agreement—pretty well all the supermarkets have come out openly supporting it. There is a reason for that: it will bring the prices on their shelves down, and that is good for working people across the country.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the SPS part of yesterday's agreement, as I am sure will all the farmers of South Devon and those exporting fish and shellfish from Brixham. The Prime Minister may not know the answer to my question, but perhaps one of his Ministers will. Will bivalve molluscs that are fished in grade B waters, which are very important for one of my major exporters, be included in the SPS agreement?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. I am not going to pretend that I have the answer in my back pocket, but I will make sure that she gets a proper, detailed answer to her question, which she can then make use of with her constituents.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is brilliant that the Brexit logjam that has cast a long shadow over this House for so many years has been smashed by this Prime Minister. Could he indicate when we might hear a bit more about the youth experience scheme that has been so yearned for and so welcomed by the universities and the English language teaching sector, and also by my staff, team and son, who were born too late to have a say in any of the mess that the Tories left behind?

The Prime Minister: We will develop the plan on the youth experience scheme with our partners. We have instructed our teams to move on all fronts as quickly as we can.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): The Prime Minister states that a new security and defence partnership will pave the way for British defence firms to access the new European defence fund, which I am sure we can collectively agree will allow our continent to defend ourselves against Putin's autocratic regime. How long does the Prime Minister think access to this fund will take—weeks, months or years?

The Prime Minister: It will certainly not take years. The whole point of the fund is to be part of the collective response to the challenge in Ukraine. The fund was one of the initiatives that came out of the work that we were doing with the coalition of the willing. Everybody involved wants to move at speed, and that is the basis on which we have approached this matter. What yesterday does is knock out one of the gateway issues that we were otherwise facing, so that we can work with others to access the fund, but we will work as quickly as we can, because the situation in Ukraine is extremely serious and will need to be addressed as soon as possible.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Prime Minister for negotiating this deal, which is good for the UK and, according to umpteen businesses, good for Scotland. As someone who benefited from a year in France many years ago, I welcome the work that is under way to give young people in my constituency access to a youth experience scheme, but will the Prime Minister work at pace to ensure that our sportspeople and musicians can showcase their talents and are no longer subjected to the Tories' botched Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. We will work as quickly as we can on that issue, because, whichever way people voted, they did not vote to stop creatives and sportspeople crossing national boundaries to showcase their talent—in whatever way that may be—so we do need to resolve it.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): The impact of the Creative Europe programme between 2014 and 2019 on the UK arts, film, publishing and other creative sectors was hugely beneficial, and not just for practitioners and organisations but for the country as a whole. Will the Government look into the possibility of participating again in this creative programme to further boost the economic potential of our creative industries?

The Prime Minister: We set out yesterday the areas where we had reached agreement. We will now have annual summits, but we will approach that matter on a value-for-money basis.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Paymaster General on this deal, which makes the people of York Outer better off, and, in particular, on the agreement on e-gates, which the Conservative party could never achieve. Will the Government prioritise e-gates talks with member states in popular holiday destinations such as Spain, Portugal and France to ease summer travel chaos for sun-seeking Brits?

The Prime Minister: We already are doing so, because it is important that we now get on with this as quickly as we can.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Ursula von der Leyen yesterday said that a second step of further negotiations is required before British firms would be eligible to compete for joint procurements aligned to the Security Action for Europe fund. The Prime Minister spoke warmly about the positive industry response, but the chief executive officer of the ADS Group has said that it was "somewhat underwhelming" in its lack of

detail. Therefore, what is the detail on which further negotiation is required before British firms even have the possibility of bidding for access to the SAFE fund, let alone creating thousands of jobs?

The Prime Minister: Let me answer the hon. Member directly. The first thing was to get through the first gateway. As this is a fund that is being set up at the moment, the second gateway is to negotiate our way into the scheme. That was always the two-stage process. The scheme itself has not been in existence for very long and is being developed, and so, along with our European partners, we will move that on at pace.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Although residents and businesses in York will welcome this deal, our university sector is our second largest export. Will the Prime Minister say more about how this deal will benefit higher education, not least in our research base but also in being able to attract the very best into our country?

The Prime Minister: We do want to attract the very best into our country and we will continue our efforts to do so. The measures that we set out yesterday will now help in that effort. They are not the total sum of our effort, but they will help in that effort.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): After every EU summit, the people of Northern Ireland have been subjected to spin, broken promises and, in some cases, downright lies. The Prime Minister today said that the new SPS agreement will mean no more lorry drivers queuing for 16 hours at the border with rotting food in the back and no more needless checks that made the borders trade so difficult, even within our own market between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. If what he is saying is true, can he tell me today that the £140 million border post being built in my constituency, spread over 10 acres and designed to carry out the very checks that he says are now disappearing, is no longer necessary and that its construction can now stop?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Member raises an important point. What we want to do with this agreement is ensure that we do remove unnecessary checks wherever they are, but we particularly had in focus the situation between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I want to ensure that we have real improvement in the situation on the ground and do not go to unnecessary expense. I genuinely believe that, for Northern Ireland, this was a big step in the right direction yesterday. We will continue to ensure that we make progress.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Unlike the SNP's singular failure wholeheartedly to support our defence sector, this deal is good for Scottish defence firms. Does the Prime Minister agree that Scottish firms gaining access to the €150 billion European defence fund is a huge opportunity for jobs and manufacturers in Scotland and in my constituency of Central Ayrshire?

The Prime Minister: Yes, absolutely. Getting that gateway open is hugely important for Scottish defence and security businesses. Those businesses are world leading, and so it would be a welcome opportunity for them.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Labour Government cannot answer how much the Chagos deal cost. The Labour Government cannot answer how much NHS England has cost. Can the Prime Minister tell us how much this reset deal will cost, and that there will be no further expenditure to the EU?

The Prime Minister: I have set out how the costs will be approached, but what we are not going to do is make those budgetary payments that other EU members make. We will look at proportionate payments into schemes, as is currently the case in relation to Horizon, which was negotiated by the previous Government. But the cost of the Tories to the country has been absolutely incalculable.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on securing a landmark deal with our European neighbours? The Prime Minister will know that my constituency has been a leading light in the creative industries for a long time—and not just because my predecessor was a double Oscar-winning actress. Local actors have been coming to me expressing their frustration about securing work in Europe because of delays with work visas, and also because of the limit of 90 days for UK nationals. Can the Prime Minister reassure my local performers that they will not just be waiting in the wings while the rest of Europe takes centre stage?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, as it is of great importance to her constituents and to many others. Our creative sector is incredible. Whether people voted leave or remain, I honestly do not think that anybody really wanted or intended that our creatives should have difficulties getting on with their trade, and we will work at pace to try to resolve that.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): British people having access to e-gates is welcome. As the Minister for EU Relations told the BBC, it should ensure more time for UK residents when abroad. But my constituents have a better suggestion for achieving that. Does the Prime Minister agree that we should be developing a reciprocal travel arrangement, so that Brits can return to six-month visits to the continent, as EU visitors can here, doing away with the confusing 90-day and 180-day rule.

The Prime Minister: The e-gates will make a huge difference and will probably be the first impact that many people see. Hopefully, we will get those in train just as quickly as we can. We are also looking at other measures.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and this deal. Perhaps most important to people in Gateshead will be the downward pressure on food prices, so I ask the Prime Minister, when it comes to food prices and to this deal, would he rather listen to Asda, Morrisons and M&S, or to the Leader of the Opposition, who does not think that sandwiches are food?

The Prime Minister: I listen to businesses on this, and they are universal in what they say about food. That is why I am surprised that the Conservative party is against a deal that brings down the price of food.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Dynamic alignment undermines sovereignty, and to undermine sovereignty does not just undermine the central principle that 17.4 million people voted for; it also undermines everybody who respects the democratic outcome of that referendum. Therefore, if the Prime Minister will not think again about this Brexit betrayal, will he, at the very least, reinstate the European Scrutiny Committee of this House, so that this House can scrutinise every single rule that we now have to take rather than make?

The Prime Minister: I have set out the position in relation to how the rules will be applied. We are already aligned, but we do not get the benefit. This deal allows us to get the benefit, which is why businesses are so in favour of it. Every trade deal requires agreement on both sides as to the way forward, and this agreement is no different.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on this common-sense reset. Does he agree that the Conservatives slammed the door of opportunity in the faces of younger generations with their useless Brexit deal, and that this youth mobility scheme opens up life-changing experiences for young people from Southampton? Will he also say how schools and universities can have input into shaping the best scheme possible?

The Prime Minister: The scheme does provide great opportunity, and we will make sure that all those interested are able to help us in the design of it.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I want to re-emphasise the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade). A constituent of mine runs an agricultural consultancy. This requires travel to the EU, which is especially frequent during seasonal peaks, and he has been hampered by the rolling 90-day rule. The issue is that EU citizens can come to the UK for 180 days in 365. We are asking for an equalisation of that scheme. Is the Prime Minister going to look at that?

The Prime Minister: We are looking at a range of issues. I completely understand the point the hon. Lady makes and the frustration that the situation causes for her constituents and for people across the country.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): I spent this morning with British metal manufacturing businesses, which are so important in my constituency and across the west midlands. Like so many other sectors, this industry welcomes the deal, particularly the emissions trading scheme linkage and the steel safeguarding that will boost jobs, boost trade and cut red tape. Does the Prime Minister agree that this deal firmly backs UK manufacturing and metal industries, and will he continue to bang the drum for them here and around the world?

The Prime Minister: I firmly agree with my hon. Friend, and what she says applies not just to this deal but to the India and US deals. We have made real progress when it comes to our exports.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Given that my constituents overwhelmingly voted to take back control of their borders in the 2016 referendum, what safeguards is the Prime Minister putting in place to ensure that his youth experience scheme is not open borders by the back door, which would be seen by my constituents as yet another Brexit betrayal?

The Prime Minister: The scheme will be time-limited, visa-led and capped. It is a good scheme for young people in this country to go to Europe, and it will have those features, which we negotiated because we had a red line about freedom of movement.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Calder Valley is home to many of the small and medium-sized enterprises that simply stopped trading with Europe because of the disastrous deal agreed by the Conservatives. Can the Prime Minister assure me that he will not stop here with this deal, but will continue to work to open more of our borders to more of our businesses?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. The Federation of Small Businesses has come out strongly in favour of this deal because it knows the impact it will have on small and medium-sized businesses.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for the statement. The deal is certainly a step in the right direction, and having closer ties with Europe has got to be good for businesses and farming. Specifically on medicine supplies and shortages, I have heard from a worryingly large number of people in Winchester with chronic health conditions who require vital daily medication to manage their condition—anti-seizure medication or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder medication, for example. Will the Prime Minister commit to removing medicine supply barriers with Europe and to delivering an agreement with the European Medicines Agency to ensure that we can free up such supplies?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member will have seen how far we got yesterday, but we obviously want to move forward from there. We will look at a range of other issues. I cannot make any promise or commitment here—it would be wrong to do so—but where there are frustrations, we want to unblock them. Common sense drives this.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): We have deals with India and with the United States, and now this Government are repairing our relationship with Europe—something that I and thousands of my constituents welcome. I congratulate the Prime Minister and ask him to go as fast as possible to secure the finalisation of the scheme that will allow our young people to live, work and study in Europe.

The Prime Minister: I endorse my hon. Friend's comments, and we will go at pace to move on the commitments we made yesterday.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Some of the free trade deals we already have require us to have autonomy over our regulation. The Prime Minister has said today that we will not be a rule taker because we can discuss the rules in this place, but discussion is not the same as control. Can he confirm that he has not ceded control to disapply or diverge from regulations in Europe?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will see from the agreement text that it is subject to our constitutional arrangements, and in the application of the rules, it is the application in this House that matters.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Can I put on record my thanks to everyone who has worked so hard to get this hat-trick of deals across the line? The EU is Wales's biggest trading partner, with over 90% of Welsh lamb that is exported going to the EU. Does the Prime Minister agree that this landmark agreement is brilliant news for food and drink producers in Wales, not least mussel producers and farmers in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: This deal will make a huge difference to my hon. Friend's constituents, and she is absolutely right to champion their interests. It will hugely help their businesses, trade and local economy.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): In an earlier answer, the Prime Minister said that he would continue with the implementation of the Windsor framework. That will see more bureaucracy and red tape introduced between Great Britain and Northern Ireland before an SPS deal can be delivered. If the Prime Minister's partnership with the EU is so positive, does he not agree that it would be better to pause the implementation of any more bureaucracy and red tape that would add costs to Northern Ireland businesses before his deal can be achieved?

The Prime Minister: I do not think we should pause the implementation of deals that we have already got, but I do agree with the underlying sentiment that we should be doing everything we can through this deal and in further steps to ensure that trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland is the same as across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): As the proud owner of two English bulldogs, I welcome the reintroduction of pet passports. Not only will this make it easier for us to travel to Europe with Clive and Bertie, but it will bring down the cost massively. That is not the only part of the deal that will bring bills down for British consumers. Can the Prime Minister tell us how my constituents will benefit from this deal?

The Prime Minister: An hour and a half, and we have only just got to pet passports—but I am really glad my hon. Friend mentions it. The deal contains an advance for pet passports, along with the many other advances that will progress as soon as possible. I assume that the Conservatives are against pet passport progress as well.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Will the Prime Minister admit to the British people that this deal takes the country back under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, which is now able once again to overrule our courts, meaning we are surrendering our judicial sovereignty?

The Prime Minister: No, that is just wrong under the agreement. There is an independent arbitration—

Mr Francois: Subject to the Court!

The Prime Minister: It is the same as the Windsor framework, which the right hon. Gentleman's party negotiated. This is an important point: it is an independent arbitration process. There is the same process for pretty well every trade deal that is struck, not just by us and other countries but by most other countries. In this particular case, if the independent arbitration needs reference on a point of law, it is referred to the ECJ, which then refers it back to the independent arbitrator to make a decision. That is how it operates.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and I warmly welcome this landmark deal with the European Union. I welcome in particular the commitment to work towards a youth experience scheme to once again allow our young people to live, work and travel freely in Europe. Does the Prime Minister agree that although this Labour Government are taking important steps to open up opportunities that will shape our young people's future, the Conservatives are dangerously stuck in the past?

The Prime Minister: I do agree. I think they are lost in the past—actually I think they are lost all together now, on a decline into oblivion. As I say, a once great party that used to support trade deals is now against every single trade deal. It is a pretty extraordinary turnaround.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Paragraph 27 of the common understanding published yesterday requires the "immediate application" of European Union rules relating to food, sanitary and phytosanitary safety. Can the Prime Minister set out what measures would be open to the EU should this Parliament choose not to adopt those new European Union laws?

The Prime Minister: We are not making an argument for lowering our standards, and we are proud to have high standards at the moment. We want to maintain those high standards, but there will of course be provision, should the occasion arise, for dealing with any conflicts that may emerge.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): The Business and Trade Committee visited Brussels earlier this year, where we saw at first hand how the previous Conservative Government damaged our relationships with our close trading partners—and British businesses paid the price. Can the Prime Minister confirm that this Labour Government are putting our national interest first in getting the deals, showing that Labour is the party of business?

The Prime Minister: I can. We have approached this on a serious, pragmatic basis. We have got a deal with 10 strands that massively takes our country forward. That is on top of the India deal and the US deal. The Conservatives spent many years failing to get these deals; that is the truth of it.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): In the UK-EU summit, co-operation on access to medicines was noticeably scarce. That is an area where we are falling massively behind compared with our European allies. Can the Prime Minister ask the Minister for Secondary Care to

[Clive Jones]

meet me, so that we can discuss why only 25% of new cancer medicines approved by the EU are fully available in the UK?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member raises an important point, and we will continue our discussions with others to try to resolve some of the frustrations—to which, common sense would suggest, we can find a better solution, and we will.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Sunderland is proud to be a city of makers, from cars to music. Without reversing Brexit, those makers need access to Europe, whether that is exporters such as Nissan, which need the certainty to export, or musicians, who need the freedom to tour. Can the Prime Minister outline how this deal will support good jobs in Sunderland, whether they be in the motor or the music industry?

The Prime Minister: Let me rest on my hon. Friend's first example, which was of cars. The India deal, which massively slashed the tariff on cars, is good for car manufacturing and good for car exports, and the deal with the US saves thousands upon thousands of jobs in the car industry, which is why it should be welcomed.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Many will be concerned that the Prime Minister's EU deal does not cover the UK's participation in future EU research programmes. How will the Prime Minister ensure that we can participate in future EU research programmes once Horizon finishes?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Member knows, we are committed to Horizon. We will retain that commitment to research, because it is so important for our national interest.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): It never ceases to surprise me how little the Opposition understand about making trade deals. Perhaps that is why they never made a good one. We do not need to explain that to the 19,000 small and medium-sized enterprises in my constituency; they have been choked by the red tape agreed by the Conservatives. Those businesses agree with the Federation of Small Businesses that this deal will finally reduce and get rid of the bottleneck. Can the Prime Minister tell the businesses in my constituency and across the country when we can finally be relieved of the Tories' red tape that is crushing our small businesses?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the red tape having such an impact on our small businesses. That is why I am pleased that we have made progress. We now need to make further progress as quickly as we can to ensure that businesses thrive in the markets in which they want to trade.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I note the careful wording of the Prime Minister's statement—it talks about Britain being "back on the world stage", and delivering for Britain. That is not the United Kingdom. I note that his SPS deal is for Great Britain. That, of course, is because Northern Ireland has already been captured by the EU and is subject to its laws and its customs code. That is why the Irish sea border remains. As for the SPS deal as it applies to Northern Ireland, is it correct that customs declarations and customs checks will still continue on goods from GB to Northern Ireland, even though they might be SPS goods? Those checks will still operate.

The Prime Minister: Yesterday was a step forward in that regard. The deal allows us to reduce frustrations and barriers, which nobody wants to see. I can assure the hon. and learned Member that I genuinely want us to get into the best position we can on Northern Ireland. It mattered to me in the negotiations, and it is one of the principles that we took into them. We will continue with that work, because I know how much it matters.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I suspect that even if there was a barrel of salt herring in it for every Opposition Member, this fishing deal would still not be salty enough for them. In fact, it is a sweet deal for prawn fishermen and shellfish fishermen in Na h-Eileanan an Iar, for salmon producers and for crofters, although not for their lambs. Is not the real betrayal of fishing communities the fact—this is the challenge for Reform—that 80% of England's fishing quota is in the hands of foreign companies or the super-rich? The challenge for the SNP is that 45% of Scotland's quota is in the hands of a few companies. The challenge for us is to unwind that privatisation of the ocean and make sure that fishing communities across the UK benefit.

The Prime Minister: That is why it is so important that we are putting the money—more than £300 million—into working with those communities to take advantage of the deal that we struck yesterday.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): We heard from Ministers over the weekend that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. The Prime Minister said in his statement that the deal paves the way for access to the €150 billion defence industrial programme, SAFE—Security Action for Europe. If everything has been agreed, why does the security and defence partnership not include access to the SAFE industrial programme now?

The Prime Minister: That is because the programme itself is being developed at speed. It was only announced the other week. It was announced in response to, and as part of, the work we are doing with the coalition of the willing. Knocking out the first gateway was important. We will now work with the EU to ensure that we can access that fund as quickly as possible. It is not a long-existing fund that has been in place for years; it is developing at the moment in response to the situation in Ukraine. I think the hon. Member knows that.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): The response to today's deal has been striking. We need to drive down the cost of food for our constituents, and retailers are lining up to say that the deal will have that impact, yet the Tories and Reform would like to put those costs back on to my constituents. At a time when we should support our farmers and food producers, we are removing barriers and red tape, yet Opposition parties would like to bring those barriers back. My constituents voted for

change because they were fed up with narrow ideological interests holding our country back. Does this deal not show why my constituents were so right to do so?

The Prime Minister: The principles are: bills down and jobs up, and that is exactly what this deal delivers.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Prime Minister has spent the past hour and a half indicating the benefits that he sees from the deal. Does he recognise that a potentially toxic side effect of the deal is that some on the left of UK politics will see this as the first step towards rowing back on what the people voted for nine years ago, while those on the right of UK politics will see a determination to stop them? Rather than the deal bringing people together, it could therefore cause toxic division.

The Prime Minister: We have taken a pragmatic, common-sense approach, with an absolute focus on reducing bills—that is hugely important to people, particularly in a cost of living crisis—and driving up jobs in our economy. Those are the principles that have driven this. I recognise that those at the extremes, on whichever side people want to say that they are on, will never be satisfied, but the country is fed up with nine years-worth of continued discussion, debate and toxic divide. It is time to move on from that and to look forward, not backward, and this deal will help us do that.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The truth is that this deal with the EU is good for my constituents in Fife, good for Scotland, and good for the UK. Does the Prime Minister agree that the SNP is tying itself up in knots over this deal? While the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) and the Scottish First Minister are desperate to talk it down, the Deputy First Minister was in Downing Street last night saying how wonderful it is, and she is right.

The Prime Minister: I learned this morning that the Deputy First Minister was in the garden at Downing Street last night. She was with businesses for a business reception. It was buzzing, because they were celebrating the deal. It was good to have her there. I would like to see other SNP Members joining her, because she has the right judgment on this one.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Fishermen in my constituency were let down by the Conservatives and their Brexit friends, and they now feel very disappointed by the news about EU vessel access within the six to 12-mile zone. Both before and since Brexit, we have retained regulatory autonomy in that zone. Will the Prime Minister ensure that we exercise our right to control the access of vessels in that area, and have control of grandfather rights, kilowatt effort and fishing methods, as well as other regulatory controls, to ensure that the area is properly regulated?

The Prime Minister: The arrangements are the same as those currently in place, and they are reciprocal, which is really important. What will be of huge benefit to the hon. Member's constituents will be the reduction in red tape and bureaucracy for them when selling stock to the EU market, which is where a huge percentage—over 70%—of it goes to. That will come without the red tape, which drives up their costs.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Interventions such as those from the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) have really demonstrated that the Conservative party has parted company with those of us who have run small exporting businesses. Perhaps instead of collaborating with those on the Reform Benches, he could talk to small businesses in my constituency in the defence supply chain, or those who support Nissan by being in its automotive supply chain, and who stand to benefit from this trade deal. Does the Prime Minister agree that we are not carping on and talking down our country, as Reform and the Conservatives do? Instead, this Labour Government's plan for change is delivering for British jobs and British businesses.

The Prime Minister: Yes. There is only one party of business now, and it is right here, in government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I support the fishing sector in Portavogie in my constituency, and the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation there speaks on behalf of those in Ardglass and Kilkeel as well. As the Member for South Down (Chris Hazzard) does not bother attending the House, we have to speak for all those fishing villages. Too often in negotiations between the UK and the EU, our fishing industry has been the sacrificial lamb. Does the Prime Minister agree that just as the annexation of Northern Ireland should not have been the price that the previous Government paid for exiting the EU, the interests of both Northern Ireland and the wider UK fishing industry should not be expendable? Will he commit to bringing forward additional financial and practical support for our local fleets in those three ports, and for processors, as they grapple with reduced access in the years ahead?

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Member that the £360 million fund will be brought forward as quickly as possible. We can discuss with him in due course how that will affect his constituents and those he is representing effectively in the Chamber today.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on a realistic, sober, sensible deal that will deliver for businesses in my constituency, including, through the SPS deal, those like Northumberland Honey, which face real barriers to exporting. I particularly welcome the first step to a youth mobility experience. The economy of the north-east, with its world-class universities, has much to gain. Does he agree that it is through fostering co-operation, interdependence and trade that we defeat the radical right, not just in the Chamber but at the ballot box?

The Prime Minister: We need to take common-sense steps, in our national interest, on the economy, trade and business, and to give young people the opportunities that they deserve.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Our opponents talk of "surrender" and believe that they have a monopoly on concepts such as patriotism, but in order to trade we need to co-operate. Does the Prime Minister agree that co-operating with our nearest neighbours and with the

[John Slinger]

United States and India is not weak and not surrender? It is strong; it is pro-business; it is pro-worker; it is in the national interest; and it is in the interests of my constituents in Rugby, businesses, farmers, holidaymakers and young people.

The Prime Minister: What is astonishing is that the Conservatives do not want to co-operate with the EU, India or the US. In fact, the Leader of the Opposition's approach to diplomacy is to accuse the Indian Government of "fake news". That is not a good basis for a relationship through which to negotiate a better outcome.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): We have learned a lot about trade policy in the House today. The Conservative party is still desperately defending its failed deal, and as for Reform, we had a no-show from the leader of the party of no deal. Labour is the only party that is serious about getting a good deal with the European Union. I congratulate the Prime Minister. Having campaigned for a youth mobility deal, I thank him for the agreement in principle, but ask him to go as fast as possible to ensure that our young people have the opportunity to travel and work in the European Union.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. We will move at pace on all fronts. It is important that young people have those opportunities.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank you for getting everybody in, Madam Deputy Speaker; it has been a mammoth session. I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. I notice that many businesses are in support of the deal. My constituency is home to many great businesses, from manufacturing companies to pharmaceutical companies, and from defence manufacturers to food exporters. Will the Prime Minister outline how the deal will benefit my great businesses in Harlow?

The Prime Minister: It will massively reduce bureaucracy and red tape, making it easier for businesses to do business. It will also open up opportunities on defence and security. That is why it has been so welcomed by the business community.

Mr Francois: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I regret that in an earlier exchange the Prime Minister, who is still in his place, may have inadvertently misled the House. The point of contention is the arbitration mechanism for an SPS deal and dynamic alignment. The text says:

> "The SPS Agreement should be subject to a dispute resolution mechanism with an independent arbitration panel that ensures the Court of Justice of the European Union is the ultimate authority for all questions of European Union law",

which, of course, this is. The Prime Minister said that the Court goes back to the arbitration panel; it does that to convey its binding decision, so he is guilty of sophistry at best, and potentially something worse.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that. He will know that it was not a point of order, and not a matter for the Chair, but he has put it on the record.

The Prime Minister: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will not descend into silly language, like the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), but this is an important point. He and I get on, and I do not think—

Sir Roger Gale: Don't be so patronising!

The Prime Minister: It was his language, not mine, but this is an important point.

Mr Francois: We genuinely get on. Come on, what is the answer?

The Prime Minister: We do. There is independent arbitration here, as there is for all of this. That can settle most issues. Where an issue of European law arises, which will not always be the case—

Mr Francois: Of course it is European law—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that right hon. Members have had the opportunity to get their points on the record. We have had in excess of an hour and a half on the statement from the Prime Minister, and I think we should move on to the next business.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

2.28 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This weekend, the Israel Defence Forces started a new, extensive ground operation throughout Gaza: Operation Gideon's Chariots. Five Israeli divisions now operate there. Prime Minister Netanyahu says that they are going to take control of the strip, letting only minimal amounts of food reach Gazans; to quote Mr Netanyahu, "just enough to prevent hunger."

Fewer than 10 trucks entered Gaza yesterday. The UN and the World Health Organisation have issued stark warnings of the threat of starvation hanging over hundreds of thousands of civilians. This is abominable. Civilians in Gaza facing starvation, homelessness and trauma, desperate for this war to end, now confront renewed bombardment, displacement and suffering. The remaining hostages, kept apart from their loved ones by Hamas for almost 600 days, are now at heightened risk from the war around them.

Two months ago the ceasefire collapsed. Since then, the humanitarian catastrophe has rapidly intensified. For 11 weeks, Israeli forces have blockaded Gaza, leaving the World Food Programme without any remaining stocks. Israel has repeatedly struck hospitals, and three more in northern Gaza ceased operations this weekend. Yet more aid workers and medical workers have been killed, after last year proved the deadliest year on record for humanitarian personnel.

The diplomatic deadlock between Israel and Hamas has also hardened. Despite the efforts of the United States, Qatar and Egypt, which we of course support, no ceasefire has emerged. We repeat our demand that Hamas release all the hostages immediately and unconditionally, and reiterate that they cannot continue to run Gaza.

We are now entering a dark new phase in this conflict. Netanyahu's Government plan to drive Gazans from their homes into a corner of the strip to the south and permit them a fraction of the aid that they need. Yesterday, Minister Smotrich even spoke of Israeli forces "cleansing" Gaza, of "destroying what's left" and of resident Palestinians being "relocated to third countries". We must call this what it is: it is extremism, it is dangerous, it is repellent, it is monstrous and I condemn it in the strongest possible terms.

Israel suffered a heinous attack on 7 October. The Government have always backed Israel's right to defend itself. We have condemned Hamas and their abhorrent treatment of the hostages. We have stood with the families and demanded that their loved ones be released. Israel's plan is morally unjustifiable, wholly disproportionate and utterly counterproductive, and whatever Israeli Ministers claim, it is not the way to bring the hostages safely home. Nearly all the hostages have been freed through negotiations, not military force. That is why hostage families themselves, and many other Israelis, oppose this plan so strongly. It will not eliminate Hamas or make Israel secure either. This war has left a generation orphaned and traumatised, ready for Hamas to recruit. As we learned in Northern Ireland, to defeat terrorists and their warped ideology, we cannot just rely on military might; we have to offer a viable political alternative. Opposing the expansion of a war that has killed thousands of children is not rewarding Hamas.

Since entering office, we have taken concerted action on Gaza. We have restored funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, supported the independence of international courts, suspended arms export licences, provided food and medical care to hundreds of thousands of Gazans and worked with Arab partners on a plan to ensure a reconstructed Gaza no longer run by Hamas. Since Israel restarted strikes on Gaza, this Government have demanded that Israel change course.

Privately, in my conversations with Foreign Minister Sa'ar and Strategic Affairs Minister Dermer, and publicly, in repeated joint statements with my French and German counterparts, we have made clear that Israel's actions are intolerable. We have raised our concerns in the UN Security Council and before the International Court of Justice. Yesterday, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister joined leaders from France and Canada in strongly opposing the expansion of Israel's military operations. The UK also led a further statement with 27 partners criticising Israel's proposed new aid delivery mechanism and defending the essential humanitarian principles of the international system that the UK did so much to establish in the first place.

Our message is clear. There is a UN plan ready to deliver aid at the scale needed, with mitigations against aid diversion. There are brave humanitarians ready to do their jobs. There are over 9,000 trucks at the border. Prime Minister Netanyahu: end this blockade now and let the aid in.

Regrettably, despite our efforts, this Israeli Government's egregious actions and rhetoric have continued. They are isolating Israel from its friends and partners around the world, undermining the interests of the Israeli people and damaging the image of the state of Israel in the eyes of the world. I find this deeply painful, as a lifelong friend of Israel and a believer in the values expressed in its declaration of independence. As the Prime Minister and fellow leaders said yesterday, we cannot stand by in the face of this new deterioration. It is incompatible with the principles that underpin our bilateral relationship, it is rejected by Members across this House, and frankly, it is an affront to the values of the British people. Therefore, today I am announcing that we have suspended negotiations with this Israeli Government on a new free trade agreement and we will be reviewing co-operation with them under the 2030 bilateral road map. The Netanyahu Government's actions have made this necessary.

Today, the Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer) is summoning the Israeli ambassador to the Foreign Office to convey this message. I say now to the people of Israel that we want—I want—a strong friendship with you based on shared values, with flourishing ties between our people and societies. We are unwavering in our commitment to your security and to your future, to countering the very real threat from Iran, the scourge of terrorism and the evils of antisemitism. However, the conduct of the war in Gaza is damaging our relationship with their Government and, as the Prime Minister has

[Mr David Lammy]

said, if Israel pursues this military offensive as it has threatened, failing to ensure the unhindered provision of aid, we will take further action in response.

The UK, will not give up on a two-state solution: Israelis living within secure borders, recognised and at peace with their neighbours, free from the threat of terrorism; and Palestinians living in their own state, in dignity and security, free of occupation. The two-state solution remains the ideal framework; indeed, it is the only framework for a just and lasting peace. Yet as the House knows, its very viability is in peril, endangered not only by the war in Gaza but by the spread of illegal Israeli settlements and outposts across the occupied west bank with the explicit support of this Israeli Government.

There are now weekly meetings to approve new settlement construction. Settlement approval has accelerated while settler violence has soared. Here, too, we have acted: repeatedly pressing for a change in course and direction, sanctioning seven entities in October and signing a landmark agreement to bolster support for the Palestinian Authority when Prime Minister Mustafa visited London last month. But here too, we must do more. Today, we are therefore imposing sanctions on a further three individuals and four entities involved in the settler movement. I have seen for myself the consequences of settler violence, the fear of its victims and the impunity of its perpetrators. Today, we are demonstrating again that we will continue to act against those carrying out heinous abuses of human rights.

Despite the glimmer of hope from January's ceasefire, the suffering in this conflict has worsened. January showed that another path was possible, and we urge the Netanyahu Government to choose this path. The world is judging. History will judge them. Blocking aid, expanding the war and dismissing the concerns of their friends and partners is indefensible and it must stop. I commend this statement to the House.

2.40 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving me advance sight of his statement. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is appalling and we continue to see the intolerable suffering of life being lost. A sustainable end to this terrible conflict is urgently and desperately needed, and that means the release of the remaining 58 hostages from the cruel Hamas captivity that we have all witnessed for too long; it means a significant increase in aid getting into Gaza; and it means a new future for Gaza, free from the terror and misery caused by Hamas, who bear responsibility for the suffering we have seen unfolding since 7 October 2023. I will take each of those three issues in turn.

First, on the hostages, will the Foreign Secretary explain what recent engagements he has had to try to secure their release and return to their loved ones? Is Britain contributing to an overall strategy to free the hostages? Are we in the room for these critical discussions? We know the hard work that went into all this at the beginning of the year.

Secondly, on aid, I have been asking the Government for weeks for clarity over the way they are using their influence to get aid into Gaza. On 6 and 14 May, we questioned the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), on the steps being taken to unblock aid delivery. We have asked the Government for details of their engagement with Israel, about their response to Israel's plans for an alternative aid delivery model, and about what practical solutions the UK has worked on with Israel to address concerns about aid diversion, but no substantive answers were given. What have the Government been doing in recent weeks to facilitate the delivery of aid and find practical solutions with other countries to get aid in?

Have the Government just been criticising Israel, or have they been offering to work constructively to find solutions on aid delivery and securing a ceasefire? We see from the joint statement issued yesterday that the Government and other international partners may not be supporting or participating in the aid delivery model proposed by Israel, so can the Foreign Secretary explain why that conclusion has been reached?

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Shameful!

Priti Patel: If I can return to my remarks, how does that non-participation help to get aid into Gaza and stop the suffering that is being experienced by everyone? *[Interruption.]* Members shake their heads, but we should all be focused on securing—*[Interruption.]* Labour Members should be ashamed of themselves, because the focus of this House should be on getting aid into Gaza. The UK—*[Interruption.]* I can speak as someone who has supported aid getting into Gaza and other humanitarian crises. The hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) might want to intervene rather than calling me out and saying that my comments are shameful. The UK has consistently been a world leader when it comes to aid delivery. We should be at the forefront of finding practical solutions and supporting the delivery of aid to those in need, so has the Foreign Secretary, in the approach that he has just outlined towards Israel, done all he can to secure an increase in aid? Has the UK's influence fallen in this aid discussion and in the dialogue with Israel?

Thirdly, on the future of Gaza, the Government have agreed with our position that there can be no future for Hamas—that is completely non-negotiable—so what practical steps are being taken to end their role in Gaza and dismantle the terrorist infrastructure? What co-ordinated international steps are being taken to stem the flow of money, weapons and support bankrolled by Iran? We are still awaiting an Iran strategy from the Government. Can the Foreign Secretary expand upon this?

We had a statement last month from the Foreign Secretary on the memorandum of understanding with the Palestinian Authority. Can he give an update on what steps are being taken to improve the governance of the PA? The MOU posed many questions, but I do not need to go over them again as I have raised them previously. The UK obviously needs to be involved in this process, given our historical role in, for example, the Abraham accords. This may be our best shot when it comes to regional peace, and the Foreign Secretary must convince us that we have influence when it comes to the ceasefire and negotiating a better future in this part of the world. What discussions have taken place with Administration of the United States—one country that does have influence—on peace efforts and getting aid into Gaza?

In conclusion, strong words will do little to resolve the real challenges and the suffering that we are seeing day in, day out—*[Interruption.]* That is a matter for the Government to address. It should be a cause for concern that we have reached a situation where the statements and actions that have been echoed by the Government today—I am referring to the Prime Minister's joint statement with France and Canada—have now been supported by Hamas, a terrorist organisation that I proscribed as Home Secretary—*[Interruption.]* They have actually put out a statement, and I am sure the Foreign Secretary has seen it.

The Foreign Secretary's decision to tear up trade negotiations with Israel and stop the bilateral road map will not—*[Interruption.]* It is not shocking. These are important questions. If the Foreign Secretary finds this—*[Interruption.]* If he cannot answer these questions, that is fine—*[Interruption.]* Then please do answer the questions, because they are important—*[Interruption.]* I would if Members did not keep interrupting me. It is quite obvious that the Government do not want to respond to these important questions, but this is important because there is so much human suffering. I understand the Foreign Secretary's points about the steps he is taking with Israel, but how is this going to help now when it comes to wider security issues and threats from Iran? How do we know that this will not be self-defeating in any way?

Mr Lammy: For decades there has been a cross-party commitment to a two-state solution and the pursuit of peace from friends of both Israel and the Palestinian people across this House. It was the Thatcher Government that imposed an arms embargo after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It was David Cameron who first called Gaza a prison camp, and it was Theresa May's Government that championed UN resolution 2334 on settlements. It was William Hague who worked with John Kerry on the push for peace and condemned the idea of moving the British embassy to Jerusalem. Sadly, today, it seems that the Conservative party, or at least its current Front Bench, is refusing to confront the appalling reality of what is happening in Gaza and what the Netanyahu Government are doing.

The right hon. Lady seems incapable of offering any serious criticism about the egregious actions of the Netanyahu Government, unlike many hon. Members on her own side. The whole House should be able to utterly condemn the Israeli Government's denial of food to hungry children. It is wrong. It is appalling. Will she condemn it? Well, the whole House has seen her response. Opposing the expansion of a war that has killed thousands of children is not rewarding Hamas. Opposing the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians is not rewarding Hamas. On this side of the House, we are crystal clear that what is happening is morally wrong and unjustifiable, and it needs to stop.

That is why we have taken the actions we have. The right hon. Lady knows hostage families are deeply concerned about what is happening and about their loved ones—she knows that. She knows we oppose the blockade on aid—does she? It was not clear from her statement whether she does oppose the blockade of aid to children. She should note that our diplomats led that call, with 27 countries joining us, to condemn what is happening and stand on the side of truth and history. What a shame she could not bring herself to do so today.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. Just last week, the UN humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher warned that the Security Council must act "decisively" to prevent genocide. Today, he said that 14,000 babies could be dead in the next 48 hours. The level of destruction we have seen of the Palestinian people and their land is remarkable. Israel has shown that it will not respond to diplomatic appeals. We now need the continuation of a full arms embargo, sanctions, accountability for war crimes, immediate recognition of the state of Palestine, and the return of UNRWA. What additional steps will the Foreign Secretary take to stave off this genocide?

Mr Lammy: I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the announcement I have made today on further sanctions, building on the announcement I made back in October. It is very important that we send a clear message to Israel that it should allow the full resumption of aid into Gaza immediately and should enable the UN and humanitarian organisations to work independently and impartially to save lives, reduce suffering and maintain dignity. She will have noted the co-ordinated statement of 27 countries, including Canada, Denmark, Finland, France and many others, who came together to make their views crystal clear about what we now see happening, what we expect to see happen, and the further action that will have to take place if we do not.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I also thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I know that he, like me, has been horrified by the scenes coming out of Gaza. Tom Fletcher, the UN's humanitarian chief, has indeed highlighted and predicted the imminent death of thousands of infants without immediate aid, and said that the amount of aid entering the strip is but "a drop in the ocean".

Let us be clear that mass starvation will do nothing to remove Hamas or secure the release of the hostages, so I welcome yesterday's joint statement with Canada and France. In it, the Prime Minister spoke of taking further action if Israel does not fully lift its aid blockade and draw back from its expansion of military activity. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm whether the expanded sanctions list includes extremist Ministers Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, who have advocated illegal actions to dispossess Palestinians across the occupied territories, and if not, why not? Will the Government go beyond reviewing the 2030 bilateral road map and urgently suspend it unless the Government of Israel change path? Will they now finally block the export of all UK arms to Israel?

In response to my letter to the Foreign Secretary last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), reaffirmed the Government's position that they consider that Israel only "risks" breaching international law through its blockade. I ask the Secretary of State what more Israel would have to do to the people of Gaza for its actions to constitute not simply a "risk", but an actual breach of international law.

[Calum Miller]

The Minister also stated in his reply that the Government would only proceed with recognition of the state of Palestine at

"a time that is most conducive to the peace process".

Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me and the Liberal Democrats that the time to recognise Palestine is now and that immediate recognition—ideally jointly with France at next month's summit—would send the strongest possible signal about the UK's commitment to the Palestinian people's right to self-determination?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I have condemned the statements of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich in the past. On 6 May, Israel's Finance Minister Smotrich said:

"Gaza will be entirely destroyed, civilians will be sent to…the south to a humanitarian zone without Hamas or terrorism, and from there they will start to leave in great numbers to third countries".

We condemn that language. We condemn the language of Minister Ben-Gvir and, of course, we keep that language under review and continue to discuss these issues with our international partners.

The hon. Gentleman asks about recognition and the work that we see France and Saudi Arabia doing. Of course, we are in close dialogue with our P5 partner of France and with Saudi Arabia, in fact. I touched on these issues with the Saudi Arabian PM in Rome at the weekend. The hon. Gentleman asked about the road map. As I have said, we will review the road map. He will recognise that there are elements of that road map, particularly as they pertain to security issues and the work we do jointly on Iran, that would not be right to suspend, but we are reviewing it—as we should, given the circumstances. I have said time and again that we have suspended arms sales that could be used in Gaza, notwithstanding those we must necessarily retain that particularly pertain to the supply chain on F-35s and their use in warfare in other theatres with which we have an interest.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his strong statement. It feels like it has taken a long time for us to get to this point. When something is intolerable, we stop it from happening some way or another. Will this actually stop what is happening in Gaza, or is it too late? The fact that Netanyahu has said he will let a small amount of aid in means that he understands he has been withholding aid. That is a breach of international law, and we must call it out for what it is. We must insist that the hostages, and also the prisoners held without charge, are returned.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend rightly prays in aid of international humanitarian law. She knows that because we in this country were one of the great architects of that international humanitarian law, we have to stand by it, and when we see it breached, we have to call it out. I began that process less than three months into office back in September when I suspended arms sales to Israel. I am terribly sad that we have had to act in this way to suspend any discussion of a new trade deal with Israel and to review our road map with Israel. It is deeply worrying that three leaders had to come together to put out that statement to make it crystal clear that the actions taking place must now come to an end, or there will be further acts to bring this war to an end. We will do all we can.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, which is the strongest statement I have heard in this House on the issue in recent times. I welcome the actions and sanctions that have been announced today, and I hope the Government will continue to keep those under review and take further measures if necessary. Is it not now increasingly clear that the Israeli Prime Minister has misled the US President over allowing aid back into Gaza? Ten trucks is a perverse and pathetic token. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the Israeli Prime Minister is in real danger of taking the support of both the American people and the US President for granted?

