

Monday
2 June 2025

Volume 768
No. 144



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 2 June 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 768

SEVENTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 2 June 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

UK Visas and Immigration: Processing Times

1. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of UK Visas and Immigration processing times. [904417]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): UK Visas and Immigration processes millions of visa applications each year. Most of them are processed to the published customer service standards, which is a huge tribute to our hard-working staff, and indeed most straightforward applications are decided within three weeks. In the year ending March 2025, more than 2.1 million visit visas, more than 190,000 work visas and more than 22,000 health and social care visas were issued. On occasion, as the hon. Member may be aware, there are some technical or processing errors, which are resolved as quickly as possible when they come to light.

Wendy Chamberlain: This is not about call centre answering and application processing times; it is about the backlog in digital status becoming fully operational. A North East Fife constituent has settled status and has done all the steps in setting up her UKVI account, yet on both her recent trips abroad she was told that her passport was not linked to her e-visa. Is this a one-off, in which case can the Minister review what has gone wrong? Or is it a system failure, in which case what is the Minister doing to address it?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Member for her question. I would be happy to look at that case. The personal details on the document associated with that person's e-visa may well have not been updated. Updating the details may be the first step necessary, after which the issue may go away.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): The problem with the immigration system we inherited is that it had very high levels of low-skilled immigration, but what the economy actually needs is low levels of high-skilled immigration. We need to attract worldwide top talent for some key sectors, many of which are based in Edinburgh East and Musselburgh, so that we remain globally competitive, but businesses tell me that long visa processing times work against that. Now that we are seeing lower levels of immigration, will the Government be reprioritising resources so we see faster processing of skilled worker visas?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He will be aware that visa processing times can vary based on the type of visa and where people are applying from. However, for most applications, even those made outside the UK, decisions are usually made within three weeks. He will also be aware that we are looking at how to reform our immigration system as a result of the record levels of net migration under the previous Government, and making sure that we focus our immigration on the needs of our economy is a priority for this Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): New research shows that foreign nationals are claiming almost £1 billion in benefits each month. We now face the highest number of asylum claims ever recorded—up another 9% since Labour took office. Meanwhile, the 42,000 appeal backlog at the end of 2024 is projected to more than double to almost 100,000 by the end of this year. The Home Secretary herself has admitted to the media that her White Paper would cut immigration by just 50,000. This is utterly inadequate. Without real deterrence and stricter measures, the visa processing delays will only worsen, so will the Minister commit to two concrete measures: implementing the previous Conservative threshold of £38,000; and introducing a legally binding annual migration cap that actually delivers accountability?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say to the shadow Minister that we have a lot of Members to get in—I want to get to Question 15 on the Order Paper—and I need her help to do so?

Seema Malhotra: This is yet another example of the Opposition wanting to rewrite history. The Conservatives quadrupled net migration to record levels. I think the hon. Member will want to correct herself on the immigration White Paper, which will be reducing net migration by considerably more than she suggested; the Home Secretary has said so. The latest figures show that, since this Government came to power, almost 30,000 foreign criminals, failed asylum seekers and others with no right to be in the UK have been removed. That includes an increase of enforced returns in the last quarter compared with the same period last year, which is a much better record than the shadow Home Secretary could achieve.

Neighbourhood Policing

2. **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on improving neighbourhood policing in Bracknell Forest. [904418]

7. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on improving neighbourhood policing. [904424]

13. **Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on improving neighbourhood policing. [904430]

14. **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve neighbourhood policing. [904431]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): We are providing £200 million across England and Wales this financial year to increase neighbourhood policing. As part of our neighbourhood policing guarantee, every community will have named, contactable officers dedicated to addressing local issues. Alongside that, during the course of this year we will have 3,000 additional officers and police community support officers working in neighbourhood teams. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) that, for Thames Valley police, that will include an extra 68 police officers on the streets this year.

Peter Swallow: Bracknell Forest has seen a spate of tool thefts recently. Tool theft is a double whammy: traders have to fork out thousands for new tools, all while they are out of work. I have raised this issue with Thames Valley police and the police and crime commissioner, but what more can be done through the Government's neighbourhood policing guarantee to stamp down on this cruel crime?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right to raise that serious crime. Honest, hard-working tradespeople in communities across the country are being robbed of their livelihoods as a result of this kind of crime. That is why we are working with the National Police Chiefs' Council on how we target the serious and organised crime that is often behind such equipment and tool theft, and putting neighbourhood police back on the streets in communities, so they can both work on prevention and go after the criminals responsible.

Matt Western: Under the previous Government, the number of PCSOs more than halved in Warwickshire. Indeed, in summer 2023, local teachers were forced to police a park in Warwick and Leamington after a knife gang terrorised pupils, stealing their bikes. More widely, constituents are fed up with crime and antisocial behaviour; 50% say that they have been personally impacted by crime in the past five years. Will the Home Secretary outline how the Government will address these crimes and make our streets safer for everyone?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of PCSOs as well as police officers in neighbourhood teams working to prevent crime. He is also right to raise concerns. Over the last two years of the previous Government, both street theft and shoplifting increased by more than 60%, at the same time as neighbourhood police were cut. We are putting the bobbies back on the beat.

Jen Craft: This week, I will be meeting eight new community police officers who begin their roles on the beat thanks to the Government's investment through the national policing guarantee. Does the Home Secretary agree that investing in community policing is the best way to tackle so much of the crime that blights our communities? Will she join me in wishing these vital officers all the best as they begin their new roles?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to welcome the additional neighbourhood police in Thurrock. She will know that that is part of 74 additional neighbourhood police officers across Essex just this year, as a result of our neighbourhood policing guarantee, and we will go beyond that. She is right, too, that local police who know what the problems are in Thurrock and across Essex are crucial to tackling local crime.

Yuan Yang: Across neighbourhoods in my Earley and Woodley constituency I have seen too many incidents of electric bikes and electric scooters being ridden dangerously, including on pavements. Residents have told me of collisions in areas such as Woodley Precinct and Kennet Island. I have been raising the issue with Thames Valley police, and I am very glad to hear the Home Secretary's announcement of 68 neighbourhood officers across our

region, but what more can she and the Home Office do to support the work of the police in cracking down on dangerous riders?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right: we need to make sure that Thames Valley has the 68 additional neighbourhood police just this year and give them the powers they need. That is why we are strengthening the Crime and Policing Bill both on dangerous cycling and dangerous riding, and giving the police stronger powers to take e-scooters and off-road bikes literally off the roads.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I recently met the chief constable of West Mercia to discuss neighbourhood policing. The West Mercia area covers Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire, and the word is that the integrated care board reorganisation will split that area into one that covers Warwickshire and one that covers some of Shropshire. I have had a letter from the police and crime commissioner citing the chief constable's concerns that amid that reorganisation and the local government reorganisation, safeguarding the most vulnerable and children could fall between the cracks. Will the Home Secretary have a word with her Cabinet colleagues to ensure that does not happen?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes a really important point, because having links between local services is crucial. We will ensure that the Home Office looks into and takes up the points she raises, so we can ensure strong local partnerships working to tackle crime.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): Last week, I visited many retail businesses in North Devon that are suffering from prolific shoplifting. This is a big problem across the country. Will the Home Secretary explain what she is doing to help police forces resource the tackling of shoplifting and dealing with antisocial behaviour?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right. There has been an increase in shoplifting in recent years, at the same time as neighbourhood policing numbers have fallen. As a result of the neighbourhood policing guarantee, there will be 110 additional neighbourhood police officers and PCSOs in Devon and Cornwall police over the next 12 months. That is important, but we are also strengthening their powers to tackle shoplifting.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Will the Home Secretary acknowledge the role that special constables play in neighbourhood policing, and does she agree that granting special constables the right to unpaid time from their employment to perform their duties would assist in their recruitment?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes a really important point about the role of specials. We want them to be able to play a much stronger role, not just in neighbourhood policing but across the board. People who take time out to be part of police forces can bring all kinds of additional skills. We are working on what more can be done to support specials and their recruitment, which has plummeted in recent years. It is important that that trend is turned around.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): In North Ascot, neighbourhood police have been out on the streets trying to clamp down on pavement parking, which forces disabled and vulnerable people on to the roads and into dangerous situations. Will the Home Secretary outline what more could be done to help neighbourhood police when it comes to pavement parking?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that neighbourhood police understand the challenges in each area, whether it be in North Ascot or other parts of the country, and local police can target those issues and work with local councils. There are different rules for different councils, so combined work between the council and the police is the best way to tackle local crime.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Six of Britain's most senior police officers have warned that the Government's actions are making it harder to keep our streets safe. From the damaging jobs tax to releasing criminals early, Labour is pushing forces to the brink. Does the Home Secretary agree with Met Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley that he will be forced to cut 1,700 police officers, PCSOs and staff this year?