Mr Lammy: I noted reports today of deep frustration in the US Administration in relation to what they are seeing. Certainly, President Trump has said that this war is just going on too long, and I think he said that again last week on his own visits to the middle east. I note the right hon. Gentleman's tweets and that he has been raising these issues. Is he as concerned as I am about the position of his Front Bench?

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I agree that January provided a small window and glimmer of hope—hope for the innocent civilians who have continued to be bombed for many months; hope for the innocent hostages, who just want to be reunited with their families; hope that was withered away by the Netanyahu Government, who broke that ceasefire. The Foreign Secretary is right that the world is watching; it is also watching us in the UK Parliament. The UK is legally bound to prevent acts of genocide. Does he agree that there must be clear and tangible consequences for Israel if it continues to have blatant disregard for international law and to use food and aid as weapons of punishment?

Mr Lammy: It is because of those very same issues, and my concern that the denial of essential humanitarian assistance to a civilian population is unacceptable and risks breaching international humanitarian law, that I suspended arms back in September. I want us to get back to a ceasefire; I want us to get back to diplomacy. There cannot be a role for Hamas, but there can never be a role for using food as a tool of war.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The anger and the outrage of the Foreign Secretary is appreciated by us all, and I sense that it is genuine, but he knows as well as I do that the Israelis could not give a damn about what he says in this Chamber or indeed about the statement. As he will know, since that statement was issued, dozens of Palestinians have been killed and there have been voices of defiance from the Israeli Government.

The statement mentions the taking of concrete action. I am not quite sure what the trigger for that is. Many of us in this Chamber have been trying to spur the Government into action over the past few months. We have tried anger and outrage and got nowhere, and we have tried

shaming Ministers into action and got nowhere, so maybe we need to beg. Do those on the Treasury Bench need us to beg for the lives of those Palestinian children before they will trigger that concrete action, whatever it might be? I am urging the Foreign Secretary—I am begging him—to pluck up all his moral authority and courage, stand up in Government against the blockage in Downing Street, and please try to save those children's lives as soon as possible.

Mr Lammy: I listened carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman said, and I take issue with the way he began his question. I think it is wrong to characterise the whole of Israel in the way he did. It is not that the Israelis could not give a fig about what is said from this Front Bench—that is not the case. Our issue today, and the reason I have taken the decisions I have about a new free trade agreement, a review of the road map and the announcement of further sanctions, is the position of the Netanyahu Government and the language from those Ministers. That is why I was so shocked that the Opposition Front Benchers could not stand up and find their own moral authority. I am proud of what we have done since coming into government, right from the beginning. I want to see an end to this war, as the right hon. Gentleman knows. Our diplomats are doing all they can to try to use our lever to bring this war to an end.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's very strong statement and thank him for his work on this matter. He confirmed the words of Minister Smotrich—that Israel's goal is to destroy everything that is left in the Gaza strip. Smotrich has also said that Israel will carry out the "conquering" and "cleansing" of the Gaza strip. Prime Minister Netanyahu has praised those words, saying that Smotrich was speaking the truth. That is effectively an explicit admission that Israeli officials intend to carry out ethnic cleansing. What are we doing to satisfy our obligations under the Geneva convention to prevent a genocide from taking place, and why are we not sanctioning Minister Smotrich?

Mr Lammy: Our obligations were met, under our legislation to ensure that none of us is complicit in any acts that breach international humanitarian law, when I suspended arms back in September. My hon. Friend will remember that, in opposition, many of us were surprised and shocked that the previous Government failed to do that. Our obligations were met, but they were not satisfied because the war still goes on. That is why, working with international partners, I have announced further measures today. It is why we continue to discuss these issues with the Israeli Government. And it is why the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has summoned the Israeli ambassador, to make our position crystal clear.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Members will see that about 70 colleagues wish to contribute. This is an important statement and there is equally important business to follow. Members may all help each other by asking short questions. I call Stephen Flynn.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—no pressure.

To see the Foreign Secretary finally find some fire in his belly on this issue was certainly most appreciated, but it was long overdue. Ultimately, as has been mentioned, the Government are still a block to action. Would he support this House being given votes on whether we support the work of the ICJ and the ICC, on whether we recognise the state of Palestine, and on ending all arms sales to Israel?

Mr Lammy: Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman that I have had fire in my belly since the day I was born in the Whittington hospital in north London—he can be sure of that. This House led the call for the international criminal architecture that we have, and we will continue, as successive Governments have, to support that international architecture.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The children of Gaza are being not just starved to death but bombed to death as Israel tries to wipe Palestine itself off the map, so I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, particularly his robust action on the illegal settlements in the west bank and on suspending any free trade agreement talks with Israel. Does he agree that history will judge all Governments around the world, and every Member of this House, not just on what we said but on what we did in the face of this 21st century atrocity?

Mr Lammy: I recognise why my hon. Friend puts his remarks in the way he does. What we must do is act in concert. This is deeply frustrating, of course, but he knows history and will recognise that the ability of the UK to act unilaterally or with one other partner was determined in the Suez crisis, when it was crystal clear that we no longer had unilateral influence in the middle east. That is why it is so important that 27 partners came together, and that I continue to discuss these issues with Secretary of State Rubio, and with Vice-President Vance, with whom I discussed them on Sunday.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I doubt whether there is a single Member of this House who does not wish to see the 58 remaining hostages returned to their families, whether dead or alive. I think that the Foreign Secretary was right to say that genocide and war crimes—my words, not his—are not the way to get the hostages released. There are parents and grandparents in this House who will stand up for children anywhere in the world—I am prepared to nail my colours to that mast. We have to take action; we cannot stand by and do nothing.

A number of Privy Counsellors—all of us, I think—wrote to the Prime Minister relatively recently, calling for the two-state solution to be imposed immediately. Sadly, that private letter did not receive a response, which is why it was published. Foreign Secretary, please take that message back to the Prime Minister and act.

Mr Lammy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he said in a cross-party spirit. He brings great authority and experience to these matters. He knows that, as a P5 nation, we are talking to our French counterparts about the way forward as we head to their conference next month. We are also talking to Saudi

[Mr Lammy]

Arabia, which is jointly hosting that conference. I recognise why he raises these issues, particularly in relation to children, in the manner in which he does.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for these essential actions: the sanctions on extremist settlers and the suspension of our trade negotiations with Israel. It is important that Israel sees that its allies will not stand by while it continues to forcibly displace Palestinians and block aid. Can the Foreign Secretary tell us what further discussions he has had with the EU on suspending the EU-Israel association agreement, so that we can put further pressure on Israel to stop the brutalisation of Palestinians in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I can confirm that I was invited to the EU Foreign Ministers' informal meeting just under two weeks ago, at which these issues were discussed, and I was able to discuss these issues with EU High Representative Kaja Kallas just yesterday.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): In correspondence to the Business and Trade Committee earlier this year, the Government said that some of the reasoning for not stopping licences for F-35-related components was the need to maintain arms for Ukraine. What practical steps have been taken in the three months since that letter was sent to ensure that weapons manufacture and supply to Ukraine is separated from the supply chains to Israel and the occupied territories?

Mr Lammy: I stand by the decisions we have taken to meet our obligations for security around the world and the decisions we have made in relation to the F-35s. I want to make it clear that our decision to suspend arms sales that could be used in Gaza is a serious one, and we are absolutely content that we are meeting all obligations that I set out back in September.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Yesterday, Israel admitted that it allowed only five aid trucks into Gaza for over 2 million people—that is more than Northern Ireland's entire population. This weaponisation of food is morally reprehensible. We must impose an arms embargo and sanctions on the Israeli officials who are responsible for these heinous crimes: Benjamin Netanyahu, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir. I welcome the joint Government statement with Canada and France. Given that time is running out with every moment we stand here talking about this issue, can the Secretary of State clarify the conditions and timeframe for the very firmest of action?

Mr Lammy: We have made these decisions today. My hon. Friend will recognise that there is an important conference convened by France and Saudi Arabia, where we will work jointly with those partners. I ask her to look carefully at the leaders' statement and our absolute commitment to take further action if necessary in the coming days and weeks in terms of the course of action that the Netanyahu Government are set to take, of military expansion and the blockade of aid.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): This Government have consistently maintained that the determination of genocide, ethnic cleansing and war crimes is a matter for a competent court, yet the lawyers instructed by this Government to defend against a case brought by Al-Haq recently have been unequivocal that it is this Government's firm position that no genocide is occurring, that we have no legal obligations to the International Court of Justice ruling and that it is a matter for Parliament, not the courts. I ask the Foreign Secretary to clarify: are those lawyers speaking on behalf of this Government, and if that truly is the Government's position, will he finally explain why he sees military support for Israel as compatible with our obligations under international law, rather than saying it is simply a matter for the courts?

Mr Lammy: That is a crude caricature of a very serious issue. I took a decision back in September in relation to international humanitarian law in suspending arms sales that could be used in Gaza because these are very serious issues—I understand the issues that are before the ICC and the ICJ, and they are very serious. It is because votes in this Parliament helped to set up those mechanisms and made us part of them that I leave it to them to make the necessary determinations that they must properly make.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We have seen the slaughter of innocents going on for far too long, and as others have said, people are dying right now. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and the Prime Minister's statement yesterday with France and Canada. The Foreign Secretary mentioned that he had met Vice-President Vance. To get a breakthrough, because Israel is not listening, America needs to be part of this. Can he tell us about that conversation with Vice-President Vance and whether he has any hope that we can make a statement jointly with the US as well?

Mr Lammy: I know that my hon. Friend's constituents will be deeply concerned about what is happening. We had hoped, and I know Vice-President Vance had hoped, that we would get a breakthrough in the ceasefire that was being brokered by the United States, Qatar and Egypt. She will have seen that the United States has been able to strike direct deals—it got its hostage out last week by going direct to Hamas—and that the breakthrough we had hoped for towards the end of last week has not come through. I do not foresee a ceasefire deal at this stage. That is why the only way forward is through more diplomacy, not less. It is not through military means. We have to be crystal clear that we disagree with the course that the Netanyahu Government are now taking.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The House wants to know, and Israel needs to know, exactly what the Foreign Secretary means by "further action".

Mr Lammy: I would ask the right hon. Gentleman to consult the Oxford English Dictionary and look at the two words.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and the actions he has taken. I also welcome the Prime Minister's joint statement yesterday. The word "genocide" is used quite often

here, and all indicators point towards that happening. I appreciate the suspension of negotiations on a free trade agreement, but children are still dying every single day, and people are losing their homes. What will it take? What do we have to wait for to call it what it is and act to stop what is happening?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend talks with such integrity, and I know that she has been a consistent ambassador for the Palestinian people in this House. She feels the same as most of our constituents, who want this to stop now. The actions we have taken bilaterally are a diplomatic move by the United Kingdom Government to exert influence to try to make it stop, but she knows history—she knows that we cannot do that unilaterally. I wish I could stand at this Dispatch Box and say that we could. If I were standing here in 1950, that might have been possible, but here we are in 2025. We must work in concert with other partners. That is why the statement from the Foreign Ministers of 27 countries is so important. It is why we have taken the actions we have today, and it is why we have indicated that we will act further if we need to, particularly as we head to this important conference in New York convened by France and Saudi Arabia, working alongside them.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): The UN has warned that 14,000 babies could die in the next 48 hours. Concrete action against Netanyahu's murderous Government is long overdue. We know that this Government are not prepared to make a determination on genocide, but they have told us that they are making ongoing assessments of the risk. Will they now finally release that risk assessment for this House and the public to see, to prove that this Government take their obligations under international law seriously and mean what they say about concrete action?

Mr Lammy: I remind the hon. Lady that last year we gave £129 million in humanitarian support to the people of Gaza and the occupied territories. A lot of that support was for medical aid, which this Government began to provide with vigour as soon as we came back to Parliament in September. Behind her question is a serious point. It falls to me to make serious decisions about the sale of arms where there might be or where there is a clear risk of a breach in humanitarian law. I took that quasi-judicial decision very soberly and seriously in September last year, and that has continued to be the position since.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I welcome today's steps forward, particularly on trade. The fact that we are on the brink of the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians is such a collective global failure that it betrays words. Unlike the shadow Foreign Secretary, will the Foreign Secretary confirm the UK's total opposition to Israeli plans to replace humanitarian non-governmental organisations and the UN with mercenaries? On the important statement by the UK, France and Canada, threatening further important multilateral action if Israel does not stop, what is the red line? We have been here before with the Rafah offensive, when the international community said it would stop Israel but it did not. Gaza is out of time.

Mr Lammy: Let me be crystal clear: this Government oppose Israel's model for aid, which does not respect humanitarian principles and cannot deliver aid effectively at speed or at the scale required. It is wrong and it is dangerous for the humanitarian system.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier, the Foreign Secretary used the phrase "morally wrong". I entirely agree with that, and I am sure we can all agree that the original Hamas massacre is equally morally unacceptable. May I take him back to the issue of recognition? I am one of the Members who has previously supported the recognition of the state of Palestine. If there were a free vote in the House, I think there would be overwhelming support for that, which would give the Government moral authority to take even more robust further action, so may I suggest that they take that course of action?

Mr Lammy: UK bilateral recognition is the single most important action that the United Kingdom can take with regard to Palestinian statehood, which is why it is important for us to get the timing right and to work with partners as we consider the issues very closely. I have talked about the international conference in June on the implementation of the two-state solution, which we will of course be attending; we are talking with our partners about it and they will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, and last night's collective statement. However, repeated strong words without action now ring hollow. Netanyahu's Government continue with the starvation and killing of innocent Palestinians. Suspending trade negotiations and other steps that the Foreign Secretary has announced today will not stop the killing of innocent Palestinians, because we are dealing with an extremist right-wing Netanyahu Government. Concrete steps to uphold our humanitarian commitments are overdue, so when will the Foreign Secretary impose a full arms embargo on Israel and recognise Palestine?

Mr Lammy: We have imposed a ban on arms sales for use in Gaza—we did that in September. I know that my hon. Friend's constituents will care a lot about the war in Ukraine and other conflicts across the world, and therefore he will recognise the decision that we have made, particularly about the F-35 supply chain. The whole House will have heard his points on recognition.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. I also pay tribute to the humanitarian workers in Gaza, who are risking their lives to help the Palestinian people. The very powerful words by our own UN humanitarian chief have already been referenced. He said that 14,000 babies need food within the next 48 hours or they will face starvation. He also said that we have not moved fast enough in the past in the face of other war crimes. Starvation is a weapon of war and it is against humanitarian law. The Secretary of State has said that he will not stand by and that, unless aid gets in, the Government will take consequential action—so how quickly will the Government take action to save the lives of those Palestinian babies?

Mr Lammy: Four hundred and thirty aid workers have been killed—Gaza is the deadliest place on earth for humanitarians. The hon. Lady is right to recognise those tremendous aid workers. Let me also reference the medical workers and the children who have lost their lives. It is absolutely appalling. We will continue to do all we can to bring this to an end.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that we are all absolutely horrified that the Israeli Government are creating a mass starvation event in Gaza. We are seeing the language of a Gaza plan that talks about the "concentration" of the Palestinian people in the south of Gaza, and even works against its own citizens. Nine Israeli citizens have been arrested—including civil society leader Alon-Lee Green, who I hosted in Parliament only last week—and have not yet been released. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that this is a deliberate and systematic attempt to destroy the Palestinian people in Gaza? Is it not time that, instead of sanctioning those taking orders, we sanction those giving the orders in the Israeli Government?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend has consistently raised these issues. The abandonment and displacement of Gazans to that small strip is entirely unacceptable. The idea that we could see this go on right through 2026 is abominable. Tom Fletcher was right to speak out in recent days, and that is why we are seeing this response from international partners. I hope that Netanyahu heeds the words of friends.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is essential that aid reaches innocent civilians in Gaza, as the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), was equally clear in stating. It is also vital that this war comes to a swift end. However, in searching for that path to peace, is it not equally vital that we reflect on certain realities? It is not Israel that has shut down the ceasefires so far or is rejecting terms in attempts to broker a new one—it is Hamas. It is not Israel holding 58 hostages—it is Hamas. It is not Israel that is misappropriating aid and selling it on at profit—it is Hamas. Is it not a damning indictment of this Government's foreign policy that it is Hamas who are cheerleading this new stance?

Mr Lammy: I do not think that on any of the six occasions when I have made a statement on this subject at this Dispatch Box, I have not condemned Hamas, what they did on 7 October and those who are keeping hostages. Let me be clear: I believe that Hamas are holding hostage the Palestinian people, but just as we can hold to that, we can hold in our heart and mind that it is morally reprehensible to continue this blockade, and to reduce 400 humanitarian aid points to four. That is impossible and intolerable, and the United Kingdom must speak up against it.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): This statement is welcome, but I believe that the Foreign Secretary has heard the strength of the feeling on the Government Benches that more needs to be done. I believe that he is more in tune with the families of the hostages who were at the border yesterday, protesting against what the Israeli Government are doing; we should show solidarity with them for standing up to Prime Minister Netanyahu. If solidarity matters, let the Foreign Secretary hear Labour Members call for a vote on recognising Palestine; he has heard Members of other parties call for that vote. We held a vote on that in this place in 2014, but it is fair to say that a minority of the people who supported the motion are in the House today. The conference is before him; would not a vote on the issue in the House show that we speak as one in calling for an end to what is happening in Gaza, and in calling for recognition of the Palestinians' right to exist?

Mr Lammy: The British people made a determination when they voted Labour at the last general election. My hon. Friend knows that in our manifesto, we committed to Palestinian recognition in the right circumstances. I have said a lot about the conference that is coming up on a two-state solution, and she will no doubt read a lot about it. Given that we are only days away from it, that is what should concentrate minds at this time.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Colleagues can see by just looking around the Chamber that not everybody is going to get in. This statement has already gone on for an hour. I will try to go fast, but I need your help, with short questions and shorter answers.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Can the Foreign Secretary tell us exactly what arms have been supplied to Israel over the past six months? What arms are being supplied now to Israel? What is RAF Akrotiri being used for? Is it supporting the Israeli war machine? Can he inform the House categorically that no component part of an F-35 jet made in Britain is being supplied to Israel, for it to continue its bombardment of Gaza?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman asked me a similar question a few weeks ago, and I gave him the answer that we suspended arms sales; that was a sober decision we made. They are not being given to Israel for use in Gaza at this time—that is a strict decision under our export licensing regime—save for the carve-out we made for F-35s. I know he disagrees with that, but that is the position, because we are not prepared to disrupt supply chains across the world.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What we have heard from senior UN officials this morning should frankly send shivers down the spine of every Member in this Chamber. Some 14,000 Palestinian children could die in the next 48 hours because of Israel's actions. Today we are getting stronger words, but limited action, and the time for it is long, long past. We need further bold and immediate action. We need to end all arms sales to Israel, impose economic sanctions and ban Israeli settlement goods. What are the Government waiting for?

Mr Lammy: I set out the position as it stands today, and I ask my hon. Friend to look carefully at the Prime Minister's statement just this morning, and at what he has indicated. Further action could be taken if we do not see this further expansion, and the restriction of aid, come to an end.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I welcome today's statement. I reiterate the calls of my hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) for the recognition of Palestine and the immediate cessation of all arms sales to Israel. As important as those are, given that the UN has said that 14,000 children and babies may die in the next 48 hours, I reiterate what many Members have asked today: what concrete action can be taken against an illegal blockade that is preventing medicine and food from getting to these people? Does it include making air drops of aid with our allies?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman asks what the concrete action is. It is really straightforward: it is that Netanyahu stops—that he halts his course of action. We are taking concrete action with our allies to try to bring this to an end, but the hon. Gentleman knows that in the end, this is in the hands of the Israeli Government. Holding up our hands and expressing disgust is not sufficient—I recognise that—but the Israeli Government will be held to account if they do not act.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I very much welcome the tone and content of the Foreign Secretary's statement, although I sincerely wish it had come a long time ago. I have to tell him, though, that British arms are still getting through to Israel in vast quantities to wreak havoc. The question is whether what he says will stop the genocide. For months, the Government have claimed that they cannot make an assessment of whether there is a serious risk of genocide as they are waiting for a determination by the courts. The Government told the High Court last week that they had already conducted an assessment under the genocide convention, so which is it? Has a determination been made, and if so, does the Foreign Secretary want to correct the record?

Mr Lammy: Arms are not getting to Israel that could be used in Gaza. My hon. Friend will recognise that the United Kingdom is a very small supplier of arms to Israel in percentage terms. I cannot account for other countries, and other countries have not made the decision that we have made. I stand by the assessments I have made that led to me suspending arms.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The House has debated this issue regularly for many months—in fact, for well over a year. However, we must remind ourselves why we are doing this. It is because brutal terrorists burned, raped, murdered, and tortured innocent citizens and took hostages, and then continued a conflict against Israel. In his expressions of anger today, the Foreign Secretary could have been much more balanced. Instead of talking about attacking hospitals, why is he not condemning the terrorists who use hospitals as bases, knowing the consequences? Instead of talking about the lack of aid, why is he not recognising the aid that is given, and the fact that that aid must not be allowed to be abused by terrorists in Israel, and—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Our constituents are watching.

Mr Lammy: On every occasion on which I have stood at this Dispatch Box and spoken on this matter, I have raised the reprehensible behaviour that took place on 7 October, and the reprehensible behaviour of Hamas. I have done that today, and I will do it again.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The atrocities happening in Gaza and on the west bank—and even worse atrocities are threatened—amount to the worst attack on Palestinians since the Nakba 77 years ago. Will the Foreign Secretary give the Netanyahu regime reason to pause by imposing sanctions on its Ministers and banning trade with illegal settlements, and will he give hope to the Palestinian people by recognising the state of Palestine now?

Mr Lammy: I will not comment on any future sanctions, except to say that as my hon. Friend knows, we keep these issues under review. He will have seen the Prime Minister's statement on these matters a few moments ago, and indeed his statement alongside the Canadian and French leaders. I know that my hon. Friend has long campaigned on the second issue that he raised; his views are very well known.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The Foreign Secretary talks of children orphaned. The prediction is that 14,000 babies will die. If that comes true, it would wipe out an entire generation. We have also seen families burned alive in tents, in events that have shocked the world. Enough is enough. I join the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) in begging the Foreign Secretary—on my knees, if I need to—to take more action. I accept that more settlers have been sanctioned, but it must be time for the Israeli Government to face sanctions. Please can the Foreign Secretary confirm that that option is actively being explored?

Mr Lammy: I have said what I have said from the Dispatch Box, and we have taken further action today. Let us see tomorrow what that yields.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): Between October and December 2024, the Government approved export licences worth more than £127 million for Israel, exceeding the total approved under the Tories between 2020 and 2023. The equipment funded by those licences, granted after the Government's so-called temporary suspension, includes components for lethal F-35 fighter jets—jets that Israel is now flying at five times the usual rate, decimating Gaza. Children are starving, families have been wiped out and hospitals have been destroyed, yet the Government claim in court that there is "no evidence" that Israel targets civilians. The Foreign Secretary is personally responsible, and refuses to ban all arms sales to this genocidal state. Like many people throughout Britain, I have to ask the Foreign Secretary: how do you sleep at night?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend has raised figures that I do not recognise, and she has raised, once again, the issue of arms sales to Israel. I banned the sale of arms that could be used in Gaza. I know that my hon. Friend is keen on clickbait, but I am not going to be baited at this Dispatch Box.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): May I repeat the question asked by the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer), which went unanswered? Last week, 65 members of nine political parties in both Houses wrote to the Prime Minister, asking him to publish the most recent genocide assessment—the one that persuaded him to send his lawyers to the High Court to argue that

"no genocide has occurred or is occurring".

Will the Government now publish that assessment, so we can all understand how on earth they arrived at the conclusion that the horrors we have witnessed, day in, day out, for months in Gaza do not constitute a genocide?

Mr Lammy: I answered that question earlier. I made a sober assessment, based on whether there was a clear risk from our export licensing, and I stand by the statements that I have made.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, but 14,000 babies will die within 48 hours, and since the statement began, hundreds will have died from starvation and famine. The unstated objective of Netanyahu is to displace Palestinians to Jordan and Egypt. One of the concrete actions that the Foreign Secretary can take is to immediately recognise Palestine. Will he do that to stop the genocide that is happening there?

Mr Lammy: I think I have now answered that question many times, but the whole House will have heard what my hon. Friend has said.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I, too, cautiously welcome the Foreign Secretary's passion and his statement, although they come a little late for 51,000 Palestinians. He has talked of the suspension of negotiations on new trade deals; would not a suspension of existing trade deals be more effective? If the Foreign Secretary does indeed believe that the behaviour of the Israeli Government is abominable, may I ask why a Minister partied with the Israelis just last week, while 370 Gazans were massacred and the world was mourning for them? Does that not undermine trust in the UK's role in this conflict?

Mr Lammy: As I said earlier to the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), it is important that we make a distinction between the Israeli people and the current direction of the Israeli Government, and I insist that we be precise in our language on that point.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): The situation in Gaza is utterly intolerable, and the Foreign Secretary has convinced the House of his passion, anger and indignation, but he will know that angry rhetoric means nothing if it is not accompanied by forceful actions. I am not one of those people who say that no action has been taken by the Government, because they have taken action, but it has not had the desired effect. Will the Foreign Secretary now say that he will recognise the state of Palestine, will stop any intelligence-sharing with Israel, and will stop the supply of components that might be used in its war machine?

Mr Lammy: Again, I have said much on this matter, particularly on the point about recognition. I am glad that my hon. Friend has recognised what the Government have done, because this is the Government who increased humanitarian aid to the Gazans, and who absolutely made clear our position on international humanitarian law—we did not see that under the last Government. We suspended the sale of arms for use in Gaza. We issued further sanctions on settlers. We have issued more sanctions today. We have now suspended a free trade agreement. We have acted collectively with our partners. We led the charge to get those two diplomatic statements this weekend. We are doing all that we can, and it is now for the Israeli Government to act.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The Foreign Secretary rightly talks about a two-state solution being the only framework through which we can find a just and lasting peace, and this has long been the case. He also talks about bilateral and multilateral talks at the upcoming conference. If that conference does not achieve the hoped-for success, will the Government consider unilaterally recognising the state of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: Our position was set out in the Labour manifesto: we believe in recognition. We have always believed that recognition should be part of the process, and that is what we are discussing with our French, Saudi Arabian and other partners.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): Starvation is a horrific and entirely preventable way to die. Some 14,000 babies' lives are at risk in the next 48 hours. To put that in perspective, 15,000 babies are born each and every year in South Yorkshire—nearly all of them would be wiped out in two days if that was the situation here. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps he will take to make sure that that does not happen? What more can be done to ensure that there is access to urgently needed aid to prevent it?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to bring to mind, as other hon. Members have done, the children, the babies and the words of Tom Fletcher. I reassure her that when the Prime Minister sat in his office with Prime Minister Mustafa of the Palestinian Authority, he raised the children of the occupied territories. We keep that in mind in our actions, and it has guided us today.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, and for reiterating the Government's commitment to take further concrete action in concert with international allies should the Israeli Government fail to cease their military offensive and, indeed, lift restrictions on humanitarian aid. Given the immediacy of the crisis and warnings that up to 14,000 children are at risk of starvation, could the Foreign Secretary please reassure the House that those further concrete steps will be taken at such a time as to prevent the mass starvation of innocent children?

Mr Lammy: As I said before, and as the Prime Minister's statement indicates, we will take further concrete action if necessary. It is my sincere hope that we will not need to take that action because Prime Minister Netanyahu will heed what those within his country and the international community are saying.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): The record of Netanyahu is that he has not heeded the statements made here or elsewhere, and I think the general view of the House is that there is a need for urgent action with regard to the desperate situation. Can we come back to the proposal that has been raised before by a number of us? If the Israelis are not willing to provide aid, others must do so. I agree with the Foreign Secretary that we cannot take unilateral action, but this Government are good at calling for coalitions of the willing, so can we now put on the table a call for a coalition of the willing to set a deadline for the Israeli Government to deliver aid, and failing that we will start taking action by delivering aid by air, sea or whatever other method we can use?

Mr Lammy: The 27 partners that we orchestrated—including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the EU—are a coalition of the willing. Our diplomats did that in the past few days. Yes, we will carry out airdrops if necessary, working particularly with our Jordanian partners, but the right hon. Gentleman knows that airdrops are not the way to feed the people of Gaza at this point—it is by ending the blockade.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I, too, welcome the statement from the Foreign Secretary and the change in tone. However, I am disappointed to note that the actions announced relate to new trade deals. Last week was the 77th anniversary of the Nakba—Arabic for catastrophe—which commemorates the murder of over 15,000 Palestinians and the illegal forced displacement of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their homes during the establishment of the state of Israel. The Nakba was not a one-time historical event. It accelerated a process of dispossession, erasure, violence and ethnic cleansing against the Palestinian people which began under British colonial rule. The current genocide in Gaza is just the latest in that process. Will the Foreign Secretary now take this opportunity, on the 77th anniversary of the Nakba and amid the ongoing starvation of 2 million people today, to end all existing military, economic and diplomatic support for Israel as a matter of legal obligation, to ensure that the UK is no longer complicit in Israel's great violations of international law?

Mr Lammy: As I said before and will say again, the Palestinian cause is a just cause and that is why we are opposed to the further displacement of the Palestinian people, and to those in the Israeli Government who talk about cleansing and driving people out from their land. I repeat that we stand by a two-state solution.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the ministerial team, who have done so much work to get the statement out and other deliverables. Given that 14,000 babies are about to lose their lives in the next 48 hours and hundreds of Palestinians have been slaughtered overnight, what are the red lines and what is the timeframe for action? If babies have only 48 hours, it needs to be of that order.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will have heard what I said from the Dispatch Box, she will have seen the efforts of the diplomatic community to come together, and she will know that the United Kingdom is not able to act unilaterally and affect decisions in Israel, but we must take the steps we can take with others and we are doing that. She is absolutely right to call to mind those children, particularly those who may lose their lives in the hours ahead.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Although it is long overdue, I warmly welcome the sentiment behind the Government's announcement. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) and I visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories last month. What we saw there was absolutely shocking. Others have described it as apartheid; I think it is actually worse than that. The Foreign Secretary said that the question of the recognition of the Palestinian state is one which is stuck in a process, but can he not at least today accept that he can recognise the right of Palestinians to statehood and democracy?

Mr Lammy: What we are discussing with France, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is how we can affect things on the ground. The hon. Gentleman will recognise that others have recognised a Palestinian state, but we would not be having this debate if that had affected things on the ground. That is the seriousness of what we are discussing with France. I have to say, as the country's chief diplomat, that I stand by the seriousness of making a decision that might bring about change on the ground.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The United Nations has stated that 14,000 babies could starve to death if aid does not get in. My right hon. Friend described that as intolerable, but it sometimes feels like we still tolerate it. What will the escalation of diplomatic measures against the Israeli Government look like, so we can stop this atrocity from happening?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend the Minister for the middle east has left the Chamber because he has summoned the Israeli ambassador. He will be discussing the issues I have discussed and the mood of the House, and urging her to watch this debate, because we need to see action on the ground.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Fourteen thousand babies is the number: 14,000 babies will die in Gaza within the next 48 hours if aid is not let in. Minister, I ask you, does your Government honestly believe that what is happening in Gaza is not a genocide? What are your Government doing to stop genocide in Gaza? It seems that you are comfortable in supplying weapons to a state that is equally comfortable in starving children. I finish by asking: what actions are you going to take? Perhaps you could expel the Israeli ambassador.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. "What actions are you going to take"? The hon. Member has been in the House long enough to know that that is not appropriate language. I should not have to repeat myself.

Mr Lammy: We took action when we suspended the sale to Israel of arms that could be used in Gaza, which we did back in September. I urge the hon. Gentleman to look at the remarks I made then and to recognise that decision made by me and this Government.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement today, the suspension of trade talks with Israel and further sanctions on Israeli settlers. However, in the horror of Gaza, it is clear that the Israeli Government are not listening to the exhortations of the international community and that they are very unlikely to listen to this further action today, so I want to press the Foreign Secretary. The UN has placed a timescale on the lifespan of babies in Gaza—it is not too much to ask that the Government set out a timescale for the meaningful further action that they will take in the event, as seems likely, that the Israeli Government do not change course.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend has been a champion of the Palestinian people and has raised the issue of this conflict for many months. I refer her to the statements of Yair Golan, the Israeli Opposition leader and former IDF member, who has urged the Netanyahu Government to listen, as he fears that Israel is losing friends and will become "a pariah state".

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Food is the means of life, and it must not be used as a weapon of war. The Foreign Secretary has rightly condemned its use as morally wrong, but it is also a breach of international humanitarian law. He has condemned as unjustifiable and disproportionate Minister Smotrich's proposals to cleanse Gaza and displace and destroy all within it. If Mr Smotrich's plan is carried out in the coming days, does my right hon. Friend agree that he will have to use a different word: genocide? Will he now sanction Minister Smotrich?

Mr Lammy: I have heard what my hon. Friend has said. He will know that the Prime Minister has said that there might well have to be further action, but we urge the Israeli Government to step back from what they are doing. Of course, we continue to condemn the extremist language used by the Israeli Government, such as "ethnic cleansing".

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's condemnation of the illegal actions and vile words used by the Israeli Government. It is heartening and humane to hold Israel accountable for its slaughter of innocent Palestinians, the withholding of aid, settler expansion and its shameless plans to "conquer, cleanse and stay" in Gaza. We need action to show that we will not tolerate this indiscriminate violence, which is effectively ethnic cleansing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our next step should be to recognise the state of Palestine? Will he outline what actions he will take to stop the impending deaths by starvation?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend's question mirrors what is felt across this House: concern for the children, the issue of recognition and, of course, the action—not, I suspect, just by the United Kingdom—that is necessary from the international community.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): As others have said, 14,000 babies are at immediate risk of starvation—this could not be a more serious moment. I welcome the suspension of trade negotiations and the expansion of sanctions. However, with other sanctions designations—on human rights and corruption; on Russia, Georgia, Belarus and others—we have taken them to the political level. Will the Foreign Secretary consider extending the sanctions regime to the political decision makers advocating for ethnic cleansing and the takeover of Gaza?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is one of the House's experts on how our sanctions regime works, and I can reassure him that all that he has outlined is under consideration?

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): The senseless and deliberate suffering in Gaza must end, and humanitarian aid is crucial to achieve that aim and to help thousands of children. If the Israeli Government continue to politicise humanitarian aid and withhold it with their blockades, what sanctions will this Government consider and then impose?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. She uses the word "politicise", but I am afraid that this is not just politicisation, but weaponisation of aid and the use of food and medical supplies. That is entirely unacceptable and abominable, which is why I have said very clearly that the UK Government stand against it.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): The impact on children is particularly devastating—15,000 children have been killed and 93% are now at critical risk of famine. Save the Children reports that Palestinian children in Israeli-run prisons are facing things worse that abuse, including physical violence and sexual assault. Some have been forced to strip, held in extreme temperatures and denied contact with their families. Those are not the actions of a democratic state. I urge the Foreign Secretary to act on behalf of those children, and may I ask him what steps he is taking to press for their immediate release?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. When considering those assessments under international humanitarian law, I pay particularly regard to the way that detainees are treated. There is a clear risk that international humanitarian law has been breached in this area, so she is right to call to mind those children who may be detained, and the human dignity that all children, wherever they are in the world, deserve.

I recognise that I have not been able to answer all the questions in the hour and a half that I have been on my feet, but I hope that our friends in Israel have seen the strength of feeling across the House today.

Points of Order

4.1 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think that today we have had the heavy assent from the Foreign Secretary that, ahead of the Palestinian state discussions led by Saudi Arabia and France at the UN in June, the British Government are on their way to recognising a Palestinian state, which I would welcome. But ahead of that, may I seek your guidance on how Members across this House who feel very strongly about this issue will have an opportunity to vote ahead of that meeting in order that the Government have full authority from this Parliament on the issue of recognising a Palestinian state?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I think the right hon. Member knows that that point of order is a matter not for the Chair, but for the Government. No doubt the Foreign Secretary and those on the Front Bench will have heard him and will respond in due course.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you can remind the House what the processes are for us to obtain an emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24, on the basis that this situation is so dire and so acute that a number of us may wish to apply for such a debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I and the right hon. Member both came into Parliament together. He knows how to obtain a Standing Order No. 24 debate, so he does not need me to remind him of the process. He will get much advice from the Speaker's Office. Without doubt, the strength of feeling has been heard repeatedly, in the statement and in those two points of order, by the Foreign Secretary and Ministers on the Front Bench.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will be aware that I and other colleagues have been raising the issue of UK residents in Northern Ireland, many of whom have lived here for decades as taxpayers and voters, but who were born a few miles across the border in the Irish Republic. They have not been able to avail themselves of a UK passport in the same way as others who live in Northern Ireland can obtain an Irish passport. This was brought to a head by my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) exactly one year ago this week, when his Bill received Royal Assent and became law. Despite my repeated parliamentary questions to the Home Secretary, I have been unable even to get a date by which the first UK passports will be issued to people in Northern Ireland. Has the Home Secretary or a Home Office Minister indicated to the Speaker's Office their intention to make a statement to the House, to finally announce when this injustice will end?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of this point of order. I have had no indication from Ministers that they intend to come to the House to make a statement on this matter, but I note that it is Home Office questions on Monday and he still has time to table an oral question to the Home Secretary.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Joint Committee on National Security Strategy, which I chair, is responsible for examining cross-cutting issues of national security. You will appreciate that the UK faces a great range of external threats and internal challenges around resilience and the choices it makes about its relationships with allies and partners. The JCNSS is following the Government's efforts to address these matters very closely, and the work of the National Security Adviser is central to that success.

Since the role's creation in 2010, every NSA has appeared before the Committee for a public accountability session—until now. Of course, some more sensitive conversations need to be held behind closed doors, but the public sessions are an essential way in which the Prime Minister's primary adviser on issues of national security is held to account by Parliament.

Despite their commitment to transparency in numerous exchanges, the Government remain steadfast that the NSA will not be accountable to Parliament. I am concerned that the Government are using a quirk of his appointment—as a special adviser rather than the permanent official—to erode democratic norms, which future, less benevolent Governments could exploit. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise me on how my Committee can get the Government to prove that they are committed to increasing transparency, to recognise the dangerous precedent that they are setting and to allow the NSA to appear before us?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. The attendance of witnesses before Select Committees is not a matter for the Chair. However, it is surprising that the current National Security Adviser has declined to appear before the Joint Committee when all of his predecessors have been willing to do so. The Government's own guidance on the matter states:

> "Parliament has powers to call any individual to give evidence… When a Select Committee indicates that it wishes to take evidence from any particular names official, including special advisers, the presumption is that Ministers will seek to agree such a request."

I am sure that the Clerks will be able to advise the hon. Member and his Committee on how best to pursue the matter further.

BILL PRESENTED

Child Abduction and Custody Act 1985 (Amendment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Lisa Smart, supported by Ben Maguire and Josh Babarinde, presented a Bill to amend the Child Abduction and Custody Act 1985 to make provision about the interpretation of that Act in relation to domestic abuse.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July, and to be printed (Bill 246).

Reasonable Adjustments (Duty on Employers to Respond)

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

4.7 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about a deadline by which employers must respond to requests for reasonable adjustments from disabled workers; and for connected purposes.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my proud membership of Unison. I thank the Minister for Social Security and Disability, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), for being present today.

Before being elected, I was the national officer for disability equality at the country's biggest trade union, Unison. I was also a shop steward for many years, where I represented workers who were having problems at work, and it was disabled workers more than any others who were facing problems. In fact, disabled workers made up about two thirds of my cases as a union rep. By law, employers have to make changes to help disabled people stay in their jobs. These are called reasonable adjustments. They can include changes such as a special keyboard to reduce arthritis pain, IT software to help workers with dyslexia, or a start time of 10 o'clock instead of 9 o'clock, after tablets have kicked in.

Unison's research found that almost three quarters of disabled workers are turned down for such reasonable adjustments, and even where the employer has said yes, about a quarter of disabled workers wait a year or more to have the changes put in place. The most common story I heard from disabled workers was that they were just ignored by their employer—they never got a reply at all. For many, that meant that they had to do their job while in pain, or they were set up to fail, because they did not have the right equipment. Their manager would start to criticise their performance, because it is hard for someone to hit their targets when they are in constant pain. They would end up having to take time off sick. Before they knew it, they would be pushed out the door. Others just resigned because the pain or stress was too much. That was all because their employer refused to make those small changes that would have kept them in work.

Employers can get away with this because there is no legal deadline by which they have to reply to disabled workers' requests for reasonable adjustments. That contrasts with other employment rights, such as flexible working requests, where the employer has to reply within eight weeks. There is no such rule for reasonable adjustments. That serious gap is leading to disabled people being pushed out of good jobs and on to benefits. My Bill would set a clear deadline for employers to reply to disabled workers making a request for reasonable adjustments.

There are already more than 5 million disabled people in work, but that represents less than 52% of disabled people, compared with 80% of non-disabled people being in work. That 29-point difference between the percentage of disabled people in employment versus non-disabled people is called the disability employment gap, and Governments have tried and failed to crack it for years.

This Labour Government are finally offering disabled people a chance at equality. We have already passed the Employment Rights Bill, which gives everyone the right to flexible working, but that will especially help disabled people, who could benefit from more breaks or part-time working to manage pain or fatigue. On top of that, our pathways to work plan will invest £1.8 billion into employment support for disabled people. A recent Learning and Work Institute report found that two in 10 disabled people on benefits want to work, but at least half of them are getting no help to find a job.

When I visited West Ealing jobcentre in my constituency last August and asked staff who a disabled person could speak to about finding a job that met their needs, they had no answer—there was no help available. Imagine what it must be like for someone who wants to work but is stuck in a system that will not let them, and that forces them to live on benefits when they do not want to and do not have to.

This Government are investing in new trailblazer schemes to support disabled people who want to work. As part of that, the West London Alliance, which covers Ealing Southall, did a simple thing. It sent an email to local disabled people on long-term sickness benefits due to musculoskeletal conditions and asked whether they wanted help finding a job. More than 200 of people replied straightaway to say yes, they wanted help. That is 200 disabled people who had been sitting on benefits with no help at all under the previous Government.

Labour's plan will give disabled people who want to work the help they need. Our Employment Rights Bill and our increase to the national living wage will ensure that those are good-quality, decently paid jobs, too. This Labour Government's plan to get Britain working also offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to radically transform the workplace so that it finally works for disabled people. Sir Charlie Mayfield, the former John Lewis boss, has been asked by Government to come up with ideas to make work more accessible and to ensure that employers take more responsibility for supporting disabled workers to stay in their jobs.

My Bill would give a right to a response to reasonable adjustment requests to the 5 million disabled people already in work, and it would help open up jobs to hundreds and thousands of disabled people who want to work, but I look forward to seeing what other ideas the report identifies. I hope that the Mayfield review will look at some of the demands of the disability employment charter, of which I was a founding member when I worked for Unison. It includes ideas such as a stronger right to paid disability leave for assessment, rehabilitation and training. The Learning and Work Institute report found that, taken together, the investments that the Labour Government are making could lead to up to 165,000 disabled people moving from benefits to decent jobs—what an achievement that would be.

Too many disabled people face losing jobs they love because employers simply do not give them the help they need to thrive at work. The Government's record £1.8 billion investment in employment support will help disabled people who want to work, but we must ensure

that those jobs are long-lasting. That is why employers must be held to a clear deadline to agree to the small changes that disabled workers need in order to get on at work.

The Government's Get Britain Working plan is an opportunity to transform the workplace so that it fits around the needs of disabled workers. My new Bill would support that aim by giving more disabled people the chance to enjoy good-quality jobs, which are the best route out of poverty and can unleash their many talents. I hope that the Government will consider taking it forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Deirdre Costigan, Katrina Murray, Mark Ferguson, Anneliese Midgley, Laurence Turner, Sarah Russell, Chris Bloore, Lee Barron, Tom Rutland, Uma Kumaran, Natasha Irons and Dr Marie Tidball present the Bill.

Deirdre Costigan accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 June, and to be printed (Bill 247).

Victims and Courts Bill

Second Reading

4.17 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

When the Government took office just 10 months ago, we inherited a justice system in crisis—our prisons were on the point of collapse, and the backlog in our courts was at record levels and rising fast—and victims were all too often paying the price. The Government are beginning the long and hard work of rebuilding our justice system so that it serves victims once more. In my eyes, that means meeting three principles.

The first is that justice must be swift. It is all too easily said that justice delayed means justice denied, but few have had the bravery to wrestle with the implications of that. This Government are investing more in court sitting days than any before them, but we know that that is not enough, so we will pursue reform—even if it courts opposition—in the pursuit of swifter justice for victims. That is why I have asked Sir Brian Leveson to propose once-in-a-generation reform of our courts. Jury trials will always be a cornerstone of our legal system for the most serious cases, but it is clear that we must consider whether there are cases heard before a jury today that could be heard in a different way, such as in front of a magistrate or a new intermediate court, in order to deliver the swifter justice that victims deserve.

The second principle of a justice system that serves victims is that punishment must be certain. This Government inherited the grotesque position of having more prisoners than prison cells. If prisons run out of space, victims pay the price. If courts hold trials and the police are forced to stop making arrests, crime goes unpunished and victims see no justice done. This Government will ensure that criminals face punishment. We are building 14,000 prison places in the largest expansion since the Victorian era, after 14 years in which the Conservatives added just 500 cells to our prison estate. We are also reforming sentencing so that our prisons never run out of space again and there is always space inside for dangerous offenders.

The third and final principle of a justice system that serves victims is that they are not retraumatised by their engagement with it. That third principle is what unites the specific measures set out in the Bill, and I will start by speaking about those which will force criminals to attend their sentencing in court.

In recent years, too many offenders have been allowed to cower in their cells rather than face the consequences of their actions. That is a final insult to victims and their families because it robs them of the chance to tell offenders, through victim impact statements, the pain they have caused. It robs victims and their families of the opportunity to look the offender in the eye and see them face the consequences of their crime and the full reality of their punishment. The Bill will change that.

The Bill gives judges the power to order criminals to attend sentencing hearings, it makes it clear that reasonable force can be used to ensure that happens and it hands out punishments to those who still defy that order. Adult offenders could face up to an additional two

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years in prison and an unlimited fine. I know, however, that that is little punishment for those who are serving long sentences or perhaps whole life orders, because they did not expect to see the light of day at all. For that reason, we will also give judges the power to impose prison sanctions on offenders, including confining criminals to their cells, the loss of privileges and, going further, limits on social visits.

If offenders appear in the dock but behave in a disruptive or disrespectful way, as has all too often been the case in recent months, judges must have the ability to remove them from the courtroom so that the hearing can continue and justice can be served. The Bill will give a judge the ability to impose the same penalties both on those who refuse to attend their sentencing and on those who attend but attempt to disrupt proceedings. While the previous Government brought forward similar measures, we are going further by expanding the range of punishment available through amending prison rules, which will expand the sanctions available to judges, and by extending the length of time for which such sanctions can be applied.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome this section of the Bill. My constituent, Sabina Nessa, was brutally murdered when she was on her way out to meet a friend. Her murderer refused to attend court and participate in his sentencing, and that caused a great deal of distress to her family. I therefore welcome the move not just to force these characters to turn up in court, but to apply sanctions when they do not comply; my right hon. Friend is to be congratulated on that.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend speaks of one of the tragic cases that has led to these changes in the law and on which, in fairness, the previous Government were also seeking to act before the election was called. We are pleased to go further on sanctions. I know that some of the families we are talking about are here and I will pay tribute to them in a few moments' time.

We will take a delegated power to allow the Secretary of State to specify sanctions in regulations. Those regulations will provide discretion to prison governors, who hold a legal responsibility and accountability for what happens inside prisons. Judges will retain discretion over when to order offenders to attend. This means that, in cases where a victim's family does not want to see the offender forced to attend, judges can decide differently. As this is a delegated power, the list of sanctions is not presented on the face of the Bill, but it will be rooted in the Prison Rules 1999, which will be amended and extended. The Secretary of State will have the ability to add more sanctions quickly and easily, should that be necessary. This approach offers much more flexibility than a rigid list, which would require the lengthy process of primary legislation to amend it.

I know that, for many, this day has been a long time coming. I am sure the House will therefore join me in paying tribute to the families of Olivia Pratt-Korbel, Jan Mustafa, Zara Aleena and Sabina Nessa, and I would like to welcome to this place Cheryl Korbel, Antonia Elverson, Jebina Islam, and Ayse Hussein and her daughter Angel, who are in the Public Gallery today. They have suffered unimaginable pain and then faced the indescribable trauma of an offender who would not face them. They have fought tirelessly to bring about this law, and we owe them a debt of thanks for their courage and fortitude. Today is their day, and it will have a lasting impact for others yet to come, who should never have to face what they have endured. While nothing will ever lessen the pain of such immense loss suffered by these families, this measure in the Bill is brought forward in the name and memories of Olivia, Zara, Sabina and Jan.

The Bill will also address the trauma that reverberates years after a parent has sexually abused their child. Today, a parent convicted of sexually abusing their child can continue to exercise parental responsibility for them. From behind bars, these vile abusers have been able to continue interfering in the lives of their children. Today a mother has to request that parental responsibility is restricted in a case where a father has committed a sexual offence against their child; now, we will automatically restrict the exercise of parental responsibility by anyone sentenced to four years or more for serious child sexual abuse against their children. This will restrict those rights from the moment of sentencing, so that children are immediately protected. It sends a clear message that abusers no longer have the power to exercise control. Making this step automatic will spare families the trauma of having to go through proceedings in the family courts, giving them the space they need to begin healing and move on with their lives.

The previous Government brought forward proposals in their Criminal Justice Bill to apply this measure to offences committed against all children, but that measure was restricted to child rape. Under their proposals, a parent could commit a wide range of heinous sexual offences against their child, including sexual assault and sexual exploitation, and not be covered. We believe that was too narrowly drawn; it overlooked the devastating impact of a parent committing other serious sexual offences against their own child—so although we supported the measures in opposition, we are now strengthening them in government.

Our measure will cover all serious sexual offences committed by a parent against a child they have parental responsibility for, such as sexual assault and sexual exploitation, causing a child to watch a sexual act and sexual activity without consent. There is no denying that we are in novel territory with this measure and, as such, we have a duty to take a balanced approach. This automatic restriction can, and likely will, be challenged. We do not yet know how many challenges the courts will receive. We have a responsibility to ensure that the courts are not overwhelmed, and that vulnerable children going through the family court do not suffer. For that reason, we have chosen to expand the offences beyond child rape, but to begin by restricting our measures to serious sexual offences where a perpetrator holds parental responsibility for their victim.

I have heard the strength of feeling from survivors and campaigners who want to see our measure extended to all offences against any child, not just where a perpetrator has parental responsibility. I understand the calls on us to be as ambitious as possible, and to expand this to a wider cohort of offenders, but we believe that our measure is stronger than what came before and is the right starting point for this novel change. We will work collaboratively and constructively with Members

from across the House, and with those in the sector. I say to them that this is the beginning of legal change in this area, not the end.

The Bill will also strengthen the powers of the Victims' Commissioner, so that victims are not forced to fight every fight themselves, but have the commissioner—both the individual and the office—to fight for them. That will ensure that there is proper accountability when victims are let down by the justice system, and that victims are not retraumatised by having to fight for every improvement to the system.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. and learned Friend is making an excellent presentation to the House. My constituent Kevin Curran has campaigned all his life in memory of his brother Declan, who tragically took his own life. He was a victim of child sexual abuse. The ability to access therapeutic services is one issue, but another is that many providers are reluctant to give their services because evidence from medical records could be used to try to break a case. Will my hon. and learned Friend ensure not only that people can access therapeutic services, but that their records will not be used in evidence to destroy a case?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I am sorry about the case of her constituent. She will know that her request is one of the leading recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, and the Department of Health and Social Care has committed to taking it forward. I know that we will see more progress made in this area.

Under the Bill, for the first time, the Victims' Commissioner will be able to act on individual cases that expose systemic failure. They will have the power to request information from agencies on why a failing has happened, what will be done to address it, and how we can drive change across the system.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I welcome the inclusion of this measure in the Bill. Does the Lord Chancellor agree that the extension of the measure to local authorities and social housing providers is essential if the Victims' Commissioner is to fully represent victims of antisocial behaviour?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member makes a powerful point, and I will say later why the Government and I reject the idea that antisocial behaviour is low level and therefore outside the purview of the Victims' Commissioner; that is why we are extending the commissioner's powers. I welcome the support that the measure has received from the hon. Gentleman and others across the House. I hope we can all work collaboratively on the measure to ensure that it takes proper effect.

The Bill will also require the commissioner to produce a new independent assessment each year, providing much-needed scrutiny of how public agencies meet their duties under the victims code. It will ensure that victims' rights are being upheld and, where they are not, that action is taken.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Bill; what she has outlined is exactly what we wanted to hear. My constituent has asked me this question. During the restoration of justice, the victim often feels isolated from the process. Does the Minister believe that if the Bill is to be effective, communication is key? Does the Bill go far enough in ensuring an obligation to communicate? I know she wants that communication, but I ask for my constituent, and to satisfy my conscience.

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member makes an important point about communication with victims, and I will come a little later to the measures in that area that will enhance the system and provide a good foundation for us to build on, so that victims have the information that they need to get through criminal justice system processes, and are kept updated once an offender has served their sentence and is on licence in the community.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way again?

Shabana Mahmood: Just once more—it is hard to say no to the hon. Gentleman!

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister ensure that the legislation also applies to Northern Ireland? I understand that it does, but I meant to ask that question before; apologies for not doing so.

Shabana Mahmood: These matters are devolved in Northern Ireland—the Bill applies to England and Wales—but we are in regular contact with our counterparts in Northern Ireland. I know that the Victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), will engage with counterparts to ensure that, where possible, arrangements reflect each other. We all have an interest in ensuring that the whole system, across the UK, is as strong as it can be.

The Bill will also ensure greater accountability for how agencies respond to victims of antisocial behaviour. As the House will know, that is an area in which many victims are not heard and not supported. Incidents are too often dismissed as minor or low-level crimes, when they have a devastating effect on local communities and on people's lives. The Bill will empower the Victims' Commissioner to request information from local authorities, and from social housing providers, which sit outside the criminal justice system, so that the commissioner can better understand how victims of antisocial behaviour are being supported. Those measures are an important first step towards rebuilding victims' confidence in the system, ensuring that their voices are heard, and leaving public bodies in no doubt that they will be held to account when they fall short.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent and compelling speech. I warmly welcome what she is saying, which closely resonates with the feelings of many of my constituents in Reading town centre and elsewhere who have unfortunately suffered from antisocial behaviour in many different forms. I am sure that colleagues from around the country have experienced the same. I commend her approach and thank her for her work.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know that this part of the Bill will get lots of support from across the House. By strengthening the Victims' Commissioner's powers, so that they can take more action on antisocial behaviour, it is important

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that we send the clear message that we will not tolerate antisocial behaviour ruining the lives of constituents up and down the country.

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour is a huge issue in my constituency. I have seen its impact on many of my constituents; it blights the community and makes people fearful in their own home. I have felt my constituents' real disappointment when it has been labelled low-level crime; that has affected how supported they feel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must absolutely ensure that antisocial behaviour is not dismissed as low-level crime, and that its victims are put at the forefront of our justice system?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is an assiduous champion for the people of Clwyd East. Let me assure her that I approach this as a constituency MP just as much as I do as a Cabinet Minister. Far too many of my constituents have, like hers, suffered antisocial behaviour and been unable to move on in their life because of the trauma that they suffered, day in, day out. They feel like nobody takes it seriously. Under the Bill, the Victims' Commissioner will be able to hold local authorities and social housing providers to account to ensure that they deliver for the victims of antisocial behaviour.

Let me move on to other measures in the Bill. The victim contact scheme plays a critical role in ensuring that information is communicated to those who are eligible to receive it. The legislation that governs it is over 20 years old, and there are issues with the scope and operation of the scheme. Victims repeatedly say that the criminal justice system is too complex, disjointed and difficult to navigate, including when they try to access support. Where we can simplify and rationalise the system, we should. That is why the Bill will streamline the system. It will bring victims who are currently served by different operational schemes into the victim contact scheme, and will provide all victims with one clear route for requesting information, through a new dedicated helpline. Taken together, the measures will better support victims and ensure that they receive the right information about offenders at the right time.

I move on to measures that will improve efficiency and deliver swifter justice for the victims of crime. Timely access to justice is a cornerstone of public confidence in our legal system, yet we face a shortage of prosecutors—an issue that directly contributes to delays in our courts. Legislation prevents the appointment of qualified legal professionals—such as Chartered Institute of Legal Executives practitioners—as Crown prosecutors, even when those individuals are eminently capable, have experience in criminal litigation, and hold the necessary rights of audience.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Only this weekend, I was discussing with a district Crown prosecutor and another Crown prosecutor the backlog in our court system, and they expressed strong concern about the recruitment and retention problem in the Crown Prosecution Service. I welcome this new measure, which will go a long way to ensuring that we have enough Crown prosecutors, so that the backlog in the court system can be eased.

Shabana Mahmood: We hope that the Bill will provide some immediate relief when it comes to the recruitment of prosecutors, because it will address an outdated constraint, remove unnecessary legislative barriers, and allow the CPS to recruit Crown prosecutors from a broader, more diverse pool of talent. Estimates suggest that there may be more than 800 CILEX specialist criminal practitioners who have expressed an interest in becoming a Crown prosecutor. The measure will support greater flexibility in resourcing, and may help to shorten waiting times for cases to be prosecuted. It supports our manifesto pledge to ensure that more prosecutors are available and, above all, may help reduce the long, painful wait that many victims face for their case to come to court.

We are committed to reforming the private prosecution system, so that it is fairer and has the right safeguards. Through the Bill, we are taking the first steps towards longer-term change. Although private prosecutions play an important role in our justice system, the way private prosecutors' costs are awarded can provide perverse incentives for firms to bring private prosecutions. Costs in private prosecutions can be more than five times higher than in cases where both defence and prosecution are funded via fees that are set out in regulations. That is why the Bill will give the Lord Chancellor the power to make regulations to set rates at which prosecutors can recover their costs from central funds in private prosecutions. That will ensure the best use of public funds and reduce the incentive for private prosecutors to prioritise profit when considering bringing criminal proceedings.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is about to mention that this comes from a proposal made by the Justice Committee as long ago as 2020, under my distinguished predecessor, Sir Bob Neill KC. I am glad to see that the measure is finally reaching the statute book.

Shabana Mahmood: I was just about to pay tribute to the Justice Committee for its work, to Sir Bob Neill, and to my hon. Friend, the current esteemed Chair of that Committee. I thank him and Members past and present for pushing for Government action on this matter, and I am glad that we have been able to include this measure in the Bill.

Let me turn to measures on the unduly lenient sentence scheme. As the House will know, the scheme is a safeguard that allows the Attorney General to refer certain cases to the Court of Appeal. That action is taken if it is believed that the original sentence did not adequately reflect the seriousness of the offence. However, in practice, the 28-day statutory time limit for referral has proven problematic when cases have been brought to the Attorney General's attention late in that period.

The Bill will ensure that every eligible case is properly scrutinised, and will guarantee that the Attorney General has 14 full days to assess any request received in the final fortnight of that 28-day window. This change will ensure that enough time is allowed for cases to be fully considered and referred to the Court of Appeal as necessary, and will provide greater clarity to victims, families and the public.

Finally, the Bill will create greater consistency in the courts through a targeted and technical amendment to magistrates court sentencing powers for six offences.

We are tidying up an anomaly that we inherited. These six offences were not included in legislative changes made by the previous Government. By ensuring that everything is aligned, this change will ultimately help to avoid confusion and errors in sentencing.

The Bill marks an important step forward in our mission to rebuild our justice system, so that it serves the victims who, in recent years, it has all too often failed. It brings forward long-overdue reforms that will strengthen victims' rights, force offenders to attend their sentencing hearings, restrict the parental responsibility of convicted child sex offenders, and further empower the Victims' Commissioner.

The criminal justice system in this country suffered terribly at the hands of the Conservative party: the backlog in our courts is long and growing longer; our prisons are trapped in a cycle of crisis; and victims have paid the price. This Government are beginning the work of reversing that damage. We will deliver swifter justice for victims, and ensure that criminals face certain punishment and that our justice system serves victims, rather than subjects them to trauma on top of what they have already suffered. I know this is just the beginning and that there is much more that we must do, but the work is under way and I look forward to a constructive debate ahead. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.45 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): In recent months, I have sat with Jeremy and Susan Everard, whose daughter, Sarah, was murdered in the most horrific circumstances; with Paula Hudgell, whose little boy, Tony, lost both legs through brutality and who asks why his abusers will one day walk free; with Katie Brett, whose sister, Sasha, was stabbed to death at 16; and with Ayse Hussein, cousin of Jan Mustafa, whose body was found in a freezer after a catalogue of official failings. Their stories are harrowing and their bravery and resilience is incredibly inspiring. They, and the relatives of countless other victims, have formed the Justice for Victims campaign group, because serious criminals are "escaping proper punishment." Their demand is clear: make the system value the lives of those who were damaged or even taken.

We welcome legislation in the name of victims, but it must be worthy of that title. A Bill that carries the word "victims" should put victims first in practice and not just in prose. I appreciate, as the Secretary of State has rightly said, that some measures in the Bill are stronger than those in the predecessor Bill, but some measures are less strong, or at least different, to those in the prior Bill. Parliamentary time is precious. I know from my own period in government that one cannot always return to the same issues time and again, however worthy the topic, so we must not waste the opportunity afforded by the Bill to enact the most radical and serious changes to rebalance the criminal justice system in favour of victims. I will explain why and make what I hope will be seen as constructive proposals to the Secretary of State.

First, victims rightly want offenders to face them at sentence and to confront their crimes. All too often, cowardly criminals squirm away from the consequences of their actions, so I welcome the intent behind clause 1, which proposes to correct that. I question how the Minister will deliver recalcitrant offenders to court, when our own prison officers are already fighting for their lives with bare hands and little serious protection. That is not a new problem, but it is one that we all have to confront together. With no kit, there can be no confidence. In the wake of the HMP Frankland attack, the Minister's idea of a limited taser trial sometime this summer in a handful of prisons, for specifically trained staff only, seems inadequate. We still do not issue every single officer with a stab-proof vest; body armour is "under review".

Clause 1, for understandable and right reasons, piles fresh duties on staff, who tell me that they are already one assault away from leaving the service. Until Ministers issue full body armour and staff our escort units properly, this duty will be a burden to them. Officers will not feel safe to force violent offenders out of their cells, not least because the Bill affords them only the use of "reasonable force", not the ability to use force as long as it is not grossly disproportionate, which should surely be the threshold in law. Judges making such orders need only to take into consideration the "reasonable excuse" of an offender to override the concern and the will of victims. What is the reasonable excuse to dodge justice? Surely that should be tightened to the most exceptional circumstances.

Where in this Bill is the right for victims' views to be heard and recorded in court? Some victims will want the offender to come before the court, even in the knowledge that they will be highly disruptive, challenge the solemnity of the court and, frankly, behave in a way that many would consider to be deeply shocking and even scarring. Surely that should be broadly the victim's choice; they should at least be properly consulted by the judge. This legislation is ultimately for the victims, even if the judge might have reservations or it leads to challenging situations or confrontations that we are not accustomed to in our courts.

Sir Ashley Fox: Does my right hon. Friend agree that using the test of reasonable force, as the Lord Chancellor proposes, raises the unpleasant prospect that prisoners so forced might bring claims for damages against the Lord Chancellor, which would be a further insult to victims? I firmly support my right hon. Friend's view that "grossly disproportionate" is the correct legal test to use.

Robert Jenrick: I agree with the point that my hon. Friend has made. Given that the threshold of "grossly disproportionate" is an available and established concept in law, why not apply it in these circumstances, so that we can equip the criminal justice system with the standard it needs to ensure that in all bar the most exceptional circumstances, these individuals are brought to court if it is the wish of the victims of crime?

Secondly, Ministers say that clause 3 protects children from predatory parents, but the devil is in the detail. Only abuse of an offender's own child counts—a point understandably made by the Labour party when it was in opposition. If a man rapes a neighbour's child, he keeps full rights over his own infant daughter. The BBC this morning highlighted the case of Bethan, who was forced to spend £30,000 in the family court to strip her ex-husband, jailed for the gravest of offences, of parental responsibility. Bethan's family call the Bill very disappointing, because it would not protect them.

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Additionally, offenders jailed for three years and 11 months, which is still a grave sentence, retain their rights. Where is the logic behind four years? Thus far, that is unexplained. Where is the child's best interest? Conversely, the Bill states that the order

"does not cease to have effect if…the offender is acquitted"

on appeal, so an exonerated parent may still be barred for life unless they marshal funds to return to court. That is neither proportionate nor principled. I appreciate the Secretary of State's view that that may well be a starting point, but let us get this clause right. This is the opportunity, and it may well be the only one for some time.

I turn to clause 11. The unduly lenient sentence scheme is the last safety valve for victims when a judge gets it badly wrong, and I know how important that is. Just last week, a case that I referred to the Attorney General alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) was heard in the Court of Appeal, and three defendants had their sentences increased. Today, a victim has only 28 days from the date of sentence to request that the Attorney General make a referral. That clock starts even while they are still waiting for the official transcript to land.

Everyone in this House has met families who discovered the scheme after the deadline, who will forever wonder whether justice slipped through their fingers because they Google-searched the rules a week too late or did not reach out to their lawyers or friends in the system who were more knowledgeable. I have been very struck recently when speaking to victims—even victims of some of the most prominent and heinous crimes of modern times, who one might have thought would have been equipped with the very best legal advice and support—who simply did not know that the scheme even existed, let alone that it had such a short time limit attached to it.

Clause 11 gives only the Attorney General, not the victim, an extra 14 days when the paperwork arrives on day 28. Officials get six weeks; the mother of a murdered child still gets only four. Ministers claim that this is levelling the playing field, but it is nothing of the sort. Victims' groups, from rape and sexual abuse centres to the Centre for Women's Justice, have pleaded for a straightforward fix: double the victim application window to 56 days, and require the Crown Prosecution Service to notify every complainant in writing of the existence of the scheme and of that deadline on the day of the sentence. Those groups asked for time; on this occasion, the Government have delivered bureaucracy. That is clause 11 in a nutshell—a lifeline for Whitehall and the Attorney General's staff, but not for the people we are sent to Parliament to defend.

Let me now turn to what the Bill does not try to do. The court backlog is spiralling, and the Ministry of Justice cannot yet provide a date by which it will start to come down. Going before the Justice Select Committee, its permanent secretary could not answer that most basic question for an official charged with leading the service. When is this going to start getting better? Cases are being listed today for as far away as 2029; meanwhile, victims are in limbo with their lives left on hold. Justice delayed is justice denied. Today, 74 courtrooms across the country are sitting empty because the Justice Secretary still has not taken the Lady Chief Justice up on her offer of extra sitting days. There is barely anything in this Bill that will put a dent in the court backlog—nothing that maximises court sitting days. Not one clause addresses listings, disclosure or digital evidence.

For many people, our justice system is opaque and secretive. I am a firm believer that sunlight is the best disinfectant—that greater transparency drives change and enhances confidence—but there is nothing in this Bill that enhances transparency on the court backlog, such as publishing the number of courtrooms that are not sitting each day and why they are not sitting. It falls to start-ups producing websites and apps to provide that information, not the Ministry of Justice itself. Nothing in this Bill increases access to court transcripts, so that victims, the press and the public can see justice dispensed. That issue was recently given further prominence by the public's shock and anger when they heard or read fragments of the transcripts of grooming gang trials. As technology transforms the ability of the courts to provide reliable transcripts using artificial intelligence, we should provide a better and more transparent service to the public and the media. That is possible, so why not use this Bill to establish basic standards in law for the benefit of every victim across our country?

There is also nothing in the Bill that mandates the publication of data on offenders' visa status or asylum status, so that we know where offenders are coming from. We need that information in order to design a criminal justice system and, above all, an immigration system that protects the British public. The London Victims' Commissioner has said that the £1 billion of unpaid court fines is "truly astounding", and that the failure of the Courts and Tribunals Service to recoup outstanding offenders' fines must come under greater scrutiny. Again, the Bill is silent on that—it contains no extra powers to recoup that money. At a time when the Ministry of Justice's budget is unquestionably under strain, why not do everything to recoup unpaid court fines, beginning with those? Victims are suffering as a result.

We welcome legislation in the name of victims, but it must be worthy of that title. Victims have asked for justice that is swift and certain; in many respects, this Bill is slow and tentative. I urge the Government to amend it—to strengthen it—so that it really does put victims first, in practice and not just in prose. Where it does, the Secretary of State and the Government will have our support, for justice and for the victims.

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

4.59 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): This Bill builds on the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, passed by the last Parliament, to improve the experience of victims in the criminal justice system, the functions of the Victims' Commissioner and, more generally, the administration of criminal justice. Like its predecessor, this Bill is published against the backdrop of significant court backlogs, with victims of crime too often waiting years for their cases to come to court, and with criminal legal aid advocates turning away from the profession. This Government have taken steps to tackle those deep-rooted problems, built up over years by the last

Government's failure to invest in the criminal justice system, but until they are resolved, victims will continue to suffer harm for too long.

On 27 March this year, the latest criminal court statistics were published, showing a record high of 74,651 outstanding cases in the Crown court, as at the end of December 2024. Also in March, the Victims' Commissioner published a report entitled "Justice delayed: The impact of the Crown court backlog on victims, victim services and the criminal justice system". The report concluded:

"With the increased number of victims held in the system because of the backlog, victim services are under increasing pressure which impairs their ability to provide the accessible, high-quality support that victims need."

It called for

"The government to explore how victims whose cases are going to trial might be given a single point of contact to improve communication and ensure their Victims' Code entitlements are delivered… The restoration of an independent Courts' Inspectorate so that the operation of the Court Service is subject to rigorous independent scrutiny… Providing emergency funding to victim support services to help them cope with increased caseloads arising from the court backlog crisis."

My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor wrote to the Select Committee in April, in response to concerns that changes proposed in Sir Brian Leveson's review would not have a direct impact on delays in the Crown court for a considerable time. My right hon. Friend noted:

"The system requires substantial reform, and the department looks forward to receiving the Independent Review of the Criminal Courts' recommendations on longer-term structural reform options later this spring, followed by recommendations on the efficiency and timeliness of court processes by Autumn."

It is against that challenging background that we debate the Bill today. I welcome the measures in it, and I know that the ministerial team will use the leverage that it gives them to improve the lot of victims in the criminal justice system, but, as in every other aspect of the work of the Ministry of Justice, they have been set a difficult task by past neglect.

Let me comment briefly on the main provisions in the Bill. First, it deals with attendance at sentencing hearings. It will give Crown court judges an express statutory power to order the attendance of offenders at their sentencing hearings and to sanction those who refuse to comply with such an order, or who attend but then commit contempt by misbehaving or disrupting the proceedings and are removed as a result. They may receive up to two years' additional imprisonment and/or the imposition of prison sanctions. Those proposals have been welcomed by advocates for victims and organisations working in the violence against women and girls sector. However, there are some concerns about how these provisions will work in practice and about the implications for judges, court staff, prison officers, prison escort officers and prison governors.

Secondly, the Bill deals with restricting parental responsibility. Concerns have been raised that people convicted of serious crimes can retain their parental responsibility unless an application is made to the court to restrict or terminate it. That means, for example, that they can potentially ask for school reports, be consulted on medical issues, and withhold their consent to a child's going on holiday or being issued with a passport.

In last year's King's Speech, the Government committed to legislating to restrict parental responsibility for child sex offenders. The new provisions automatically restrict a person's parental responsibility when they are sentenced to four or more years in prison for a "serious" child sexual abuse offence against a child for whom they hold parental responsibility. This means that instead of the non-offending parent or carer having to drive the process, the offender's parental responsibility will be automatically restricted at the point when they are sentenced.

Thirdly, I will discuss victims' rights. The Bill will: update the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 to expand the eligibility criteria to victims of more offences, who will then be covered by the victim contact scheme; create a victims helpline for some victims who are not covered by the scheme; expand the definition of "victim" for the purposes of the scheme; and ensure greater consistency for victims of offenders who are subject to a hospital order.

Fourthly, I will address the powers of the Victims' Commissioner. In their manifesto, the Government committed to increasing the power of the Victims' Commissioner. The Bill achieves that by allowing the Victims' Commissioner to exercise their functions in individual cases that raise public policy issues, placing a duty on local authorities and social housing providers to co-operate with the commissioner for the purposes of supporting victims and witnesses of antisocial behaviour, and empowering the commissioner to report independently on the victims' code.

Fifthly, I will speak to prosecutions. The Bill seeks to increase the flexibility of the director of public prosecutions in appointing Crown prosecutors. It will remove the legislative barrier that is preventing CILEX lawyers, who have specialist qualifications and more limited rights of audience, from becoming Crown prosecutors.

Sixthly, I will discuss the cost of private prosecutions. In June 2020, the Justice Committee launched an inquiry into the fairness of private prosecutions and the need for procedural safeguards, following a request from the Criminal Cases Review Commission that arose from the Horizon scandal. The Committee recommended that the Government should

"urgently review funding arrangements for private prosecutions in order to address the inequality of access"

and

"ensure a fair balance between the prosecutor and the defendant".

In March 2021 the then Government accepted the Committee's conclusions and agreed that

"costs recoverable from central funds by a private prosecutor should be limited in the same way that costs so recoverable by an acquitted defendant already are, by being capped at legal aid rates."

They said that this would require amendments to the existing legislation, and I am pleased that, through clause 10, the Lord Chancellor is able to make regulations to achieve that aim.

Finally, the Bill introduces greater flexibility into the unduly lenient sentence scheme, as requested by, among others, the Victims' Commissioner for London. There are other technical changes in the Bill, but those are the major proposals and I welcome them all. In aggregate, they both assist victims in their progress through the criminal justice system and reform that system to make it more consistent and user-friendly.

[Andy Slaughter]

The Bill is not a panacea for the troubles afflicting the criminal courts—that will require more radical root-and-branch reform, and for that we await the findings of the independent review—but it is a step along the road towards a fairer and more humane criminal justice system for victims.

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

5.7 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It means a lot to be speaking about this Bill as the Liberal Democrats' justice spokesperson, but also as someone who has engaged extensively with the criminal justice system as a victim. When I came out the other end of a gruelling Crown court trial as a victim several years ago, I pledged to myself that I would do everything I could to play a part in fixing a system that too often re-traumatises and punishes victims.

When I was part of survivors group therapy with Survivors UK a few years ago, I processed my experiences of abuse alongside 11 other brave men, some of whom are watching today. I swore to those lads that I would never forget their stories, and that I would do what I could to help transform our pain into justice for victims and survivors in the future.

When I meet victims of crime who come to see me for help in my constituency, I promise them that I will throw the kitchen sink at fighting for the support that they need and deserve, so my contribution today is for all of them. I say on their behalf that it is time to shift the centre of gravity back to victims in our criminal justice system. It is time to give victims their voices back. It is time to dignify victims' experiences with action.

That is why Liberal Democrats fully support the Bill's efforts to address, for example, the horror of children still being subject to the parental responsibility of those deplorable parents who are convicted of serious sexual offences against them. That is why we welcome the proposed victims' helpline, eligible for victims whose perpetrators are sentenced, regardless of length, so they can get information about perpetrators' release and so on. That will go some way to help address some of the concerns I have expressed about the shortcomings of the existing victim contact scheme. I thank the Government for taking on board the feedback from me and many other Members and groups.

It is why the Liberal Democrats also welcome the Bill's measures to strengthen the powers of the Victims' Commissioner, empowering them almost to act more like an ombudsman who can take up the causes of individual victims where it is in the public interest. That is why we agree that defendants should participate in sentencing hearings, because robust rehabilitation necessarily involves facing up to one's actions and understanding the impact of them on their victims.

Liberal Democrats believe that the Bill could be even more ambitious for victims and survivors. That is why, while supporting the Bill in the remaining stages of the legislative process, we will be challenging the Government to address some of the serious omissions that stand to leave victims without the protections they need. The first—the Minister knows this is coming—is on domestic abuse.

The Liberal Democrats have highlighted that this Government have inherited a scandalous state of affairs, where the state does not know how many domestic abusers are behind bars. The Government do not know the reoffending rate of domestic abusers in our criminal justice system. The reason is that there is not a specific identifier in our system, whether it is an offence or something else. Since November last year, we have been screaming out for the Government to deploy robust measures to officially identify domestic abuse perpetrators on a statutory basis, so that victims and survivors can be better protected. I am genuinely grateful that the Government have agreed to seriously develop a way of identifying perpetrators. I know that work is happening behind the scenes, but I would like the Minister to confirm on the record whether we can work together to achieve that in this Bill, or, if not in this Bill, in which piece of legislation in future we might be able to see some progress.

The second gap is on court transcripts. Victims and survivors need measures that deliver fair access to court transcripts. The shadow Justice Secretary forgot to mention that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) has led the way on the issue in this place, repeatedly urging the previously Government to make permanent the pilot scheme.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): One of my constituents, a victim of domestic abuse, has written to me about the work Sarah has done, which has resonated across the country. My constituent said that access to transcripts was difficult. She welcomed the pilot from the Ministry of Justice but said that the communication around that for victims was not good enough. Does my hon. Friend agree that, whatever work is done, we need to ensure that victims are communicated with so that they know what powers they have to access the information they need?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I remind Members that we refer to colleagues not by their first or second names, but by their constituency.

Josh Babarinde: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is absolutely right; it is critical not only that victims' rights are strengthened, but that victims have the knowledge of those rights and entitlements so that they can invoke them, enforce them and, fundamentally, benefit from them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park has been urging the Government to make permanent the pilot scheme that affords victims of rape and other sexual offences a record of their sentencing remarks free of charge. She has campaigned on this issue for years, not just since the populist bandwagon has been in town, like some others in this House.

With the pilot scheme ending imminently, we must not return to a world in which some victims are charged up to a staggering £22,000 just to see a write-up of their case. This is exclusionary justice, delivered at an eye-watering price. As well as campaigning for the pilot to be extended, we would therefore push the Government to expand it to cover a far wider pool of victims and survivors.

On a similar note, as a constituency MP, I encourage the Government to take steps to encourage not just written but audiovisual records of court proceedings to be made available to victims and survivors. A mother came to a recent constituency surgery to share with me that her son, who has special educational needs and is non-verbal, was restrained on home-to-school transport, and legal proceedings were kicked off as a result. The mother did not get to see the video evidence of the incident until the court case, and has had no access to that harrowing and traumatic evidence since. She ought to have the right to it, so I hope the Government will be able to help us on that matter.

A third gap is on national insurance contributions. We need support for victims' charities, who have said that the hike in contributions in the Budget will take their services and the victims who rely on them to the brink. A fourth gap is on family courts. We need measures to prevent abusers from using parental alienation proceedings to perpetrate their abuse. A fifth gap is on the court backlogs, which leave so many victims in the lurch for years—when can victims expect to see measures to tackle them?

In conclusion, the Liberal Democrats are concerned that these gaps in the Bill risk overshadowing many measures that I know Ministers have been working hard on. We look forward to supporting the Bill and its efforts to ensure that victims are heard, protected and respected. We will challenge the Government to go further and faster to ensure that victims and survivors get the support they deserve and that they do not pay the price for the neglect they were subject to under the previous Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): There are many colleagues hoping to contribute; to enable hon. Members to prepare, I inform the House that after the next speaker there will be a speaking limit of four minutes.

5.17 pm

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): Today, I will speak to one part of the Bill, which will require convicted offenders to attend their sentencing hearings and provide consequences where they refuse. It is known as Olivia's law.

Olivia Pratt-Korbel was nine years old when she was murdered in her own home by a stranger with a gun. The murderer, Thomas Cashman, fired a bullet through the door of Olivia's home, which passed through the wrist of my constituent, Cheryl Korbel—Olivia's mother—before hitting Olivia in the chest and ending her life. Cheryl and her cousin Antonia are with us in the Under-Gallery today.

To lose a child to murder in your own home, while you try to protect them, is a burden that no parent should ever be asked to bear, but under our current justice system convicted criminals can opt out of attending their own sentencing. That is what Olivia's murderer did. Cashman remained in his cell, refusing to face the court, to hear Cheryl's words or to look her in the eye. It was the act of a coward. That injustice must end.

Nothing in this world can bring Olivia back. But instead of collapsing under this weight, Cheryl fought back. She and her family have campaigned so that no other family would suffer the same. Olivia's law is her work. It is Olivia's legacy, and it is Cheryl's legacy.

Today I will read out Cheryl's victim impact statement. These are the words that the murderer—the coward—Thomas Cashman refused to hear. I want the words of Cheryl Korbel committed to this House, so that they will be on record in this place forever. Let her words ring out in this Chamber, like they should have done in Cashman's ears that day.

"Olivia was born six weeks early on 13 June 2013 at Whiston hospital weighing 4lbs 2oz. She was so tiny that she fitted in one hand. She had the most beautiful tanned skin. There wasn't a blemish on her.

The tiny little bundle grew into a toddler, having the most perfect chubby rolls on her legs. Every time we went out, we were stopped by anyone and everyone, saying how beautiful she was, especially her big, beautiful brown eyes and thick curly hair.

Ryan and Chloe adored her as their baby sister. She slept in my room until she was one and then she moved into the big room with Chloe.

Liv wasn't the best sleeper and would wake up of a night. Often by the time I got to her Chloe was already up and soothing her. Chloe was like a second mother to Liv.

The years passed by too quick and Liv started nursery. She was loved by everyone. She loved to play, in particular playing house and princesses. Cinderella was their favourite.

At home she would dress her dog Gizmo up in a blanket and put him in a pram, pushing him around the house. Gizmo still brings his blanket into me now.

More years passed and Liv skipped into her first day of reception. I was heartbroken but she was so happy and content. I couldn't believe my baby was going into big school. She loved helping others and especially the role of being the teacher's helper. She had a special bond with one of her teachers.

Liv was such a social butterfly. She was particularly good with younger children and was such a caring little girl. Liv had really long and beautiful brown hair. Something she was very proud and particular about.

A few weeks before she was cruelly taken away from us Liv had heard about the Little Princess Trust and what they do, from a friend in school. After talking to me, Liv decided she wanted to donate 12 inches of her hair, in her words, 'for the sick kids to have beautiful wigs'.

We then went online together and applied for the sponsor form. Liv was due to have her hair cut on 27 August.

Liv was a girly girl and loved to play with makeup. She loved shoes with heels on. She didn't want to wear trainers, ever. She had her own style and would wear what she wanted to wear even though it often didn't match.

She would go to our Tony's house with the girls and come down in their clothes and say she'd just found them. Those clothes would then make their way to our house and the girls would never see them again.

As Ryan and Chloe got older and began doing their own things, it became mostly me and her on our own. She was nicknamed my shadow. We were just always together, me, Liv and Pearl her purple bear.

This was once Chloe's bear, but Liv took a liking to it and decided it was now hers. Pearl was her comfort blanket.

Each evening was different with Liv. One night we could be watching Matilda while she was upside down on the couch. The next night, she would leave me watching H2O while she sneaked upstairs to Ryan's room whilst he was out so she could lie on his bed watching YouTube on her iPad.

Liv never stopped talking. Literally never. Even if she wasn't directly talking to anyone, she would be chatting away. One thing I miss most is hearing her say 'mum'.

I just miss hearing her voice. It's just so quiet. I would do and give anything in the world to have her chatting to me. It's so very lonely without her. Everything is just so quiet. I just can't cope with the silence.

[Anneliese Midgley]

Setting my alarm at half seven in the morning is something I still do because it's ingrained in me. The day goes by in a blur and then gets to half two and I think about the school pickup, something I will never get to do again as a mum.

She was and will always be my baby. But I miss the routine we had. My mind keeps telling me that I've forgotten to pick her up from school.

Now tea time was a big thing for me. Because it was so centred around her and what she wanted for tea.

Everything I do and everywhere I go is a constant reminder that she is not there with me.

This happened in our home where we felt safe and should have been safe. We had no choice but to leave the home that was Liv's first and only home. When the police left and we weren't allowed back there, it was heartbreaking.

I walked in and it was if time had stood still. The cups of tea still sitting on the coffee table, next to her Little Princess Trust sponsor form. Liv's new bike still propped up on its stand. One of her dolls laying on the living room floor and her brand new sparkly shoes in a box.

Right at that moment I was home. We were back to how our lives were before that night. And I soaked up the surroundings until reality dawned and brought me back to my living nightmare. Packing up our home was horrendous. Having to pack up our lives, having to strip Liv's bed, pack her clothes, toys, jewellery, her memories into a box.