Yvette Cooper: I gently remind the hon. Member that thousands of police and PCSOs were taken off our streets under the Conservatives. That is why the number of people who say that they never see the police in their communities doubled under the Conservatives. This Government are turning that around, with 3,000 additional police on our streets this year alone. That includes 470 more neighbourhood police on London's streets.

Matt Vickers: We did not get to whether Mark Rowley was right or wrong, and I notice that the Home Secretary forgot to mention the hundreds of millions being gobbled up by Labour's jobs tax, or the fact that police numbers reached record levels under the last Government.

That aside, the National Police Chiefs' Council has published its anti-racism commitment, saying that racial equality does not mean treating everyone the same or being colour blind, and calling for arrest rates to be artificially engineered to be the same across racial groups. Does the Home Secretary agree that the police should respond to people's actions regardless of race? If so, why did the policing Minister endorse this barmy document?

Yvette Cooper: The shadow Minister is, as he knows, talking nonsense. The police have to police without fear or favour; that is the standard that they apply and sign up to. I am really sorry that he wants to undermine the important work of police across the country, just as his party in government undermined the number of police on the streets—took them off the streets—so we ended up with thousands fewer police on our streets. This Government are finally putting them back into communities and back on the beat where they belong.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Peaceful protest is a fundamental right in any free society, but for protests to remain safe and orderly, a visible, well-trained and effective police presence is often needed on top of existing

neighbourhood police teams. Cities such as Manchester are seeing rising numbers of demonstrations, which the combined authority estimates will cost up to £2 million this year to police. While the Met receives specific grants to cover the cost of policing protests, Greater Manchester police receives no such allocation. That is not only unfair to my constituents, but unsustainable. In the light of the worries highlighted by police leaders about their funding being cut in the upcoming spending review, can the Home Secretary ensure that areas such as Greater Manchester receive the funding they need to police protests properly without taking away from the neighbourhood policing our communities deserve?

Yvette Cooper: We will continue to support Greater Manchester police and police forces across the country. It is right that they should be able to deal with issues and challenges, including public order. We are strengthening the system in that area as a result of weaknesses in the national co-ordination that we have inherited. I can tell the hon. Lady that Greater Manchester police will be getting 176 additional police officers for their neighbourhood teams over the course of this year.

Vehicle Nuisance

3. **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle the antisocial use of off-road bikes. [904419]

23. **Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle vehicle nuisance. [904440]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Off-road bikes careering through estates and communities are dangerous and an antisocial nightmare. We are giving the police stronger powers to seize bikes without the need for repeated warnings, in order to help keep our streets safe.

Darren Paffey: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. My constituents around Weston Shore have had enough of exactly the kind of thing she describes. Antisocial motorbikes are racing outside their homes every night. The constant noise disturbs everyone's sleep, yet they have seen no meaningful enforcement in recent years. The Secretary of State has outlined that further powers are coming. Will she confirm that she expects local police forces to use these powers fully to tackle this issue seriously, so that this blight on my constituents' lives can be stopped?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The issue he raises will resonate with people across the country; whether it is Southampton or south Tyneside, too many areas are facing the blight of off-road bikes and street racing. At the moment, the police have to give people multiple warnings. It can be two strikes or three strikes and the bikes are still on the streets. That is not good enough. We want to make it much easier for the police, so that it is one strike and out.

Tristan Osborne: I thank the Home Secretary for her response. In Kent we are using section 59 powers to confiscate bikes, including in Snodland and Walderslade in my constituency. However, the police have stated that

the legislation is not powerful enough, and that they welcome powers to seize bikes. Can we ensure that police inspectors and police and crime commissioners are given guidance and that the number of vehicles seized is monitored, so that we can stop this problem once and for all?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right; we need to ensure that the police have the powers that they need and are able to act swiftly. We want to make it easier for them to crush bikes more quickly as well as to seize them and take them off the streets, and that requires additional neighbourhood police. In Kent, that means an additional 65 neighbourhood police officers, and there are similar numbers for Hampshire.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Many residents in my constituency complain about motorcycle noise from illegally modified exhausts. Can the Home Secretary inform me of her plans to help local police and local authorities address this nuisance?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right to raise this issue. Noise and speed are used deliberately in order to harass people and intimidate local residents. It is disgraceful antisocial behaviour, and it is really unfair on local families. That is why we need to give the police stronger powers to clamp down on it.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Off-road bikes are often used illegally across private farmland, causing damage to crops, spooking animals and leaving farmers feeling scared and vulnerable. While the Crime and Policing Bill includes a provision to make it easier for the police to seize vehicles associated with antisocial behaviour, Avon and Somerset police has little or no resource to police rural crimes properly. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to stop the illegal use of off-road bikes on farmland?

Yvette Cooper: As well as strengthening the law, we are working with the National Police Chiefs' Council on a stronger rural crime strategy. I can tell the hon. Lady that Avon and Somerset police will be getting 70 additional neighbourhood police officers across the area this year as a result of the neighbourhood policing guarantee.

Violence against Shop Workers: Rural Areas

4. **Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle violence against shop workers in rural areas. [904420]

The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): Under the previous Government, shop theft was allowed to reach epidemic proportions. There was a 70% increase in the last two years of the previous Government. We are working hard to tackle this epidemic in every area of our country, including rural areas. Through our Crime and Policing Bill, we are introducing a new stand-alone offence of assault against a retail worker. We will not tolerate workers facing abuse and violence simply for doing their job, whether that is in towns or in rural areas.

Amanda Hack: Convenience stores are at the heart of our communities and provide employment for over 700 people in shops in North West Leicestershire, but workers often face abuse. When I visited one of my

local shops recently, I was told that just a few days earlier the assistant manager had been punched in the face when he was just doing his job. Although the assault had been reported, the police had yet to pay a visit. Will the Minister share her plans to support rural policing in constituencies such as mine, so that we can tackle violence against shop workers?

Dame Diana Johnson: May I express my concern about the attack on my hon. Friend's constituent? It is totally unacceptable. Under the retail crime action plan, the police made operational commitments to prioritising attendance where violence had been used. Some progress has been made, but much more needs to be done. I will ensure that every police force understands how seriously the Government take this offence. The additional 35 police officers and 21 police community support officers who will be in place as a result of our neighbourhood policing guarantee might go some way to helping with that.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I recently visited the Huntingdon branch of Barclays bank in my rural constituency, where staff highlighted to me that although the Crime and Policing Bill will make assaulting a shop worker an offence, branch staff in banks and building societies are not included in that classification, despite the fact that they work on the high street and are subject to the same threats and intimidation as shop workers. There were over 10,000 instances of abuse in branches last year. What rationale can the Minister provide for excluding branch staff in banks and building societies from the protections given to retail staff, who work next to them?

Dame Diana Johnson: A case has been made over several years for why retail workers should be covered by this specific offence. Work was done with the Co-op, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and many others to get the evidence together. If there is evidence from the financial sector and from banks, I want to see it, so I ask the hon. Gentleman to talk to the people with whom he was having conversations about this. I am very open to looking at this, but at the moment, we have drawn up the offence on the basis of the evidence available to us.

Gaza: UK Nationals Visa Scheme

5. **Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** What assessment she has made of the potential merits of creating a visa scheme for people in Gaza related to UK nationals. [904421]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): I know that we are all desperately concerned about the intolerable humanitarian situation in Gaza. The UK, along with France, Germany and many others, continues to call for an immediate ceasefire, the release of hostages and more aid into Gaza. There are a range of routes available for those wishing to join family members in the UK, and we are working with the Israeli, Palestinian and other authorities in the region to help British nationals and other eligible people to leave Gaza via safe routes.

Marsha De Cordova: The situation in Gaza is beyond devastating. More than 54,000 lives have been lost. Hospitals are being bombed, people are being tortured and starvation is being used as a weapon of war. Palestinians in the UK are rightly scared that they may not see their mother, father, brother or sister survive these atrocities. The Government rightly responded to the war in Ukraine by offering a family visa scheme, so that Ukrainians could travel here to join their family. Is it not time for a similar scheme—a Gaza family scheme that offers the same solidarity and respect for life?

Seema Malhotra: The statement that we recently issued with France and Germany, calling for Israel to immediately restart a rapid and unimpeded flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza, was vital. We still need to see so much more action being taken. Any decision to implement a bespoke visa scheme would need to consider a range of factors, including the unique crisis situation and the relevant impacts on security, compliance and returns. As I have said, immediate family members are able to join those in the UK using one of the existing family routes.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): My constituents in Taunton have a proud record of supporting refugees; they would support refugees from Gaza, as they do those from other countries. But charities that support refugees come to me with concerns about the asylum accommodation being allocated to the town. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the concerns about the latest allocations, on which I was not consulted, and about which I received no notification?