No mother should ever have to do that.

We left our friends, our neighbours. My neighbour Chris was amazing and often when I needed to go to work would sit with Liv until Chloe got home from college.

It's so hard to go back to the area where I grew up and where I raised all three of my children, the area where some of my closest friends live. The smallest of things remind me of Liv, her friends playing in the streets. When I see them it's hard to accept she is no longer here.

Moving into the new house was difficult for all of us. Not being able to make her bed, put her clothes away. The toothbrush in the bathroom and not having her favourite food in the fridge.

And that night when I realised Liv had been shot and needed me. I was not able to do CPR properly on her because of my injury. I did not have full use of my hand and I felt helpless. It was only then my neighbour came in and tried all he could to save my baby.

My worst nightmare was being separated from Liv and not being with her when she needed me the most. I was the first person to hold my baby girl and as her mum I should have been the last.

I cannot get my head around how Cashman continued to shoot after hearing the terrifying screams. The utter devastation he has caused, he doesn't care. How could he? His actions have left the biggest hole in our lives that can never be filled.

That man set out to do a job and he didn't care about anyone else. Or who got in the way. He certainly couldn't own it either. Ryan, Chloe and I are just existing day to day and have been since it happened.

We have been waiting for the trial and focusing on it and not addressing how utterly broken we are as a family. I cannot even think about rebuilding our lives without her.

Because of this we have missed out on so much, my nan who was 92 adored Liv and Liv her. Recently my nan's health deteriorated, and she was admitted into hospital. A couple of weeks ago we were able to bring her home on end of life care.

Due to being at court every day we have not been able to spend enough quality time with her; my main focus has been getting justice for Liv. I believe she held on long enough to hear that that coward had been found guilty. Sadly my nan passed away last night.

My nine-year-old Liv was the light of our lives, our beautiful, sassy, chatty girl who never ran out of energy. She was a character, she was my baby, she had amazing qualities and knew what she wanted in life.

She will never get to make her holy communion, wear that prom dress or have a sweet 16th birthday, walk down the aisle with the man of her dreams or become a mother of her own children. All that promise for her future so cruelly taken away.

Now I have to drive to the cemetery to be close to my baby daughter. I sit with her and talk to her telling her I miss her smile, her kisses, her cuddles, her voice.

I tell her she will live on in my heart, she will always be with us, my little shadow.

We love you endless amounts Liv."

Let Cheryl's words be heard. Let them be honoured. Let Olivia's law pass, and make sure that no victim's voice is ever shut out of justice again. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Lady for sharing that with us. It was important that the House heard it.

5.28 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I pay tribute to that powerful contribution from the hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley). Our thoughts and prayers are with Liv's family in the Gallery.

I truly welcome the provision of better information for victims of crime. It is essential that victims are at the heart of justice. As Baroness Newlove has said in regard to domestic abuse:

> "Victims and survivors of domestic abuse must be able to trust in our criminal justice system—that it will provide a robust, trauma-informed response that prioritises their safety while holding perpetrators to account."

We must ensure that victims feel not only that they will get justice, but that they can trust the system. We need to restore trust and confidence in our system.

I am glad to see that the Bill will bring more victims into the scope of the victim contact scheme. They must be given more information about an offender's upcoming release and the discharge of licence conditions, and should be notified of key events, such as an offender's transfer to an open prison. One of my constituents raised with me the case of a domestic abuse survivor who, along with her unborn child, survived an attempted murder by her ex-partner. Although he received an 18-year sentence in 2016, in March this year he was eligible for open prison placement four years early, and that was incredibly distressing. As they often say, perpetrators of domestic abuse know everything about their victims. They know where they live, where they work and where their children go to school. It is terrifying for victims to find that perpetrators are potentially being released early; they cannot prepare for that. I want parole boards involved in the decision to give an open prison placement to a domestic abuse offender, so that we can ensure that victims' voices are heard.

It was said earlier that timely access to justice is key, but confidence is, too, and we must be careful about the language we use. We must ensure that all victims trust our legal system, and I fear that some discussions do more harm than good.

5.31 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): I begin by thanking my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor for bringing forward this much-needed legislation, which will change our justice system for the better by strengthening support for victims and holding those who violate our laws to account.

In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton North, the scars of serious crime and antisocial behaviour and an inundated court system hold back our communities. My constituents and people across the country are looking for answers to those challenges, rather than the posturing that we see all too frequently in some quarters. This Bill goes a long way to providing those answers, and I know that the changes will be truly welcomed in my constituency.

Last week, I held a town hall event focused on crime and antisocial behaviour in Spotland, an area that I am proud to represent and to relay concerns from today. I place on record my gratitude to all those who attended, and who gave their stories, as well as those from Rochdale borough council, Greater Manchester police and Rochdale Boroughwide Housing, who also attended and were questioned by local residents. We covered a vast array of issues in a constructive and thoughtful manner, and I believe we got to the crux of what keeps people in Spotland and across my constituency awake at night: ultimately, it is the safety and security of their families and loved ones.

Across our borough, stalking offences, dangerous driving, off-road bikes and drug crime have been growing in prominence. In Greater Manchester, our court backlogs are some of the largest in the country. Most people I spoke to at the event were weary after years of cuts that reduced the police presence, which is essential, and consistent under-investment in our courts. They have seen a system that was built to protect them pushed to the brink and unable to respond effectively to the changing nature of crime in our communities.

Despite the challenging nature of what we discussed, I did not come away disheartened. On the contrary, I came away hopeful and determined to take my constituents' concerns forward. Communities are rarely unresponsive to challenges, or idle in the face of them. In fact, they want to be part of the solution. People in my constituency want to work alongside authorities and local leaders to make our streets safer and to make sure that victims are supported and perpetrators face the full force of the law. They want common-sense and considered interventions from Government, like the ones before us today.

I will touch on one of the Bill's provisions that will make a real difference to the communities I represent. First, the shadow of on-street grooming still hangs over families and survivors in my constituency. That is alongside wicked present-day crimes perpetrated against children across the country, the cruelty and cowardice of which remain with victims for life. According to the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 500,000 children will experience some form of child sexual abuse every year in England and Wales. A third of childhood sexual abuse offences are committed in the family environment. We must make sure that children who are exploited or abused no longer remain under the responsibility of a family member capable of committing such vile acts. That is why I commend the provisions in the Bill to restrict parental responsibility for offenders sentenced for abusing young children.

Families must feel that they have a place to turn to when this unimaginable violation befalls a loved one, and must feel supported in law. I wholeheartedly support the steps to minimise bureaucracy and limit procedural burdens in a way that mitigates the further distress put on families, so that they can begin to rebuild what the perpetrator has shattered. I also support other measures in the Bill, including the provision that mandates perpetrators to attend their sentencing hearing or face further penalties.

As we know, crime does not exist only at a single point in time; its implications live on for victims, sometimes forever. Neither is it faceless. Behind each criminal act is a perpetrator who should face the consequences of their decisions. They should be made to look at the damage they have done to a person's life, and to hear the verdict on their crimes. The Bill gives victims agency—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order.

5.35 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) for her incredible speech, to Olivia's family, and to the Government for listening to their call and including that provision in the Bill. I want to talk a little more about provision for victims, and in particular my court transcripts campaign; the Minister knows this is coming. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for his generous tribute on that point.

I am really disappointed that there is no mention of court transcripts in the Bill. Trials are lengthy and traumatising experiences, which victims do not routinely attend; some are actively advised against doing so. Reviewing the sentencing remarks can help provide victims and survivors with clarity and closure, but too often accessing those sentencing remarks is unaffordable, which only adds more barriers to achieving justice. That is why throughout the last Parliament I campaigned on providing victims and survivors with free access to copies of their transcripts. I am glad that my open letter to the then Justice Secretary received support from the then Mother and Father of the House, as well as the former Chair of the Justice Committee.

I was glad to have cross-party signatories to my amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill in the last Parliament, which, if accepted, would have enabled all victims to receive a transcript of both the sentencing remarks and the judge's summing up free of charge. Despite broad support, the amendment was ultimately unsuccessful both in this House and in the other place, where a similar amendment was tabled by my colleague Baroness Brinton and blocked by 187 Tory peers.

Given the previous Government's refusal to address this gross inequality and their inexplicable opposition to this policy, letting down victims and survivors, I have been interested in the Conservatives' change of heart. I notice the shadow Justice Secretary's recent support for transcripts, and the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) raised the issue of the accessibility of court transcripts with the Justice Secretary last month. I am glad to see indications that they may be finally acknowledging the extent to which the last Government failed victims.

[Sarah Olney]

Following my campaigning on this issue, and the invaluable work of campaign groups working to support victims, I am glad that a 12-month pilot scheme was introduced in May last year. The scheme gives victims of sexual assault and rape access to court transcripts of their trials at no cost to them. Victims and survivors who have made use of the pilot have reported that its impact has been transformational, yet to my recent question on the issue, the Minister responded:

"We are currently assessing the pilot's uptake and impact and will be able to say more on our plans for future provision in due course."

As I am sure the Minister is aware, last week I introduced a Bill to the House that called for the rape and sexual offences free sentencing remarks pilot scheme to be made permanent. My recent early-day motion on this issue, which calls for the scheme to be expanded to cover all victims of crime, has also received cross-party support. If the Government do not make the scheme permanent, not only will they fail victims, but they will be not upholding the commitment in the King's Speech last year to strengthening support for victims.

I have heard directly from constituents who have accessed their transcripts, having not attended their trial, as well as from members of the public from across the country who have been through similar experiences. They have told me of the hugely positive impact that accessing a court transcript has had on them and their journey. With just eight days until the scheme is due to end, and given that I still await a response to the letter that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne sent to the Justice Secretary on the issue, will the Minister outline the future plans for the scheme? I urge her to make support for victims permanent. I also ask the Ministry to make clear its basis for discontinuing the pilot scheme.

I welcome so many measures in the Bill, and I really welcome its additional support for victims. I really hope that as the Bill continues through the House, we can amend it to extend the pilot scheme and make it permanent.

5.39 pm

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the Women and Equalities Committee. Rape survivors are too often hidden in plain sight. In Bolsover, my constituency, 10,554 women will have been raped or sexually assaulted since they were 16—a third in their own homes—in Shirebrook, Tibshelf, Wessington, Barlborough and every village and town in between, and 5,277 of them will have been raped more than once; 880 will have reported it, and if we are lucky, 26 will have seen a charge brought.

I have permission to share the experience of one of the wonderful constituents who reached out to me. She said,

"I was spiked in a hotel and sexually assaulted in my room where I thought I would be safe."

As a result, she says,

"I lost my job, my marriage nearly crumbled and I lost six of my son's most formative years because my brain shut down completely…and I went into survival mode."

She continues:

"We need to raise our boys better, to respect and work alongside women without judgement or expectations around sex".

She is right, but this is not just a Bolsover problem; this is a society issue. Rape is a part of our national story—a part that we are not telling—and we cannot continue with a culture where he did it and she hid it.

Women do not report because they have been let down by the courts for too long. That was the case for another of my constituents, who went four years and five months from rape to trial, with multiple suicide attempts. I am so pleased that this Government are doing something about this, and are treating violence against women and girls as the national emergency that it is. The measures in this Bill mean that victims of crime will finally be put first.

The Bill is also our opportunity to put a full stop to a lifetime of ongoing trauma. I will keep speaking about the 10 babies born every day to their mummies who have been raped—six children in my constituency every year, and in every constituency across England and Wales. We see those children hidden in plain sight on our school visits; we see them as adults in the workplace; they drink among us in the pub. But their brave mothers have hidden the story behind their existence throughout history—often even from them.

The mums tell me about the struggle to bond with a baby who looks like the man who hurt them. They tell me about the pain of loving their children and also wishing that they did not exist. They tell me about living with the threat of their rapist being part of their life forever. One survivor said that she could not report the crime because the perpetrator had parental responsibility, and told her that he would use it if she reported it. Being charged, going to prison—nothing would take away his rights around the child who was conceived when he raped her. This Bill is our opportunity to change that. I call on our Government to remove parental responsibility where a child is conceived via rape. Our precious children can no longer be the only proceed of crime to which a criminal has lifelong access.

5.43 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a privilege, as a Member of Parliament, to support our constituents in their hour of greatest need. All too often, that is when they are a victim of an appalling crime. Many of the constituents I speak to are at their wits' end; they are desperate to be heard, helped and protected. They rightly want their tormentors to be made to stop, and they want justice.

Many of the steps taken in the Bill will be welcomed on both sides of the House and by victims across our country. It is right, for example, that we restrict convicted sex offenders' access to their children, and it is right that we give victims more information about their offenders' release. However, the calls for justice for the victims of grooming and rape gangs grow only louder. Across this country, people are rightly horrified by these crimes and the subsequent cover-up, which represents the biggest national scandal in our history, yet the Government have failed to use this opportunity to deliver real justice for those victims and survivors.

Last month, I spoke in this place of the details of just some of these disgusting crimes. I was able to so because of the organisation Open Justice for All, which has purchased, redacted and published transcripts from some of these court cases. However, it has been refused

permission to do that in several instances, because a judge has claimed that there "no public interest" in doing so. This is wrong. Of course we must make sure that the anonymity of victims is protected, but nobody is suggesting doing anything to compromise that. These were public trials held in open court, and at the moment the transcripts represent the only way to get to the truth of these revolting crimes that have been carried out across Britain for far too long.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Is not the answer, in part at least, a national statutory inquiry into what occurred, not least because we do not actually know whether it is still going on? That inquiry would expose so much, which would allow all those right-thinking people to take the action necessary and protect so many of the people who might be at risk from further horrors.

Katie Lam: I can only agree with my right hon. Friend. It is appalling that such transcripts are currently the only way to understand what has happened in these cases. Relatedly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) has previously said:

"These aren't just legal documents, they're historical documents that tell the story in detail of some of the worst crimes in our recent history".

This Bill acknowledges that transparent information about our justice system is in the interests of victims, but it does nothing to address the problem. What is more, due to the current limits on appeals against unduly lenient sentences, many victims of these horrific grooming and rape gangs will be denied a vital opportunity to seek real justice. In far too many of these cases, we have seen courts hand down lenient sentences. For far too many victims, there will be no redress and their abusers will walk free. Often after just a few short years, these monsters are back in the communities they came from, walking among us and walking among their victims.

Just last week, the Court of Appeal revisited the case of three men who were convicted of raping a teenage girl in Yorkshire. Ibrar Hussain and brothers Imtiaz and Fayaz Ahmed were convicted in January for committing unspeakably evil crimes against a 13-year-old girl. In the first instance, they each received sentences of less than 10 years. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark mentioned, he and my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) referred this case to the Attorney General. In this instance, the court rightly ruled that these sentences were far too short. This Bill should have made it easier for victims to seek such redress. It does not.

Mrs Blundell: This Government have announced specific support for five local inquiries and are getting on with the implementation of the recommendations of the Jay report. Would the hon. Member like to comment on what the previous Government did on this subject?

Katie Lam: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. There are several points that I would like to make in response. First, five local inquiries is nothing like enough. These events took place in 50 towns and all the victims deserve justice. Secondly, there are trends across the country and only a national inquiry can get to the bottom of those. Thirdly, she mentions the Jay inquiry. Inquiries are very often specific. The Hillsborough inquiry did not investigate every football match. The infected blood inquiry did not look at the whole of the NHS. The Manchester Arena inquiry did not address every terrorist attack. There has been an inquiry into child sex abuse, but that is not a specific inquiry into the specific phenomenon of groups of mostly Asian Muslim men grooming and sexually torturing mainly white children, facilitated and covered up by those in the British state whose job it was to look after them. That is a specific phenomenon, a particular stain on our country, and it deserves a dedicated inquiry.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Katie Lam: I am coming to the end of my speech.

I am sure that the Lord Chancellor and the Minister want fairness for victims, so will they please amend the Bill, first, to offer the independent national inquiry into grooming and rape gangs that the country and victims need; secondly, to ensure that all such transcripts, appropriately redacted, be made available to the public; and, thirdly, to allow victims greater ability to appeal against the shockingly short sentences that we see all too often?

5.49 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I pay tribute to Liv's family and to Cheryl for her powerful statement.

I want to focus on the victims of state violence and the fact that they are missing from the Bill. I want to remember the 97 victims who perished at Hillsborough, and their families who have been through so much and fought for justice for so long. I also want us to remember our Government's commitment to those families to bring in the long-overdue legal duty of candour on public officials, otherwise known as the Hillsborough law. The Bill as it stands is a major missed opportunity to make good on that promise and finally deliver justice for the 97. We have failed to meet our own self-imposed deadline for this year's 36th anniversary—a painful moment for Liverpool made yet more painful by broken promises and the threat that this commitment may be watered down when it is eventually brought forward.

The core of the Hillsborough law is straightforward: a statutory duty of candour on all public bodies and officials. That means that when incidents occur, those in power must proactively tell the truth, share all relevant information and co-operate fully with investigations and inquiries. There can be no more defensive PR operations, no more smear campaigns against victims, and no more families forced to battle the system for decades just to have their loved ones' names cleared.

Without a full Hillsborough law, the cycle of cover-ups will continue. From Grenfell to the infected blood scandal, we have seen time and again that institutions act to protect themselves as a priority, leaving ordinary people to pay the price. This Bill is an unmissable opportunity for the Government to make good on their promises. I hope the Minister will listen to the strength of feeling and bring back a Government amendment that implements a full legal duty of candour on public officials.

I also want to take the opportunity to raise the important Inquest campaign for a national oversight mechanism, which is backed by 70 organisations. It is

[Kim Johnson]

the subject of a private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer), which is making its way through this place. Public and private bodies have a duty to keep us safe from harm, but every year hundreds of people die preventable state-related deaths. The lack of any mechanism for learning from past tragedies is a huge part of that. When someone dies after contact with the state, hundreds of vital recommendations are made following inquests and inquiries. That includes deaths of people in police and prison custody and in mental health settings, and following disasters at Grenfell and Hillsborough. These families need transparency, accountability and action so that changes are made to prevent future deaths in similar preventable circumstances.

Introducing a mechanism would be a watershed moment for families bereaved at the hands of the state, and it would be unforgivable for us to miss the opportunity that the Bill presents to bring forward such a mechanism. When it comes to victims of the state and public bodies, the details in the Bill are severely lacking. I hope the Minister will listen to the points I have raised and come back with some Government amendments to improve accountability and oversight mechanisms to ensure justice for all in tragedies at the hands of the state.

5.53 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I welcome the Bill as an important first step towards a more accountable criminal justice system—one that reflects the needs and voices of survivors of crime. Too often, victims have been let down by a system that fails to grasp their trauma and recognise their experiences. They are expected to navigate an underfunded and overstretched justice process that all too frequently delays or even denies justice. I sincerely hope that the Bill is just the beginning of a wider governmental approach to fix the crisis in the criminal justice system, including the court backlog and the mess left behind by the previous Government.

Liberal Democrats support the creation of a specific domestic abuse aggravated offence, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for his tireless work on the issue. In February, two men from Hampshire were released as part of the early release scheme, even though they had both been convicted of domestic abuse. The former partners of those men said that they were terrified and felt unable to regain control of their lives. One of the victims said:

"He got three years, I got life."

The law should be changed to reflect the full impact of domestic abuse on its victims.

I recently met a constituent whose ex-husband was convicted of sexual communication with a child but was permitted to change his name. Even though the Crime and Policing Bill will require registered sex offenders to notify police and seek permission before changing their names, serious risks remain. My constituent's case highlights how sex offenders can conceal their identities by changing their names. That was raised in the last Parliament by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). Will the Government take action to protect victims and survivors from that loophole allowing registered sex offenders to change their names to avoid detection?

I am glad that the Government are taking steps to support victims and survivors of crime. I hope that more will be done to ensure that the criminal justice system truly protects the most vulnerable and delivers accessible and fair justice that is centred on the needs of those it is meant to serve.

5.55 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): May I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) and to Olivia's family for their powerful campaign?

The Bill seeks to challenge the power imbalance that has long existed in our justice system between perpetrators and their victims—for too long, offenders have had the upper hand. I am proud that this Bill and this Government will finally put victims first. The Bill will strengthen our courts, reinforce the core principles of our justice system and provide greater protection for the victims of crime. It will grant our courts the power to order offenders to attend their sentencing hearings, using reasonable force if necessary, and to extend sentences and impose sanctions in prison for the cowards who refuse to face up to what they have done.

Once and for all, our justice system will ensure that those who commit crimes are held fully accountable for their actions. The Bill will strengthen the role of the Victims' Commissioner in monitoring and reporting on compliance with the victims code. In doing so, it will drive meaningful and lasting change to ensure that victims' rights are not only recognised but firmly upheld. At its core, the Bill is about shifting the balance of power, moving it away from offenders and placing it in the hands of survivors. It is about safeguarding the rights of every person across the country.

The shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), is no longer in his place, but he said that he wants transparency. Well, let us give him some transparency on the previous Government's record on justice for victims. Ten months ago, this Government inherited a justice system in crisis, because the last Conservative Government left prisons on the brink of collapse, a backlog in our courts and a system that failed victims up and down this country. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) about how few people report rape in the first place, but shockingly, 60% of those who do report it drop out of the criminal justice system before getting to trial and are often retraumatised by the system. It is a shame that the shadow Justice Secretary is too busy—perhaps with his leadership bid—to hear what I am about to say: justice under the Conservative party means more offenders escaping justice and fewer victims receiving it. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives do not like to hear it, but that is their record in government.

As many Members across the House will know, we are facing an alarming rise in domestic abuse. Sadly, in Gloucester we are all too aware of the scale of that crisis. In December last year alone, nearly 250 arrests related to domestic abuse were made. Given how desperate and widespread that issue is, I am proud that the measures in the Bill will help to deliver justice for the one in four women and one in seven men who have experienced domestic abuse, and for the constituents I represent, who need and deserve that justice. Having spoken in

my constituency surgeries to survivors and victims of domestic abuse, I welcome in particular the changes that the Government are making to ensure that victims receive information and support, particularly about their offender's release. I hope that that will be part of wider reform of the parole and tagging system, which has led to far too many of my constituents being let down in the past.

I am inspired by the pace and ambition with which the Government are delivering on their ambition to tackle and halve violence against women and girls. On the off-chance that the Government might welcome more ideas on how we can better support victims, I invite my hon. Friend the Minister to back my Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill, which aims, like this Bill, to place power in the hands of survivors and support them as they seek justice and rebuild their lives.

This Bill brings us a step closer to halving violence against women and girls and delivering the transformative plan for change that our country and my constituents so urgently need. I look forward to voting to give the Bill its Second Reading.

5.59 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) for speaking so movingly about Olivia and her family. I rise primarily to speak about the victim-centred measures in the Bill and would like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister for her engagement with me on this matter and with my constituent Rhianon Bragg, a formidable activist who has done so much work to improve support and services for victims.

The expanded victim contact scheme should see more victims able to get adequate information about their offenders' sentences and make representations about licence conditions or supervision requirements as they relate to them. Similarly, the victim helpline will give more victims the information they need. I truly welcome those measures, which the UK Government say will cost an extra £0.2 million for HM Prison and Probation Service each year, with updating the victim contact scheme costing £20,000 and the victim helpline costing between £100,000 and £200,000.

I am concerned about whether those costings will be sufficient. As co-chair of the justice unions parliamentary group, I call on the Government to commit to delivering the additional resources necessary for the Probation Service to deal with the inevitable increase in demand, both initially and as victims become more aware that they have these rights. There is a risk of overextending a service that is already in a workload and staffing crisis, at the expense of victims.

Extending the powers of the Victims' Commissioner is also welcome. Victims should always feel secure that the commissioner can and will do everything in their power to tackle shortcomings where the victims live. That is why I continue my call for a victims' commissioner for Wales, to represent victims of crimes in the specific context of Wales, where many victim support services and important policy levers, such as those relating to health and social care, are devolved and held to account by the Senedd.

At this point I will mention another aspect of the Bill: the Crown prosecution recruitment. We need personnel in the criminal justice system in Wales who can operate in Welsh and English, so I call on the Government to seek such personnel. Of course, devolving the entire criminal justice system in Wales, as recommended by three independent commissions, would be the best way to ensure a well-focused approach to victim support. In the meantime, a victims' commissioner for Wales would ensure that the particular voices and experiences of victims in Wales are properly represented. We need only look to the fantastic work done by the London Victims' Commissioner, Claire Waxman, to see what is possible when we have a focused approach.

The Victims and Courts Bill is a good basis on which to build. There are ways in which it could go further to better support victims, particularly in Wales, and I look forward to seeing how it develops with amendments in Committee.

6.2 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Given the time limit, I first want to say a huge thank you to the Victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and to the Solicitor General, who are ably supported by our amazing female team at the Home Office.

I will not go through everything that is fantastic about the Bill, which is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve things for victims. I just want to suggest three ways in which it could be an even better Bill, as my hon. Friend the Minister is always open to suggestions. The first is the unfair use of so-called bad character evidence, which allows the cross-examination of rape victim-survivors about their previous sexual assaults. This has nothing to do with the court case in front of them; it is about victim blaming, intimidating the victim and making the victim afraid to go to court. It would improve the Bill if we did not allow so-called bad character evidence to be used in these proceedings.

Secondly, we need to recognise, as is in law, that victims of domestic abuse are often victims of coercive control. That can include things like taking out loans in their name, but in extreme cases it can be about coercing them to break the law. We need a way for courts to recognise when a victim of domestic abuse has been coerced into committing a crime as part of that domestic abuse, so that the crime is treated as such and seen as part of the ongoing abuse.

Thirdly, I have been campaigning on the issue of person at risk of violence orders. When somebody leaves a domestic abuse situation, they often leave with a lot of debt. In order to keep their address hidden from the perpetrator, they must obtain a person at risk of violence order, involving not only another retraumatising court process but an additional £308 that they must find every time they move. Despite the fact that there may be an active court case or the perpetrator may have been arrested, victims have to independently prove that they are a person at risk of violence.

This Bill is all about ensuring that victims can get justice. Part of getting justice is being able to leave abusive situations and being protected while they do that. My three suggestions would help to strengthen the Bill and increase the confidence of victim-survivors in justice.

6.6 pm

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Imagine a school night with a child being repeatedly asked by his father if he had completed his homework. The child replied, in an exasperated tone, "Yes". His dad came towards him with his fist, ready to punch him, but the boy's mum stepped into the space in front of that fist and pushed her son out of its way. The full force of that fist hit her so hard that she was spun around and fell down the stairs, bruising her arms, legs and back. From the top of the stairs, the child's father shouted to his son, "Look what you made me do."

The boy's mother left her husband, taking the children with her. Social services were aware that the same father made statements that he was capable of killing. Then imagine a situation where, despite knowing all of that, a family court permitted that father of those two boys five hours of unsupervised contact per week.

My constituent Claire Throssell does not need to imagine this nightmare: she and her two sons, Jack and Paul Sykes, lived it. On a two-hour contact visit, permitted by that court and allowed to go ahead by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, Jack and Paul Sykes were locked in the attic by their father. Using gasoline, their dad set multiple fires alight across their home. Paul, aged nine, died at the scene after his older brother tried to save him, and then Jack, aged just 12, died later in hospital. The father also killed himself in the blaze. Jack and Paul's voices were not heard by social services, by CAFCASS or by the family court. The only time Jack's voice was heard was when, as he was held in the fireman's arms, he used the last of his strength to say, "My dad did this and he did it on purpose."

There must be urgent reform of the presumption of contact in law, on the basis of evidence, principle and to ensure children's voices are put at the heart of our family courts system. Legal principle means that parents should always be given contact with their children, even in circumstances where there is a known domestic abuser. The harm report, published in 2020 by the Ministry of Justice's expert panel on harm, was clear that the presumption should not remain in its present form.

The Bill before us today presents the ideal opportunity to make changes to the family courts and to deliver for the victims of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. It already ensures that the justice system serves victims, rather than subjecting them to further trauma on top of what they have already suffered.

Labour's important mission to halve violence against women and girls within a decade will require a national effort and the use of every single tool available to target perpetrators and address the root causes of abuse and violence. Now we need to do what the previous Conservative Government failed to do and hold family courts to the same standard by taking a child-centred approach and repealing the presumption of contact where a parent is a known domestic abuser.

The Government must act now to save the lives of children for generations to come by ending contact at any cost. Let us not just imagine a world in which the voices of children are put at the heart of our family court system, where children such as Jack and Paul are listened to, not ignored, and no more towns such as mine are left to grieve—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Lady must recognise that there is a time limit so that Members can get in.

6.10 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): Ilford South has been collectively traumatised by sexual violence and domestic abuse. Together, we have mourned the murders of Harshita Brella and Zara Aleena. Together, we are horrified at the cases of physical and sexual violence that women and girls face every day, many of which go unreported. That is why the Victims and Courts Bill before us today is so desperately needed, because it promises to help us bring justice and empower victim-survivors.

I thank all those who have made the Bill possible, especially the victim-survivors whose voices gave it power and made it real. Although their work has been indispensable, I know that it must never fall on the shoulders of survivors alone to drive policy change. We must all come together to share the burden of fixing the violence that is so deeply embedded in our society. That is why I feel it is so incumbent on me as a male Member to engage with this Bill and see it through. Sexual violence and domestic abuse are men's issues as much as they are women's issues.

If I may speak candidly, my conversations with survivors in my work as London Councils' lead on community safety and violence against women and girls have taught me that victim-survivors are often doubly traumatised—they are first traumatised by the experience of their abuse, then retraumatised by a justice system that is opaque, difficult to navigate and, quite frankly, not built for them.

Sir John Hayes: There is a third trauma when a sentence that emanates from the court is unduly lenient. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Attorney General has the power to review unduly lenient sentences, but only within 28 days of the date of a sentence. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in calling for the length of time to be extended, in the name of victims?

Jas Athwal: Certainly, as somebody who stands for justice, I will always support anything that would make it stronger.

I welcome this Bill as a start to addressing the injustice that survivors face and a vital step in achieving our plan to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. Through the updated victim contact scheme and the new victim helpline, this Bill simplifies one aspect of the justice system that survivors must navigate. This single, harmonised scheme means that victim-survivors will have a clear route to requesting information about an offender's release, should they want it, empowering those survivors.

Another welcome aspect of the Bill is the automatic restriction of parental responsibility for perpetrators of child sexual offences. Sexual violence against children is particularly vile and traumatising for families and survivors alike, with survivors taking an average of 22 years before they feel able to disclose their abuse. This Bill will prevent perpetrators from involvement in a child's life, safeguarding children from further trauma and enabling them to start healing.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): The hon. Member is talking about the length of time it can take for victims of sexual violence to get over their trauma and seek help. Does he agree that organisations such as Rape Crisis do absolutely vital work in helping survivors of sexual abuse and rape to move past what has happened? Does he also agree that it would be a fantastic improvement to the Bill if there was some national Government oversight of how much money is put into funding such victim services?

Jas Athwal: Certainly, coming from a local council that is strapped for cash, I agree with the hon. Member's emphasis; we must look at that as we go forward.

The Bill will prevent perpetrators from being involved in a child's life, safeguarding children from further trauma and enabling them to start healing. This new restriction is shamefully overdue. Our current system is not built for survivors; it is full of gaps and loopholes for predators, reflects society's biases and is perilously hard to navigate. To truly centre survivors, the Bill should go further. The automatic restriction of parental responsibility should be extended so that if an individual abuses any child, not just their own, their parental rights are automatically removed. That would further safeguard children, saving families the vast personal and emotional cost of navigating the family court system and ultimately preventing the retraumatisation of survivors and their families.

I welcome the Government's actions to begin building a justice system that finally centres survivors, rather than treating them like an afterthought, and I hope this Bill will empower those who have not been properly protected for so long. However, as we know, there is still so much further to go and so many more battles remain to be fought in order to prevent sexual violence and empower victim-survivors—online, in our schools, in our homes and on our streets. This Bill is a desperately needed first step, but it must be the beginning of our campaign to get justice for victim-survivors, not the end.

6.16 pm

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley), and to Cheryl and her family for their fight for justice.

Having worked with both adult and child victims of traumatic abuse, I was glad to stand last year on a manifesto that committed to reforming the system to put the needs of victims first, and to ensure they get the support they need and deserve. This Bill is part of that mission. I am pleased that it strengthens victims' rights, forces offenders to attend sentencing hearings, and empowers the Victims' Commissioner to do more to stand up for victims and hold public bodies to account where there are failings. Nevertheless, there are three areas in which I believe we should go further and faster.

First, we know that victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence are faced with a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing specialist support. They are left at the mercy of the various budgetary decisions made by each area's police and crime commissioner, local authority and health bodies.

Emily Darlington: What does my hon. Friend say to a police and crime commissioner, such as the one for Thames valley, who does not fund sexual abuse support services in Milton Keynes?

Jess Asato: I believe that all police and crime commissioners ought to fund those services—hopefully the Minister can respond to that point. It is clearly outrageous that any victim of sexual violence should be left without any service at all.

Where specialist domestic abuse services do exist, they are faced with a deeply precarious financial situation that is severely hampering the ability of victims to access the support they need. Fewer than half of victims and survivors are able to access the community-based support they want. Without that support, some victims may be unable to leave domestic abuse perpetrators, or may return to them when they find it too difficult to escape their controlling behaviour. In 2022, only 7% of victims who wanted their perpetrator to receive support to change their behaviour and stop reoffending were able to get that, and recent research undertaken by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has found that 27% of services are having to turn away child victims from vital support due to a lack of capacity.

For those reasons, I believe this legislation needs to include a statutory duty to commission specialist domestic abuse and sexual violence services based in the community for both adult and child victims. It is a stain on our nation that victims of the most unimaginable trauma do not have a right to support after abuse. A new statutory duty would also allow us to create parity with the accommodation-based services that were introduced by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, so that community-based services are given the same legislative protection.

Secondly, I believe that the parents and carers of victims of serious sexual and violent crimes also require support as third-party victims. A campaign on this issue has been led by Cath Pickles, the chief executive officer of Restitute, an amazing local charity that supports third-party victims. These crimes fracture families and support networks, and those who are left to care for primary victims often develop their own mental health issues and may even have to give up work. There are mothers who must face picking up the pieces after the sexual abuse of their child, and families who have to support domestic abuse victims as they fight for justice. We should look to include them in the scope of the support available to victims, because the impact of abuse does not just harm the primary victim, but can destroy the victim's family too.

Finally, I recognise that we must not risk a very welcome step forward with potential legal challenges, but I believe we ought to look again having at a stricter definition for the purpose of depriving people of parental responsibility, especially where there is a risk to the child. Many will simply not comprehend how the serious sexual abuse of a child is compatible with the right to family life. What about the child's right to live a life free from harm? I hope that the Government are willing to work with me, and with others, to tighten that aspect, among others that I have mentioned, as the Bill progresses through the House.

6.20 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I declare an interest, as a member of the Women and Equalities Committee.

Today marks a defining moment—a moment when we finally put victims at the heart of our justice system. For countless people in Bolton, that moment is long

[Kirith Entwistle]

overdue. I am proud to support the Bill: proud because it empowers judges to compel offenders to attend their sentencing so that no victim is left speaking into a void; proud because it finally—finally!—removes parental rights from child sex offenders, something that I can hardly believe we are doing only now, in 2025; proud because it gives real power to the Victims' Commissioner to demand answers, scrutinise the system and drive change; and proud because it will speed up justice and tear down needless barriers. Survivors deserve a system that works for them, not against them.

From conversations on doorsteps and from constituency surgeries, I know that far too many of my constituents have experienced domestic abuse and coercive control. That is why I have been working with those at Bolton's frontline organisations, including Fortalice and Endeavour, who understand what is at stake and the difference that the Bill will make. Fortalice provides refuge and support for domestic abuse survivors. Its chief executive, Gill Smallwood, told me that it had received more than 400 referrals since January alone, and that the Bill would finally deliver the change that victims need. Gill told me that, right now, victims are left in the dark about bail conditions or release dates. The Bill will change that: it will allow victims, finally, to be kept informed by enabling them to nominate a trusted professional to receive updates, and to access information through a dedicated helpline.

Endeavour, another local charity, supports high-risk young people, black and minoritised survivors, and older victims. Its chief executive, Jill Caldwell, told me of a woman who had had to flee her home, job and support network, simply because she had not been told that her abuser had been released. The Bill would have prevented that. By guaranteeing victims the right to up-to-date information, we are ending uncertainty and removing the burden on victims to constantly chase, ask, call and email for updates. We are saying, "You deserve to know; you deserve to be safe; you deserve to be heard and to be reassured at a time of complete uncertainty, when you have already endured so much."

The Bill is ambitious, but my constituents in Bolton need it to go further. Right now, 82% of domestic abuse victims never report the abuse, not because nothing happened but because they fear they will not be believed, and for those who do, the courtroom can become a second site of trauma. Time and again, constituents have told me about the misuse of "bad character" evidence, when a survivor's past is wilfully distorted to discredit that person. That is not justice; it is re-victimisation. The Bill must change evidence standards so that no survivor's trauma is ever twisted into testimony against them.

The Bill also gives us a long overdue chance to fix the way in which domestic abuse is handled in the family court system. I urge the ministerial team to go further, and to strengthen protections for the children of abusers. Survivors in my constituency are still forced into contact with abusers who intentionally exploit the legal process to maintain control. We know that the family court system was not built to withstand this kind of manipulation, and that abusers have learnt exactly how to weaponise that—and win. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service—CAFCASS—relies on outdated, prejudiced views of what a family should look like, prioritising contact with both parents even when one has a proven history of domestic abuse. This antiquated policy prioritises the family unit over the child's best interests, even when the cost is the child's trust, stability and wellbeing, so the Bill must go further.

Finally, the Bill can end a quiet injustice: the punishing of women simply for surviving abuse.

I am proud that this Labour Government are putting power back into the hands of victims, and I fully support the Bill.

6.24 pm

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): May I first pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley), the families of victims across this country who are here listening to us today, and the victims who are seeking justice through this Bill? I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) for her strong articulation of concerns about rape and domestic abuse, and my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) for her very strong speech. There have been some extremely passionate speeches today, with constituents' views at their heart.

As a former police officer, I have seen the criminal justice system from both sides, and I can tell the House that it has fallen short in recent years—not just in prosecuting crime, but in supporting those who are most harmed by it. We have heard similar testimony today. This Bill is an important and necessary step towards restoring the principle that justice is not just about punishing offenders, important though that is. It is also about standing up for the most important part: victims. As I have said in Westminster Hall debates, justice delayed is justice denied. Given the previous Government's record with regard to policing cuts, soaring court waiting times, the mismanagement of probation services and our prisons being left full, I am afraid the inheritance is dire, but this Government are trying to correct those mistakes. I will cover just three points, because I am conscious that other colleagues wish to speak.

On victims' rights, it is absolutely correct that we should have reasonable ways of getting a perpetrator into a courtroom, but the Bill needs to go further; I would support audiovisual recording of such things. We do that for the Supreme Court, where people are able to see sentencing. With victims' consent, justice for high-profile cases should be in the public domain. I urge the Government to go further by allowing the rest of society to see justice being served, as I think we are now reaching that point in our technological development.

I welcome the fact that the Bill grants victims a statutory right—not just a courtesy—to be kept informed and to have their voices heard during critical stages of the process. I also support granting enhanced powers to the Victims' Commissioner. As someone who worked as a police officer, I know that antisocial behaviour, from nuisance biking to graffiti and persistent noise, is a major problem in many communities across the country. The Victims' Commissioner will have the power to stand up to local councils and other bodies of authority on behalf of people who have less of a voice in society. I welcome that measure, because I believe that victims of antisocial behaviour should be treated the same as any other victim of crime.

I welcome the time limits for sentencing reviews, which the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) mentioned. He will be aware that the Bill extends those limits; if a review is received in the last 14 days of the existing 28-day period, there will be an additional 14 days to act. Could the Bill go further? Of course it could, but this is a welcome step none the less.

Lastly, I will discuss the court backlogs and the impacts on communities, which I have raised in Westminster Hall debates. I welcome the powers in the Bill to improve sentencing powers for six offences, including unlawful subletting, breaches of restraining orders and violation of criminal behaviour orders. We need to get the magistrates to step in and work with that.

In short, there is a lot in this Bill that we should support. I encourage colleagues to vote for it today.

6.28 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): This Government were elected on a promise to deliver a justice system that puts the needs of victims first. I stood in my constituency to support our police to tackle crime, take back control of our town centre and crack down on antisocial behaviour. Today's Bill, alongside the other landmark legislation introduced by this Government that I have voted for in this House, offers further progress on delivering on that mission for people in Mansfield. There are three parts of the Bill that I would like to highlight; they will be particularly welcomed in my constituency. First of all, there is the strengthening of the powers of the Victims' Commissioner. Under previous Governments, victims have too often been let down when navigating the criminal justice system, which has made them feel like an afterthought. It is encouraging to see victims at the centre of the Bill, which has been welcomed by victims' organisations and charities. They recognise the legislation's potential to make a meaningful difference.

Secondly, the Bill introduces the ability for judges to hand down sanctions to offenders who refuse to attend hearings, including a restriction on social visits and a longer sentence. There are numerous examples of murderers refusing to attend sentencing hearings, and that has led to recognition that we need to clarify the courts' powers to compel attendance. We know that for some victims, the presence of the offender in court is extremely important for closure and resolution. I welcome the fact that the Bill will force criminals to understand and face up to the consequences of their crimes.

Sir John Hayes: At the risk of being repetitive, will the hon. Gentleman press, as I have done—I think the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) agreed with me—for lenient sentences to be dealt with more severely? That is, the Attorney General should have extra time to review those sentences. There is nothing worse for a victim than seeing the perpetrator of the crime given an unduly lenient sentence.

Steve Yemm: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important and salient point, and I thank him for raising it.

Thirdly, the Bill will place a duty on local authorities and social housing providers to co-operate with the Victims' Commissioner on antisocial behaviour. I have spoken many times in Parliament about the need to do more to support the victims of antisocial behaviour in my constituency. Members will all know from their casework inbox that antisocial behaviour is not always a criminal justice matter, and that other agencies, such as local authorities and social housing providers, play an essential part in supporting victims. I therefore wholeheartedly welcome the fact that the Bill will empower the Victims' Commissioner to get the information needed to identify systemic issues, make informed recommendations and scrutinise how the system as a whole responds to that type of behaviour.

In conclusion, the Bill will ensure that the criminal justice system serves victims. The previous Government allowed the prison system to reach the point of collapse, and all too often, victims paid the price. By contrast, Labour is fixing that mess and reforming the social justice system. Today I will vote for this landmark legislation, because I know that its measures will be welcomed back home in my Mansfield constituency.