Seema Malhotra: I will be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Fraud

6. **Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con):** What recent assessment she has made of trends in the incidence of fraud. [904422]

10. **Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD):** What steps she is taking to help tackle fraud. [904427]

21. **Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to help protect consumers against fraud. [904438]

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): We monitor fraud trends very closely. Fraud is a growing transnational threat that requires urgent action. That is why the Government are developing a new fraud strategy, which covers better collaboration with industry, improved public awareness and improved collaboration with international partners.

Damian Hinds: The figures were, of course, coming down, but the incidence of fraud—much of it online—is now back up to a new high. Many factors are involved, but will the Government look at taking further steps, including requiring enhanced intelligence sharing between platforms and banks, and better mandatory user identification on sites such as dating apps and online marketplaces?

Dan Jarvis: I know that the right hon. Gentleman takes these matters seriously, but I gently remind the House that under the last Government, Lord Agnew, then Minister with responsibility for countering fraud, literally resigned at the Dispatch Box. Among other things, he accused the Treasury of having “little interest” in the consequences of fraud for our society. It is precisely because of the important points that the right hon. Gentleman raises that a national fraud squad of some 400 new specialist investigators is being recruited. That will be led by the National Crime Agency’s national economic crime centre, working closely with the City of London police. We will do all we can to protect the public from fraud.

Victoria Collins: A study last year showed that more than two in five people over 50 had been scammed in the last five years, losing an average of £2,000 in each scam. In half of those cases, the money was never recovered—and that is just at the small end of the scale. Even in the past two weeks, as a result of developments in artificial intelligence, there have been exponential improvements to scams, which are more convincing and realistic than ever before. What is the Home Office doing to protect people, especially the more vulnerable, by informing them about AI scams?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise concerns; the numbers that she references are deeply concerning. Combating fraud and beating scammers requires raising public awareness, and I am grateful for the work that she has done on this. I can tell her that the Home Office is working closely with the banking, telecoms, digital and tech sectors to improve systems and share data faster with law enforcement. Over 60 stakeholders from across industry are involved in the development of our new fraud strategy. Public communications, targeted support for the most vulnerable and AI are key parts of our strategy.

Gurinder Singh Josan: The Government have outlined a clear ambition to make the UK a global hub for the crypto industry, to support our growth mission. Many of our constituents are already regularly engaging with crypto. What assessment has the Minister made of the crypto sector, and particularly of the steps required to protect consumers and investors while ensuring that we allow the industry to develop?

Dan Jarvis: Stability and security remain key to ensuring the health and growth of the UK economy; protecting investors and consumers is central to that. We are continually evolving our capabilities, including by working closely with industry partners to ensure that security is front and centre of the UK’s framework for the crypto sector.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Facebook Marketplace is responsible for three quarters of the fraud on social media, yet it seems uninterested in doing anything about that. Will the Minister assure the House that he will take Facebook to task, in order to clamp down on that fraud and make sure that consumers are protected?

Dan Jarvis: The Online Safety Act 2023 will require tech companies to take measures to prevent fraudulent content on their platforms or face significant fines.

Under the Act, the largest firms will be required to do all they can to prevent fraudulent advertising from appearing on their platforms.

Violence against Women and Girls

8. **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle violence against women and girls. [904425]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): We are already taking significant steps to make sure that violence against women and girls is treated as the national emergency that it is. That includes launching our domestic abuse protection orders, and investing almost £20 million this year in specialist services for victims and in projects to help prevent VAWG and improve our response to it. Later this year, we will publish our cross-Government VAWG strategy, which will set out our long-term plan to tackle the crisis.

Joe Morris: For some families of victims, further review of release decisions can provide some solace, but it cannot do so for my constituent Doreen Soulsby. Her daughter’s murderer was released before the Victims and Courts Bill passed through this place. Will the Minister meet Doreen and me to discuss clause 61 of the Bill and the release of life prisoners?

Jess Phillips: Yes, of course. As my hon. Friend knows, I have had a strong bond with Doreen for many years. Of course I would be delighted to meet him and her.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): Research undertaken by Women for Refugee Women has found that banning work for women seeking asylum leads many women, sadly, to stay in unwanted and abusive relationships. Will the Minister consider lifting the ban on asylum seekers working, and will she specifically include women seeking asylum in the Government’s upcoming strategy to tackle violence against women and girls?

Jess Phillips: It is well beyond my remit as safeguarding Minister to make asylum policy, but I can absolutely guarantee the hon. Lady that migrant women and their experiences will be part of the violence against women and girls strategy; this issue has received some of the money from the recent uplift in victim services. Working together with by-and-for services across the country, we will always take account of the experiences of all women and girls in our country.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Katie Lam.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): On 28 April, the Minister was clear with this House that the framework for local grooming gang inquiries and Baroness Casey’s audit would both be published in May. It is now June. Presumably there is a new timeline for publishing them, so will the Minister share it with us, please?

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and I apologise for the month’s wait. I waited 14 years for anyone to do anything. Baroness Casey has requested a short extension to her work from the Home Secretary,

and the Home Secretary has informed the Home Affairs Committee of this. We expect the report very shortly, and when we have it, the Government will respond to it, and will lay out their plans with all the evidence in hand.

Knife Crime

9. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle knife crime. [904426]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): We have taken action to ban zombie knives, and the ban on ninja swords will come in this August. We are also bringing forward Ronan's law, which puts stronger restrictions on online sales, through the Crime and Policing Bill. There will also be additional funding, through the hotspot action fund, for high-visibility patrols in the areas with the most knife crime and antisocial behaviour.

Chris Bloore: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer, and for the seriousness with which this Government are tackling the scourge of knife crime in constituencies like mine. In Redditch, the anti-knife-crime campaigner Pete Martin is making a real difference by educating young people in schools about the dangers of knife crime. Will the Secretary of State consider visiting Redditch to see Pete's work at first hand, and the real difference that it is making in our schools?

Yvette Cooper: Can I pass on my thanks, through my hon. Friend, to the team who are doing such good work in his community? We are certainly keen to know more about that, because he is right about local work preventing young people from being drawn into knife crime. That is why we are setting up the Young Futures prevention programme, and we are introducing a new law on child criminal exploitation to go after the gangs who draw young people into crime.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): As Sussex police consider how to tackle knife crime in Eastbourne and invest in community policing, I have been urging them to prioritise investment in their Grove Road premises in the town centre, as opposed to their Hammonds Drive industrial estate premises. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should prioritise investment in town centres such in Eastbourne, so that we can better tackle knife crime there?

Yvette Cooper: Obviously, police forces have to make their own operational decisions, but we do believe that town centres need to be a particular focus of neighbourhood policing, and when it comes to preventing youth crime, including knife crime. Sussex police are getting 64 additional neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers under the neighbourhood policing guarantee this year, but we are also focusing on hotspot policing, targeting the areas with the highest knife crime.

Illegal Working

11. **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle illegal working. [904428]

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): Clamping down on illegal working is a crucial element of our strategy to tackle immigration crime. Since coming to office, this Government have increased raids, arrests and civil penalties to their highest levels in years. Our Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill will introduce tougher provisions in this area, particularly to bolster our enforcement action against illegal working in the gig economy.

Johanna Baxter: Good employers in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire South—those who conduct employment checks and employ people on decent terms and conditions—are being undercut by unscrupulous firms that use exploitative practices and prey on the vulnerabilities of people seeking a better life here in the UK. What steps are being taken to protect people from exploitation and employers who do the right thing?

Dame Angela Eagle: Enforcement of the law is the best way to deal with this issue, which is why there has been a 40% increase in visits to check whether illegal working is going on, and a 42% increase in arrests since this Government came to office.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Could I be counterintuitive for a moment and make a New Labour point? The cause of a lot of illegal migration is the fact that it is easier to work here illegally than anywhere else in Europe, and that is because we do not have national identity cards. The Gordon Brown Government, quite wisely, were going to bring them in, and the coalition Government wrongly stopped that idea. Why should we not have national consensus now on bringing in national identity cards, given that we all carry mobile phones? It would dramatically reduce illegal working.

Dame Angela Eagle: I am reeling at the New Labour point that the Father of the House has made. E-visas basically give us the capacity to do a similar thing, and they are easily checked, which is why, in the border security Bill, we are extending those checks to the gig and zero-hours economy.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Around our asylum hotel on Blackpool seafront, we see increased illegal working in our takeaways, bars and restaurants. Will the Minister outline to my constituents how this Government are tackling that illegal working, to ensure that we have safe spaces for people in the jobs in our vital tourism industry?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are tackling illegal working by significantly increasing enforcement. That is why we have had a 40% increase in visits and a 42% increase in the number of arrests for illegal working. There are fines of £60,000 per illegal worker discovered, and those who are discovered working illegally can be arrested and put on the route to deportation.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Surely the best way to tackle illegal working is to make more legal opportunities. The "island of strangers" immigration policy will cause huge issues for the workforce in Scotland; the care service says that it could threaten the whole sector.