6.33 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): Every day, we Members hear from our constituents that victims of crime have been sidelined, and left to navigate a system that often feels indifferent to their suffering. My decision about what to raise in today's debate stems from a conversation I had in my constituency surgery a few weeks ago with a constituent who has asked to remain anonymous.

My constituent told me of an abusive relationship that she was in, which resulted in the birth of a child. My constituent ended up in court in a custody battle over her child. In the trial, she was accused of refusing the father contact. She told me how that horrific experience made her feel. She felt that the court system was used as a form of abuse by her former partner. Her claim against him was dismissed as being her word against his, and she asked me to look again at parental rights in the context of abusive relationships. I also heard about a constituent—who, again, asked to remain anonymous—who had been beaten by their partner, who then gained full custody of their child. These are just two of hundreds of similar stories that I have heard, thousands of similar stories that my constituents could tell, and millions of similar stories that women and girls—and, indeed, men and boys—around the country could communicate to us.

We are looking again at these laws today. Under the Bill, courts will be used to empower victims, alleged perpetrators will be required to attend court hearings, the victim contact scheme will help victims to navigate the legal system and will have a dedicated helpline, and automatic parental rights will be restricted in cases of child sexual abuse, exactly as they should be.

The Bill also includes measures to address antisocial behaviour, a subject on which I have received lots of representations from constituents, as I am sure colleagues from across the House will have done. At my constituency surgery on Saturday morning, an individual talked me through the horrific death threats that he had been receiving daily from his neighbour, who spent hours a day screaming through the walls of their semi-detached home at my constituent and his family. This behaviour left my constituent afraid to leave his home. Under current regulations, ultimately nothing was done, and this behaviour

[Adam Thompson]

began to let up only when the neighbour decided to move away of their own volition. That is not good enough.

When the system fails, it is the victims who suffer first and who suffer the most. They deserve better, and this Bill is a critical part of that better future. Today, let us send a message that the days of delay, denial and degradation are over, and that from now on, our justice system will put victims first.

6.36 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a privilege to rise in support of the Government's Victims and Courts Bill, an important and overdue piece of legislation that puts victims where they should always be: at the heart of our criminal justice system.

For too long, victims in towns such as Horwich, Westhoughton and Bolton in my constituency have been treated as bystanders—forgotten once the police investigation ends, let down by poor communication and denied a voice in the system that should be shaped to uphold their rights. I am pleased that the Bill will go some way to fixing those issues.

Indeed, the Bill will give the Victims' Commissioner tools to better hold the system to account and stand up for victims, and therefore to deliver on this party's manifesto commitment made at last year's general election. In particular, I welcome the Lord Chancellor's remarks on new powers for judges to compel offenders to attend their sentencing hearings. Too many families have watched in disbelief as those convicted of the most appalling crimes refuse to face the consequences of their actions in court. This legislation is about upholding dignity in the courtroom and giving victims the right to see justice done.

Crucially, the Bill will also help to tackle the interminable delays and appalling inequality of access to justice left by the Conservatives, after 14 years in power, for this Labour Government to sort out. It will remove legislative barriers that prevent qualified practitioners from being appointed Crown prosecutors, thereby making our system more efficient, flexible and, crucially, diverse. It will empower the CPS to recruit from a broader talent pool, ensuring that cases are prosecuted more swiftly and reducing unacceptable backlogs, enabling the Government to finally ensure quicker justice for my constituents in the magistrates court and the Crown court at Bolton.

Finally, I welcome the provisions in the Bill to close loopholes in the unduly lenient sentence scheme, which have been remarked on by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). The Bill will ensure that the Attorney General will always have at least 14 days to consider a referral, even if it is made at the end of the 28-day limit. These provisions will guarantee that victims and the public are not denied proper scrutiny of lenient sentences due to late submissions. This Bill is thoughtful, robust and, above all, victim-focused. I look forward to supporting it during its passage through this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Front-Bench speakers for the winding-up speeches. I call the shadow Minister.

6.39 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank Members from all parts of the House for their contributions to the debate. We have heard powerful speeches that reflect the deep importance of the Bill, and the heavy responsibility that we all carry for delivering justice not just in name, but in practice. Like others, I pay tribute to the campaigners who have joined us, whom I was privileged to meet briefly earlier, and who are in the Gallery. They have all campaigned on behalf of their loved ones—Sabina Nessa, Zara Aleena, Jan Mustafa and Olivia Pratt-Korbel. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) for her incredibly powerful contribution. To see Cheryl hear those words, knowing that they were going on the record, will have impacted so many Members today. I am sure that it will be something that Cheryl will never forget. We must not forget how difficult the campaigning has been. All campaigners have had to relive experiences and deal with the most unimaginable memories. They pay a very heavy price every time they have had to do that, and I thank them for it, and I know that other Members will do the same.

The Opposition welcome the intent behind this legislation. Measures to compel offenders to attend sentencing hearings and to remove parental responsibility from serious child sex offenders were committed to, and work was begun on them, by the previous Government. The provisions to compel offenders to attend their sentencing hearings come after we have seen one too many disgraceful examples in recent years of the most serious and violent criminals hiding from justice, and from the pain that they have caused. That must end.

We welcome cross-party support on this matter, but at present, the Bill leaves out an important principle. The decision to require an offender's attendance should fundamentally be driven by the wishes of the victims and their families. It is they who must live with the consequences of the crime, and they who should be at the centre of deciding whether the person who harmed them should be made to face them in court. Justice must not just be seen to be done, but should be shaped by those it seeks to serve. We will push for changes to this legislation during its future stages to ensure that is the case. We also want to make sure that the correct balance is struck on the use of force. The Prison Officers' Association is clear: notwithstanding concerns about prison officers' equipment, they will not resile from taking offenders to court. The legislation needs to ensure that only in the most exceptional circumstances does that not happen.

We have heard concerning stories about parents having to spend tens of thousands of pounds in court to remove parental rights from serious sexual offenders, and I welcome the fact that the previous Government planned legislation to begin addressing that. We welcome our shared desire to act on this issue, but the Minister will have heard campaigners' concerns that the approach in the Bill does not cut it. I welcome the Minister's public commitment to considering how to strengthen it.

Last year, when in opposition, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is sitting in the Gallery, supported an amendment for a much broader measure than the Government are proposing today. I encourage her to speak to her colleague on the Front

Bench about how this measure falls short. The debate then was around whether the measure should apply to offenders perpetrating offences against any children, and about where to set the threshold. Our proposed measure was not perfect, but this measure is the worst of both worlds. It relates only those who have offended against their own children, and there is quite a high bar, in that they have to have been sentenced to at least four years. I think that we can do better than that.

We also welcome improvements to victims' information rights and the powers of the Victims' Commissioner. That role, which has been maintained by Governments of all parties for a significant time now, is incredibly important. Baroness Newlove, the commissioner, will look closely at the Bill, and will support victims and campaigners in their efforts to ensure that it delivers. She has also consistently raised a possible source of funding—funding is always a challenge for every Government Department: unpaid victim surcharges. The £1 billion-plus might help fund some of the work that we want to do.

Although there are measures that we welcome, there are changes that are being trailed as measures for victims, but that are nothing of the sort, such as the changes to the unduly lenient sentence scheme, which have caused confusion even in the Chamber among Labour Members; for example, the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) seemed to think that these are measures for victims. The measure on the unduly lenient sentence scheme is nothing to do with victims.

A total of 14,000 people signed the petition for Sasha's law, which was set up by campaigner Katie Brett, who is on the Justice for Victims group, in memory of her sister Sasha. If the House will forgive me, I will detail what happened to her sister. She was murdered in 2013. Aged just 16, she was raped and stabbed more than 100 times, and her body was set on fire. Katie and her family believe that her killer met the criteria for a whole-life order, but he was only given a minimum sentence of 35 years. Katie and her family did not know anything about the right of appeal, and even if they did, who really thinks most people are in the right state of mind to think about that sort of thing within 28 days of the sentence being passed? Katie is not alone. Ayse Hussein, another member of the campaign group who was also in the Gallery today, campaigns in memory of her cousin, Jan. Jan's killer had raped, tortured and imprisoned various girls and young women, and also murdered Henriett Szucs and hid the bodies of both women in a freezer. He did not receive a whole-life sentence, and would probably leave prison one day. Again, her family knew nothing of the right to appeal.

When they saw that changes were to be made to the scheme, campaigners reasonably thought that the changes would extend the 28-day time limit for victims, but no: the Government want to give more time not to victims and families but to themselves. More time for Government means that they have longer to think about and reflect on these deeply personal and sensitive matters than victims will have. That is bordering on insulting, and I think the Minister will share my concerns. In Committee we will put forward amendments that require victims, not just the Government, to be given more time. I hope we will have the support of Labour Members who have committed today to supporting that measure, such as the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal).

We welcome the creation of a statutory right for victims to have information about an offender's release, but we want to know how this will be delivered, who will staff the helplines, how victims will know their rights, and what exactly they will be told. For some time, the Victims' Commissioner has raised the question of whether victims should get to know the specific release date.

Sir John Hayes: To be clear, the current situation allows victims 28 days for a referral, and the Bill extends the period for consideration to 14 days. What we want is for victims to have longer, and it seems absolutely right that that should happen. It would be a perfectly reasonable amendment for the Government to table in order to back victims. Is that really too much to ask?

Dr Mullan: My right hon. Friend has laid out the situation correctly. I counted three Labour Members in the Chamber today who already support such a measure. I look forward to them voting in support of an amendment along those lines given what they have said today, but I might not hold my breath.

Let us be clear that victims of crime need more than just the measures in the Bill. They need a criminal justice system that works and delivers justice swiftly, fairly and consistently. That is where the Bill falls short. When we were in government, we toughened up sentences for the worst criminals. We began the difficult task of unpicking automatic halfway early release for offenders, which was introduced by Labour. We quadrupled legal aid for victims and enshrined the victims code in law. We dedicated £230 million to our tackling domestic abuse plan, including a quadrupling of funding for victims and support services, and we introduced tagging of domestic abusers.

Labour Members made a lot of promises in opposition, including on measures in the Bill. It is now up to them to deliver. The Bill might tighten certain laws and improve the experience for some victims, but it fails to address the elephant in the room. It does nothing to tackle the fundamental problems that victims face every day when trying to access justice. For all the good the Bill may do, it does nothing to address the mounting pressures on our courts after the Government spent almost a year dragging their feet instead of doing everything they could to get the courts operating at maximum capacity. Even now the Lord Chancellor is not pulling every lever available when it comes to court sitting days, as the Lady Chief Justice has repeatedly asked her to do. The truth is that victims are still waiting months, sometimes years, for their cases to be heard. Trials collapse, and offenders walk free—none of that is fixed by this Bill. Being a victim of crime is life-changing. The very least a just society can do is ensure that victims are respected, protected and supported through the process.

We also urge the Government to commit to greater transparency across the criminal justice system. Without reliable data we cannot have accountability, and without accountability we cannot have reform. We will press for the regular publication of statistics on court and hearing delays, trial backlogs, court occupancy rates and administrative performance. Victims and the public alike have a right to understand where and why the system is falling short.

[Dr Mullan]

Although we will not oppose the Bill on Second Reading, we will continue to work constructively to improve the legislation in important ways. We support many of its goals, but we will continue to ask the difficult questions: is it deliverable and enforceable, and will it actually make victims' lives better as it intends? Let us make this legislation a genuine step towards a justice system that works better. Justice cannot be delayed, and it cannot be selective; it must be felt tangibly, fairly and swiftly by those who need it most. They deserve nothing less.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): It is a true privilege to deliver the closing speech on Second Reading of the Victims and Courts Bill. I would like to start by paying tribute to the families of Olivia Pratt-Korbel, Jan Mustafa, Zara Aleena and Sabina Nessa, most of whom have been in the Gallery and whom I have had the privilege of getting to know over the past few months. As today's debate has shown, the House agrees that justice is not optional. Criminals should never be allowed to hide away from it. I am grateful to all of the families for their tireless campaigning to bring forward measures on sentencing hearings. The changes are an important step forward for victims and a testament to their courage.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) for her very powerful words today. They were not just her words but the words of Cheryl Korbel, whose words will stay with me forever and whose words should have been heard by her daughter's killer. This Bill is a legacy for Olivia and for all those who have been failed by the justice system.

As the Lord Chancellor has already outlined, this Bill has victims' experience at its core. As the Victims Minister, it is an honour to meet victims and survivors every single day in this role. This Bill has been created with them at its heart. I echo the tribute from the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) to the Justice for Victims campaigners, who I have also had the privilege of meeting. Becky and Glenn Youens, Susan and Jeremy Everard, Katie Brett—whose story we have also powerfully heard from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan)—Paula Hudgell and Ayse Hussein, who is with us today, have all helped to change the law, and we owe them all a huge debt of thanks for that.

This Bill will make the justice system more efficient—it is a system, and it all needs to work for it to operate effectively—so that victims can begin to move on with their lives faster. I sincerely thank Members from all parties for the thoughtful, powerful, sometimes emotional, but mostly constructive way in which they have contributed to the debate today. Support and justice for victims should never be political. I stand here willing to work with anyone of any stripe and of any colour to make sure that we bring forward the strongest package available for victims.

The issues and the inheritance of our justice system have long been discussed in this place. It is well known to Members what a state our justice system was in when we came into office just 10 months ago, but this Government have begun to rebuild its foundations. This Bill will be just the beginning, not the end of our reform programme for victims. We have the independent review of our criminal courts, led by Sir Brian Leveson. That will lead to a more effective and efficient criminal courts system, improving timeliness for victims, witnesses and defendants without jeopardising the requirement for a fair trial for all involved. We await the imminent outcome of David Gauke's review into sentencing, which will address a number of the issues that Members have raised today.

Turning to some of the issues raised, I will respond first to my friend, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson. I am proud to work with him for victims in this place. He has always been constructive and is always seeking to do what is right. Although I cannot give him the commitment today, I am meeting him tomorrow morning, and we will hopefully have imminent news for him on a lot of the work we have been doing together. I also thank his fellow Liberal Democrat, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for all her work on court transcripts and specifically the pilot for sentencing remarks transcripts in cases of rape and serious sexual offences. Having spoken to victims and survivors, I know how vital that is for them. The pilot is due to end next week and we will soon be publishing our response and how we intend to take that forward. I look forward to speaking with her further on that soon.

Many Members spoke about the parental responsibility measures. I stress that the Government have heard the strength of feeling on this issue. Our focus must be on automatically restricting parental responsibility for offenders who have committed serious child sexual abuse offences—the most heinous crimes in society. We are taking that step today in this Bill for those who have committed these offences against a child for whom they personally hold parental responsibility, because we need to protect those in direct harm. I stress and echo the words of the Secretary of State that this is a novel and untested change in the law. The response from perpetrators is unpredictable, so we have chosen to focus first on cases of highest harm, because we do not want unintended consequences and we need to prioritise all vulnerable children who are going through the family courts. However, this is the beginning, as we have said, and we look forward to working constructively across the House on this measure.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I know that my hon. Friend cares deeply about this issue. In the course of the passage of the Bill, will the Government look at amendments that could see the family courts end the presumption of contact and ensure we end this cycle of abuse?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is a champion for the cause of protecting children going through the family courts, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball), whose contribution today was equally powerful. Meeting her constituent Claire Throssell, and hearing the story of Jack and Paul, will stick with me forever. I think about that on a daily basis.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the family justice system delivers the right outcomes for survivors of domestic abuse and their children. We have

heard loud and clear concerns in the Chamber and from outside on the need to go further. A child's welfare must always be the family court's paramount consideration when making decisions about that child's life. The Ministry of Justice has undertaken a review on presumption of parental involvement, and its findings, along with any recommendations, will be published shortly. I look forward to working with hon. Members across the House, including my hon. Friends, on that soon.

Right hon. and hon. Members across the House made many comments about the unduly lenient sentencing scheme, welcoming measures in the Bill about extending the time limit for the Attorney General to look effectively at cases so that justice can be served. As they will know, the Law Commission is undertaking a review into the scheme as a whole, and I—and I am sure the Law Commission—would welcome their feedback on that. We will look closely at the findings of that review to ensure that any recommendations are carried out effectively.

Sir John Hayes: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way—by the way, I have always liked her. I take at face value what she has said. Will that Law Commission review be in time to amend the Bill? That is key. If it will not be on time, how can we handle that?

Alex Davies-Jones: It is important to look at any Law Commission recommendations properly and effectively. Of course there will be time, because we are in the first year of a five-year Parliament and this will not be the Ministry of Justice's only Bill. As I have said, the justice system that we inherited from the previous Government was in crisis, and we are beginning to put it back piece by piece, starting with our prisons, our courts, our victim support and family courts, looking at the system as a whole. Further legislative vehicles will come forward from the Ministry of Justice where recommendations that have been reviewed could be adopted.

I know that we are short on time, but I want to turn to the comments made by the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) about the IICSA. I will put it on the record again—I think it needs to be said—that the Government are absolutely focused on delivering meaningful change for victims impacted by these horrendous crimes. Earlier this year, we published our plan for responding to the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse through the Crime and Policing Bill, on which I am proud also to be a Minister. We are strengthening the law by introducing a mandatory reporting duty to make it an offence to fail to report or to cover up child sexual abuse. We are also legislating in that Bill to make grooming a statutory aggravating factor in the sentencing of child sexual offences to ensure that that behaviour is reflected in the sentencing of perpetrators.

We also plan to legislate to remove the three-year limit for compensation claims and shift the burden of proof from victims to defendants in the civil courts, as well as amend the law of apologies to encourage employers to apologise to people wronged by their employees. A legislative vehicle is currently being identified for that measure. I stress again that the Government are getting on with the job of delivering for those victims and survivors. We are not delaying; we are actively working at pace to ensure that justice will be served and support is available.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) raised the case of Rhianon Bragg. Again, I was proud to have the opportunity to meet Rhianon and to discuss her case. Through the Bill, we will be strengthening the victim notification scheme and opening it up to more victims, ensuring that timely communication is available. Victims have told me time and again that that is needed; this change will be testament to that. On her calls for Wales, she will know that, as a proud Welsh MP, I will always stand up for Wales and for Pontypridd. A justice system that covers England and Wales robustly is important, and I will ensure that it is there. I will meet the Welsh Government soon to feed back her specific concerns.

A number of colleagues mentioned bad character evidence. They will be aware that the Law Commission is looking into that, and we will carefully consider its recommendations. I stress again that I am willing to work constructively with right hon. and hon. Members on all the issues that have been raised. The Bill is one of many legislative vehicles that we will have.

The Bill stands before us as a legacy for the victims and survivors that I have had the honour of meeting in my 10 months in this role. These changes are long overdue. They will strengthen our justice system and help deliver the accountability and service that victims of crime want and deserve. I urge the House to give them its full support. I stand ready to work with everyone on that. I proudly commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

VICTIMS AND COURTS BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Victims and Courts Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 26 June 2025.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Vicky Foxcroft.)*

Question agreed to.

VICTIMS AND COURTS BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Victims and Courts Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Vicky Foxcroft.)*

Question agreed to.

School Buildings: Northumberland and Newcastle

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Vicky Foxcroft.)*

7 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I am glad to have secured this important debate and to see the Members who have stayed in the Chamber and who share my concerns about the conditions of school buildings in Northumberland, in Newcastle and across the country. Speaking on the conditions of school buildings and the education of our young people should not be used for political gain or for making cheap political points—to be clear, I am not here to do that.

I regularly visit schools throughout my constituency. Despite being schools in the largest geographical constituency in England, they are all united by a clear, overarching similarity: the dedication of teachers and staff to ensuring that their students can access the best possible education and resources. From Queen Elizabeth high school to the Sele first school to Hexham middle school and Longhorsley St Helen's Church of England first school, the list goes on. There is an unwavering strength of community throughout the local schools, fostered by the teachers, the parents, the staff and the students, and it is a testament to the constituency that the region I represent cares so much about the future of our young people.

When we invest in the condition of our schools, we are not just fixing buildings and infrastructure; we are investing in the education of our students and the future of our young people, creating a secure learning environment that should allow all students to reach their full potential. Unfortunately for students of Prudhoe community high school in my constituency, those young people have been let down.

In February, mere months before students were set to sit their GCSE and A-level examinations, structural engineers discovered cracks that threatened the safety of students, staff and teachers. As a result, the school was closed while investigations were conducted. It is testament to the strength of Prudhoe's community, to the staff and headteacher Annemarie Moore, and to the Cheviot Learning Trust that students have been successfully relocated, with minimal disruption, to a building in Washington.

Relocating IT equipment, removing furniture, and launching cleaning and repairs is no small feat, and I commend everyone involved for their dedication to Prudhoe's students and to finding the most appropriate location for them to continue their education in what must be some very trying circumstances. I think back to my own experience of doing GCSEs and A-levels not that long ago. It was challenging enough to do them in a school that was great as it was. It is another thing to imagine doing that with the stress and while losing all that time on the bus every week.

Although everyone accepts that the best outcome would have been for students to go back into school to receive their education on site, that simply would not have been safe. I commend the Department for Education for the hard work, support and reassurance that it has provided to the students, teachers, parents and staff every step of the way. However, the situation raises

an urgent question: how can a school built less than nine years ago, under the previous Government, be closed due to cracks in the building's infrastructure? There is one clear answer to me: the blatant disregard of the previous Government for my constituency's community. The Conservative Government had launched the priority school building programme with the intention of

"rebuilding and refurbishing school buildings in the worst condition across the country."

They appear to have achieved what could be described as the opposite.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this matter for debate. I spoke to him this afternoon to seek his permission to intervene on him tonight, and he has given me that opportunity.

He is right to highlight the issue of schools and their importance. The most important thing about schools is the children—the pupils—as he has clearly outlined. When a school is only eight or nine years old, there should be a warranty that covers all eventualities. The hon. Gentleman might be coming to that and to telling us where the warranty works and does not work. I would expect, as I am sure he would if he had a house with a warranty on it, that there would be substantial cover to ensure that the school could be repaired and that the children could get back there—because that is the most important thing: the children.

Joe Morris: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct: the most important thing is the children. This is about the children of Prudhoe and the whole community. If he ever has the opportunity to visit Prudhoe community high school, which I hope he does, he will see the most extraordinary set of students, and staff who are desperate to get their children back on site and back into learning. PCHS was where my mum went to school, so I have a very personal link to it. I have spoken to the headteacher multiple times about making sure that we get those students back on site with the correct support that is needed, so I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman on that.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech—he is clearly a passionate advocate for his schools in Northumberland. Another school in Northumberland is Berwick Academy, which was Berwick community high school until it became an academy in 2011. Over the years it has been good, but it now requires improvement. In terms of its physical condition, unfortunately the students' toilets now have black mould, which—he was talking about the previous Government—is a terrible failing. We are still waiting on the plan to rebuild that school. In 2021 the county council had a plan to rebuild it, but we are still waiting on an outline business case. Does he agree that these are just not good enough standards for our students, for our parents and for our community as a whole in Northumberland?

Joe Morris: My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for his constituency and for the north of the county. Too often schools in Northumberland have been victims of the mañana attitude of Northumberland county council. For far too long, whether it is on this or on SEND—special educational needs and disabilities—transport, the council has been asleep at the wheel when it comes to issues affecting the children of Northumberland.

The structural issues at the school have damaged not only the community but the children's education. One thing that really stuck out to me was a quote from a former Conservative Education Minister saying that those schools were built

"one third cheaper per square metre on average than schools built under the Building Schools for the Future Programme",

which was Labour's flagship programme. Educational services should not just be used for political gain when our country and our county's young people depend on them. The students of Prudhoe deserve and need a safe place to continue their education. They need it in the short term, and they need it in the long term.

When a report was leaked to *The Observer* that a senior official at the Department for Education had described the "upcoming risk" three years ago that many schools were in such disrepair that they were a "risk to life", I do not believe that a newly rebuilt community high school in Prudhoe was one of the ones at the top of their minds. The school's facilities were described as fantastic when it reopened, and they were a welcome investment, but it is clear that something has gone seriously wrong. I completely take the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the need to look at a warranty. For my generation, a warranty is something we consider for a mobile phone, not a public institution like a school, but clearly something needs to be done.

I would really like the Minister to reflect on what can be done to investigate how this went so badly wrong and how this community was let down, because the students of PCHS deserve nothing more. They deserve better. They deserve, at the very least, an apology. To experience a school closing for an indeterminate period of time is a disruption that no student should have to experience. It uproots lives, derails routine and destabilises students. No child should have to go through this. No parent should be forced to watch their child go through this. As the hon. Member for Strangford indicated, school is not just a building where children learn; it is a building where children should feel safe, supported and at home.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I have had a visit today from students at St Wilfrid's school in Branton—the 17th, of the 43 schools in my constituency, that I have seen or visited—and they spoke about the fabric of the school, and of the importance of the buildings to ensuring not just that students have the right learning environment, but that teachers, parents and the community can feel proud to have a place where children can thrive. The fabric of the building is really important for education. Would my hon. Friend agree that we need to do something for all schools across the country to ensure that their fabric is maintained and looked after?

Joe Morris: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Like him, I have done my best to visit as many schools in the constituency as I can—having said that, I can feel letters coming in from headteachers to suggest that I have not yet got around to visiting. The fabric of the schools is important. Ensuring that schools feel invested in is important, whether they are the smaller schools in my constituency like Kielder, which is incredibly small and has a tightly focused and tight-knit group of young people and staff, or some of the larger schools—or,

[Joe Morris]

indeed, some of the schools out of my constituency, in Newcastle, attended by some children from Callerton and Throckley.

Some of the damage done to the community in Prudhoe is due to the feeling that they were led up the garden path. Prudhoe is an incredible community. It is one of the shining lights of the Tyne valley. It is one of the best places to visit, and to be, in my constituency, although all towns in the Tyne valley are excellent. It deserves so much more—it deserves a Rolls-Royce of a school—but not only was the last Labour Government's Building Schools for the Future programme scrapped; the replacement programme appears poorly crafted at best.

I want briefly to mention another school in my constituency. Haydon Bridge high school has a dedicated teaching force and a headteacher, in David Nisbet, who works tirelessly for his community and is focused on innovative ways of improving the school, on employability, on moving forward and improving outcomes for students. I do not want to mislead the House, but I believe the school serves a catchment area larger than the M25. The challenges for such a rural school are massive. I visited the school fairly recently and we discussed some of the challenges it faced, including getting adequate funds and support. It did get some minor investment under the last Government, which is obviously welcome—don't get me wrong—but it did not touch the sides of what was needed. I would like to see Northumberland county council do something about the state of the toilets in that school, which the headteacher told me was the No. 1 issue raised by the student voice. These are little things that could be done; it is a council-maintained school, and the council should step in and take action.

There is a list of inadequacies in the backing provided to those schools—I could go on. How could these conditions for a school building, and inadequate investment, possibly foster an educational environment that helps students to reach their full potential? I want to draw attention to the work of the RISE programme. I had some correspondence with the head of Haydon Bridge, who recognised that the contextual support that Haydon Bridge high school is now getting—that is mindful of its hyper-rural, hyper-sparsely populated location—is welcome. That contextual support, in relation to schools' structural elements and the socioeconomic make-up of their student bodies, is necessary.

What I have been saying is applicable not just to PCHS and Haydon Bridge high school, but to every school building throughout Northumberland, Newcastle and the north-east that was on the receiving end of 14 years of Conservative neglect. Throughout my constituency, we have wonderful teachers who adapt to the diverse needs of the communities they teach, from the western edge of Newcastle and places like Throckley, and the towns and villages of the Tyne valley, to the most remote communities in the Allen valleys and north Tyne. All those teachers are striving to ensure that their pupils have the best possible start in life. It is only right that their dedication and hard work is delivered in buildings that are fit for the present and for the future.

I will continue to speak up for our young people to ensure that they access not only the education they need, but the education they deserve. I will continue to give a voice to Northumberland, Newcastle and the north-east more broadly. Chronic underfunding, deliberate neglect and thoughtless oversight is what the Conservative contempt for the west of Northumberland brought during 100 years of domination, but that needs to end with this Labour Government.

I once again thank the Department for Education for their dedication and commitment to supporting the community of Prudhoe; I thank Sunderland College for its gracious hospitality in hosting the staff and students of Prudhoe community high school in its Washington campus; and I thank the teachers and staff of PCHS for doing everything they possibly could so students could continue accessing their education, and for reassuring parents during a very difficult transition. Most of all, I pay tribute to the community of Prudhoe and to the councillors who have worked particularly hard, including Angie Scott and Lawrence O'Donnell, who have been fantastic voices for their community during a fraught time.

I am grateful for those who did not jump in and immediately seek to politicise the matter or score points when the news about Prudhoe community high school first broke. Although it is important that we look at this situation in context and at the damage done by the poor decisions made by the previous Government, this is not about scoring points; it is about getting a fair deal for a community that has suffered for too long. It is time that the previous Government are held to account for their failure and neglect, and that starts with what happened to the students and staff at Prudhoe community high school.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for securing a debate on this important subject. I know that he is a tireless champion for children and young people in his constituency, and a strong voice on the matters that he has raised. I also thank all Members who have contributed through interventions.

Education is at the heart of this Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity and give every young person the best start in life, no matter their background. Fourteen years after the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme, this Government inherited a school estate in dire need of repair. We are committed to fixing the foundations for staff and pupils, and determined to drive high and rising education standards for children across the country. That is why we protected key education priorities at the Budget, increasing investment this financial year to £2.1 billion to improve the condition of school buildings—up from £1.8 billion last year—and have committed to continuing the current school rebuilding programme.

We are driving forward that programme, including for five schools and colleges in Northumberland and Newcastle. Starting this April, we are kicking off work on 100 school rebuilding projects and ramping up the pace of delivery, backed by £1.4 billion this year, in recognition of the urgent need to improve the condition of school buildings. We are funding the permanent removal of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in schools and colleges across England, working directly with affected schools on plans to suit individual needs.

We support local authorities, academy trusts and voluntary aided school bodies, which are responsible for keeping their buildings safe and in good working order, by providing capital funding, rebuilding programmes, and extensive guidance and support. They work with their schools on a day-to-day basis and are best placed to manage their buildings, with local knowledge of individual condition, need and priorities. Where the Department for Education is notified of a significant safety issue with a school building that cannot be managed with local resources, we provide additional advice and support on a case-by-case basis. We want all schools and colleges to have the resources and buildings that they need to give our young people the freedom to learn in safe, high-quality environments.

On the specific points raised by my hon. Friend, I appreciate the significant disruption and challenges that the Prudhoe community high school building closure has caused for everyone involved. The safety of pupils and staff is paramount. We have been providing advice and support to the responsible body since we were made aware of the building issues that led to the decision by the trust to close the school in February 2025. We have worked closely with the school trust to identify alternative accommodation options to return pupils to face-to-face education as quickly as possible. All pupils were relocated to the Sunderland College Washington campus, as a whole school community, and resumed face-to-face education from 31 March. I can assure him that our priority and focus remain to return pupils to education on the school site as soon as possible.

I am aware that the school was built as part of the priority school building programme in 2016, as my hon. Friend identified. From our own investigations, we understand that the issue is an isolated one. We are working closely with the trust as its investigations continue into the cause of the problem as a matter of priority. We will continue to work with the trust on remediation options to enable a return to the school site.

We are a mission-led Government, dedicated to breaking down the barriers to opportunity and giving every child the best start in life. We cannot do that without well-maintained buildings in which children and young people can learn safely. That is why we have recently published our school estate management standards, gathering in one place links to key policies, processes and practical advice on the basics of managing a school estate, to help the bodies that manage school buildings daily to progress to fully effective practice. Driving high and rising school standards is at the heart of our plan for change to improve children's life chances, and high-quality, sustainable buildings are a key part of that. For too long our school estate has been neglected. This Government are gripping that issue and ensuring that school buildings are fit for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

7.19 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 May 2025

[Peter Dowd *in the Chair*]

Pensions: Expatriates

9.30 am

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pensions for people living overseas.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. For over 70 years, successive Governments have upheld the frozen pension policy. The result on those impacted has been not only a severe financial toll, but a heavy emotional burden. These individuals built their lives and careers in the United Kingdom, contributed their share through national insurance, and then, often later in life, moved abroad, in many cases to join family members. In doing so, they found themselves victims of an outdated policy. Most of them first became aware of the policy only after noticing that their state pension was not increasing in line with policies such as the triple lock, proudly founded by the Conservatives.

Let me be clear about what the frozen pension policy entails: British citizens who retire in certain countries—for example, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and most of the Commonwealth, in fact—are denied the annual inflationary increases to their state pension. A person retiring to the USA sees their pension uprated yearly, but if they cross the border into Canada, those increases stop. That can result in elderly pensioners receiving as little as £60 a week on average, despite the current basic state pension being £176.45 a week. As many as four in 10 frozen pensioners report struggling to afford most necessities such as food or medicine.

It may be tempting to dismiss this as a problem "over there", but British overseas pensioners are citizens who have lived, worked and grown up here. They remain citizens here; they are constituents, and, with the changes to overseas voting rules in 2024, many are now registered to vote in United Kingdom elections again. That means there are up to half a million voices who feel forgotten, neglected and increasingly betrayed by successive Governments.

Geography should not be an excuse for a lack of morality. British overseas pensioners are making their voices heard; over 75% want their representative to commit to ending frozen pensions. In 2016, at an all-party roundtable event, the now Deputy Prime Minister called for a change on frozen pensions and a commitment to finding a solution. I am glad she did so then; I am concerned that the Government are not doing so now. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether that is still the position of the Deputy Prime Minister, and indeed, the Government.

Since I first raised the issue in the House of Commons last year, I have read and heard many compelling stories—for example, that of Anne Puckridge. Now 100 years old, Anne remains an inspiration to all of us, having served in the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force during world war two—I repeat: the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force—serving six months in each branch. It is fair to state that she has paid her dues to this country. After the war, she lived and worked for the vast majority of her life in the United Kingdom, until she moved to Canada in 2001. She is one of around 60,000 veterans affected by the policy.

The emotional impact of the policy cannot be overstated. Many of those affected say that they were never informed that their pension would be frozen when they moved. Anne was not told, and the campaign reports that 86% of pensioners affected had no idea the policy even existed before they were impacted. That is too little, too late.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on this timely debate. He just referred to a 100-year-old. Does he agree that the frozen pension issue is not just about the fact that people are seeing a relatively small pension compared with the one they would have had if they were still a UK resident? Because of the policy, in their final years of existence on this earth, they will have a paltry pension to pass away on.

Gregory Stafford: I entirely agree with the hon. Member, and I will come on to some of that later. He is absolutely right that there is not just a severe financial impact, but a moral impact. Constituents of ours, who have paid their dues—and, in Anne's case, more than paid their dues given what they have done for this country—will end their days on pretty much nothing when inflation is taken into account.

Last December, I challenged the Prime Minister during Prime Minister's questions on his decision not to meet Anne during her visit to the UK—a visit that required an 8,500 mile round trip, which is no mean feat at the age of 99. She was not offered a meeting with the Prime Minister.

Anne's story is sadly emblematic of a much wider injustice that continues to be perpetrated on our elderly. Only this year, we saw continued poor treatment through policies such as the removal of the winter fuel payment and the betrayal of the WASPI women, both causes that were vociferously supported by the Labour party in opposition. Labour is happy to freeze pensioners and happy to freeze their pensions.

The Prime Minister's refusal to meet Anne is symbolic of a Government who are, I regret to say, unwilling to listen to some of the most elderly and vulnerable among us. That brings me to the crux of today's debate: the Government do not seem willing to engage in any meaningful way with the overseas electorate affected by the policy. I remind hon. Members that 158 parliamentarians from across the UK and Canada wrote to the Government last October calling for an end to the policy, and more than 140,000 people signed Anne's petition to meet the Prime Minister in December.

The most concerning aspect of the Government's current line of response is the estimated cost of ending the policy altogether. Based on calculations made annually, the Government quote the figure of £950 million a year to uprate and backdate all pensions, but that is not the ask. The End Frozen Pensions campaign has made it abundantly clear that it is not calling for retrospective compensation. It is asking simply to receive the same

[Gregory Stafford]

annual increases going forward that are awarded to pensioners living here, and in the USA, France and a host of other countries.

The cost of such a policy change is a mere £55 million a year—a fraction of the overall pensions budget. Will the Minister agree to meet the End Frozen Pensions campaign to accurately assess the cost of what is being requested by pensioners? Will he work with us, in good faith, to find a solution that reflects the modest and realistic nature of the appeal?

Beyond the severe individual hardships, there are important and growing geopolitical consequences to the point where the policy is now creating serious diplomatic tensions with some of our closest allies, as pensions are frozen in 50 out of the 56 Commonwealth nations. How can we speak proudly of our Commonwealth partnerships while refusing full pensions to veterans in the Falkland Islands, British-born nurses in Barbados or former civil servants in Canada? Those are countries with deep and historical ties to the UK, yet they are forced to subsidise our negligence.

Australia and Canada have made their frustrations clear. Canada has been formally requesting a resolution to the issue for more than 40 years. In October, 103 Canadian parliamentarians wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to address the issue. The Canadian and Australian Governments already provide full state pension increases to their citizens living in the UK. Meanwhile, they are left picking up the tab for British citizens residing in their countries.

With Canada and Australia having just held national elections, and with new trade discussions likely on the horizon, what assessment has the Minister made of the policy's impact on our future ability to trade and meaningfully engage with those countries? Will he look at how reciprocal barriers to the policy may be overcome?

As I draw to a close, let me return to the heart of the matter. The policy causes financial hardship for a large number of affected elderly people. It also causes indignity and isolation; their repeated dismissal by the Government is leading to their political disenfranchisement. Putting an end to this blatant injustice is not only achievable but affordable—£55 million a year is not beyond our means. What is ultimately lacking is not money, but political will.

I have one practical ask of the Minister: will he meet campaigners to more fully understand their demands? If not to resolve the issue outright, will he at least commit to acknowledge the request for uprating on a going-forward basis only? Will he agree to work with me and campaigners to explore how, at a minimum, awareness of the policy might be improved, given the vast majority of impacted pensioners still report having no knowledge of the policy's existence prior to moving overseas? All that those pensioners are asking for is a level playing field, so that those who have contributed can live out their retirement with dignity and security.

9.39 am

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) on securing this important debate on an issue that is often overlooked, as I think we would all agree. It is fair to say that successive Governments have ignored this issue for decades and, understandably, many UK citizens are unaware of what would happen to their state pension if they were to relocate to one of the countries affected by this regressive arrangement.

It seems completely arbitrary that someone could emigrate to America and continue to receive an annual uprating in their state pension, but not if they went to Canada. We have heard that the blight of frozen pensions affects nearly half a million British citizens living overseas, despite the fact that they paid national insurance contributions for much of their working lives.

The impact of this arrangement is absolutely shocking. We have already heard that four in 10 frozen pensioners report that they struggle to afford items such as food and fuel. In my view, our state pension system is already insufficient to meet the needs of millions of existing and future pensioners, but let us imagine how inadequate it would be if the pension failed to rise at least in line with inflation or earnings for more than 20 years of someone's retirement.

Most pensioners in this position were never informed that their state pension would be frozen in this way. The scandal therefore has a number of parallels with those behind other campaigns, such as that affecting women born in the 1950s, who argue that they saw their state pension age increase without due notice.

Such measures only end up hurting the most vulnerable in our society. Taken alongside recent decisions to means-test the winter fuel allowance, which was mentioned earlier; the refusal to pay compensation to the WASPI women; and the proposed cuts to disability benefits, it could appear that the Government are trying to balance the country's books on the back of some of the poorest members of our society.

Although there will always be a cost to Government decisions, I ask the Minister to consider that beginning to uprate the frozen pensions at a future date would cost only around £55 million a year. Most commentators would understand that that is not beyond the realms of possibility. It would be a significant step not only in showing that the Government are on the side of older people who have made a contribution to our country, but in unravelling a long-standing anomaly that the public simply cannot understand.

Finally, the Government should also consider that with changes to the overseas voting rules, as was mentioned earlier, many of the UK pensioners affected by the frozen pension scandal are now in fact registered voters in the UK.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): My West Dunbartonshire constituent, Fraser, has now retired and lives in Australia. He is one of the half a million British citizens and voters now affected by this 70-year outdated and harsh practice. He is from my home town of Clydebank. He worked in the ordnance factory in Bishopton for decades, and then in the Govan shipyards. He paid his national insurance contributions for many years, but his pension is frozen. He tells me that every year it is getting harder and harder for him to make ends meet.

Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a scandalous injustice? We are not seeking a full backdating, but for the Government to introduce some form of yearly indexing to answer that injustice.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: Yes, I wholeheartedly agree that now is the time to grasp an issue that successive Governments of all shades have failed to grasp. This is the Government's chance to do something positive for older people by ending the injustice once and for all, and I urge them to do so.

9.44 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for introducing this debate and for putting his case so well on a subject that has been brought to the House's attention on numerous occasions, both in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber. There are several people in the Public Gallery today who have been involved in the campaign; we thank them for all their correspondence to ensure that we can follow the campaign on behalf of so many British people. Just last week, I was working on some cases in my office. These issues occur regularly, as the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) said.

As we are all aware, the Government's policy on freezing state pensions for British pensioners living overseas affects some half a million pensioners and is fundamentally unfair. I believe that it is morally unfair, because it penalises pensioners who have earned their state pension through decades of national insurance contributions. They have done the same as everybody else and have paid national insurance contributions and tax. They made a contribution to the society that they lived in. Today they are being penalised, and it is grossly unfair.

People who have worked for their entire life in United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are being denied the annual pension increases granted to UK residents simply because they chose to retire abroad, often to be closer to family. As they get older, they want to support their family, but their family also want to support them, so there is a physical necessity. People want to make the most of their savings elsewhere, as anyone is entitled to do. For example, a pensioner in Australia or Canada, where pensions are frozen, might receive some £7,000 annually, while UK-based pensioners get more than £11,000 annually as a result of triple-lock upgrading.

There is a real differential and a real problem to be addressed. Over time, inflation diminishes the value of frozen pensions, pushing some expat pensioners into poverty. That has an impact not just on them, but on the countries in which they now live. In extreme cases, pensioners have reported surviving on pensions worth less than £20 a week in real terms. Nobody could survive on that—it is impossible. We ask the Minister to give us some support and give us something to tell our constituents and their families.

The freeze is fundamentally unjust. It penalises pensioners who have earned their state pension through decades of national insurance contributions. I think of Anne Puckridge, a 100-year-old world war two veteran who served in all three branches of our armed forces decoding messages during the war. After working in the UK until the age of 76, way beyond her pension years, and paying all her taxes and national insurance, she moved to Canada in 2001 to be near her daughter. Her daughter wanted her to be there, and she wanted to support her daughter. Her pension was frozen at £72.50 per week, rather than the £169.50 she would receive in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which has resulted in an estimated loss of £60,000 over 23 years.