Asylum seekers waiting for their case to be processed are in effect an unused resource. Why not shorten the time that asylum seekers have to wait before being allowed to work, to bring some relief to such sectors?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are shortening the time that it takes to process asylum claims by getting the system that we inherited from the Conservatives working again. That is why there has been a 63% increase in the number of initial claims processed. That follows a 70% fall in the period before the last election.

Rape Gangs: Statutory Inquiry

12. **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): If she will establish a national statutory inquiry into rape gangs. [904429]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): Child sexual exploitation and abuse are the most horrific crimes, and the Government are taking decisive action to ensure that victims and survivors of grooming gangs get the justice that they deserve. We are delivering on the key recommendations of the seven-year independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, including the recommendation on mandatory reporting; we have asked all police forces in England and Wales to review historical cases in which no further action was taken, and to reopen investigations; and we have commissioned Baroness Louise Casey to conduct a national audit of the nature and scale of grooming gangs and this offending in this country. We will leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of truth and justice.

Graham Stuart: Senior figures in the Catholic Church and the Church of England were found to have conspired to cover up child abuse by priests. Senior figures in the Labour party are now opposing local inquiries in places such as Bradford, London and Wales, and Ministers here oppose a national rape inquiry. We have also heard from a former Labour Member of Parliament, Simon Danczuk, that he was told not to raise the issue of the ethnicity of some of the perpetrators. When will Labour put aside its electoral interests and stand on the side of the abused?

Jess Phillips: The idea that I or the Prime Minister have ever put anything other than the interests of the victims of grooming gangs at the heart of everything that we have ever worked for is, frankly, for the birds. We have increased the number of arrests of the perpetrators that the right hon. Gentleman talks about. We will continue to pursue these violent, abusive, vicious abusers through the courts—through justice—and I will continue to take my counsel not from him but from the victims in this country.

Qualifying Period for Settlement

15. **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Whether her proposal to increase the standard qualifying period for settlement to 10 years would apply retrospectively. [904432]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): Settlement in the UK is a prerequisite for becoming a British citizen, and

it is also an important step in integrating and contributing to local communities and the country. The White Paper proposes an expansion of the points-based system to increase the standard qualifying period for settlement to 10 years. Individuals will have the opportunity to reduce the qualifying period based on their contributions to the UK economy and society. We will consult on the earned settlement scheme later this year; after that we will provide details of how the scheme will work, including in respect of any transitional arrangements for those already in the UK.

Olly Glover: Kamala moved to the UK in 2021 as a skilled worker in my Oxfordshire constituency. They worked to discover novel drugs for diseases with no current treatment. They are an additional rate taxpayer and have made many professional and personal ties here. The sudden increase to the qualifying period from five to 10 years has plunged hard-working people like Kamala into uncertainty about their future. Will the Minister meet me to understand the impact of the policy not just on workers like Kamala but on the Government's wider science and research objectives?

Seema Malhotra: The changes are indeed important. We recognise how important they are to people and will listen to what people tell us in the consultation. After that we will provide details of how the scheme will work, including in respect of any transitional arrangements for those already in the UK.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Emily asked me to raise this issue in the House only yesterday, so I am taking the first opportunity to do so. Emily is a carer and has cared for a number of people across the Harlow community. Will the consultation on the earned settlement scheme take into account the hugely important role that carers, sometimes from overseas, do to support the most vulnerable in our communities?

Seema Malhotra: Indeed, carers, including those who have come from overseas, do important work to support us, our families and our communities. My hon. Friend will recognise that, as I have said, it is important for us to ensure that people's voices can be heard in the consultation. We recognise that settlement is an important step in integrating and contributing to local communities and families. Under the current system, people primarily qualify for settlement on the basis of their length of time in the UK, but we also believe that people should be contributing to the economy and society before they gain settled status in our country.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Another group for whom the immigration White Paper is creating uncertainty is refugee families. Family reunion is a vital route by which refugees can safely reach the UK, free from the grasps of criminal trafficking gangs. The Government should be looking for more ways to facilitate refugee family reunion, not hindering it. It is unclear how the White Paper's reforms on English language requirements will apply to refugee family reunion. Will the Minister acknowledge the needs of this unique and vulnerable group? Is she able to provide clarity on the level of

English language proficiency that people who apply for refugee family reunion will be expected to have once the reforms are implemented?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Member for her question. She will know that in the immigration White Paper we have referenced that we will be looking at reform of the family rules, and we will be consulting on that.

Topical Questions

T1. [904442] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): May I first pay tribute to the first responders, the police, ambulance, fire service and others who dealt with the horrific incident at the Liverpool parade, some of whom I met last week? I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with those who were injured and affected.

The House will also have seen the disgraceful and unacceptable small boat crossings on Saturday. No one should be making those journeys, and criminal gangs are likely to have made millions of pounds this weekend alone. The gangs are increasingly operating a model where boats are launched from further along the coast, and people climb in from the water, exploiting French rules that have stopped their police taking any action in the sea. That is completely unacceptable. The previous Government raised the issue with France for years, but to no avail, and I have raised it with the French Government since the summer. The French Minister of the Interior, and the French Cabinet, have now agreed that their rules need to change. A French maritime review is looking at what new operational tactics they will use, and we are urging France to complete the review and implement the changes as swiftly as possible. This weekend I have again been in touch with the French Minister of the Interior, who supports stronger action, and further discussions are under way this week. I will update the House in due course.

David Simmonds: On Friday in my constituency I met the leader of Hillingdon council, which hosts 3,000 asylum seekers in Home Office accommodation—the most per capita of any local authority in the country. He told me that the council faces a £5 million per annum funding shortfall, which is more than its entire budget for libraries and culture on supporting asylum seekers. What plans does the Home Secretary have to ensure that local authorities are reimbursed in full for the role they play in supporting asylum seekers in this country?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member raises an important point, and we did inherit an unacceptable asylum backlog, including huge and unacceptable bills for asylum accommodation. We have already brought the bills for asylum accommodation down, saving hundreds of millions of pounds, with hundreds of millions of pounds more to be saved over the course of this year. That is a result of the action we are taking to clear the backlog that the previous Government left us with, and as part of that we are working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on how to co-ordinate support for local councils.

T3. [904445] **Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): Crawley is home to the Tinsley House and Brook House immigration removal centres, and their associated scandal. What consideration is being given to the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into immigration detention, including ending the use of such centres for indefinite detention?

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): Immigration centres are not used for indefinite detention. We can only keep anyone in detention in an immigration centre if there is a reasonable prospect of their removal. If there is not, they have to be released.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Home Secretary, Chris Philp.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to the people and emergency services in Liverpool.

On the Home Secretary's watch, this year so far has been the worst in history for illegal immigrants crossing the channel. The Government's laughable claim to "smash the gangs" lies in tatters—they are not smashing gangs; they are smashing records. The right hon. Lady mentioned the French. The French prevention rate on land is lamentably under 40%, and even those who are stopped are then released to attempt a crossing again the next day. Although she talks about action at sea, nothing has happened whatsoever. At the weekend we saw pictures of the French police just standing there taking photographs while illegal immigrants departed. Does the Home Secretary agree that the recent 12-year fishing deal should be suspended until the French agree to stop those small boats at sea and prevent illegal immigration?

Yvette Cooper: Let me remind the shadow Home Secretary that when he was Immigration Minister he said:

"I will continue to push my French counterparts to look hard at interceptions at sea."

Five years of Conservative government later, the French Government had not agreed to any changes at all. This Government have reached a new agreement with France, and we are now pressing for that to be operationalised as swiftly as possible. But we will not take lessons from a former Immigration Minister who, on his watch, let legal migration treble and small boat crossings soar more than tenfold.

Chris Philp: Immigration is at a record level on the Home Secretary's watch, but as usual she does not answer the question or take responsibility. Let me try this instead: it emerged yesterday that the Attorney General, Lord Hermer, chose not to refer for a longer sentence under the unduly lenient sentencing scheme—as the Attorney General can—a man who had been given just 28 months for rape, yet Lucy Connolly got more prison time for a tasteless tweet. Why does Lord Hermer think rape is less serious than Twitter comments? This is two-tier justice in action. Does this not show that Lord Hermer has appalling judgment and the Prime Minister should fire him?

Yvette Cooper: The question comes from a former policing Minister under whose Government charge rates for rape and domestic abuse plummeted, while charge

rates for crime dropped substantially. This Government support much stronger action on violence against women and girls because we recognise the serious damage that those crimes do. Shamefully, the previous Government left us with a shocking legacy on crime, on immigration and across the board, but this Government are turning that around.