When Mrs Puckridge notified the Department for Work and Pensions of her move, she was not informed that her pension would be frozen. At no stage was it intimated to her, "Look, if you go there, this is going to happen." Because of that false pretence—because it did not disclose the full facts of the case—I believe that the DWP stands accused in the moral court of law for how it treated this lady. She only discovered the situation when her first expected increase did not arrive. She stated:

> "It's the injustice of it that is so unfair, the fact that we were never warned."

They were never told. That is disgraceful.

As other hon. Members have said, the widespread lack of transparency is reminiscent of the lack of transparency with WASPI women. The all-party parliamentary group on frozen British pensions has reported that nearly 90% of all affected pensioners were unaware of the policy before moving. Given that those half a million British pensioners have paid into the national insurance system throughout their working life, does the Minister consider it fair to deny them the annual pension increases that residents of the United Kingdom receive?

An especially important factor is that the affected pensioners are not adding to the pressures on public services such as the NHS on their retirement. When people get to 79 or 80, their impact on the national health service will be greater. They may have complex needs. Their age is agin them. Very clearly, their dependence on the NHS at that stage is much greater. If we take that out of the equation and they go to Canada, America or Australia, there is a real saving to the NHS. There will be no prescriptions either. I speak as someone who takes 14 tablets a day just to stay alive; most of them have to do with diabetes, but that is by the way. If someone is saving the NHS all that money, is only right that that be considered in the financial equation.

The findings in the 2020 inquiry report of the APPG on frozen British pensions indicate that the policy affects war veterans and even some members of the Windrush generation, who have returned to their country of birth but now face economic hardship as a result of this policy. The Windrush generation caught the imagination of this great nation. I became aware of their case through being an MP, and it is a really justifiable one. They are now being penalised if they decide to go back home to be close to their families, having come here, worked all their days and paid their national insurance contributions and taxes.

As the current policy is leaving expat British pensioners having to return to the UK, I ask again whether the Minister will conduct a cost-benefit analysis to assess whether ending the freeze might reduce long-term costs by preventing the need to repatriate. The cost factor is of such magnitude that a review might persuade the Government to ensure that expatriates get their pension.

The freeze is also morally indefensible. It punishes a perfectly valid legal choice to live abroad, and it ignores the contributions that these pensioners made to the

[Jim Shannon]

economy and to our society. Many moved abroad with a reasonable expectation that their pension, a right earned through years of work, would retain its value. The arbitrary distinction between countries with and without an operating agreement lacks logics and smacks of red tape and bureaucracy gone mad: pensions increase in the US but not in Canada or Australia, for example. We always used to blame the EU for bureaucracy. We might blame it again, of course; later today I presume that we will have a statement in the Chamber on the UK-EU deal, so we will have a chance to go over the past once again.

I support the APPG's recommendations. It is time to end the frozen pension policy and provide full uprated pensions to British expat pensioners as soon as possible. I believe that that stance is supported by evidence from the Governments of Australia and Canada, with which we have a good working relationship. Has the Minister had the opportunity to talk to the relevant Ministers in those Governments? It is not that they are telling the UK what to do, but I understand that they have suggested that we may need reform. If the Minister has had the opportunity to talk to them, what has come out of those talks?

It is unjust to penalise pensioners for living abroad when they have paid into the system like everyone else. By uprating pensioners globally, the UK would honour its moral and economic obligations and ensure that members of the post-war generation that rebuilt Britain can retire with the security that they deserve, wherever they choose to live. Today is an opportunity to make that request and that plea again, and to ask our new Minister to look at the issue in a positive way and consider all the cost factors. There are many things in the pot that should be looked at once again.

9.53 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Eleven years ago, my colleague Ian Blackford stood in pretty much this spot talking about exactly the same thing. Exactly the same arguments that were made during that debate could be made today. Things have not moved on. We are not in a better position. At that time, we were talking about 550,000 frozen pensions; now we are down to 500,000. People are dying before they receive their entitlements.

Pensions are a social contract. We pay our national insurance and our taxes into the system in the expectation and with the understanding that we will get something out of it when we become pensioners. This is not party political: it applies to all Governments over the last 70 years. No UK Government have been willing to fulfil the contract with pensioners who choose to live in a certain country. I do not think that that is fair. When we begin to pay taxes, we are not told that our pension entitlement will vary if we choose to live in one of these countries.

That they are overwhelmingly Commonwealth countries seems even more bizarre. We have a special relationship with the Commonwealth: for example, 12% of Canadians claim Scottish heritage and 14% claim English heritage. Scotland is a nation of emigrants as well as a nation of immigrants—not an island of strangers. It is a brilliant thing that we Scots are found all over the world. In a significant number of places, people with Aberdeen accents can be found speaking the Doric.

People should be allowed to go and live with their family in the expectation that the Government will continue to support them in older age, not pull the rug out from under them. They have paid into the system just the same as the people who choose to live here. In fact, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) says, they are taking less out of the system than those who continue to live here. The cost-benefit analysis shows that people overseas are not using the NHS here on a regular basis. They are not getting the free prescriptions in Scotland. They are not getting prescriptions down here. They are not getting a free TV licence—well, nobody is getting a free TV licence. They are not getting the benefits that an older pensioner living in the UK would expect. They are not taking those things out of the system, yet the UK is still unwilling to uprate their pensions. They are going to live with their families, in a significant number of cases, and not getting their entitlements.

The Deputy Prime Minister previously said:

> "The situation is unfair, illogical and doesn't make sense."

It has never been enough of a priority for any Government to sort out, but given the current Government's electoral standing with some older people on the basis of WASPI and the winter fuel payment, it might be an idea to solve the situation now and gain back some of that capital.

A lady who lives in Canada is coming to visit Scotland in June and is going to pop into my office while she is here. She is from Aberdeen. She went to St Margaret's school and her husband went to the school I went to; there is an annual music prize awarded in his honour. At the end of her email asking to come and see me, Maureen added something about frozen pensions:

> "I believe the Prime Minister is not happy about us Canadians kicking up a fuss. We have been doing it for at least 15 years, but no one listens."

That is the biggest injustice of all: the fact that we are not listening.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) has secured this debate. Like many of us, he is standing on the shoulders of giants: the issue has been brought up for years and years, but we have never managed to make enough of an impact on the Government to get the change to happen and have them recognise that this is important. As several Members have said, now that we have had a change in the electoral rights of people overseas so that they are able to vote for longer, perhaps the Government will feel more under pressure. But it should not have taken that. It should have been understood that this was a moral decision. It does not matter where someone chooses to live out their twilight years; they should have the same entitlements as others who have paid the same amount over the years.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) spoke about his constituent from Clydebank who worked in Govan. The country has been built—these islands have been built—on the hard work of these people throughout our manufacturing history. Anne Puckridge, who is an unbelievable human being, was in the RAF and made a huge input to our prosperity and the safety and security of these islands. We are paying

these people back by saying, "Nah, you've paid the same as everybody else, but you've chosen to live in a different postcode, so we're not paying it." This is an injustice that needs fixed.

I know that I have managed to speak for seven minutes, but actually it is pretty difficult to stretch this out. All there is to say is, "This needs sorted. Please could you sort it?" That is the passionate case that we are all making on behalf of our constituents and those who might choose to move to other countries in future. We do not want them to have to ask, "Do I want to live in Canada where my daughter lives? Do I want to live somewhere else, or do I have to stay here because I cannot get my pension uprated?"

I am not asking for a full commitment on any of this. I am not asking for all the backdated stuff. I am not asking for a commitment for every single individual. I understand that some international agreements may have to be made to make some of this happen. But I want the Government to say, "We recognise that this is a priority for people and that there is an unfairness in the system. We will look at doing what we can to ensure that people, no matter where they choose to live, get the pensions that they are entitled to."

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind Members that we are not supposed to use the second person. Please address things through me and not directly to other Members.

10 am

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) on raising an issue that, quite simply, is a matter of national shame. I had the privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on frozen British pensions for more years than I care to remember, and in that task I had the staunch support of Sir Peter Bottomley, Lord German and many others. We all regarded this as a non-partisan issue. It was quite simply a cross-party matter that had to be resolved.

In spite of the effort that we put into it over many years, successive Governments of all political persuasions have sheltered behind the myth that we uprate pensions only in countries with which we have a reciprocal arrangement. Historically, we have had a reciprocal arrangement with the United States but not with Canada. On one side of the Niagara Falls, people get their pension uprated; a couple of hundred yards across the river, people do not.

That is arrant nonsense, and it is unjust for all the reasons we have heard this morning. These are British citizens who paid their dues over their whole working lives before emigrating. They are as entitled to the full state pension as any other British citizen. John Markham, of blessed memory, led the campaign in Canada for many years. The irony is that, every time he came back for two weeks to make the case to whoever was in power, he would claim his two weeks' uprated pension, because the moment he set foot on British soil, he was allowed to have it. Where is the sense in that?

The point has been made that pensioners in the majority of Commonwealth countries do not receive uprated pensions, but pensioners in the European Union do, because we reached a reciprocal arrangement when we left the European Union. I am delighted that expat UK citizens living throughout the European Union are getting their pension uprated. That is absolutely right—they have paid their way—but I fail to see why people living in what we proudly used to call the British Commonwealth do not get their money.

What about those living in Australia? What about people like Norma Maloney in South Africa or the greatly revered Anne Puckridge, who I have been privileged to meet on many occasions, in Canada? Why do they not get their money? The answer is quite simple: it comes down to the Treasury solicitors, who have historically been absolutely terrified that, if we give an inch, somebody will try to bring a class action to get a backdated pension, and of course those sums would be astronomical.

When Sir Oliver Letwin was in the Cabinet Office, he made the eminently workable proposal that we should uprate whatever pension the recipient was getting at the time of the uprating. Anne Puckridge would get the triple-locked increase on her fairly pitiful pension, not on anything retrospective. That is not what the expats ought to be receiving or what they are entitled to, morally, but it would work, because over time—by attrition, as people fall off the perch—we would reach the parity we ought to have today.

I was as critical of the previous Government as I am of the current one. They are sheltering behind a Treasury lawyers' position that is wholly untenable and, I believe, patently dishonest. These elderly people—and I speak as an elderly person—have paid their way. They are entitled to their money. They should have it, and the Government must do something about it now.

10.6 am

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, Mr Dowd. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for securing this important debate.

Nearly half a million UK pensioners living overseas are being penalised, not because they did not pay into the system but because of where they now live. They are our citizens—our veterans, carers, former teachers and nurses. They worked all their lives, paid into the national insurance system and are now denied the annual uprating of their state pension. Their pensions have been frozen, sometimes for decades, based purely on whether the UK happens to have a reciprocal agreement with their country of residence. As we have heard, it cannot be fair that a pensioner in the US sees their pension rise each year, while a pensioner in Australia does not.

The Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for an end to that injustice. We have already heard about Lord German's sterling work, and I would like to highlight the policy research by Liberal Democrats Overseas, which has proposed a fair and affordable five-year plan to restore full uprating, starting with those who have lost out the most. Campaigners acknowledge the cost of their demands, and are even willing to accept partial uprating as a first step. However, as we have heard, previous Governments have refused to act and, worse, have turned down repeated offers from countries such as Australia and Canada to negotiate new agreements. This Government can take a fairer approach.

[David Chadwick]

It is interesting that the Welsh Affairs Committee is looking into how we can engage the Welsh diaspora in promoting brand Wales overseas. A new settlement for British pensioners living overseas strikes me as a good way to engage with the British diaspora, particularly as we strike new agreements with countries all over the world. We Liberal Democrats call on the Government to stop hiding behind outdated excuses and to start treating all UK pensioners with fairness and dignity.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): People who receive a pension income have worked throughout their careers for that money, and they deserve to be able to access it fairly and with the proper information, lest we see a repeat of the WASPI scandal. Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that, for people receiving a UK pension, uprating should not be a lottery of land borders, and that His Majesty's Government should redouble their efforts to find reciprocal arrangements with countries currently without an agreement with the UK?

David Chadwick: David Lloyd George created the social contract on which our pension scheme still runs, and I am sure he would be proud to hear my hon. Friend calling for that social contract to be adhered to.

Several hon. Members have drawn attention to the fact that we now have many constituents living abroad who have the right to vote. To better represent their needs and make more progress, the Government might wish to consider the idea of overseas constituencies. That would give one or two hon. Members the opportunity to represent the needs of people living abroad who certainly warrant their full pensions.

10.10 am

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for securing this debate.

Nearly 13 million UK citizens receive the state pension, and around 1.2 million of them live outside the UK. Most of those people are entitled to state pension increases because they live in the European economic area or in the 15 other countries with which the UK has signed an agreement. In return for uprating the state pension, those countries have promised to continue supporting their own citizens living in the UK.

It is right that UK citizens who have diligently paid into the UK national insurance system over many years are entitled to receive their UK state pension, whether or not they decide to move abroad. However, the issue at the forefront of today's debate is whether pensioners who reside overseas receive annual increases to their pension.

As other hon. Members have set out, this depends on the specific country in which a person lives. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I know it is unfair that some UK pensioners abroad receive state pension increases while others do not, simply because of the country in which they live, not because of the contributions they have made to the UK national insurance system. Addressing that is a matter of fairness and equality, especially for those who have paid into the UK system for their entire working lives.

There has been a long-standing campaign to rectify this discriminatory system. However, the last Conservative Government refused to take any positive steps to increase the number of reciprocal agreements, which would have had the effect of uprating pensions. In fact, it is disappointing—although unsurprising—that under the last Conservative Government, agreements lapsed and the best interests of both British nationals residing overseas and non-British pensioners residing in the UK were neither prioritised nor championed.

We saw catastrophic economic mismanagement under the last Administration, with spiralling inflation rates and a soaring cost of living. That hugely exacerbated the gap in the value of pensions paid to recipients in countries with reciprocal agreements and those paid to recipients in countries without, with a completely unacceptable impact on hundreds of thousands of pensioners.

The majority of pensioners who live overseas receive pension increases because they live in countries with reciprocal agreements. However, many fall through the gaps and are left struggling. Currently, half a million UK pensioners living overseas do not receive the annual state pension increases that those in the UK and in certain other countries are entitled to. This issue affects my constituents and the constituents of many hon. Members. Their pensions are effectively frozen at the rate when they first started claiming—sometimes decades ago. This frequently leaves long-term pensioners abroad significantly worse off over time.

The UK Government have stated that they uprate pensions only in those countries where there is a mutual agreement. Many of those agreements have not been updated or renegotiated for decades, and no new ones have been signed since 1981. Countries such as Australia and Canada have repeatedly requested new agreements, but the UK has declined. Frozen pensions are the norm in countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and parts of the Caribbean and Asia, despite significant British expatriate populations. It is critical that the Government tackle this injustice and take steps to ensure that all pensioners receive the support to which they are entitled. However, it is also critical that this comes alongside a fair deal for the UK taxpayer.

Rather than unilaterally increasing the state pension for UK citizens living abroad, I urge the Government to prioritise entering new arrangements with other countries that would manage costs and provide oversight. That would be more affordable and provide a better framework for monitoring payments. Colombia, Mongolia, Thailand, Uruguay, Brazil, Australia and Canada have all approached the Government in the past decade to ask for a reciprocal agreement, and each time the Government have refused.

We have seen the Government enter new bilateral and multilateral trade negotiations over the last few weeks. As they work to build new trade partnerships with countries across the globe, there is a real opportunity to speak out for thousands of British pensioners who currently face unfair financial hardship. I urge the Minister to ensure that existing agreements are not allowed to lapse. The Liberal Democrats also call for the inclusion of reciprocal pension agreements in future trade deals. More broadly, the Liberal Democrats believe that the Government should conduct an independent review of frozen pension policy, an issue that has been raised with me time and again by constituents.

The previous Conservative Government abandoned pensioners and totally failed to give them proper support. This Labour Government have also treated pensioners poorly by cruelly ripping away the winter fuel payment. The Liberal Democrats are proud to be the ones who introduced the triple lock, lifting thousands of vulnerable pensioners out of poverty.

Sir Roger Gale: It saddens me enormously that the hon. Lady is trying to make a partisan case, simply because—as I recall, and I think I do recall correctly—a member of her party was the Pensions Minister in the coalition, and one of many pensions Ministers who stood by the present policy of refusing to allow these pensions to be paid. The blame lies across the board, not with any one political party.

Sarah Olney: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his intervention; his memory obviously goes back further than mine on this issue. However, we are dealing with the current situation, and the Minister here today is the person who currently has the power to do something about it. I am merely reflecting on the set of circumstances that led us here.

What I will say is that, in the Liberal Democrat manifesto for the last election, we committed to the triple lock. We remain committed to the triple lock, and I will take further opportunities to ask the current Minister, with the power currently to do something about this issue, to redouble his commitment to it. I will also make the point that, as I am sure the right hon. Member will agree, that this Government are not doing everything they can for pensioners.

The Liberal Democrats are looking to the future, and we want to build a country that is the best place in the world in which to save for and enjoy retirement. We want to give everyone the chance to enjoy a decent retirement, by developing measures to end the gender pension gap in private pensions and to ensure that working-age carers can save properly for retirement. We must also improve the state pension system by investing in helplines to ensure quicker responses to queries and resolution of underpayments, as well as ending the scandal of lost top-up payments by overhauling the processing system and providing proper receipts.

The Liberal Democrats are proud to be the party that champions the rights and protections of pensioners. We will continue to hold the Government to account to ensure that a fair outcome is reached for all pensioners—both those who reside in the UK and those who live abroad.

10.17 am

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) on securing this important debate, and I thank everybody who is here to take part; it is heartening to see what is, to all intents and purposes, cross-party consensus on this long-term issue, and I am grateful to be able to speak about it today.

It is worth reminding everyone in the Chamber that, as we have heard, this is a full cross-party challenge that we have faced over the last decades and that, as we have also heard, successive Governments, be they Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat, have not grappled with it enough. I am grateful that that point has been raised, because I do not think it would be honest of us to reflect on it in the way that had been done previously.

We have a duty of care to pensioners at home and abroad, and I believe we are all in agreement about that today. However, we have heard much about inconsistencies in how support is delivered and about the ultimate postcode lottery; we speak of postcode lotteries a lot in this place, but this one perhaps wins the prize for being the ultimate postcode lottery. The arguments have been well rehearsed.

The two strongest criticisms of the existing overseas pension system are, first, that most pensioners do not realise that the frozen pension policy exists—perhaps before emigrating to live with their family, as we have heard—and, secondly, that not all British pensioners overseas are impacted by the policy because of reciprocal arrangements, as a result of which, there is a very unequal playing field. Like many here today, until an elector emailed me when I was a candidate in the election, I was not fully aware of this situation.

A large number of overseas pensioners are covered by reciprocal arrangements, which enables us to treat overseas pensioners moving to the UK comparably with UK citizens living abroad. In total, about 60% of overseas pensioners are covered by reciprocal arrangements, which, where possible, is of course the preferred option for pensioners.

However, we have heard some harrowing cases, and Anne Puckridge has certainly got her mentions this morning. That 99-year-old veteran of world war two has lived in Canada since 2001 and is still receiving the £72.50 a week that she has received for 24 years. With 442,000 people receiving a frozen state pension overseas, and often receiving as little as £65 a week or indeed less, the real-life impact of this approach is considerable.

In my South West Devon constituency, I have heard from Denise Bateman, formerly of Ivybridge and now residing in Australia; Gillian Clarke, another Australian resident, who at the age of 87 has seen no increase in her state pension in 27 years; Stephen Mumby, also a resident in Australia; Clive Gray; and Deborah Matthews and Laurie Morbey, who have both raised this issue with me. They are predominantly resident in Australia, but there are also examples in New Zealand and Canada.

As their correspondence highlights, those people could have moved to Turkey or the Philippines, and they would be receiving an unfrozen pension. Yet, they have moved to Commonwealth countries and, despite having worked for many years and contributed to life in the UK, are now faced with a limited pension. Anecdotally, those I have heard from in Australia lived and worked here for far longer than some of those now living in Europe. Indeed, some good friends of mine are retired and have lived in Europe since before I was born, yet they still qualify for the state pension and receive the full pension, having not even worked here in the last 50 years.

As with anything of this nature, the Government need to make sure they properly communicate pension terms to people well ahead of the time they expect receive a state pension. We have seen in the WASPI women campaign the issues that can be caused, and I believe that no one wants to replicate that. British citizens need to know the implication of any move

[Rebecca Smith]

abroad so that they can plan. That is the fairest thing to do, and perhaps work could be done—for example, with well-known employers or organisations in countries that generally support emigration—to help improve the information flows on this topic, in addition to the work that the Department for Work and Pensions and others are already doing.

In 2020, the cost of uprating frozen pensions to 2020 levels was estimated to be around £600 million, and the cost of uprating to today's levels would be significantly higher. However, as we heard, the End Frozen Pensions campaign has suggested that people do not want the backdating and are happy to see their pension uprated from this point in time, which would cost £55 million. It is worth reflecting that Ministers appear to be having to hunt for cash down the back of the sofa, and I appreciate that the Chancellor has to make the sums add up. That said, the End Frozen Pensions campaign has clearly highlighted that overseas pensioners are in effect net savers for the UK—there is no burden on the welfare system or the NHS—meaning an aggregated saving of around £2,500 per person, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted.

As we have heard, the current system of reciprocal agreements ensures there are protections on both sides for countries in the EU or the EEA, and I am happy to support that long-standing and right approach. However, in the light of the new voting rights, which we have also heard about, this is perhaps the right time for the Government to start exploring conversations on further reciprocal arrangements, especially with Commonwealth friends such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia—countries to which my own constituents have moved. We have heard about the diplomatic awkwardness that this issue causes, which should also prompt such conversations.

The Liberal Democrats mentioned the challenges around pensioners and pensions, and we understand the difficult situations caused by the lack of compensation for the WASPI women, the cruel cut to the winter fuel allowance and the fact that the Government pledged to reduce energy bills by £300 without mentioning that we may all have to wait until 2030 for that to be delivered. Pensioners up and down the country are understandably losing confidence in this Labour Government and in the Prime Minister.

We have talked about the 442,000 people receiving a frozen state pension, but what will the Government do about the 10 million pensioners here in the UK who have had their winter fuel allowance removed? I was surprised to hear that an additional 100,000 pensioners accessed A&E departments last winter, compared to the winter before, which is a direct consequence of Labour's policy to literally leave pensioners out in the cold.

It really does not matter what dedicated campaigners say in this debate, because we all know that when it comes to issues facing pensioners, we could argue that the Government have their fingers in their ears. However, today is a chance to break the cycle, and for this new Government to be the one that makes this change. It sounds as though there would be enormous support in the Chamber if they chose to pursue that.

We need to push for more action to deliver reciprocal agreements, if possible, with allies such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where the overwhelming majority of those with frozen pensions currently reside. That should help to provide more security for all those still affected. None of the Front Benchers here has been a Minister before, so we get the privilege of being a fresh pair of eyes, while recognising the lack of action in the past, whether that be under the Lib Dems, Labour or Conservatives, as we have discussed many times. I understand the Minister's previous expert experience in this field, and he might have a few ideas of his own, which I look forward to hearing.

I appreciate the concerns raised by colleagues about specific cases, and I sympathise with those who committed so much to our country in their early lives, only to face challenges unprepared, when they should have been made aware of them. Information is clearly going to be a large part of the solution, and debates such as this go a long way to raise the profile of issues that do not always get the airtime they deserve. Judging by the Minister's nods during the debate, I believe that he agrees, and I know from other things he is doing that information is top of his agenda. I hope we will see some commitment to that this morning.

Finally, I plead with the Minister to get the tone right this time. As discussions take place, will he please not treat these pensioners like the WASPI women and those affected by winter fuel payments? He should be honest in the debate, think clearly about the cost and provide constructive solutions that can help reduce the number of pensioners in this position in five, 10, 15 or even 30 years' time.

10.26 am

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for opening today's debate, which was granted by Backbench Business Committee, and for setting the scene so well, in a way that others then followed.

I thank all hon. Members who made the time to speak and set out their cases. They covered issues that are important to many state pension recipients living abroad. I recognise that those who are affected, who obviously cannot speak today, feel strongly about this issue; many of us, in their shoes, would feel the same. On that basis alone, it is right to debate this subject and to hear from hon. Members about their constituents, including my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister), the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and others who are not in Scotland.

Late last year, my predecessor, now the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, met Anne Puckridge and others from the End Frozen Pensions campaign to discuss the policy's impact. We have listened, and I read case studies every week, either from hon. Members who have written in about them or in letters directly from pensioners themselves. We are all aware that there are many countries where high inflation has posed particular challenges in recent years, so I recognise the salience of today's subject matter.

We all recognise the importance of the state pension, as the UK's foundation of support for older people. In 2025-26, the Government will spend over £174 billion on benefits for pensioners. That represents 5.8% of the UK's GDP and includes £145 billion spent on the UK

state pension, including for those living abroad. I raise those facts because they are important; they sit behind the debates that we often have here or in the main Chamber about the size of the state and the level of taxation.

As hon. Members are very aware, the state pension is uprated abroad only when there is a legal basis for doing so, which is why we are here today.

Kirsty Blackman: On that, the state pension is uprated abroad only when there is a legal requirement to do so. There is no legal bar to the UK uprating those pensions in countries where there is not a reciprocal agreement in place.

Torsten Bell: There must be a legal basis for making payments. However, the hon. Member is right to say that under the specific policy I am setting out, payments are made only when there is a legal requirement to do so. As the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon set out right at the beginning, that is a long-standing policy that has lasted for 70 years. For many years, the priority for successive Governments of all parties has been to prioritise those living in the UK when making difficult spending decisions on pensioner benefits. That was true of the coalition Government, when a Lib Dem Pensions Minister chose for five years not to make any progress on this issue. He did that under a Conservative Government and a Conservative Prime Minister all the way through.

The hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick)—my constituency neighbour—mentioned Lloyd George, who introduced a state pension with no uprating whatever. The first uprating of the contributory state pension in 1946, under the Attlee Government—again, I am making a point about the cross-party basis of some of these decisions—was not paid to pensioners living abroad. So since the beginning, policy on pension uprating has been consistent.

As we have discussed, people move abroad for many reasons—to be with their family, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) set out, enjoy a particular climate or return to their country of birth. It is for individuals, not the Government, to make those decisions, but when they make them, they will of course consider the impact on their finances, alongside a wide range of other factors. As the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) set out, our duty is to ensure that information regarding the effect of living abroad on the state pension entitlement is available. These days, that is on gov.uk, and includes information on where the uprating does and does not occur.

Pensioners who have retired to other countries will obviously take into account the UK state pension position, but they will also look at the wider provision for pensioners in those countries. Many countries will have a means-tested provision that is similar to the UK pension credit. It is true that the real-terms value of some people's state pension will fall over time, but in most cases, particularly in the countries that have been mentioned today, that will be compensated for by higher means-tested payments when they are living abroad.

It is also important that further advice can be obtained from the International Pension Centre or the Pension Service. The hon. Member for South West Devon asked whether there is more we can do, and I want to be clear that I am always open to new ideas about what more we can do to communicate what happens to the state pension if people choose to retire abroad. More generally, I am happy to meet with any hon. Members who have suggestions in that area.

Jim Shannon: I gave the example—others will have similar examples—of a constituent who had moved to Canada. She phoned the DWP to ascertain her pension obligations and responsibilities, and was assured that her pension would follow her, but quite clearly it did not. The Minister outlined a system whereby it should be able to follow her, but that lady went a stage further—she actually phoned the Department, which told her that it would not matter and she would still receive her pension—and quite clearly it did not.

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Member for sharing that story. I have not heard of specific cases like that, and he might like to write to me about it. The position with respect to Canada is clear: somebody can take their state pension with them, but the uprating will not be paid once they are living in Canada. That is what the gov.uk website spells out. However, I am open to talking about individual cases and to hearing suggestions about what more we can do to communicate clearly, because this is an important issue.

Of the 1.1 million state pension recipients overseas, 652,000 live in countries where pensions are uprated. However, I do not want to hide from what that means, because that is why we are here today; as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) said, it means there are more than 400,000 pensioners living in countries where uprating is not paid. By volume, those are in the countries that have been mentioned most today: Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Many hon. Members have spoken eloquently of the impact of living in a country where that uprating is not paid, and I have heard about it myself in correspondence from those affected, as I have said.

That does not mean that we can wish away the real trade-offs that are involved. There would be significant additional costs to be borne by current taxpayers if uprating were extended to everybody living overseas, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North calls for. The cost of increasing all state pensions in payment to current UK levels would be approximately £0.9 billion a year, as has been mentioned. If there were any above-inflation uprating, it would then increase gradually over time.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Torsten Bell: Let me get through the discussion of the costs, and then I will take any interventions on that issue.

I recognise that many campaigners are asking for indexation in future, not for retrospective indexation, although there are obviously disagreements among campaigners about the exact ask to prioritise. However, arguing that we can simply put in place indexation going forward does not escape the need to recognise the real trade-offs involved. The long-term impact would be the same, as the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) explained. In the end, moving to forward-looking indexation would take us to the same increase in spending levels as would immediately

[Torsten Bell]

lifting people up to the current level of the basic and new state pension. It is the same effect in the long-run, and we owe it to everyone to make financial decisions based on the long-run effects of the policies that we call for.

There are wider considerations about the net financial effects of these decisions. The hon. Member for Strangford and others raised the issue of health expenditure. To get to a wider understanding of the net effects, we have also to take into account where income is taxed and where it is spent. That does not get us away from the underlying point, which is that, focusing narrowly on the question of uprating, the costs are as I have set out.

Sarah Olney: Does the Minister not agree that under a reciprocal arrangement, not only would we uprate the pensions of our citizens who are living in a partner country, but that partner country will then be required to uprate the pensions of their citizens living here, and that would obviously be a benefit to this country, because they will have a greater income that they can spend here? Can the Minister assure me that that particular effect is included in the estimates?

Torsten Bell: I recognise the point that the hon. Member is making. I offer a few reflections on that. Some countries already do provide uprating for their pensioners based in the UK, so some of that is already in place, although it does vary across countries. It is, obviously, always for countries to set in place their own social security system. That is why the Australian system, for example, provides means-testing of the state pension, or elements of means-testing of their state pension. I suspect most people—with the possible exception of the Leader of the Opposition on occasion—do not support means-testing of the state pension.

I come on to the other point made by the hon. Member in the debate, which was to call for new reciprocal arrangements to put in place more widespread uprating. As I have explained, that would require significant tax rises. There is no way around that. The issue she raised would not negate that effect.

It is worth putting ourselves in other's shoes. Why did the Liberal Democrat Pensions Minister for five years not change the policy on this issue? It was because he recognised the costs involved, and that it would involve tax rises. It is worth us reflecting on why the situation is not as some people would like.

Sir Roger Gale: Does the Minister consider that it is morally acceptable for Canada to uprate the pensions of its citizens in this country and to also bear the cost of this country not uprating its pensions for UK expats in Canada when Canada has formally offered to enter into a reciprocal arrangement? Why is that offer not being accepted?

Torsten Bell: Canada is a close ally of this country. We talk about that a lot in the current climate, for a whole host of reasons, and that is not going to change.

The right hon. Member is correct that Canada has made requests for a formal reciprocal arrangement, but the UK Government's position—and that, again, of all parties—is that we are not in the business of new reciprocal arrangements with any countries. The only recent agreements have been the roll-over agreements with the EU and the EEA by the previous Conservative Government, but that was to maintain the existing social security arrangements, not to put in place any new reciprocal arrangements over that time.

I fully recognise the case that many hon. and right hon. Members have made today. I see the ongoing campaigning that those Members have put in place and that of many pensioners who are affected, but as I have said, the policy on uprating pensions is a long-standing one. More importantly, changing it involves real costs and trade-offs.

I gently note—very gently, so that I get out of this room safely—that many of the people calling for pensions to be uprated are also calling for reverses to the winter fuel payment policy and compensation for WASPI women, but are not calling for less investment in the NHS or higher taxes. In the current financial climate, there are real choices, and there have been no suggestions in this debate about how any of these policies would be funded.

I fully recognise the issues raised by Members today. I hope that I have explained why that recognition sits alongside the long-standing policy in this area, and I look forward to hearing the closing remarks from the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon.

10.38 am

Gregory Stafford: I think I have 22 minutes; I usually get about 22 seconds to wind up, so this is a luxury, but I will not test your patience, Mr Dowd, by taking the full time.

We have had a very wide-ranging and helpful debate today. I am especially grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) who brings a significant amount of experience from many years on this issue. It was interesting to hear his historical knowledge and, indeed, the potential solutions that he raised.

This is very much about the social contract, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) suggested. People have paid in, so they should expect to receive an equitable and fair playing field, whether they happen to have moved to somewhere in the European Union, the Philippines, Canada or Australia, or they are still living in this country.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted exactly why this is morally unfair—it is by not just the dint of the policy itself, but its impact on people. There are people living on very small incomes who are having to choose between paying their heating bills in those countries and their medicine and food. That is clearly not appropriate, especially as we have discovered many people who have paid into this country not just financially but in terms of the things they have done, for example, serving in the armed forces.

It was interesting to hear from the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) on the Welsh perspective and his interesting idea for a number of MPs for overseas citizens. I am not sure whether that is Lib Dem policy.

Sarah Olney *indicated dissent.*

Gregory Stafford: It is not; the Lib Dem spokesman is shaking her head, but it is an interesting idea. Before entering Parliament, I have to confess that I had no idea this was an issue. People might say that is because I am so young I would not even had to have thought about it—I can see what you are thinking, Mr Dowd. But it has come up time and again. The case of Anne Puckridge really highlights it, but many other Members have mentioned other people who have been affected. I thank the campaigners on this for highlighting it to me and to others. Without them, this issue would really have died a death.

Even after having understood this issue, I did not fully grasp the nature of the problem. I understood that we did not have reciprocal arrangements, and we were not paying uprating in places such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other Commonwealth countries, which I did not agree with, but I could just about understand because they are foreign nations. I was contacted yesterday by a representative of the Falkland Islands Government—the Falkland Islands is a British overseas territory, and is essentially Britain in all but name. There are 80 people there in this situation, many of whom have served in the armed forces. It seems bizarre that even for our overseas territories we do not uprate the pension. I reflect on that, and I hope the Minister does.

I was disappointed but not surprised that the Lib Dem spokesman, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), decided to get in some political digs, conveniently forgetting that her party had a Pensions Minister for five years in the coalition Government who did absolutely nothing about it. I think that her comments do her, this campaign and the pensioners no service at all.

In contrast, I thought the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), the Conservative spokesman, were measured and sympathetic. I wanted to correct her on one thing: Anne Puckridge is now 100, and I do not think she would want to be known as that. I suppose it was heartening to the campaign, but disappointing overall that my hon. Friend, like so many of us, has had so many people contacting her about this. She was right; we have a new Government and new Ministers, so we could have a fresh look at this.

I do not lay the blame at the feet of the current Minister, or indeed, the current Government. As I said at the start, this is a multi-generational, cross-party problem for which we all should take some responsibility. However, it is in the current Minister's hands to fix the problem now. As the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) said, given everything else this Government are doing to pensioners—whether that be personal independence payments, WASPI, winter fuel and so on—this issue could be one where people see they are actually on the side of pensioners.

I am afraid I was a little bit disappointed with the Minister's speech. I accept there will be a cost to the taxpayer, though I think it is disingenuous to say there is a trade-off between this particular policy and cuts to the NHS. It is a more complex situation, and I get that, but I fear he has been captured—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich said—by the Treasury solicitors. That is unhelpful.

Finally, I go back to the requests I made. Will the Minister agree to meet with the campaigners so that we can go through the cost-benefit analysis and have a discussion about whether his figures or the campaigners' figures are accurate? Will he at least commit to looking at some of the reciprocal pensions arrangements that we have with some of the countries that have been mentioned today, including Canada? Will he commit to doing everything in his power to make sure that first, people understand this policy and where they can and cannot get their pensions uprated? Even if he cannot commit today to sorting this out, will he commit to it still being on his radar going forward? If he has the opportunity—if finances allow—will he look to remove this policy so that every person, wherever they live, gets the pension they deserve?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered pensions for people living overseas.

10.45 am

Sitting suspended.

GP Services: Christchurch

10.57 am

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I will call Sir Christopher Chope to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to GP services in Christchurch.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. This short debate was triggered by the perverse decision, announced last week, of the Dorset integrated care board to refuse permission for Burton surgery to reopen. The surgery is a premises in Burton village in Christchurch constituency, which has had a GP surgery for more than 30 years. The surgery was converted from a guest house. It has good car parking nearby and a pharmacy adjoining it, and is a well-loved community facility.

In 2007, the GP practice in Burton was amalgamated with Christchurch medical practice and became a branch of that practice. Then, in December 2023, patients were told that the Burton premises would be closed and all patients transferred to Christchurch medical practice in Purewell. I wrote to the integrated care board to express my concern at the impact that would have on the people of Burton. Although the ICB said that it was powerless to intervene because the surgery was only a branch, local residents were confident that another GP practice would acquire the premises and continue to provide GP services, because the building is in really good order: it has 11 consulting rooms and is a very attractive proposition for another GP practice. It was expected that it would be put on the open market for sale.

Much to everybody's frustration, that did not happen. The owners of the practice decided instead to do a closed deal with a veterinary hospital based in Christchurch, which agreed to acquire the site, thereby excluding the possibility of another GP practice taking it over. However, one thing they had not thought about was that they needed to get planning permission for a change of use. The planning application was strongly opposed by local residents, backed by me, and it became a major issue in the general election campaign. Eventually, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council refused the application on a series of grounds, the principal one being that

"insufficient evidence has been submitted to demonstrate that the loss of a community facility at this site would not result in a substantial decline in the range and quality of facilities and services available for local people."

In essence, the local planners said that it was necessary to keep the surgery in Burton because removing it would take away an important community facility. If nobody else was willing to open such a community facility, I would not have been able to put forward this argument, but another practice has now purchased the premises and is willing and ready to open a branch in them. However, in order so to do, it had to apply to the integrated care board for permission. It did just that last November. Extraordinarily, it took months before a decision was reached—so long that I raised the issue in an oral question. The Secretary of State himself took it on board and, as a result, the ICB was pushed into having to make a decision on 23 April. As I understand it, the decision was made on 23 April, but was not communicated until some time afterwards.

In the meantime, and in anticipation that the application to reopen the branch was essentially a formality, South Coast Medical completed the purchase of the building and started the refurbishment. The plan was that it would reopen this summer. The ICB's decision to refuse permission for the branch surgery to reopen is, in my view and that of my constituents and local residents, beyond belief. I appeal to the Minister to intervene on behalf of the 4,500 patients whom the ICB accepts would choose to re-register at Burton were the surgery to reopen.

Ironically, it is said that the cost of re-registering those 4,500 patients would be a significant burden on the health service. That is because people who are in their first year with a GP are thought to be more burdensome, so the GP gets paid a slightly larger amount for each of them. To describe the exercise of patient choice in that way—as a burden on the NHS—seems to me to be pretty wide of the mark.

After I heard the outcome of the application, I tabled a series of questions, one of which sought to establish how many people have been transferring from one practice to another in Christchurch each year, because I wanted to get a feel for that. The answer, from the Minister for Care, stated that the information is not available.

Some of the arguments made in favour of not allowing the surgery to be reopened, in answer to another of my questions, were based on the number of appointments already taking place in Christchurch. That prompted me to table a named day question on that subject. At about 9.30 am this morning I received a holding response, saying that the information relating to the number of appointments at surgeries in Christchurch over the past couple of years is not available, yet the ICB says that it used that very information to help it reach its conclusion. I hope the Minister will explain why the ICB, which I think is basically the custodian of all this information, so far has not decided to share that information with Ministers. Either it has the information or it has not been wholly open in suggesting that the information helped in its decision.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Christopher Chope: I will not just at the moment, but I may do later.

This whole issue is a test case for the credibility of the new Labour Government's promises about increasing access to GP services. In August 2024, after the general election, no one in government or in the NHS, including Dorset ICB, was suggesting that a GP surgery in Burton was not needed. Now that a serious plan to reopen the surgery is in place, without any capital cost to the NHS because South Coast Medical has acquired the premises using its own resources and does not need a grant, it is surely perverse that the ICB is arguing that such a

branch surgery can no longer be afforded and that reopening it would adversely affect the financial viability of other practices in Christchurch.

I tabled questions on that issue as well. There is no evidence that other practices in Christchurch would be adversely affected, and I challenge the Minister to share with me, the House and my constituents the evidence that has been used to reach this decision. Will she also explain what can be done to appeal against the decision? It has been handed down by an unelected and unaccountable quango, or arm's length body, which, among other things, has said to me in a letter that there have been no complaints about the quality of service being provided by the other main practice in Christchurch, which was operating the Burton branch and chose to give it up. However, there have been many complaints; I have fistful of them here, some of which I may refer to. Either the ICB does not open its post, or it is closing its eyes and ears to representations about issues relating to the availability of doctors, the importance of patient choice and the inconvenience of having to travel so far in a community that is not well served by public transport and where taxis are very expensive. If somebody is dissatisfied with the quality of service being provided by their general practitioner, they may wish to exercise their choice, and it is good to have some healthy competition, but all that seems to be being squeezed out by the integrated care board.

I will quote from a letter from Helen Yonwin, who writes: "Since the surgery closed last year in Burton and patients were transferred elsewhere, trying to get an appointment has been a nightmare. They seem to be unable to cope with the extra patients. The telephones are not always answered and it can take over 30 minutes to eventually get a response, only to discover that you are number 20-something in the queue. After a long wait to be told there are no available appointments, so ring again the next day, there are still no appointments, 'But you can receive a telephone consultation from a GP'—but the next available slot is in four weeks' time."

That is not improving access to GP services, which is what the Government pledged. It is a levelling down and reduction in service. I hope the Minister will say that it is intolerable and unacceptable, and that for it to be condoned, if not supported, by the ICB is appalling.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Christopher Chope: I will just finish quoting from this letter: "If you are lucky enough to get an appointment, the next problem is getting there. Many people don't drive or have a car, public transport is not easy for those with mobility issues, and taxis are expensive. If you do drive, another problem arises because parking is very limited." It continues: "I cannot understand how it was stated that no complaints have been made. I and many others, in emails sent to the ICB, mentioned several issues, but I doubt any were noted." That is a letter from one constituent; there are lots of others.

A new housing development has been approved in the locality of Burton; with some 700 new houses, there will inevitably be increased demand for GP services. Indeed, the developer, or the owner of the land, has already approached a surgery to see whether it would open a branch on the new estate. That will not be necessary if the branch to which I have referred is reopened.

I will quote from another letter. I will not give the person's name because it refers to their condition, but she has multiple sclerosis. She says: "It's so hard for me to get to the Purewell surgery even if you can get an appointment…I fell nearly two years ago, and I still haven't had a proper appointment to see a doctor to see what's causing my pain." She says that she wants to have a choice.

Another person wrote: "I previously lived in Stour surgery's catchment"—that is another surgery within the Christchurch constituency—"and they were amazing. I couldn't fault them one bit. I then moved to Burton and was forced into this alternative provision." She says that it is a nightmare to get hold of and that we should have a right to choose who we want as our GP. She also says, "Every time I've had an appointment, it's been running 30 to 45 minutes late." Reopening the local branch surgery would resolve those problems.

I hope that I have given a flavour of the strength of local feeling on this fraught issue. Somebody else wrote to me that not everybody wishes to complain publicly about the lack of service available from providers in the Christchurch medical practice, because they are worried about the consequences for them. I think that such concerns are irrational, but they are understandable.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his campaign on this issue. It is what we expect from him, because he is very assiduous and very committed to his constituents. He has clearly laid out the issue. Does he feel that the main reason for the ICB's not pursuing the case is finance? If it is, even with the proposed new housing, perhaps the Minister needs to look at the case personally to ensure that it is not being held back by anything that the Government are doing at this moment in time.

Sir Christopher Chope: The hon. Gentleman mentions the issue of finances. I tabled a written question about how much the health service has been spending on general practice in the Christchurch constituency. Again, rather surprisingly, the information is available only for the year ending 2023, so we do not have any information for 2023–24. Although I would not expect the figures for 2024–25 to be available, I certainly would have expected the total costs for 2023–24 to be available by now. The answer says that in 2022–23, some £17.5 million was spent on providing GP services in Christchurch.

The idea that the cost of transferring patients from one practice to another should be a decisive factor against the reopening of a branch seems extraordinary. It makes a nonsense of the argument that we must rein in our expenditure. While we are talking about the ICB's expenditure, for the last several years I have been complaining that, at any given time in Dorset, under the ICB's supervision, there are some 250 patients in Dorset hospitals who have no need to "reside", as it is called. In other words, those people are in hospital but do not need to be there. Every day, that is 250 patients at a cost of between £500 and £1,000 each.

The same body is presiding over that scandal. It said last year that it was going to halve the number, but it has failed to do so—indeed, the number is just the same as a year ago. Instead of taking it out on the people of Christchurch and saying, "You can't have access to a reopened branch surgery," it should be looking at its own poor performance. As I have said to the Minister

[Sir Christopher Chope]

informally, the idea that Dorset ICB will somehow be amalgamated with other ICBs—creating even more bureaucracy, and making it even more remote from the people—is, again, farcical.

My final point—I want to give the Minister time to respond—is that, in answer to a written question, the Minister for Care said that as a result of what has happened in the last year, the number of patients in Highcliffe has increased by about 150. In Christchurch medical practice, the total number of patients has actually fallen; in the Stour surgery, it has increased; and in the Grove, it is about the same. To suggest, on those figures, that the financial viability of other practices in Christchurch will be threatened if this branch surgery is reopened seems to be without any justification. I hope that the Minister will be able to give a positive response, although I note that the Minister for Care is not responding to the debate.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Christopher Chope: I will not, because I want to ensure that the Minister has time to respond to those points.

11.18 am

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for raising GP surgeries, which is a vital matter to so many of our constituents. That is because GP surgeries are the front door to our NHS, and visiting a GP represents far better value for taxpayers' money than accident and emergency departments. That is why, since coming into office, fixing general practice has rightly taken up a lot of our bandwidth, energy and focus.

It is worth remembering that we inherited a system in total disarray, and a bizarre situation in which we simultaneously had a GP shortage and newly qualified GPs looking for work. I am proud of everything we have done to turn GP services around in the nine or 10 short months we have had. However, before I come on to that, let me address some of the hon. Gentleman's points.

Ahead of this debate, I asked my office to get in touch with the integrated care board locally so that we had a fuller picture of what is happening on the ground. My understanding is that Burton surgery was previously a branch of Christchurch medical practice, which is just under two miles away. The surgery closed in August last year because the owners wanted to sell. Although the ICB did not approve of the closure, it recognised that it had little influence over the sale as GPs are independent practitioners.

I am informed that the local community were—as they often are—understandably unhappy with the news about changes to the services, and that the hon. Gentleman got in touch with Dorset ICB. When a veterinary business tried to buy the site, the application received over 100 objection letters and the sale did not go ahead. The ICB then received two further applications to renew the site, about which it considered a number of factors, as is normal practice: whether there is good access to surgeries in the area; what the impact would be on patients and on community needs; how it would affect the quality, equity and safety of provision; and how it might affect the stability and ability of other local GP services to run viable surgeries in their area.

I have been assured that the decision that Dorset ICB took was not taken lightly but based on the needs of and the benefits to all prospective patients in the area. The surgery catchment area for Burton is covered by Christchurch medical practice and Farmhouse surgery. As the hon. Gentleman outlined, reopening would have required additional costs, which were not justifiable given the financial challenges facing the NHS—something that we all understand. Consequently, Dorset ICB felt that those costs would reduce provision in the area and lead to significant financial pressures on other local surgeries, which could lead to further closures.

Dorset ICB has seen no degradation of services for patients since the surgery closed and the number of appointments has not decreased overall. I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the numbers, and I do not know why that information is not available; I am happy to take that question back to the Department. Local MPs should have as much information as possible about services in their areas. These are taxpayer-funded services, so I will check as to why that information is not available. Dorset ICB has not received what it calls formal complaints from patients, but it has received communications from a local campaigning group, which is important. On balance, however, it decided that it could not reopen the practice.

On the point about housing needs, which I talked about for many years when I was an Opposition Member of Parliament, the Government absolutely understand the issue of additional demand and the challenge it poses to primary care infrastructure.

Clive Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Karin Smyth: I will not, because the hon. Member for Christchurch wants me to answer his questions.

We are working closely with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to address the issue of additional demand in national planning guidance and ensure that all new and existing developments have an adequate level of healthcare infrastructure for the community. The NHS has a statutory duty to ensure that there are sufficient medical services, including general practice, in each local area, with funding and commission reflecting population growth and demographic changes. The hon. Gentleman highlights an important point that we will continue to pursue.

Those are the facts about the decision made by the ICB, which was its decision to make. I am not going to stand here and tell the hon. Gentleman that he is not right to do what he is doing; he is absolutely right to fight for the best possible service provision for the people of Christchurch, and I would do the same for my constituents—all hon. Members do that. These decisions are best made locally, however, and it is for Dorset ICB to use its autonomy to make them, not Ministers in Whitehall.

Sir Christopher Chope: The ICB is not elected or accountable. We have an elected and accountable council—BCP council—which decided that the surgery in Burton, a community facility that had been there for more than

30 years, should remain and that permission should not be granted to change its use, because of its value as a community asset. Why should the ICB be able to second-guess the elected representatives of the community? Is that not intolerable?

Karin Smyth: I could talk for a long time about the accountability of health services, but we do not have time for that. The legislation, as set up by the previous Government and others, is clear that ICBs have responsibility for commissioning services on behalf of the local population within the resources that they have available. They need to do that under particular guidelines, which I have outlined, and it is important that they keep up communications with Ministers and local people.

I am not au fait with the day-to-day running of Dorset ICB—that is not for Ministers—but at a strategic level, I recognise that Dorset currently has the fifth-highest ratio of GP clinicians to patients in the country. I know that everyone wants to be in first place, but I am sympathetic to the ICB's arguments that other practices may suffer if the surgery were reopened. Closing the former site has made the services at Christchurch medical practice and other neighbouring practices slightly larger, which has given them greater resilience in the long term.

The hon. Member for Christchurch mentioned the new Labour Government and what we are trying to address. I do not have the figures in front of me, but every hon. Member present will know there have been hundreds of GP service closures—not just branches but practices—over the past 14 years. The trend has been for primary care to receive a smaller share of the NHS budget, and as a result, secondary care has had much more activity. We all know about the 8 am scramble, and some GPs have been forced to work in appalling conditions with leaky roofs and buckets catching rainwater.

That is why our priority is to stem the flow of resources away from primary care, shift the focus of the NHS from hospital to community, and begin building a much better neighbourhood health service. Our objectives are to hire more GPs, reach an agreement on a new contract, rebuild surgeries through increased capital spend, and bust the bloated bureaucracy that has built up. In the summer, we committed to bringing in an extra 1,000 GPs through the additional roles reimbursement scheme, which we backed with an extra £82 million of funding after changing a technicality that prevented primary care from hiring more new doctors. We have surpassed our initial target and 1,500 more GPs are now serving patients on the frontline. Since we took office, I am happy to confirm that 11 have been recruited by Dorset ICB, including, as I understand, three in the hon. Member's constituency.

In conclusion, we are committed to shifting the NHS from hospital to community and to building a neighbourhood health service. We are bringing back the family doctor.

Sir Christopher Chope: One of the issues is that since the branch surgery was closed, Christchurch medical practice has reduced its number of full-time equivalent GP doctors. There used to be 10.7 and now there are only 10.2, which may be part of the problem. Surely it must be in the interests of the Government, the taxpayer and everybody else to allow a branch surgery to reopen, at minimal additional cost, to the benefit of 4,500 people in the Christchurch area.

Karin Smyth: As I said, decisions about how the additional costs are borne and the resilience of the rest of primary care in the area are for the ICB. It has been very clear that that is not the case, so the hon. Member may want to take it up with the ICB.

Since we came into office, we have been doing the hard yards of restoring the role of general practice at the heart of our health service, including in the hon. Member's constituency, by investing in people, places and programmes that cut bureaucracy. We are laying the foundations for an NHS that is fit for the future, particularly based around primary care and neighbourhood health centres.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Adoption and Kinship Placements

[Mrs Carolyn Harris *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for children in adoptive and kinship placements.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Harris, and I thank so many hon. Members for being present in the Chamber. I will keep my speech as short as possible so that they can all get in—bear with me.

Children who are no longer able to live with their birth parents are the responsibility of us all. I committed to speak up for them and their families before my election, so it is a privilege to be here to do just that. We are primarily here to talk about those who are fortunate enough to have a permanent placement through adoption, or a secure long-term arrangement with a special guardianship or child arrangements order—in other words, kinship care. However, we know that the average amount of time that a young person or child spends in care before they are adopted is 15 months, and that often involves multiple placements. We also know that around 80% of those children may have experienced neglect, abuse or violence before their adoption. The adoption and special guardianship support fund was set up in response to those realities, which is why the recent uncertainty and the limitations that have been placed on it have been so concerning and have resulted in this debate.

Over recent weeks, the adoption and special guardianship support fund has been raised a number of times in Parliament, first when we were waiting for news about the fund for 2025-26 after damaging delays, and several times since the Government announced that they would continue funding the scheme, albeit with significant rule changes. Hon. Members on both sides of the House, many of whom are here today, have been raising these issues and speaking out, as I have, and seeking opportunities to raise the future of the ASGSF in detail.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. Many of us have been talking to special guardians in our constituencies—I certainly have in Hartlepool—and one of their huge concerns is that the cut to this fund will dissuade people from taking on these incredibly important roles in the future. Does the hon. Member agree that that will result in costs popping up elsewhere for the state, costing us more in the future?

Rebecca Smith: The hon. Gentleman takes the words right out of my mouth, and if he stays for the whole debate he will hear me say exactly that. He raises an important point: we are asking people to care for the most vulnerable children, and if we do not give them the tools to do that, they will not apply in the first place.

I am pleased to have secured this debate to shine a further light on the issue, highlight how the Government's recent position is a false economy, and put further pressure on them to do the right thing and reverse the recent changes. Without access to the previous level of support offered through the fund, there is a real concern that the number of adopters will fall, and more children—including those with some of the most difficult and challenging stories—will face the long term in care, seeing their future massively impacted as a result.

Before I progress, I wish to pay tribute to the thousands of parents, guardians and carers across the country who have been fighting for children and young people in their care—those who are unable to live with their birth parents—and especially to those families in my constituency of South West Devon, some of whom I have met, and some who have written to me to share their experiences. They are all, rightly, incredibly worried about the impact of the cuts on the support that they previously received, and it is a privilege to be here to speak on their behalf.

I also place on record my thanks to the charities that have been campaigning against the recent changes to support for children in adoptive and kinship placements: Adoption UK, Coram, Kinship, Family Rights Group, and the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies to mention a few, as well as local adoption agencies such as Adopt South West, which serves families in my constituency and others in Devon and Cornwall. Their work has been especially powerful over the past couple of months as they have shared information with us and we have fought together.

The adoption and special guardianship support fund was set up under the Conservative Government in 2015 as a result of the Children and Families Act 2014, and it was designed to help families to access the specialist therapy services that they may need. Since the Adoption and Children Act 2002, adoptive families have had a right to an assessment of their adoption support needs by their local authority. However, the 2014 Act introduced a number of further measures to support adoptive families, including the fund. In 2023, the fund was expanded to include kinship care, enabling some children with special guardianship or child arrangements orders to qualify for support too. That was a solid legacy to work from.

Since July 2024, however, there has been a cloud of uncertainty over the future of the adoption and special guardianship support fund. Although it is a lifeline for thousands of vulnerable children, it was left hanging in the balance. Families were left wondering whether the therapeutic support that their children desperately need would vanish overnight.

In April, the Department for Education announced significant cuts to the fund. The annual therapy funding per child has been slashed from £5,000 to £3,000. The separate £2,500 allowance for specialist assessments has gone, match funding to support the most complex cases has gone, and the ability to carry support across financial years has also gone. That is a shocking 40% reduction in funding for the support that we all know is highly specialised and that, as a result, comes at a cost.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate, and I agree 100% with the point that she is making. Two constituents in West Dorset support two children with multiple needs—overlapping autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and significant trauma of the kind she mentioned. The funding for a one-off assessment remains, but the ongoing funding to support those children no longer exists, and that is a fundamental problem.

Rebecca Smith: Absolutely: the goalposts have completely shifted. As we saw with farming, it happened overnight, so there was no warning for families and no ability for them to come up with other ideas.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Following the announcements in April, a constituent got in touch. She has two adopted granddaughters who, given their traumatic start in life, rely on specialist support. Does the hon. Lady share my concern that diminishing the support fund will have long-term financial impacts on the Government's budget?

Rebecca Smith: I agree with the hon. Member that there is definitely a concern around that issue. I will touch on it more later, but it has already been brought up this afternoon.

I turn to what some of my constituents are saying. My constituent CA said:

"These children are slipping through the net and it is the parents who are dealing with the fallout— excessive child on parent violence, total exhaustion from managing needs at home and constant battling with professionals.

I myself have had to give up my career—"

incidentally, she was a teacher—

"in order to maintain the daily battle of getting her to school, then constant meetings to get her any sort of education that meets her needs. It's exhausting!"

Similarly, Joanne said:

"Myself and my husband adopted our daughter 12 yrs ago and our son 6 yrs ago. They both have Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder alongside Autism Spectrum Disorder.

My son is 6 yrs old and because of the trauma he endured in utero, he also has complex needs and has suicidal ideation with intent and wishes he has never been born—we were lucky enough to secure vital match funding last year to enable the sensory OT"—

that is, the sensory occupational therapist—

"to have weekly sessions to support him in controlling his emotions and to create a specific sensory diet which school will be able to use"

to support him in accessing school and supporting his needs. She continued:

"To hear that the fund is being reduced to £3,000 is truly terrifying. As a family, we have been in crisis and at risk of family (placement) breakdown, as having 2 complex children is exhausting, physically, mentally and emotionally, and my husband and myself had nothing left in the tank to carry on. I have been unable to work for 6 yrs due to my daughter being unable to access education as her needs were not understood or being met."

The Labour Government promised to be different, to be bold and to put children first. However, when it came to one of the most vulnerable groups in our society—children who have experienced trauma, neglect and loss—they hesitated, they wavered and they failed to provide the leadership that we had been told to expect.

The Government say that the changes to the fund have been made to "maximise the number" of children supported, but how can they claim to support more children by offering them less? How can they ask families to step up and adopt or become guardians, only to pull the rug out from under them when they need the most support? Nearly 20,000 children received support through the fund last year. That is 20,000 stories of resilience and of families holding on through the hardest times. Now, however, many of those families are being told, "You're on your own."

Another constituent wrote:

"I am in the final months of a doctorate to become a Clinical Psychologist and much of my work…is with families who rely on this fund. Children and young people who are adopted have almost all experienced developmental trauma and are left with many relational and neurodevelopmental complexities that require long term specialist support and intervention in order to heal. Parenting these children is usually not straightforward and can be incredibly challenging and draining, requiring specialist support. I have little doubt that with the reduction of the fund, we will see a significant increase in adoption break downs…This is not only incredibly traumatic for all involved, but is also incredibly expensive—far greater than the costs that will be saved through the reduction in the support fund. The cost of keeping a child in care has been estimated at around £280,000, significantly more than the £2,000 that has been cut.

We know that that is not the only cost that will increase. As well as the risk of returning to care, adopted young people face tougher educational and employment outcomes and their mental health and wellbeing is significantly impacted, especially as they transition to adulthood. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill has just progressed through the Commons—why undermine its aims by severely limiting the support in the ASGSF?

In the past few months, it has become clear that this decision should not be binary. It should not be about spreading funding thinly to go further; it should be about extending the funding to its previous levels. We need to see a return to the £5,000 fair access limit, to reinstate the £2,500 allowance for specialist assessments and to allow for match funding. We must make the funding permanent—not subject to annual spending rounds—provide it for more families and recognise that if it is not provided and ringfenced by the Government, it will fall to local authorities to find it, and we know how that tends to end up.

To conclude, I will quote from a constituent who works as a professional in this field and has raised some serious questions that I hope the Minister can address. She says:

"There has been no consultation process at all...how can this be fair or legal as adoptive & kinship families have access to therapies in their adoption and special guardianship order paperwork and in their EHCP agreements?"—

that is, education, health and care plan agreements. She continues:

"Who will adopt disabled children where lots of intervention and support is necessary? How many children will return to care? What will families do without multi-disciplinary assessments where it is beyond negligence to take this away as it is often the only thing that triggers considered recommendations for adopted children in EHCPs for case reviews, for providing carefully managed intervention plans.

Our previously looked after children are being discriminated against due to their complex needs where families face yet another closed door."

I call on the Minister to reverse her decision and to acknowledge that failing to do so risks an uncertain future for these special children and young people, and their families.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I am concerned that there are a lot more Members present than on the speaking list. If you have not put in to speak, it is unlikely you will be called. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 3.28 pm, so I am allowing each Member three minutes in which to speak.

2.42 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on her speech.

This is difficult: because of the Minister's professional background, I know that she will know everything we are going to say to her in this debate. I know that she cares deeply about this issue. In fact, I know that she will do everything she possibly can to ensure that children who have care experience, whether that is through a special guardianship order or adoption, get the holistic support they need. I know that she wants every child to have the therapeutic interventions that will make a difference to their life course and their future.

I know that the Minister understands the importance of the fund and the transformational difference it makes not only to children but to their families, siblings, parents and environment. I know that the Minister understands that the life course of these children will be different if they do not get that vital intervention as early as possible. I know that she understands the issues associated with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, trauma, abuse, violence and neglect.

I know that the Minister cares deeply about this issue, yet there was a cliff edge between the last fund and this fund. It was only at the eleventh hour—in fact, it was gone midnight—before we saw the confirmation that the fund would continue, but it was not until two weeks later that we learned it had been slashed by 40%.

The outcomes of those young people will be deeply affected. Drilling into the data, the average amount spent on therapeutic support for a family was £3,335 last year. That is the average, so many need more. As a result of the changes, the average will not even be reached and those specialist assessments will not be there. It would be fine if we had these services available in our public sector—I would welcome that—but we simply do not. Those families need vital access.

I suggest to the Minister that she stamps her feet at the Treasury's door, and that she demands that the Treasury does not play games, like it did this morning during Treasury questions, but actually delivers the money, because it will cost the Treasury far more if it does not. I also suggest that the Minister addresses the big challenge that we are seeing: that the number of children in our country in care is rising. That is where the solution is—getting that early help to make a real difference. I am proud that my city is reducing the number of children who are care experienced, but we need to see this fund restored first.

2.45 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on securing this debate and on her excellent speech.

We know that adopted children are often the most traumatised in our society. The abuse, neglect and instability that they have endured in their earliest years leave lasting scars, affecting their development, their ability to trust and their mental health. With the right support, those children can heal. Therapy gives them a second chance to feel safe, to build meaningful relationships and to lead stable, loving lives.

Let us take the example of Leo, an eight-year-old boy who lost his parents and two siblings and now lives with his special guardian under a special guardianship order due to his assessed psychological need for permanence. Leo also has a diagnosis of autism spectrum condition, and experienced complex trauma within his birth home during the first few years of his life. Thanks to support from the fund, Leo and his special guardian mum have been accessing specialist psychotherapy. The progress that he has made has been remarkable. He is now able to share his sadness and ask for comfort when he feels overwhelmed—a huge step for a child who used to shut down completely and express distress through challenging behaviour.

Leo's case highlights why early therapeutic intervention is so crucial. However, due to recent cuts and delays in the ASGSF funding, Leo has been waiting five months to continue his therapy, which is critical work focused on processing the complex grief of losing his entire birth family. The interruption in therapy is more than just a pause—it risks undoing much of the progress Leo has made. Rebuilding trust with his therapist will take time, and the delay may trigger deep feelings of abandonment, undermining his already fragile belief that adults can be safe and consistent. Even when therapy resumes, the reduced number of sessions now available is unlikely to be enough to fully support Leo through his grief. A child such as Leo does not need a quick fix; he needs time, skilled support and consistency to help him to heal.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My hon. Friend is telling the heartwarming story of her constituent. Two constituents of mine, Liz and Steve from Wincanton, have recently become the special guardians for their grandchild. They faced a long-drawn-out process as a result of the delays to the adoption and special guardianship support fund, and they have really struggled to get the support they need. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should urgently reverse these harmful cuts and reaffirm their commitment to supporting vulnerable children?

Caroline Voaden: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

When children like Leo receive the right early help, they are more likely to thrive in school, avoid crisis services and grow into adults who contribute positively to society. Supporting those children gives them a second chance at life, and ultimately it also saves money. That is why the fund was created in 2015. Early therapeutic intervention can be transformative and much more cost-effective than dealing with complex problems later in life.

Demand is growing—in 2023, 38% of families reported reaching a crisis point, up from 30% in 2022—yet therapists fear that recent funding changes will reduce the number of children they can support. Some are already leaving the field. Families are growing wary, hesitant to invest in assessments and worrying that they will not have enough left for therapy or that funding will run out entirely. I have met one therapist who says she will be able to see fewer children, not more, because of the reduction in funding.

Quality of care is also at risk. Limited budgets may push families toward cheaper providers, who lack the specialist expertise needed to work safely with traumatised children. Many effective therapeutic models just cannot

be delivered within the reduced budgets and fewer sessions. The long-term costs of underfunding are enormous. Without proper support, placements may break down, forcing vulnerable children back into the care system. We cannot let that happen. Restoring sustainable ASGSF funding is essential. Every child like Leo deserves the chance to heal, and that starts with the right support at the right time.

2.50 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on securing this important debate. I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise concerns on behalf of my constituents in County Durham. Kinship carers play a crucial role in our communities. They step up to care for children when their parents are no longer able to do so, often under challenging circumstances. Their care allows children to remain within their families and support networks, which we know leads to better outcomes in adulthood.

Yet, despite their vital contribution, Government support remains unequal. A two-tier system persists, where access to help is based not on a child's needs, but on how they entered kinship care. That must change. For example, only kinship children who have previously been looked after the local authority can access pupil premium plus, priority school admissions, support from the designated teacher and the adoption and special guardianship support fund. That should not be the case—it is simply unfair. That is one reason why I support the Kinship charity's #ValueOurLove campaign, which calls for the Government to join up the fragmented system and guarantee access to support, no matter which route is followed into kinship care. Emotional and behavioural challenges are the main reasons kinship carers fear they cannot continue to care for their loved ones. These children, often shaped by trauma and loss, need early, high-quality therapeutic support to heal—support that must be protected, not cut.

I welcome the Government's commitment to a £40 million kinship allowance trial in 10 local authorities, but we urgently need clarity. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm when decisions will be made, and whether County Durham will be included, since I understand that 317 local authorities are vying to be a pilot authority. In east Durham alone there are 340 kinship families, some of whom are known to me, who face ongoing financial uncertainty and reduced access to support. The limited pilot risks leaving many behind.

The comprehensive spending review is the ideal opportunity to accelerate plans for kinship carers. I urge the Minister and the Government to commit to a non-means-tested allowance, at least equal to the national minimum fostering rate, and to ending the current two-tier system. Carers save the state £4.3 billion annually. Every child matters and deserves the same chance to thrive, no matter their circumstances.

2.53 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for leading the debate. The crowd that is present indicates how important the issue is. Adoptive and kinship care is a wonderful thing to offer children a safe and caring environment to grow up in, but there is no doubt that it has challenges that need addressing, and in particular need Government support. It is great to be in Westminster Hall to talk about that.

To give an understanding of the topic, in Northern Ireland there are an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 children living in informal kinship care, and the number of children living with friends and family is consistently increasing. As of March '24, there were some 4,000 children under the care of local authorities, even though a number of children had been adopted out of care in 2023—there are still many more in care than are being adopted. Northern Ireland, along with Scotland, seems to have the highest rate of kinship care, and there is no doubt that more should be done to support those agreeing to take on the care of relatives.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The hon. Member mentions the challenges that kinship carers face; one is the legal complexity of the current system. I recently spoke to a constituent who has a special guardianship order in place for her grandson, for whom she is the kinship carer. On her diagnosis with lung disease, she went to see whether it was possible to add her son, the child's uncle, to that agreement. She was told that it was not legally possible—but thankfully, and thanks to advice from the Family Rights Group, she learned that it is. Does the hon. Member agree that more needs to be done to simplify the legal processes around kinship care?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is frustrating to have a legalistic system that seems to try to hold up the process, when people are looking for a good way forward for the child.

In October 2024, the Government announced that it would provide some £40 million to trial a new kinship allowance in 10 local authorities in England. The aim is to test whether paying some form of allowance to kinship carers could encourage more people to take a family member in when needed. The Government have said that trial will start in the autumn. Finances are often a block, and relatives who already have children of their own often find they simply cannot afford to take on kinship care. Would the Minister and the Government—those who hold the purse strings—consider extending funding for that trial to Northern Ireland and Scotland, where the figures surrounding children living in kinship care with family members are higher? A trial in those two places would give a better perspective, if the Minister does not mind me saying so.

There are many reasons why a family may choose to adopt, but post-adoption support is paramount. I have no doubt that, with specialist long-term assistance, relationships can thrive. Access to therapeutic services for children is incredibly important to support the child's emotional and mental wellbeing. For example, in education—I find this to be of major importance—children will naturally discuss their family environments, their parents and their grandparents. For many young people who do not have the same environment, those conversations in schools can become uncomfortable for them. Although we have fantastic pastoral support in schools, perhaps it is not a bad idea for outside specialists to engage with those kids in school to ensure that they have the specific support that they need.

[Jim Shannon]

Statutory adoption pay is paid at 90% of earnings for the first six weeks and at a further, lower rate of £187.18 a week for the next 33 weeks. Perhaps kinship payments could also be looked at for those relatives who take on care from birth, so that they are not left behind when supporting young children, and giving them the best start.

To conclude, the sacrifice that adoptive and kinship carers make for the lives of young people is incredibly wonderful. Many people out there make that decision for the betterment of a young person and to give them the opportunity to grow up. Government support for them must be unwavering so that they do not struggle, but have access to sufficient finance and wellbeing support. For the children, having access to long-term assistance will allow them to thrive. What more can we ask for in this debate other than their bright futures?

2.57 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Since I came to this House in July, I have found this issue to be one of the few that cuts across parties; all hon. Members see what the adoption and special guardianship support fund does on the ground, whether in their county councils or district councils. It is one of those issues brought up by people at our constituency surgeries, and we see the impact that it has on the families supporting those children.

I pay tribute to the Minister, who has been very patient with the many comments that I have put to her, and supportive in getting me answers, but I have big concerns about the impact of the changes to the fund. It will discourage future kinship carers to come forward if they feel that the financial impacts on them mean that they will not be able to support the children who they desperately want to. Many hon. Members in this Chamber have been councillors and have seen the impact on local government finances. We know that if the Government do not step up or change course on this issue, local government simply will not be able to step in and take their place.

This Government, of which I am proud to be a part, talk a lot about social value in our decision making. I am frustrated that the previous Government did not talk about social value as much as they should have. This is an issue where social value is evidently important in making financial decisions. It is about not just the price to Government of future interventions, whether they be—God forbid—in police or crime or in education, but the impact that it will have directly on the life chances of those children involved.

I took my responsibility as a corporate parent very seriously when I was a county councillor, and I was often very frustrated when politics got in the way of making good decisions about children's services and supporting children in Worcestershire. We cannot afford not to take better financial decisions on this issue, or it will cost us more money down the road.

In the past few weeks, I have met some of the children in my constituency supported by this fund. Frankly, we are missing out on some of the brightest young people I have met. They have gone through hugely difficult times and will make incredible contributions to society. On this issue, I am more than happy to grab my pitchfork and support the Minister in running to the Treasury. This decision is something that we cannot afford not to change.

3 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for securing this important and timely debate. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care, I will focus on how vital kinship carers are and on how they are often overlooked and under-supported. Many do not even identify as kinship carers, yet they are the ones providing stability, safety and love to children who can no longer live with their birth parents. Often, they are grandparents, aunts, uncles or family friends; they do this for the love of the children, and often of the families the children can no longer be with, yet kinship carers need proper support to avoid these arrangements breaking down.

In a 2024 survey, 35% of kinship carers rated the information they received from their local authority as very poor, while 44% said they did not trust their local authority at all. They are exhausted by being forced to battle a system that should be supporting them. Many are navigating complex traumas on top of a failing special educational needs and disability system, with half of children in kinship care also not getting the help they need in their education setting. Families also face a cliff edge of support when the young person turns 18.

That is why the adoption and special guardianship support fund—a pot that kinship carers have been able to access only since 2023—is so crucial to getting the bespoke therapies that these children and their trusted adults rely on. In my Chichester constituency, we are lucky to have Beacon House, which is a truly outstanding therapeutic service for young people, families and adults. I will share some of the comments from the children who have had the support of Beacon House. One said:

"It has helped me to understand why I sometimes act the way I do in scenarios and to unload my day to day worries that perhaps were taking a toll on my mental health".

Another said:

"It's made me feel safer. It doesn't make me feel I'm not welcome here".

And finally:

"It has helped me to think about why I do things and help to understand and for my parents to understand too".

For so many of the families using services like Beacon House, the adoption and special guardianship support fund has been a lifeline. It benefited more than 18,000 children last year. I believe that the Government know this fund is vital to families up and down the UK, and I understand their desire to increase its availability so that more families can benefit, but the fund is preventing breakdowns in adoptions and special guardianship arrangements. Will the Minister make the argument to the Treasury for increasing the fund, so that all children under care arrangements can access this support, with proper clinical assessments funded so the support can be tailored? These families do extraordinary things, stepping in, often at a moment's notice, to give vulnerable children a future. The least we can do is give them the support they deserve.

3.3 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship. Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on securing what we all acknowledge is a really important debate.

Like a lot of people in the Chamber today, one of my biggest privileges before coming to this space was serving as a corporate parent on the local authority of the place I lived at the time. Although "corporate parent" can feel like quite a stale and bureaucratic term, it is actually one of the most deeply important and human parts of a councillor's role, making sure they are there for, championing and supporting every young person who, for whatever reason—whatever has happened to them in their life—now finds themself in their local authority's care. There is nothing more moving or devastating than to speak to some of those young people, to see their inspiring resilience in the face of traumas that lots of people here never have to even contemplate happening to themselves, and to know the very real ways in which the current system is continuing to let them down and fail them.

We know that kinship placements, strong supportive fostering placements and adoptive placements are strongly associated with the best outcomes for young people in care, providing the best support for them to make the best start in life and later to thrive, but far too often the system is not set up to facilitate that. Young people often end up—at great cost to all of us and our local authorities—in unproductive and sometimes deeply cold private placements.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): We rightly hear about the many challenges that adopted children can face, but as a proud adoptive parent, I say we also need to remember the huge joy they bring to their families and adoptive parents. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the many challenges in children's social care. Does he agree it is vital that the Government get on with the root and branch reform of children's social care, as they are committed to do, so that we get children into permanent, safe, long-term placements as soon as possible?

Alistair Strathern: Absolutely. In a heartwarming way, my hon. Friend has reminded us of the opportunity we have if we can get the system right, to make sure that more young people who have had deeply difficult starts in life can experience the parenting, support and love that we all want for our children.

I am glad that, whether through investment or reform, the Government are committed to overcome the challenges in the system they inherited. Whether it is finally funding a long overdue and important kinship care pilot or reforming and supporting more local authorities to attract more people into foster caring, there is a lot to shout about. I am glad, albeit with some caveats, that in the context of a difficult financial and public services inheritance, we have been able at least to safeguard existing funding to keep adoption support going for the next year.

Although it is welcome that the funding is now being accessed by many more families, there is no getting away from the fact that the changing cap will have an impact on young people with SEND and their carers. Their concern is understandable. There will be lots of conversations about how we can best bring to life our broader vision and look after the young people in our care in the best way, by supporting more of them into nourishing, fantastic and thriving placements. In the meantime, we owe it to them to use every available lever to provide the fullest support possible.

I welcome that support, but what more can we do to ensure that local authorities use their virtual heads to hold schools accountable for the pupil premium placement money they are given for children in adoption and foster care placements under their watch, to widen support available to them? Where we have given local authorities more money for children's social care, I would welcome consideration being given to how guidance could be strengthened to ensure that they are filling in the gaps. We know that is in the child's, the family's and all our best interests.

Like many others, I welcome further opportunities to work with the Minister. We have a number of champions of care and care leavers here. It is one of the most exciting and energising things about being an MP in this new Parliament. I know we would all be excited to work with the Minister to bring to life fully this Government's vision of ensuring that every young person, particularly those entrusted to all of us, those society cares for, gets the support in life they desperately need.

3.7 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for bringing this vital debate. I rise to applaud the work of Beacon House in Cuckfield in Mid Sussex, which serves people across the south-east, including constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller). I visited recently and met the incredible people who do incredible work there. Jigsaw in Burgess Hill also supports children who have been adopted. I thank the families in Mid Sussex who have taken on children in kinship care or have adopted them. That is an enormous commitment to make and is so important, as we have heard from a number of hon. Members. I also thank them for writing to me.

As has been said, many of us do not know what it is like to be an adoptive parent or to take on kinship care; I certainly do not. Until a few months ago, I was unaware of the ASGSF and the vital provision it offers to families who have come forward to take on children. When considering the work provided by the ASGSF, we need to remember that we are talking about families, and because of that, a lot of what goes on is in private, behind closed doors and not very visible to the public. That is why so many hon. Members have come today from all parties to make the case for the ASGSF to be reinstated and properly funded. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for her work in pushing the urgent question that came the day after last year's funding expired, which resulted in ASGSF funding being secured.

Details of the changes to how the funding is allocated were released during recess, and I think we were all deeply dismayed by that. As other Members said, this money gives people the courage to offer to adopt and take on kinship children, and prevents adoption breakdowns

[Alison Bennett]

every single day. There is a great deal of cross-party support for getting this right, which is why after this debate I am going to the Backbench Business Committee to put in a bid for a Back-Bench debate on this matter, because we share the same strength of feeling. I urge the Minister to come back with a better answer than the one that I suspect she will be able to give this afternoon, although I do not want to prejudge where she is going to go.

3.10 pm

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for securing this important debate. I also thank the Minister for engaging constructively with me on this important issue and for the extension of the £50 million fund that supports children in adoptive and kinship care. It helped 20,000 children last year, and that support has really made a difference.

I welcome the Government's £40 million commitment to the new kinship care trial, which is a positive and much-needed step in the right direction. It is absolutely right that our Government support as many children as possible who have been adopted or raised in kinship care. However, a number of constituents have raised concerns about the future of funding and how it will be delivered in practice.

One first-time adopter in Swindon North wrote to me about his experience of applying for the adoption support fund. He said that overall the experience was positive, but he was concerned about the changes to the funding ceiling and asked whether he will have to reapply. He fears that that could cause delays and that his child might miss out on the vital therapy that they need at a crucial time. Will the Minister confirm whether families that were previously approved for higher levels of funding will automatically be approved under the new lower ceiling without the need to submit new applications?

Another constituent who got in touch with me is a mother who is a special guardian for two children. She, too, welcomed the kinship fund trial, but expressed concerns about the scheme. Currently, no detailed information has been published. She relies on the adoption support fund and is unsure what will happen when it ends. Will the Minister tell us when more information about the kinship fund trial will be shared? Can she confirm whether Swindon will be included in the trial area? It would be nice to get an answer to that, although we have some competition from Dudley.

Finally, the FASD Hub South West team have been in touch. It is a voluntary organisation that provides vital support for children suffering from the effects of FASD. Many of those children have experienced trauma, neglect and irreversible brain damage, and previously benefited from clinical pathways and multidisciplinary assessments, supported by the £2,500 premium, but that funding is now gone. The team are deeply concerned that children with FASD will no longer be adopted simply because the support is not there. Will the Minister provide clarification on the funding levels through the upcoming spending review, and commit to long-term, sustainable adoption support funding for children with FASD? Those children must not be left behind.

3.13 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for securing this debate.

About 3,000 children in England are adopted each year, and most have suffered severe abuse or neglect. Earlier this year, the Government left many adoptive families in limbo when they failed to confirm whether the adoption and special guardianship support fund would continue beyond 31 March. That was even the case right up to the end of March. I received a letter from my constituent Laura Blatherwick, the Devon lead for the Like Minds network, who wrote:

> "It is now the 22nd March and we still don't have a decision from the Government on the continuation of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund… In NINE DAYS the fund is due to close….New applications and top ups to existing support take MONTHS to approve. This means that already there are families not receiving the support they desperately need, and others will have a long gap in their therapy. We are very concerned about current increases to risk and recovery disruption for some of the most vulnerable children we support."

As we have heard, in the end the fund was retained, thanks in part to pressure from the Liberal Democrats and my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who forced an urgent question in Parliament, but the funding available to an individual was slashed by 40% from £5,000 to £3,000.

I have been in contact with two organisations in Devon that are affected by the changes: the Youth Arts and Health Trust and Family Compass. Between them, these two registered charities provide professional therapies for approximately 130 children per year. The children have experienced adoption, and their therapy has been terminated mid-process, often at very risky times in their lives. The Youth Arts and Health Trust is dipping into its limited reserves to continue to offer therapy—for free and at a cost to the charity—to some of those young people who are profoundly at risk. That therapy must continue because the young people are disclosing issues such as youth homelessness and sexual abuse and exploitation.

The huge reduction in funding means that much-needed, year-long therapy is now unaffordable through good-value, trusted providers. We are likely to see other providers that we cannot be sure of moving in to fill the gap. This is not just a funding issue; it is a moral issue. In fact, it is a moral failure. A system that claims to protect children cannot simultaneously undermine the very services that support their recovery.

3.16 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for enabling us to speak on this subject. I declare an interest as an adoptive parent and foster carer. That experience has shown me the transformative effects that adoption can have and the immense challenges faced by many children who are looked after and care experienced.

When we talk about Government support, let us be clear that we are talking about lifelines, not luxuries. Around 3,000 children in England are placed in adoptive families every year, and 80% of them will have suffered

from abuse, neglect or violence, so it is no wonder that they often need specialist support to help them and their families to heal, and to live with the scars that will never fully fade.

I will not speak at length about the adoption and special guardianship support fund, as many hon. Members are raising it in their speeches, but I will say that to limit its reach is to effectively clip the wings of the young people and families it supports, as well as those of the incredibly skilled and compassionate professionals who work with them. I highlight the fact that the Minister is among that group. She draws on a wealth of experience from her career as a social worker, and I know how deeply she cares about adopters and kinship and foster carers. If she faced no financial constraints, I know that the money would be out of the door tomorrow, to support every family to the fullest.

Yesterday, I met Adoption UK, which stressed to me not only the importance of the ASGSF but of the need to ensure that all healthcare and education professionals are aware of the impact of early-childhood trauma and care experience, so that affected children and young people can receive targeted support and advocacy services.

In advance of an Adjournment debate led last month by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon), I spoke to the social worker who supports my husband and I with what we hope will be the adoption of our second child. She had lots of thoughts on the subject, and I would like to mention some that I could not raise in that debate. She highlighted the need for improved holistic support in schools, enabled by integrated working among schools and healthcare professionals such as occupational therapists, so that there is continuity of support; closer working between psychologists and adoption teams, because access to support within teams could reduce the need for families to apply to the ASGSF; and higher levels of short-term funding to allow for weekly therapeutic support, which is currently very difficult to obtain through the ASGSF.

Although I do not have enough time to say as much as I would like about kinship care, I will say that too few families receive financial or therapeutic support, but they still face the practical and emotional challenges. The route closest to my heart, which my husband and I took, is fostering to adopt, which gives the benefits of early permanence, but without a cast-iron guarantee that the placement will end in adoption. I hope we will have the opportunity to debate that more in the future.

My point is that whatever the route into permanence, children's needs are no different. What is different is the consistency and quality of the support they receive. When we ask families to step up for vulnerable children—and they do, day in and day out—the least we can do is make sure that we step up for them.

3.19 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for securing this important debate.

The Government's cuts to the adoption and special guardianship support fund are going to harm vulnerable children in my constituency of Wokingham and across England. Those children and their families will see vital therapies suspended, and they do not know when, or even if, they will resume. Prior to the cuts, one family received 264 hours of therapy, but that will now fall to just 32 hours. Will the Minister meet me and my constituents to discuss the cuts to the ASGSF, so that she can hear directly from those affected? Will she publish the analysis on which the changes to the ASGSF were made? Will she detail the level of consultation that was undertaken with service providers and adoptive and kinship families before the cuts were announced?

Finally, I pay tribute to all the families who will be affected by the cuts, and ask them to continue their incredible work in fighting against them. I also thank my constituent, Clare Solomons, who has worked so hard in organising petitions, speaking in the media and being an invaluable source of advice on this issue. I hope the Minister will listen to the experience of families and reverse the cuts as soon as possible.

3.20 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on securing this debate.

It is an often repeated political trope that children are our future, but it stands the test of time much better than most clichés. It is also often said that a society can be judged on how it treats its most vulnerable. I feel that the two sayings come together here as we talk about some of the most vulnerable children in our society and the vital support networks that surround them.