T4. [904446] Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): At the Home Affairs Committee, we have heard worrying evidence about unaccompanied children arriving in this country and being placed in wholly unsuitable accommodation, including staying in rooms with adult males, which presents safeguarding risks. Clearly, there are issues about the age assessment process at the border and the responsibility of the contractors who organise the accommodation. Will the Minister tell the House what steps the Government are taking to ensure children in this country are safe?

Dame Angela Eagle: When people arrive and claim to be children, there are tests at the border to check whether we think they are children. If they are accepted as children, they are put into local authority care, so they should not be in asylum accommodation at all. If they are seen to be adults and end up in asylum accommodation, they can always make an appeal to the local authority that they are in and undergo what is known as a Merton age assessment test, which will decide on their age once and for all.

T2. [904444] John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): On Saturday, 1,200 illegal migrants poured into the United Kingdom by small boat. Many gave spurious reasons to stay here, so when will the Government repeal the Human Rights Act 1998 for immigration cases and take back control of our borders?

Dame Angela Eagle: To tackle illegal migration, we must work across borders in co-operation with other jurisdictions. Were we to leave the European convention on human rights, we could not work with those that sign up to it.

T5. [904447] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): On Saturday, residents in Westerhope told me how nuisance vehicles, illegal and modified e-bikes, off-road bikes and speeding cars are making their lives an absolute misery, and I have had similar complaints from residents in Slatyford and Newbiggin. The chief constable of Northumbria tells me that his force has already tripled the number of vehicles impounded over the past few years, so it is keen to enforce the laws, such as they are. Will the Minister set out how her new proposals will make life better for residents in Newcastle?

The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): I welcome what my hon. Friend has said; this is a problem up and down the land. At the moment, police forces are doing their best, but the Crime and Policing Bill will allow them to seize vehicles that are being used in an antisocial way, without having to give any warnings, and then to destroy them. That is the way forward, but I pay tribute to the work that is already ongoing with police forces.

T6. [904448] Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Since taking office almost a year ago, the Home Secretary has spectacularly failed to put a cap on illegal immigration or a deterrent in place, and this weekend's record number of boat crossings demonstrates that she has clearly completely failed to take control of our borders. What can she say in all honesty to my constituents about her plan, because clearly it is not working?

Yvette Cooper: Given that the right hon. Member was a member of the previous Government, her question might be rather more plausible if she apologised for the 100-fold increase in small boat crossings under her Government's watch and for the quadrupling of net migration as a result of the policies that she supported in government. If she wants to support stronger action against illegal migration and the gangs that are organising it, why will she not support the counter-terrorism powers that this Government are putting in place to go after them?

T7. [904449] Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): In the light of the ban on disposable vapes, which came into force this week, will the Minister outline the measures being taken to step up the work at ports, including at East Midlands airport, to prevent counterfeit and banned vapes from being imported into the country?

Seema Malhotra: While Border Force does not routinely disclose information of a port-specific nature, in the calendar year of 2024 it seized approximately 300,000 e-cigarettes and vapes at the UK border. Border Force has a robust approach to seizures, based on intelligence received from its partners. I know that my hon. Friend has raised this issue previously, and I am very happy to meet with her to discuss it.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): In my constituency, we have seen the parks police slashed from Bushy Park and rates of theft and knife crimes soaring. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner warned last week that the Home Secretary will not meet her laudable targets on neighbourhood policing, tackling knife crime and tackling violence against women and girls without additional investment. Can she reassure my constituents that they will see the bobbies on the beat that she has promised, or will they see only the Chancellor's iron fist?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell the hon. Lady that more than 400 additional neighbourhood police officers will be on the streets in London this year as a result of our neighbourhood policing guarantee.

T8. [904450] Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): There is increasing concern in my constituency that a number of Deliveroo riders are subcontracting to unregistered riders, some of whom are working illegally. Will the Minister say what is being done to crack down and ensure that all Deliveroo riders are registered and are not here working illegally?

Dame Angela Eagle: There is an amendment to the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill that extends the requirement to check illegal working to the

gig economy, the zero-hours economy and all those areas that have non-traditional employer-employee relationships. I look forward to being able to operationalise that when the Bill becomes law.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Regarding non-crime hate incidents and the amount of police time taken to investigate them, does the Minister agree that the clue is in the name? They are “non-crime”. Does she also agree that already stretched police should focus their efforts on tackling real crime, rather than being the virtue-signalling thought police?

Dame Diana Johnson: The Home Secretary has been very clear about the priorities that police forces should actually focus on. As agreed with the Home Secretary, the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the College of Policing are conducting a review of non-crime hate incidents. We will update Parliament in due course on the findings of that review and any changes that may be required to the code of practice introduced by the shadow Home Secretary in March 2023.

T9. [904451] **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Doncaster East’s neighbourhood policing team recently seized multiple stolen offroad bikes using tactics including drones and high-visibility patrols. Its swift action has made a real difference in tackling antisocial behaviour in places such as Hatfield and Dunscroft. I commend the team on its work and the public support it has received through its “Where’s the bike” campaign. In the light of that, I ask the Minister about the progress around the neighbourhood policing guarantee and when Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme can see named police officers in their towns—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the work that South Yorkshire police has been doing and the Doncaster East neighbourhood policing team going after the offroad bikes, which cause havoc and are a total nightmare in the community. They are getting additional neighbourhood police as part of the neighbourhood policing guarantee, and we will give them stronger powers to keep the streets safe.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Leicestershire police has signed a reported £800,000 contract with Palantir—a company that has a worrying history of racial profiling and surveillance concerns in the USA. It has since removed all the contract details from the public record, and the Home Office holds no central records of such a deal. What reassurances can the Home Secretary give that the people of Leicester are protected from intrusive and discriminatory policing practices? How can transparency and oversight be upheld in such partnerships where no central records are kept?

Dame Diana Johnson: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman might write to me with the details of what he has outlined. If so, I will look at them.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister for visiting my constituency last week after the horrific incident following

the Liverpool football club victory parade. Will the Home Secretary join me in congratulating the emergency services on acting so swiftly, but also in condemning the Reform UK party and the far right for trying to stoke up hatred? Can she explain how her Department will tackle this misinformation to prevent further action in future?

Yvette Cooper: I join my hon. Friend in saying a huge thank you to all the first responders—those who I met last week, but also many more who were involved in a very swift response that undoubtedly saved lives that day. It was a day of huge joy across the city of Liverpool that ended in a horrific incident, but I know from her constituency and across Liverpool that it is a city where communities come together in the face of the greatest difficulties and show their strength as a community.

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

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Can I draw the Home Secretary’s attention to the amendment I have tabled to the Crime and Policing Bill, which would extend the definition of exploitation in the Modern Slavery Act to include orphanage trafficking? It is a horrific crime that affects about 5 million children across the world, and it is something we need to recognise in our legislation.

Yvette Cooper: The Chair of the Select Committee raises a very important point. I know that she has a strong interest in this issue that goes back many years, and has taken strong action herself on modern slavery. We will look at the amendment she has tabled, and are happy to discuss it with her further.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Last week, my whole community was shocked and appalled to hear about the stabbing of a 15-year-old boy in Cribbs Causeway. Thankfully, he is stable, and I know we will all be thinking of him and his family at this time. Three 16-year-old boys have been charged. Could the Minister please set out what steps the Government are taking to tackle knife crime, including among young people who could have much brighter futures?

Yvette Cooper: I convey all thoughts to the family of the victim in this awful stabbing case, and all of those affected across the community. My hon. Friend is right to raise the deep concerns that exist about the number of young people getting drawn into serious violence—we are seeing this across the board. That is why the Young Futures prevention programme is so important, and why we need to work to prevent this by strengthening the law on child criminal exploitation.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): As I speak, there is a removal van outside the illegal immigrant hotel in my constituency—let us hope they are moving them out, not moving more in. Can the Secretary of State assure my constituents that these illegal immigrants are not being dispersed in the community, being housed in houses in multiple occupation owned by private landlords, and will she advise me on where they will be housed?

Dame Angela Eagle: Anyone who is in a hotel is someone who has claimed asylum, and whose asylum claim is pending. They are not necessarily illegal immigrants at all, and the hon. Lady should make that position clear.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, Dr Mohammed Mohsen was offered a position in the acute medicine department at Royal Cornwall hospital in my constituency. He was due to start that role last year, but due to the ongoing conflict and travel restrictions in Gaza, he has been unable to travel to the UK. Would the Minister meet me to consider his case, as he requires urgent assistance?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, and I am very happy to meet her. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is working to ensure that those who need to leave Gaza, and are able and eligible to do so, are supported in that. I am very happy to look at this matter with my hon. Friend.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Home Secretary was asked a question about Lord Hermer of Chagos, as he perhaps ought to be known. Why did she not answer it, and will she do so now?

Yvette Cooper: Lord Hermer does not decide sentencing—he has a particular role as the Attorney General. The right hon. Gentleman, as a very experienced Member of this House, will know the way in which the system works.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Harpreet Uppal.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): At a recent roundtable on violence against women and girls hosted by the Mayor of West Yorkshire, we heard from local organisations that do outstanding work but are hampered by short-term funding, as well as from a brave survivor who shared her experiences. They specifically asked for the Government to commit to strategic investment. Will the Minister review contracts with the sector so they are multi-year and take a long-term view of service delivery and preventive work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): My hon. Friend makes an important point that short-term funding massively hampers the sector. The vast majority of violence against women and girls funding comes from local authorities and, in fact, other Departments, but I will absolutely commit to looking at how the Home Office manages its contracts to ensure sustainability.

Speaker's Statement

3.40 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the next piece of business, I will make a brief statement. This morning, the Government published the strategic defence review. The Prime Minister made a speech and held a press conference in Glasgow, in addition to other media appearances. That follows several days of media briefing. I am disappointed that, once again, the Government appear to have breached the principle set out in paragraph 9.1 of the “Ministerial Code” that

“When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.”

I recognise that the timing of policy announcements is not always wholly within the Government's control. There may be a need to co-ordinate announcements on international trade with trading partners, for example, or announcements may be delayed by last-minute legal intervention. The announcement of the SDR, however, was wholly at the Government's discretion, so it is highly regrettable that Ministers have chosen, once again, to hold a major media event before coming to the House. That shows complete disregard for the House and for hon. Members. I note that Ministers, when they were in opposition, were not slow to complain when previous Governments made major policy announcements outside Parliament. In fact, the SDR was due at Easter, so I am sure that a day would not have mattered.

I am not responsible for compliance with the ministerial code, which is a matter for the Prime Minister—it is the Government's code, not the House's code—but I regard this as a particularly blatant breach. I have invited the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) to consider whether the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee might usefully inquire into the matter.

Ministers are elected as Members of Parliament first, before they get their ministerial roles, so they should recognise the importance of the House. It is amazing that, in opposition, Members think that everything should be discussed on the Floor of the House, but when they are in government, their memories are short on that point.

I have been here through many SDRs. In fact, in one of the major SDRs with Lord Robertson, we did not even know the effect on everybody's constituency until it was read out from that Dispatch Box. What has changed? I will tell you what has changed: the disregard for Members who sit on the Back Benches. I am here to defend those on the Back Benches, so please, I hope we have no more of this.

All I would say is that it is the Government's ministerial code. They should be ashamed of not enforcing it.

Government Announcements

Mr Speaker: We now come to the urgent question. I call the shadow Leader of the House.

3.43 pm

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con) (*Urgent question*): To ask the Leader of the House if she will make a statement on Government announcements outside the House of Commons.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I hear your statement, Mr Speaker. I responded to an urgent question on a similar matter on 14 May. I reiterate the commitments I gave then. The “Ministerial Code” is clear:

“When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.”

That is an important principle that the Government stand by and uphold.

Since that last urgent question on 14 May, the Government have made a number of important oral statements to the House, on the infected blood inquiry, on the cross-Government review of sanctions implementation and enforcement, on the charging of individuals under the National Security Act 2023, and on the legal aid cyber-security incident. The Prime Minister has updated the House on the three trade deals that we have struck in the national interest, the Foreign Secretary has updated it on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the Justice Secretary has responded to the sentencing review, and the Defence Secretary has made a statement on the future of the Diego Garcia military base.

This afternoon, the full conclusions of the important strategic defence review will be published and laid before this House first, with a significant statement from the Defence Secretary to follow. I am satisfied that this Government are coming to the House regularly to keep Parliament informed. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not satisfied, and I think that is the key. Back Benchers on both sides should rightly hear it first. I do not care how many announcements have been made in the House; it is those that have not been made here that we should be talking about.

Lucy Powell: As I have said, the Defence Secretary will make a statement this afternoon, and I am satisfied.

I recognise that there are times when we make a judgment on when an oral statement is needed, balancing that with the rest of the day's business and other factors, but in nearly all instances a written statement is also made, and that is an appropriate mechanism for updating the House. As well as making 153 oral statements during the current Session, we have made 673 written statements.

As I said before the recess, the ministerial code makes it clear that when Parliament is in session, announcements should be made to the House. Let me gently point out that we have only just returned from the recess—as of an hour ago—and before the recess we were at pains to ensure that the House was updated on the subject of the Diego Garcia military base before it adjourned.

[Lucy Powell]

The Government and I take our obligations to Parliament very seriously, Mr Speaker, and I will continue to work with you and colleagues throughout the Government to make certain that important announcements are made to the House, and that Members from across the House have ample time to consider issues and ensure that the Government are scrutinised effectively.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Leader of the House.

Jesse Norman: Is that really the best that the Leader of the House can do—an “I speak your weight” autocue recitation of points that she has made in her three previous attempts to deal with occasions when the House has been embarrassed and disregarded over the last three weeks alone? It was a hopeless miscue of a response that bordered on a contempt of Parliament itself—yet another attempt to change the subject, blame others and distract attention from the latest fiasco. Evidently the defence of the realm is not important enough to merit making its way up the list of priorities in the Government’s media handouts. Lord Robertson himself, as you have said, Mr Speaker—and I am amazed that you had to intervene on the Leader of the House during her own remarks—would be ashamed and embarrassed to think that this was being done in his name.

Just three weeks ago, the Leader of the House had to be dragged to the House over the Government’s briefing on the immigration White Paper outside the House. That came just days after they had done the same in respect of prisoner recall, the UK-US trade deal and, of course, the Chagos islands. That followed instances involving tuition fees, planning reforms and even the fiscal rules, on which you, Mr Speaker, had to reprove and chastise the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Now we have seen the unhappy sight of the Secretary of State for Defence, no less, extensively briefing the media on the decisions to deploy airborne nuclear weapons and build the next generation of submarines, before coming to the House. Perhaps, as I have said, they were not important enough to merit a mention beforehand.

Journalists have been able to read the strategic defence review since 10.30 am, while the Opposition were prevented from seeing the document until five minutes ago, precisely in order to avoid parliamentary scrutiny. All this is manifestly in breach of the ministerial code, the Nolan principles and, of course, Labour’s own manifesto, demonstrating the Government’s arrogance and complacency and their disdain for the House and for democratic accountability, and this from—the clue is in the title—the Leader of the House, whose job is to protect and safeguard the House and its Members. Unfortunately, her obvious floundering just now made the point far better than I can.

When did the Leader of the House know about these announcements, and what steps did she take to prevent the media briefings and ensure that the announcements were made to the House of Commons first? Will she now apologise for yet another high-handed Government decision for which she alone is fully responsible, in this instance, to the House?

Lucy Powell: It is nice to see the right hon. Gentleman in his place and respecting Parliament today—that is not always the case.

As I have said before, I believe strongly that the Government should be and have been making the most important announcements to the House when Parliament is in session. We have made more oral statements than the previous Government did in their entire last Session—we have made 154 statements in 140 sitting days, compared with their 72 in 101 sitting days—and we have made many written statements and answered parliamentary questions. We had the statement on Diego Garcia on the day that the deal was signed, despite difficulties with the timing. We had a statement on the US economic deal on the day that it was signed, and the Prime Minister updated the House after the EU trade deal.

As I have said, the SDR has now been given to the Opposition and is being laid before the House. There will be time for colleagues to scrutinise it and to question the Defence Secretary on it this afternoon. The Government responses to the sentencing review and to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s report on the women’s state pension age, as well as many other major announcements, such as the upgrade in defence spending, were all made to the House first.

I am curious to know whether the shadow Leader of the House raised these important issues with the previous Government when he was a Minister or a Back Bencher, because I remember many, many occasions when they disrespected this House, and I do not remember hearing his voice at the time. I remember when the Procedure Committee, I and many others wanted the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, to be accountable to the House of Commons. The previous Government did nothing about it, and I do not remember the right hon. Gentleman saying anything about that. I recall the then Culture Secretary announcing the end of the BBC licence fee and, separately, the privatisation of Channel 4 on Twitter, with no intention of coming to the House to explain those major policy changes.

The previous Prime Minister, on the first day of a very long recess, announced that he was scrapping the Government’s net zero targets—he did not come to the House to explain that. He also announced the scrapping of High Speed 2 during a conference recess and never came to the House to account for it. During covid, one of the Conservatives’ many Prime Ministers announced major changes to our way of life to the media and not to Parliament, such as the 2020 winter lockdown—he did not come here to talk about that—and the covid vaccine roll-out. When he closed the borders and then reopened them, he announced it to the media and not to Parliament. Let us not forget that the Supreme Court found that Parliament was illegally prorogued by the previous Government. Do you remember when the former Prime Minister was found to have misled Parliament? There is no greater disrespect to Parliament.