Children often come into adoptive and kinship settings having experienced incredible trauma, neglect or abuse in the first months or years of their lives. The complex challenges that arise from those unthinkable but all too real experiences should be talked about more often. We need to do more to highlight how we can support our fantastic adoptive and kinship care support networks, not talk about cuts to the funding that keeps them going.

In the south-west and throughout the country, thousands of children and their families are supported by funds from the adoption and special guardianship support fund. In 2023-24, the south-west had 3,129 applications under the fund approved, with nearly 1,200 applications for creative and physical therapies.

On the economy, kinship care saves the Government about £4.3 billion each year, and adoption saves £4.2 billion, spread among local authorities, the wider economy and the NHS. Why, then, did the Government feel they had no option but to slash the ASGSF budget allocation per child? I am not sure.

In conclusion, we already have a crisis in adoption, with the number of families willing to step forward to adopt plunging. Without the support of the ASGSF for the families who need it, that number will continue to decline and the number of children saved will plummet. I call wholeheartedly on the Government to reverse the harmful cuts immediately, and to reaffirm their commitment to supporting vulnerable children and the families who care for them. We can be a society that cares. We must look after those for whom we need to care so deeply.

3.23 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), who spoke so passionately for children and families.

[Manuela Perteghella]

Kinship carers and adoptive families perform an extraordinary public service, providing stability, love and hope for children who have experienced trauma, loss or neglect. I had the privilege of meeting many adoptive families and family carers in my Stratford-on-Avon constituency. Too often they are left to navigate complex systems with little support. More than half of kinship carers say that their children are not getting the help that they need in education or to access mental health, or indeed any legal advice about their rights or options. Many are forced to reduce their hours or leave work entirely, yet there is still no statutory right to paid employment leave for kinship carers.

On adoption, the situation is no less troubling. Post-adoption support is patchy at best, with some families waiting six months just for an initial assessment, and the Government have now reduced this important fund. The cuts to the ASGSF threaten the very purpose of the adoption system and might lead to adoption breakdowns. These families deserve stability, not sudden U-turns. They need clear, consistent support, not muddled promises. Above all, they need a Government who stand with them, not just in words but in action.

3.25 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on securing this important debate.

Around 157 children in my constituency are in kinship care. These are children being raised not by their parents, but by grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings or close friends who step up in times of crisis to provide stable, loving homes when children cannot live with their parents. They do that not for recognition or financial reward, but out of love and a deep commitment to bringing families together.

Across England more than 132,000 children are growing up in kinship care. Those children might otherwise be in the care system, and it is thanks to kinship carers that they are not. That love comes at a cost—a cost that is often borne alone, as I have heard at first hand from kinship carers in my constituency. When I met our local kinship care group in Polegate in my constituency—set up by formidable local kinship campaigner Wendy Turner—I listened to carers and children and heard about the challenges they face, particularly financially.

Unlike foster carers, most kinship carers receive little or no financial support, despite taking on exactly the same responsibilities. Recent research from Kinship and the Centre for Care reveals that kinship carers contribute more than £4.3 billion to our economy, yet many struggle to make ends meet. The figures are deeply troubling. Kinship carers are twice as likely as other adults to rely on food banks and four times as likely to be behind on their bills, and one in eight may be forced to make the heartbreaking decision to stop caring for the children they love, simply because they cannot afford to continue.

This is not just about fairness to carers; it is about doing the right thing by children. When I think of those 157 children in kinship care across Lewes, Seaford, Newhaven, Polegate and our local villages, I see 157 reasons why we must do better. I have written to the Chancellor urging investment in kinship care to be prioritised in the upcoming review, and the message from my constituents is clear: these families stepped up for children when it mattered most; it is now time for us to step up for them.

3.27 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on securing this important debate; she and I are both passionate about this issue, and I know she cares about it deeply.

I will start by reminding colleagues—as many have done already—about who the children we are talking about are. These are children who have experienced the kind of trauma that none of us should ever have to experience in our life. After I first brought up the adoption and special guardianship support fund with the Prime Minister in March, a lady from Lincolnshire wrote to me. She is a special guardian for a child who witnessed her mother being murdered by her father at the age of two. For some reason that child does not qualify for child and adolescent mental health support, and has been able to access only a limited amount of counselling. That is the sort of child the ASGSF is for.

These are also children who have been abused and neglected. When I spoke to the Purple Elephant Project, a therapy provider in Twickenham, its chief executive officer Jenny, who has worked with adopted children for many years, spoke to me about children she had worked with who had been made to sleep in the garden, or who had ingested heroin. Those are the sorts of experiences these children have been through. They need our collective help and support to overcome that trauma, as do the amazing people who step up to care for them, whether through adoption or often as kinship carers overnight.

As one adoptive parent in my constituency said to me, these children deserve

"the absolute best second chance in life."

I implore the Minister, who has a professional background in this area and cares about this issue deeply, to please listen to the pleas from those on all Benches about the support that is desperately needed.

Before I talk in a bit more detail about the ASGSF, let me say a couple of words on kinship carers, given that I have been proud to campaign alongside my party for kinship carers for a number of years. I welcome the limited progress we have seen under this Government and the previous one on support and recognition of kinship carers, but as the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) said, we have to go much further. We have to roll out allowances on a par with those for foster carers across the country to all kinship carers, extend employment leave to kinship carers and ensure that children in kinship care are given the support that they need in education through pupil premium plus and priority school admission.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) said in a recent debate, adoptive parents make a "lifelong commitment" to children. We heard from the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), who has also adopted, that the state needs to give them a lot more support. One constituent said to me that the ASGSF is the only post-adoption support there is for these children.

That brings me to the ASGSF. I cannot begin to describe my anger and dismay at what has happened. I will try to contain that emotion as I speak. The stories that have been sent to me, and that I have heard face to face as I have been working on this issue in recent weeks and months, have on a number of occasions moved me to tears. These families faced months of uncertainty. The Minister had to answer a litany of written questions and letters from Members from all parties on whether the ASGSF would continue for this financial year. Those Members were stonewalled.

I have explained the trauma that these children have experienced. They have had a huge amount of uncertainty and instability in their lives, and the Government added to it. We were all stonewalled. It took me dragging the Minister kicking and screaming to the House of Commons Chamber to answer an urgent question the day after the fund expired for her finally to commit to renewing it for this financial year. There was a sigh of relief among carers, adoptive parents, kinship carers and charities across the sector that the uncertainty had ended, despite the backlog that had built up in the meantime and the interruption in therapy for so many children who had had to stop therapy because they had run out of money from last year's fund.

However, there was no hint from the Minister during her response to my urgent question of the cuts that were to come. Instead, the Government waited until the depths of the Easter recess to sneak out a private letter to local authorities and charities about the 40% cut to grants, the removal of the assessment grant and the scrapping of the match funding. An adoptive mother I met at the drop-in organised by Adoption UK and Kinship yesterday told me that that felt very underhand. She said, "It felt like the Government didn't care as I was dealing with my adoptive son, who was dysregulated and trying to hurt me."

There was no consultation with the sector, despite the fact that the Government have reference groups, such as the kinship care reference group, that they talk to on a regular basis. There was no consultation with them and no formal public announcement. Even the Government website on the ASGSF remained out of date for several weeks, until our first day back after recess, when the Minister issued a fairly scant written ministerial statement. My first question to her is: when she answered my urgent question on 1 April, was she aware that these cuts were coming, or did she inadvertently mislead the House on that occasion?

The impact of the changes to the ASGSF means that we have a backlog. Everybody who had previously applied—some 46% of applications for grants for this financial year exceed the £3,000 limit—has to reapply. There will now be a delay and an interruption in therapy. The mum I met yesterday told me that she is borrowing money from friends and family to continue therapy because, in her son's last therapy session, they finally achieved a breakthrough and she cannot bear to stop it. Purple Elephant in Twickenham is desperately fundraising to try to make sure that there is no interruption in therapy for the 40 or so children that it supports.

We know that, with smaller grants, providers will struggle to provide adequate therapy. Given the sorts of trauma that we have talked about, these children's brains need rewiring and they need time to build trust. Often, therapists have to run several sessions before a child will even come through the door. That takes time; it will not be done in the few short sessions that the grants will cover. Given that the assessment costs will now have to come out of the reduced grant of £3,000, after a bespoke assessment is made there will be very little, if anything at all, left for the actual therapy.

In addition to the impact on the children and the carers who are desperately trying to look after them, the changes will undermine and destabilise the charities and other providers that offer support in this area. As many hon. Members have said, we are talking about children who are dysregulated and exhibit challenging behaviours, and the changes will lead to adoption and kinship care placement breakdown, which will result in extra costs for the taxpayer, because more children will go back into care. We will probably also see more school exclusions as a result of dysregulated behaviours, and therefore poorer educational and employment outcomes. Sadly, care-experienced children are four times more likely than other children to end up with a criminal conviction by the age of 24.

The costs to the taxpayer of the changes, in the short term and the long term, are exorbitant, yet the fund is only £50 million; in the grand scheme of things, it is not a huge amount of money. If the Government wanted to extend the fund, say by 50%, I could tell the Minister exactly where she can get the money from. In her written ministerial statement, she suggested that the fund can be topped up from local authority children's services budgets. I am not sure whether she is aware of this, but a lot of local authorities are on the brink financially, and many children's services budgets are in huge deficit. However, where she can find the money is in the £46.5 million that the Department for Education spent on advertising, consultancy and marketing costs in the last year. I suggest that she halves that budget, and instead expands the ASGSF by 50%.

These cuts are entirely incoherent and contradict Government policy. The DFE has recently written to Adoption England calling for improvements in adopter recruitment, and the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill mandates the signposting of support, yet everything we have discussed today will go against those measures. I have three asks of the Minister: please apologise to carers and children up and down the country, reverse the cuts—I have told her where to get the money—and fight tooth and nail in the Treasury over the spending review for the next financial year, and make that announcement early. Carers and children will continue to campaign, and I will be alongside them.

3.37 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on securing this important debate. Keen observers of Westminster Hall debates will have noticed that she responded on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition to the debate that I had secured this morning, so there is a nice symmetry in the fact that I am responding to her debate this afternoon.

My hon. Friend gave an excellent summary of the current system and the impact that the changes that happened overnight will have on adopters and carers and, of course, on the children they support. Hon. Members from both sides of the House have powerfully demonstrated

[Gregory Stafford]

the impact that the changes are having on their constituents, and the situation in my constituency of Farnham and Bordon, which includes Haslemere, Liphook and the surrounding villages, is no different. Hon. Members will have to forgive me; because so many Members have spoken in the debate, I will not be able to mention all their contributions. However, I pay special tribute to those Members who referred to their personal experiences in this matter.

First, I want to note the strong record of the previous Conservative Government on supporting kinship carers, adoptive families and some of the most vulnerable children in our society. While others have made promises, we took action. However, there is no doubt that there is more to do, which is why I welcome this debate.

The Conservatives have a strong record of prioritising and increasing adoption and strengthening kinship policymaking, including by introducing the adoption and special guardianship support fund, which provided financial support to local authorities and regional adoption agencies to pay for essential therapeutic services for the most vulnerable children. The Government's decision to cut the fund was a retrograde step, and it has placed significant stress on the near 17,000 applicants in 2023-24 alone who utilised services such as family therapy, parental training and creative therapeutic intervention.

It is highly regrettable that the Government failed to provide clarity about the continuation of the fund before its expiry on 31 March. Despite repeated calls for assurance, including from practitioners and sector leaders, Labour delayed its announcement. When it finally came, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) stated, it confirmed a 40% reduction in the fair access limit, capping support at £3,000 per child per year compared with the £5,000 that families could access previously. The reduction places pressure on local authorities to bridge a shortfall of almost £34 million, using already stretched children's services budgets.

The Minister has stated previously that additional support can be provided above the cap, but only at the discretion and financial behest of local councils. As hon. Members have said, many local authorities are not in the position to do so, but even if they are, this approach risks creating a postcode lottery, with some of the most vulnerable children supported but others left out.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): As one of the vice-chairs of the APPG on kinship care along with the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), I want to add my voice to those calling for a reversal of the cuts, and for the Government to go further and better support families in adoption and kinship care.

Gregory Stafford: I know what a doughty champion my hon. Friend is for this cause, and I entirely agree with him. The Government need to set out precisely what they will do going forward, as well as reversing the cut that they made. I seek clarification on what the Minister's adoption strategy is, beyond the delayed and unfair cuts that she has made so far for these children. In 2024, there were nearly 3,000 looked-after children who were adopted. Putting aside the fund that we have been talking about, how is she going to support those vulnerable children?

While the continuation of essential schemes remains, let us say, grey under this Government, adoptive families now cite a lack of support as a key barrier. Without essential support, the whole adoption process risks becoming what former MP and Children's Minister, Tim Loughton, called a "false economy". The truth is that when we fail to invest in adoption, especially in kinship care, we end up relying more heavily on a state system that, in the long run, costs more and too often fails children. It leaves them more vulnerable to poor outcomes, including higher risks of criminal involvement and limited aspirations. When it is done right, adoption offers the security, stability and sense of belonging that every child deserves, and we should support it accordingly.

Likewise, the deeply flawed Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill represents a major failure for kinship carers. The lack of statutory obligations and the concerns about the sufficiency of financial support highlight the need for continued advocacy and potential further legislative action to ensure that kinship carers and the children they support receive comprehensive support. Those carers typically receive little financial or emotional support, despite playing a vital role in keeping children out of the formal care system.

These often unsung heroes deserve better. That is why the previous Government introduced the social impact bond model, an innovative funding approach that backed targeted projects to support kinship families. They included initiatives such as training and guidance for carers; family group conferencing, where social workers bring family and carers around the table to discuss the most viable options for the long term; and other structured efforts to prevent the breakdown of kinship placement, which, if unsupported, can push children into the care system.

A notable example of such an SIB is Kinship Connected. Funded by private investment, it aimed not only to relieve pressure on local authorities but, more importantly, to enhance stability and wellbeing for the children at the heart of these families, by rehoming children with their grandparents when the immediate family had broken down. That ensured that siblings remained together and received consistent, supportive care within their extended family network. That approach prioritised emotional continuity and minimised the trauma often associated with foster care placements.

Kinship care and adoption offer vital, human-centred alternatives to the traditional care system, yet too often those pathways are undervalued. To truly serve the best interests of children, we must ensure that local authorities are supported and broaden our strategy to actively support and invest in family-based solutions beyond the boundaries of state control.

The Minister has been widely praised this afternoon by Government Members. This is the time for her to live up to that reputation, so I will close my remarks with four questions to her. How are the Government working with local authorities to ensure that they are able to provide the best care available for vulnerable children, especially following the cut to the adoption and special guardianship support fund? Secondly, what steps will the Minister take to ensure sustained and equitable support for kinship carers, particularly in the light of the cuts to that fund and the absence of statutory obligations in legislation? Thirdly, how are the Government ensuring that private capital is not isolated by their

state-focused strategy, so that that as much investment as possible can be awarded to worthy schemes for kinship care? Finally, how are the Government extending family group conferencing to ensure that children are kept within the family unit, where they can be safe and happy for as long as possible?

I agree with the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore). I will take up my pitchfork, too, and go to the Treasury to get the funding. We have a duty of care to these children. We need to support adopters and carers. If we do not, the financial cost will be great, but the human cost will be far greater.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I recognise that there are many champions of children and families in Westminster Hall this afternoon. Indeed, there are many passionate Members who really want the right outcomes for children who are adopted and who are in kinship care through special guardianship or child arrangements orders and others.

I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for securing this important debate. I too want the best support for adopted and kinship children, and I acknowledge her sincere interest in the subject. There have been many interventions, questions and speeches. Because of time I will not refer to each Member by their constituency, but I will do my best to respond to the many questions that have rightly been put.

We recognise the particular needs of adopted and kinship children, many of whom have experienced trauma. Some will have experienced in utero damage, which can result in foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and other conditions. That is why the Government have continued to provide funding to support these children through the adoption and special guardianship support fund and other ways. There have been no cuts in the overall budget of the adoption and special guardianship support fund. When that announcement was made, I said that further information would follow. The further announcement was made during recess so that the fund could be opened and therapy could be accessed. We had to announce that so that the new criteria were available and the funding could be opened.

Although funding has been confirmed at £50 million this year, we know that it will not be enough to meet the expected demand, and we are therefore making these decisions now to enable us to support the maximum number of children. Families will still receive a good standard of support through the fund: £3,000-worth of therapy each year is a substantial amount of support, and will fund an average of 19 to 20 hours of therapy on current costings. Where needed, local authorities and regional adoption agencies can use their own funding to increase the amount of therapy, if needed. Both multidisciplinary assessments and specialist assessments will be able to continue, but the money for that will have to come from that £3,000. We have decided to stop match funding and the separate funding of special assessments, but, as I said, such assessments can continue out of that £3,000.

Caroline Voaden: Will the Minister give way?

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD) *rose—*

Janet Daby: I will give way to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) first.

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for allowing me to intervene first. In the Adjournment debate that I held on this subject, the Minister responded,

"support for adopted children is critical. It can decrease the likelihood of adoption disruptions or breakdowns."—[*Official Report*, 3 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 555.]

In real terms to people on the ground, this is a cut, so will she acknowledge that the actions of her Government will have an impact on adoption breakdown and disruption?

Janet Daby: I absolutely recognise that the threshold and criteria have changed to enable us to reach as many children as possible under the current funding of £50 million. It is crucial that assessments continue for those children to enable them to have the right types of therapy. If Members allow me to press on, I will be able to respond a bit further to the many things they raised.

I turn to the point about adoption and special guardianship support funding not being available to all children living under special guardianship orders. The main reason that the fund is available only to previously looked-after children living under special guardianship or child arrangements orders is that previously looked-after children, such as those who have been in foster care or residential care, may face higher levels of vulnerability and disadvantage than their peers. These funds aim to provide targeted support to address the specific challenges associated with their prior experiences.

I was asked many questions about the kinship pilot and kinship funding, and I want to say more about the adoption and special guardianship support fund. On 14 April, the Department announced that the fund would be open to applications with changed criteria and a fair access limit of £3,000 per child per year, and that match funding and the separate funding of specialist assessments would be stopped. When assessed as having a need, families can approach their local authorities and regional adoption agencies. Adoption England is obviously working with regional adoption agencies. We also have specialist centres of excellence—a multidisciplinary approach to ensuring the essential provision that adopted children need.

Alison Bennett: What is the Minister's assessment of the reserves that local authorities and adoption agencies have available to boost that funding?

Janet Daby: We have invested a further £8.8 million in Adoption England, £5 million of which will go towards centres of excellence. On local authorities, Members will be aware of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. They will also be aware that we are investing in early prevention and intervention work in local authorities. In doing so, we are trying to support families through kinship arrangements. Members will also be aware that we have committed £40 million to a pilot for kinship care.

Rachael Maskell: The bottom line is that there is insufficient money for specific therapeutic interventions for those young people. Will the Minister commit to go back to the Treasury and make the case for ensuring the full funding of therapeutic interventions so that no child misses out?

Janet Daby: The Government are in a challenging situation, but we will continue to ensure that provision is in place for adopted and kinship children. We will always make sure there are certain provisions in place, and we will continue to look at the different types of therapy that are needed. Obviously, I will continue to have conversations with the Treasury about the essential funding that is needed in this area.

I am very conscious of time, and the hon. Member for South West Devon needs to respond. On the £40 million package to trial a new kinship allowance from kinship carers, hon. Members across the Chamber have put in bids for their local authorities, but we will make sure that there is a call to all local authorities for expressions of interest. That will be launched this summer, and it will identify which local authorities will be best placed to deliver the pilot from autumn 2025. Unfortunately, I cannot guarantee that it will be local authorities that have already put in bids to me.

Adopted children and those in kinship care should be supported to obtain good educational outcomes. However, many do not do so, as this cohort has poorer GCSE results than the overall population and higher exclusion rates. Adopted children are entitled to priority school admissions, plus advice and support from designated teachers. Schools also receive £2,630 in pupil premium plus funding for every adopted child in their school. Both adopted children and children in kinship care can receive advice and support from local authority virtual school heads. We will fully update the statutory guidance for virtual school heads, including sections on supporting educational outcomes.

Through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, we are seeking to mandate local authorities to appoint at least one person to promote the educational achievement of children who live in kinship care, regardless of whether they have been in local authority care. These duties will ensure that they receive consistent support to improve their outcomes.

There is much more to be said on all this and in response to all the questions. I am grateful to hon. Members for raising the important subject of adoption and kinship care support today, and for such a thoughtful and wide-ranging debate. I will take away many points from today's debate.

On match funding for assessments, match funding applications accounted for less than 2% of all applications in the last financial year. It is important to put it in that wider context. There was wide disparity in the country on match funding but, as I have said, there are other avenues that adoptive parents and kinship carers can pursue to ensure that they get the additional support they need for their children.

I have listened carefully to Members' remarks and I know that many outside this House will be very keen to follow up on what has been said. I am sure there will be opportunities to further question me and this Government on these issues, and a Backbench Business debate has been mentioned.

I am sure that hon. Members will agree that the biggest tribute must very much go to the parents and carers of adopted and kinship children. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) mentioned the joy that adopted children and kinship children bring to their families. I want to acknowledge that, and to thank all those parents and carers who continue to demonstrate compassion, resilience and dedication.

3.58 pm

Rebecca Smith: We heard earlier about the role of a corporate parent. That did not make it into my speech—I ran out of time—but although that might be a local authority responsibility, it is clear that today there are many who take the same approach as parliamentarians.

Hon. Members have highlighted the opportunity to provide the best possible outcome for children in adoption, kinship and foster care, but also the need for significant commitment to ensure that the specialist resources required to deliver on their potential are a certainty for families. I think everyone in Westminster Hall would agree that we have not heard that certainty today, and I believe that we will all be working incredibly hard to keep pressing the Minister—and, by the sound of things, the Chancellor —to ensure that we get the funding required for these vulnerable families. No doubt we will all see each other, I hope, in the main Chamber to discuss this further.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for children in adoptive and kinship placements.

Government Travel Advice: Laos

4 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government safety advice for visiting Laos.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I am grateful for the chance to lead this debate on the Government's safety advice for visiting Laos and to raise awareness of the dangers of methanol poisoning.

Late last year, the family of Simone White contacted me to alert me to her tragic case and their worries about a lack of awareness among young people of the dangers posed by counterfeit alcohol. As any Members present who have seen the media coverage will know, Simone was travelling with her friend Bethany in Laos, as many young people from the UK and other countries do. They were staying in the town of Vang Vieng, a regular fixture on the backpackers' trail around south-east Asia, when they drank free shots that they were offered in a hostel. The next day, both felt unwell and initially thought that they had food poisoning, but a few days later, Simone tragically died in hospital, the victim of methanol poisoning.

I have since had the opportunity to meet Simone's family and have heard what a wonderful young woman she was, with a brilliant life ahead of her. When attending her funeral in January, it was clear from the eulogies delivered the kind of esteem in which she was held by friends and family. What really struck me was the sense of determination that came through from her friends and family that, no matter what, when she set her mind to do something, she would go out there and achieve it, whether that was playing a musical instrument or deciding at 13 that she wanted to become a lawyer, as she subsequently successfully went on to do. The eulogies also told of a keen sportswoman who regularly played football and netball, as well as finishing several half-marathons to raise money for good causes. A testament to her character was the voluntary legal work she took on outside her job, helping victims of domestic abuse. She also became a covid vaccine volunteer.

I pay tribute to the courage of Simone's family—her mum Sue, her dad Neil, and Tom and Amanda, and their wider families—as well as to her friend Bethany, who was with her in Laos. They have shown courage in fighting for justice for Simone and in trying to raise awareness so that other families do not lose loved ones in the same tragic circumstances. I welcome members of Bethany's family and others involved in tragic cases involving methanol to the Public Gallery this afternoon—thank you for joining us.

Simone was not the only young person to die at the hostel, with two young Australians, Holly Bowles and Bianca Jones, two young Danish women, Anne-Sofie Orkild Coyman and Freja Vennervald Sorensen, and an American, James Louis Hutson, losing their lives as well. All our hearts go out to their families, who lost loved ones in the most difficult circumstances. As Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said in November, this is "every parent's worst nightmare".

I put on record my gratitude to the Minister for taking the time to meet Simone's family earlier this month, and for her replies to my many letters on the subject. I appreciate the support that the Minister's Department, along with Kent police, have offered to the family during this awful time.

Issues with the addition of methanol to alcohol are not confined to Laos, with reports of over 30 deaths in Turkey earlier this year. Nor is the issue new: just over 10 years ago, Cheznye Emmons was travelling in Indonesia with her boyfriend when she drank gin that had been mixed with methanol. The inquest into her death heard that she suffered sudden blindness and convulsions, and died five days later.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing this debate. I do not think anyone was not shocked and moved to hear what can happen, especially to young people, who go for one of those adventure holidays where they look forward to the excitement they will have together. Does he agree that although it is ostensibly safe to visit Laos, British citizens need to be aware that excursions out of the safe golden triangle are an absolute no-go? Rules are already in place, but those rules are perhaps not raised enough with British citizens. How does he feel we can effectively get the message across?

Jim Dickson: It is indeed the case that not enough awareness is currently out there among citizens of all ages travelling from the UK to places where organised crime regularly doctors drinks. Part of the mission of this debate and our conversations with the Minister and the families is to raise awareness and find ways that the Government can help to do that.

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): I want to raise awareness of this issue today in the name of Kirsty, who tragically died in Bali as a result of methanol poisoning. I also pay credit to her family, who live in my Cheadle constituency—some members of her family are here—and tirelessly campaign to raise awareness of the issue. Methanol poisoning is not just a problem in Laos but in many countries across the world. Does the hon. Member agree that more needs to be done, including having a curriculum fit for the 21st century and a greater public awareness campaign that involves travel agents, NHS providers, schools, colleges and universities to inform and educate people on the very real dangers of methanol being used in countries across the world?

Jim Dickson: I thank the hon. Member for that moving intervention. Our hearts go out to Kirsty's family; it was a pleasure to meet her mother just now. I pay tribute to them for the work they have been doing since their loss. I agree very much with the hon. Member that more needs to be done to strengthen the curriculum, particularly to ensure that young people are aware of the risks involved in methanol. But there is much more that we think the Government can do, and I will suggest some ways in which they can do that later in the debate.

Following Cheznye Emmons's tragic loss in Indonesia, Cheznye's family, including her mum Pamela and her sister Measha, have been campaigning through their "Chez—Save A Life" campaign to warn of the dangers of counterfeit alcohol. I hope we can use this debate—I know other Members wish to participate—as an opportunity to widen awareness of the significant danger that methanol poisoning can pose. That is especially

[Jim Dickson]

crucial for travellers heading to countries where organised crime, as I said, seeks to profit from using methanol as a cheap way to dilute spirits.

I hope that there will soon be progress in the case of the death of Simone and other tourists who died in Laos. I hope very much that those responsible will be swiftly brought to justice, but I know that the case is ongoing and the outcome is uncertain. I am optimistic that with the Government's support we can take important steps to prevent more families going through what Simone's family has experienced. I know they would like to see the dangers of methanol much more widely communicated, especially to young people and other inexperienced travellers heading out on those incredibly important first trips abroad.

In Australia, the Government are taking steps to increase awareness of alcohol-related risks in overseas travel and are launching a dedicated advertising push to reach young Australians. The Smartraveller hub is a website provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It will roll out a specific marketing campaign to raise awareness and educate Australians on the signs of methanol poisoning and how to protect themselves from drink spiking, and on broader alcohol safety, as well as warning young people that they must travel knowing the risks and watch out for their mates.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The case he raises touches the hearts of those across the world who have also lost loved ones in the tragic circumstances of methanol poisoning. Would he agree that it is imperative that we must build awareness of how to stay safe abroad among all those preparing to travel, regardless of their age, to ensure that these tragedies are not repeated?

Jim Dickson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This issue does not just affect young people. It is important that we get messages across to young people, and I am suggesting a variety of ways to do that, but travellers of all ages could be at risk from methanol poisoning, and other alcohol tampering and spiking. I will also suggest some ways that the Government could deal with that issue.

I would like the Government, as part of their ongoing work, to reform the curriculum, perhaps through personal, social, health and economic education, and to consider how we can build awareness among young people of how to travel safely. If they are looking for inspiration, they might want to look at the Australian campaign and lessons on alcohol safety. I know that Simone's friend Bethany currently has a petition on the parliamentary website to that effect.

I appreciate that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has updated the health section of the travel advice on its website, but I hope that we might be able to review what could be done to make the warnings clearer and more explicit, and that information more readily available. The Government's Travel Aware website has an informative section on methanol poisoning, but could more be done to make that advice and guidance better known to young people before they travel? Someone really has to search for it to find it.

I also hope that the Government might explore whether one of the big players in the travel industry—we all know that big brand names are involved in the travel industry—might consider funding an awareness-raising campaign to educate travellers about how to stay safe as they explore. I look forward to the Minister's response. I hope that she may be able to answer some of the questions I have raised, and further reassure Simone's family that everything possible is being done to protect and inform young people of the dangers of methanol poisoning. I commit not just to listening to the response to this debate, but to continuing the campaign to make sure that the different parts of Government that have to work together to solve this problem genuinely do that.

4.12 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister and to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) for enabling me to make a brief contribution to this debate, and to highlight an issue about a Brit from my constituency who faced a very difficult situation in Laos. I wish, however, to start my remarks by saying how sorry I was to hear about the truly tragic death of my hon. Friend's constituent. I very much appreciate the family being here today, and all the work they have undertaken.

My former extremely vulnerable constituent was coerced into drug trafficking, apparently enabled online, and detained at the Laos border in June 2024. From then onwards he was detained awaiting trial and facing the death penalty, and under Laotian procedures he was unable to move prisons for more than six months before he died. In December he spent one night in hospital before being discharged back to prison, where he died at the age of 65, thin and with wounds on his body apparently from scurvy. I know that the FCDO engaged with his case when he was still alive and after his death, but I wish briefly to underline two points.

First, the length of pretrial detention can make British citizens and their families vulnerable to financial extortion in Laos, and there is a particular problem with obtaining good quality legal support. I urge the Department to continue to engage with my constituent's family on that issue, given their concerns about recommended lawyers. I appreciate that the FCDO's travel advice indicates that legal representation is far below UK standards in Laos, but the impact of that on people in desperate situations cannot be underestimated.

Secondly, and finally, it is imperative that the risk of what is effectively the transnational exploitation of vulnerable people is better recognised. There must be a co-ordinated response between police and border services, especially when clearly vulnerable individuals are travelling to countries such as Laos. The FCDO website is rightly clear about penalties in Laos for illegal drugs, and that the standard of prisons is poor, but vulnerable and coerced individuals are being manipulated, and they need more than information on a website to protect them.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, and it was wonderful to hear the debate initiated by my

hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson). I thank him for securing it. I know that he has been active in supporting his constituents all along. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham North (Vicky Foxcroft), the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tom Rutland), who have all been active in assisting with educating Members of Parliament—who have so much to do with their young constituents—and were active in a parliamentary lobby just last month. All these approaches will hopefully lead to a proper prevention strategy.

I also pay tribute to Sue White, Neil White, Tom Sampson and Amanda Dennis. That family tragically lost their dear daughter Simone White to methanol poisoning in Laos. I want to repeat here what I said when we met last week over in King Charles Street: thank you for your determination to raise the profile of a problem facing so many young travellers. So much fortitude has been shown by the families and other young people, and family members being here today makes this debate even more salient. Our thoughts are with all the families of those who set off with high hopes for their holidays, yet tragically lose their lives.

I am grateful for the contributions from other hon. Members today. I pay tribute in particular to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). She is right to raise the situation of the family of her constituent who tragically died. My door is open, and I look forward to meeting the family when they are ready to have a conversation about the tragic loss of their dad.

My right hon. Friend is also right to emphasise the transnational repression element, which sadly seems to be quite prevalent in parts of the Indo-Pacific, for which I am the Minister. I am very pleased that we have this opportunity, because of the strength that it gives me to improve my mandate to take up this issue with like-minded countries. She raised transnational repression, but also the lack of good quality legal advice in country. Often when a family hear of something, they arrive in a country that they do not know anything about, and, particularly in the country that we are talking about here, the system is very different from that in the UK, so this is where we really do need there to be that high quality legal advice.

Laos is a country under significant strain, and that includes its health system. It is a one-party state socialist republic. Culture, history and levels of socioeconomic development inform how open societies can be, and in this particular case, of course, we are dealing with a way of doing government that is very different from our own. Having said that, I was very pleased on a recent visit to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, to be able to raise both the tragic case of the loss of Simone and that of the constituent of my right hon. Friend.

For all of us at the FCDO, supporting British nationals abroad is a priority. I want to underline the fact that, happily, most British people who travel abroad do so without incident or the need for consular assistance. Yet every day our staff here in the UK and in our network around the world work tirelessly to help people facing some of the most distressing events imaginable. They work around the clock, keeping cool heads in all sorts of emergencies and crises, to provide assistance to people on one of the worst days of their lives. When an incident occurs, people rightly want to know whether it was preventable and what steps are being taken to stop such incidents happening, so let me set out some of the ways in which the Government are acting, informed in part by the activism that has come out of such tragic losses.

The FCDO regularly updates travel advice, including recently on the methanol poisoning question. We also seek to underline other risks—for example, the dangers of travelling on motorcycles without helmets. Our embassy in Vientiane regularly engages with the Laos authorities to help to prevent accidents and incidents. In this particular case, the Laos authorities issued an order prohibiting the sale and consumption of Tiger vodka and Tiger whisky because of concerns that they posed a risk to public health. I emphasise to anybody listening to the debate that it is not simply a question of a shot being offered to someone. It is also the fact that what is in bottles in supermarkets, in some cases, will not be what is described on the label.

During my visit to Laos last month, I discussed those priority consular cases with the vice Foreign Minister, and since then our ambassador in Vientiane has met the Ministry of Public Security to receive an update on the ongoing investigation. We cannot prejudice ongoing criminal investigations and potential prosecutions, but we continue to raise with the authorities the need for a swift and transparent inquiry into this tragic case.

I have also had the opportunity to raise the issue with the ambassador to the UK and a delegation of travelling Members of the Laos National Assembly. I emphasise that it is not the exact same situation as an MP, as elections in Laos are very different from those in the UK, but I was able to raise the issue with an audience of a dozen influential Laos National Assembly Members.

In all our efforts, our goal is to help British nationals make better informed decisions about international travel. Safety is always our top priority. Our advice is there to guide people, but obviously not to set rigid rules; people have their own autonomy with their travel plans. Our work considers all the risks proportionately, and draws on local knowledge to offer advice to those travelling overseas. In the wake of Simone's hospitalisation, we reviewed and updated our travel advice for Laos to reflect the risks of methanol poisoning.

We now include warnings about the risks of methanol poisoning or counterfeit alcohol in the travel advice for Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Costa Rica, Fiji and Turkey. Since then, we have worked with like-minded international partners to review our travel advice globally to ensure that we highlight the risks from methanol poisoning accurately. We have over 30 million individual views of our travel advice every year, so there are a lot of people who follow the Foreign Office as a regular part of their travel planning.

Alongside travel advice, the Government also aim to reduce incidents through our long-standing travel aware campaign. This includes encouraging British nationals to secure appropriate travel insurance, read our travel advice, and sign up for alerts. A dedicated section on the risks of spiking and methanol poisoning now shares practical tips on how to spot and prevent it. We are working in partnership with more than 100 organisations across the travel industry to reach more people and

[Catherine West]

direct them to our travel advice and travel aware pages online. That includes airlines, tour operators, and insurance providers.

We have a targeted youth travel ambassador programme, and we are giving special thought to this summer, so that we can impress upon youngsters travelling to the Laos region what the dangers are. We are working with partners such as Vibe by Jet2holidays and Gap 360 to reach younger audiences with bespoke information and blogs that highlight the dangers of methanol poisoning. All that raises awareness, and we are committed to improving. Indeed, we are updating our travel checklist to ensure it includes advice on the risks of methanol poisoning—and we welcome all feedback.

Finally, I recognise the depth of feeling on this issue. We all want to help Brits abroad to stay safe, and our message to those who find themselves in hot water abroad is: "We've got your back." None of us wants any other family to go through this. The FCDO will consider any future proposals carefully. We will explore more ways to inform British travellers about the risks of methanol—for instance, through channels online—and work with others to get the message out.

I thank all MPs who were able to speak in the debate. This debate can also play a role. We will continue to provide clear, accessible, and up-to-date travel advice, and keep it under constant review. We will also work with Governments around the world to reduce the risks, wherever we can—including in Laos.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 20 May 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

British Steel: Special Measures Update

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The Government committed to updating Parliament on British Steel every four weeks for the duration of the period of special measures being applied under the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025.

Government landmark achievements and actions

Since the oral ministerial statement on British Steel on 22 April in the House of Commons, and the repeat statement on 24 April in the Lords, the Minister in the Lords—my noble Friend Baroness Gustafsson—and I have written to a number of Members to respond to specific questions. I can also confirm that work is under way on developing an impact assessment and on bringing forward regulations under section 7 of the Act, which allows the Secretary of State to introduce a compensation scheme for steel undertakings affected by the exercise of powers under the Act. The Secretary of State will also reply to correspondence from the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee to enable ongoing scrutiny of the Government's use of these powers.

We have prioritised securing the future of the UK steel sector since our first days in office. As we have shown with the passing of the Act on 12 April, in what was a unique and unprecedented situation, we will not hesitate to take steps to safeguard the future of UK steelmaking, protecting jobs and supply chains.

On 8 May we reached agreement on an economic prosperity deal with the United States, which will save thousands of well-paid, high-skilled jobs that are vital for our economy. For the steel sector, this deal will see the US remove 25% s232 tariffs on steel for UK exporters.

Yesterday, 19 May, as part of the substantial package agreed at the EU summit, we also agreed to work towards linking the UK and EU emissions trading systems, creating the conditions to exempt UK exporters from the EU carbon border adjustment mechanism, or CBAM—something the steel industry has been seeking, to lower the cost of decarbonisation, avoid competitive distortions and boost market confidence. The European Commission has also confirmed that, in a specific product category subject to the EU steel safeguard measure, it will restore the UK's country-specific steel quota to historic levels and that this will be reflected in a post-2026 regime. This will ensure that UK producers, including British Steel—the UK's largest producer of these goods—will continue to be able to export tariff free at historic trading levels.

British Steel Ltd

Our intervention in British Steel under the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act has enabled us to secure the raw materials required to maintain a two-blast-furnace operation in Scunthorpe for the coming months. The redundancy consultation initiated by British Steel's owners, Jingye, has also been cancelled, removing the immediate risk to 2,700 jobs.

Government officials remain on site in Scunthorpe. Our priorities are continuing production, remedying critical health and safety issues, and stabilising operations.

We recognise the considerable interest from Members across both Houses regarding the funding that will be required for the Scunthorpe site. We have been clear that all funding will be drawn from existing budgets, within the spending envelope set out by the Government in the 2025 spring statement. As the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have made clear, the UK's fiscal rules remain non-negotiable.

To date we have provided £94 million for working capital. This covers items such as raw materials, salaries and addressing unpaid bills, including for SMEs in the supply chain. This does not take into account future revenue. The Department for Business and Trade's accounts for 2025-26 will reflect the financial support that the Department has given to British Steel.

We have also been clear that there will need to be investment to secure British Steel's long-term future—including private investment—in modernisation. That position has not changed. Work continues at pace to develop the optimal policy and strategy approach.

Steel strategy

This Government stand by our manifesto commitment to spend up to £2.5 billion to rebuild the UK's steel sector, in addition to the £500 million we have committed to Tata Steel UK for the transformation of Port Talbot. This is being delivered in part though the National Wealth Fund. The National Wealth Fund is operationally independent, and financing is already accessible to projects that meet the investment principles. Companies across the UK are already engaging with them on projects within the steel sector.

We continue to develop our thinking on the steel strategy. The recent developments in the UK steel industry, including at British Steel, have underscored the need for a steel strategy that represents a long-term vision for a revitalised and sustainable industry and the actions needed to get there. Understanding how the future of British Steel fits into this is crucial and will take some time to work through.

I have engaged extensively with the steel sector in recent months, visiting sites across the country and participating in roundtable discussions with producers, buyers and metal recyclers. This has given me an insight into the emerging opportunities and significant challenges that the UK steel industry faces. I have been left with no doubt that the sector is at a critical juncture, and it cannot afford to wait any longer for decisive action.

That is why we are now looking at what actions we could take under the steel strategy. We sought views on the issues that we know are important to the sector in the Green Paper we published on 16 February, such as electricity prices. We are also looking at ways to increase demand for domestic steel, including through public procurement. We are thinking about the best ways to defend the sector from challenging global market conditions on UK producers and unfair trading practices, and how to support the sector through the transition to greener steelmaking to deliver economic growth. Steelmaking is essential for our modern economy, supporting jobs and living standards in the UK's industrial heartlands. We are confident that steel has a bright future in the UK and the full strategy will be published later this year.

We will provide a further update on British Steel to Parliament in June.

[HCWS649]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Office for Nuclear Regulation Corporate Plan 2025-26

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): Later today I will lay before this House the Office for Nuclear Regulation's corporate plan 2025-26. This document will also be published on the ONR website.

I can confirm, in accordance with paragraph 25(3) of schedule 7 to the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published documents on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS648]

Petition

Tuesday 20 May 2025

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Newcastle United Carabao Cup Win

The petition of residents of the constituency of Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West,

Declares that Newcastle United Football Club is to be warmly congratulated on its recent Carabao Cup win; notes that this is the club's first major trophy win since 1955; and further declares the petitioners' ongoing support for Newcastle United and its fans.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to congratulate Newcastle United Football Club on its achievement, and to establish a national award to recognise major group sporting achievements.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Chi Onwurah, Official Report,* 24 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 750.*]*

[P003053]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):

The Government warmly congratulate Newcastle United football club on its Carabao cup victory. This is a significant achievement for the club, marking its first major honour in 70 years. This success is a testament to the skill, dedication, and commitment of the players, coaching staff, and everyone involved with the club, as well as the unwavering support of its passionate fanbase.

Sport plays a vital role in communities across the country, fostering a sense of pride, unity, and shared identity. Newcastle United's triumph is a clear example of how sporting success can inspire local communities and football fans. The club's achievement will undoubtedly be a source of great pride for the people of Newcastle and beyond, and it reflects the strength of football in the north-east.

The Government recognise the importance of celebrating excellence in sport, and there are several well-established ways in which sporting achievements are recognised at a national level, most notably through the national honours system. The Government are always keen to celebrate the success of British sport and remain committed to supporting the development of football and other sports at all levels. Once again, we extend our congratulations to Newcastle United on this well-earned victory.

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PETITION

Tuesday 20 May 2025

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Tuesday 27 May 2025

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