Rather than upholding the ministerial code, the previous Government ignored breaches of it time and again, with reports sitting on the Prime Minister’s desk and nothing being done about them. We, by contrast, have strengthened the ministerial code. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) laughs from a sedentary position, but we have given the independent adviser on the ministerial code the power to instigate his own investigations. Therefore, we have strengthened it.

Not only did the previous Government disrespect Parliament; they did not have enough for Parliament to do. They had a threadbare King's Speech, with banning pedicabs the pinnacle of their ambition in their last year in government. Now that they are in opposition, they seem to be carrying on the same and hardly turn up for work. They could have used any one of their Opposition days to raise these issues, but they did not. They have many other parliamentary devices at their disposal, and they do not use them. They were a zombie Government, and now they are a zombie Opposition. The next time they bring forward an urgent question, they might want to check their own record before giving us lectures.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I thank the Leader of the House for reminding me of the mistakes of the previous Government in not coming to the Floor of the House? I would have hoped that this Government had learned from the mistakes that have just been highlighted. To try to defend what you criticise is not a way forward.

I am trying to ensure that Members on both sides of the House are allowed to question Ministers first, rather than watching announcements on Sky News. It is interesting that the SDR has been offered to journalists but that the Members here have not had the chance to see it. I agree with the Leader of the House, and I thank her again for reminding me, but let us now see the Government treat this House in the way that I expect.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Will you take a point of order now, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: No, I will not, because we have to wait till the end, as you well know, Sir Roger, as one of the most senior Members.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I think my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is right to remind us of the many breaches of this rule by Her Majesty's Government when the Conservative party was in power. However, in the middle of this mud-slinging, let me raise a still small voice of calm. The current Prime Minister pledged to be more transparent, open and proper in government. Will my right hon. Friend go back to the Cabinet and remind it that proper scrutiny in this House first, with untrammelled questions for an hour or more at a time, is more scrutiny than the Government would get in a press conference and is the proper place to do this? I hope she will take that message back, so that statements such as the one we are about to hear are given on the Floor of the House first.

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. As she will know from the many times I have said it before, I do regularly remind the Cabinet that this is an important aspect of being a Cabinet Minister, or indeed a Minister. We are doing our very best to make sure that there are regular oral statements to this House on important matters and that they are brought here first. In the absence of an oral statement, there is a written ministerial statement, of which notice is given the day before so that colleagues have ample time, as she says, to properly scrutinise all these announcements.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is incredibly disappointing to find ourselves here to discuss this issue yet again, but this time on the vital matter of national security and defence.

There was a remarkably similar urgent question before recess, and it was disappointing then, as it is now, to hear the Leader of the House attempt to justify not bringing major announcements to the Floor of the House first by citing the number of statements the Government have already given to Parliament. The ministerial code is clear: the Government do not get to pick and choose which significant statements they do or do not make to the House; whenever possible, they should be doing it every single time. While I agree with the premise of the question from the shadow Leader of the House, I must say that it is a bit rich given the Conservatives' appalling record of doing exactly the same thing when they were in government. However, that does not let the current Government off the hook.

Will the Leader of the House please confirm that the Government will comply with the ministerial code, or shall we expect to do this little dance every week? Surely this time would be better spent making a statement to the House.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for that. I will make no apology for the fact that we are doing lots of things—we are making lots of announcements, and we are delivering the change the country voted for—and that does bring with it competing demands. As I say, when the House is in session, statements and updates will be made to this House first. Sometimes that will be via a written ministerial statement and sometimes it will be by an oral statement—it depends.

We also have to balance statements with the rest of the day's business. I would point out to colleagues that we have an important Second Reading debate today, with dozens and dozens of Members down to speak. We are now having two urgent questions before a very important statement and then other business as well. We do have to balance these things in the House's interests, but the statement is being made to the House today. The Defence Secretary will shortly be in his place, and I am sure he will spend a long time answering questions on it.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that criticism was not aimed at me for granting two UQs. The reason I have granted two UQS is that the Government did not come here first with the strategic defence review. If they had, we would not be having the UQs and there would be no pressure on time.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Trust, integrity and transparency must be the watchwords of our politics, but those principles were worn extremely thin under the previous Government. What steps is the Leader of the House taking to redouble our commitment to trust and integrity, because our constituents expect no less?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I do find it slightly strange that Conservative Members seem to think that they are somehow now the upholders of parliamentary democracy and standards in Parliament. I am afraid that some of us have much longer memories. We are taking steps to raise standards, behaviour and the culture in this House, and indeed to make sure that the House is respected.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I think the word the Leader of the House was looking for was “sorry”. There is much in this place which, as we know, is complicated and arcane, but the ministerial code is crystal clear on this point. The job of the Leader of the House is to represent this place and Back Benchers of all parties around the Cabinet table to make sure that this place hears things of such vital importance first. As important as public transport is, may I suggest that the defence of the realm is a little more important than the Government’s buses Bill, which will have no Divisions this evening? Will the Leader of the House please tell us why she thinks No. 10 is getting this so wrong and what she is doing to try to put it right?

Lucy Powell: I am certainly sorry if members of the media have been given sight of the SDR ahead of Members of this House. My understanding is that it is being published for the first time in this House today. As I said earlier, we have put on a statement; that was always our intention. We were always going to have a major statement today on the SDR and that is indeed what we have done. Even though there is other important business today, MPs from across the House will have ample opportunity—I am sure they will take that opportunity—to scrutinise the Defence Secretary not only today but on future occasions via Select Committees and elsewhere.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest, as a member of the Modernisation Committee. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for standing up for us Back Benchers and for granting so many urgent questions—I say that as someone who speaks in most of them on behalf of the people of Harlow. Does the Leader of the House agree that part of the Government’s remit is to modernise and to bring back trust in politics? Will she outline what she has been doing to that end and the work that the Committee has been doing to make this place more accessible?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he does on the Modernisation Committee. He will know that one of the remits we have set out for the Committee is to ensure more time for Back Benchers to scrutinise Government business. That is a key part of modernising Parliament, and it will ensure that this Chamber is, and will be in the future, the real crucible of national debate that we want it to be. I am sure we will see that today and on other days.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Knowing the Leader of the House to be a decent person, I suspect that behind the scenes, when events of this sort happen, she probably argues quite strongly that announcements should be made to this House first and to the press afterwards. Does she think the reason that is not happening is that the Government genuinely think they will get less publicity to hold a press conference after there has been scrutiny in the House, or is it that they just have no confidence that they can stop their people leaking things in advance?

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words at the beginning of his question. He is absolutely right that part of my job, which I take incredibly seriously, is to uphold this House in Government, and to ensure that the rest of the Government respect this House, come to this House to be scrutinised, and are open, transparent and available to this House. It is a message that I relay very regularly and I am sure I will relay it again later today. I say gently to him that Government announcements do happen outside of Parliament sitting, and that has long been the case. Managing announcements over the course of a few days can often be a challenge, but I reassure him that on the strategic defence review, we were always going to make the statement to the House today, with the publishing and the laying of the 150-page document to the House first. I reiterate that there is a balance to be struck. People want time to read and digest before they can question the Defence Secretary. That is always a balance, too.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): It is not just the House as a whole; the Defence Committee also was not given advance sight of the report. Committee members were left texting journalists over the weekend to find out what was going on. At the beginning of this Parliament, the Defence Secretary committed to the Defence Committee that he would be more open and more transparent, and reset the relationship with the Committee. Does the Leader of the House think that the Secretary of State is living up to his commitment to be more transparent, after what has happened today?

Lucy Powell: My understanding is that we offered to brief the Chair of the Defence Committee, but I will stand corrected if that is not the case. I hear what the hon. Member says, and I think that across Government, Ministers, civil servants and everybody else must take their responsibilities to Select Committees incredibly seriously. Select Committees are a very important part of accountability to this House. I know that the Secretary of State for Defence—someone I speak to regularly—takes his responsibilities to the House incredibly seriously, and I am sure he will look forward to coming before the Committee to be questioned and scrutinised at length about the SDR and many other matters.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I say to the right hon. Lady, whom I have known for a little while, that normally when a Speaker upbraids the Leader of the House, the first response of the Leader of the House is to grovel and apologise? That is standard, because she has to take it for the party that she represents in government. I simply suggest that I am a little surprised that she did not make peace in that way with Mr Speaker.

Notwithstanding that, I say gently to the Leader of the House that it is not just a case of not having brought the review to the House. We know now that journalists were given scrutiny of it. When I was leader of the Conservative party, I remember that Tony Blair, as Prime Minister, offered me advance sight of documents that were a bit delicate or needed security clearance. The Leader of the Opposition was given the opportunity to look at such documents so that they were fully informed of developments. Was such an opportunity offered to the Leader of the Opposition or the leader of the Liberal party?

Lucy Powell: I do apologise to Mr Speaker regularly, I have to say—usually in private, but I am happy to extend that apology to him today if he has not heard me apologise. I have the utmost respect for Mr Speaker, who I work very closely with, and I totally respect his job in upholding Back Benchers' rights to question and scrutinise Ministers and Government policy. That is what he is there to do, and he does it brilliantly.

I do not know what Privy Council briefings were offered to whom, but I can inquire for the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), and I will make sure that he gets a reply.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On 30 January, the Leader of the House said,

“we will publish the child poverty strategy in the spring.”—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 442.]

The Guardian broke the story on 23 May that the child poverty strategy will not be published in the spring. I cannot find a written statement or any indication of an oral statement regarding the delay. Can the Leader of the House let us know whether the announcement will be made and whether the child poverty strategy will be published in the spring—it is now June, so probably not—or whether it is likely to be published in the autumn, just so the House knows?

Lucy Powell: I know this is a matter of great concern to the hon. Lady, and something that she raises often in this House. I will ensure that she and the House are updated on the timings for the child poverty taskforce, and that Ministers come to this House regularly to update on its progress.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): As we have this knockabout, what troubles me is that the House has a very important job to do. We are talking about the expansion of nuclear weapons—we assume, because we have not actually read the review, even though journalists, and members of the public through the newspapers, have been given briefings on this—and we wanted to analyse the review so that we could ask sensible questions. We will be in here for this urgent question, for the next urgent question and for the statement. When does the right hon. Lady expect the House to get a chance to digest this 130-page report before we ask questions following the statement? Everybody else in the country seems to have been able to do so.

Lucy Powell: I was on the Opposition Benches for many years—many more years than the right hon. Gentleman has been—and I recognise that it is a challenge to properly scrutinise big reviews that are laid before the House not long before a statement is made. It is the same with Budgets. I will ensure that today is not the only opportunity, but the first of many, to question the Government about their strategic defence review, which will last for many years to come. I know the Secretary of State will also want to ensure that as further questions emerge today, next week and in months to come, Members of this House have ample opportunity to put those questions to him.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Integrated care boards had their budgets cut by 50% via a phone call from the interim head of NHS England to ICB leaders, and that announcement was only made formal in response to a written question that I put to the

Secretary of State. Half of NHS targets were cut without a statement in the Chamber, and although there was a statement in the Chamber on the abolition of NHS England, it has been carrying on at pace without so much as a White Paper, a Bill or any opportunity for effective parliamentary scrutiny. Will the Leader of the House give us an opportunity to look at and scrutinise this fundamental reorganisation of the NHS, which is so far going under the radar?

Lucy Powell: Issues relating to decisions about ICBs and NHS reorganisation are regularly raised with me at business questions. The hon. Lady is right to say that there was a statement in the House on NHS England, and I can reveal to her—this will probably not be a surprise—that getting rid of NHS England will require primary legislation. There will be ample time to consider those issues through the passage of that legislation, but I hear what she says.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is not just by giving statements to the media that this Government disrespect the House. Just before we went into recess, we had a farcical situation where the shadow Secretary of State for Education had to bring forward an urgent question asking for a written statement to be made earlier in the day. The Government very clearly decided to make a written statement later in the day, and sent a Minister to come here, not answer hon. Members for the whole urgent question and refuse to say what the content of the written statement was—a statement that the Government had already written and intended to publish later that day. That was done simply to avoid scrutiny. What representation did the Leader of the House make on that day to ensure that information was given to the House in a timely fashion so that it could be scrutinised, rather than the Government hiding away?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue; I think she is talking about the pay review recommendations and the Government's response. They are issues that I take incredibly seriously, as is ensuring that this House has ample time for consideration, so I went back and looked at the usual practice regarding pay review settlements. The settlements went across a range of Government Departments and a number of sectors—not just schools and education, but the NHS, Ministry of Justice, Cabinet Office and a number of other Departments. It is usual practice—it was under her Government as well—that such settlements are announced by written ministerial statements simultaneously in order that they are all put out at the same time.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I am sure the Sunday papers would like to thank the Government for advance sight of their upcoming statement. I am a member of the Defence Committee and I ask the Leader of the House to acknowledge that this urgent question is actually wasting all our time. Mr Speaker is quite right in granting it, but if procedure had been followed and we knew about the statement, we could have got on and debated the rest of the day's business. Does the Leader of the House agree that there are few announcements to be made in this Parliament that are as important as our defence strategy?

Lucy Powell: If we were not doing a statement today, I would agree with the hon. Member, but we are doing a statement on the strategic defence review. The review is 150 pages long and will be laid before the House in time for the statement, as is usual practice. There were trails of the statement ahead of time—during recess, on the Sunday—but the full document and conclusions will be laid before this House, as I have said. I am sorry that members of the media were given advance sight of it—as I understand, it was in a closed reading room—but publication of the report will be to this House this afternoon.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): To read about our nuclear defence strategy over the weekend, ahead of the SDR, is quite alarming—just as it is to see this morning that journalists have received all the information and the Opposition still have not had sight of it. The Leader of the House is saying that she is speaking to No. 10 and Cabinet members about the importance of this matter, but did she raise concerns over the weekend when she saw the leaks in the paper?

Lucy Powell: Some aspects of the SDR were trailed ahead of time, but not the one to which the hon. Gentleman refers; that was not something that the Government were designing to put into the public domain over the weekend. That is normal practice these days. I know we all like to speak about a time when we just did things when the House was sitting, but things are sometimes given to the media ahead of time, although not the nuclear issue that the hon. Gentleman is talking about. We will have a further urgent question on that, and we will have the full strategic defence review statement shortly, at which he can ask the Secretary of State for Defence a question.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Leader of the House has just told us that the document was “trailed” to journalists, but at 10.41 this morning *The Daily Telegraph* published a long article in which its authors clearly set out that they had read the entire document. At the same time, the shadow Secretary of State for Defence was refused an advance copy of it, even under Privy Counsellor rules. Why do the Government appear to trust journalists with national security, but not the shadow Secretary of State?

Lucy Powell: As I have said in previous answers, I am sorry that members of the media were given a reading room space to look at the SDR before it was laid before the House. That should not have been the case. Other people have asked me about Privy Council briefings; I know which ones I have offered, and I understand that they were offered to members of the Opposition, but I will get Members the full details of who was offered Privy Council briefings and who was not.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I fully respect the role of the Leader of the House in this place, but I am shocked, although in a way not surprised, by what has happened. The Government Benches are very quiet today, which is unusual on such occasions, so I think Labour Members must feel the same way we do. I would like to ask the Leader of the House two questions, and perhaps offer her a way to dig herself out of what is an increasingly big hole. First, will she offer a full

apology to you, Mr Speaker, and to Members of this House? Secondly, will she seek reassurances from the Prime Minister that this simply will not happen again?

Lucy Powell: I think I have made all those things clear. We are doing a statement today on the SDR; we were always doing a statement today on the SDR. We are laying the report before the House, as is the tradition. That is the convention, and it is the right thing to do. The Secretary of State for Defence will shortly be here, and I am sure that he will be here for a long time answering all the questions that people have. I do not need to ask him this, but I will ensure that he regularly comes to this House to update it on aspects of the SDR and how it is rolled out. It is a document for a long period of time, not just for today.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is very helpful that in the last few minutes the Leader of the House has confirmed that the media were briefed directly, before the House, on the content of the review. I am grateful to her for being so honest, but I do not think that it is enough for her to promise not to do it again. Will she order an inquiry in Government about how the decision came to be made and who authorised the briefing of journalists? Whoever it was needs to apologise directly.

Lucy Powell: I think I was responding to suggestions that they were briefed, and to some articles and so on that were read out. As I say, these matters should be coming to the House first; that is why we are having the statement today, shortly. It was always our intention to do the full statement today and to lay and publish the full report in this House first. I regret it if members of the media were given advance sight of it before Members of this House.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): The people of Eastbourne deserve to have Government announcements scrutinised on their behalf by their MP in this Chamber before release to the media. To compensate for the Government's shortcomings on this front, will the Government commit to announcing statements in this House first? Will the Minister also commit to inviting local journalists from the *Eastbourne Herald*, *Eastbourne News*, *Eastbourne Reporter* and *Bourne Free* to Government press conferences of particular interest to Eastbourne, so that they can hold the Government doubly to account on our town's behalf?

Lucy Powell: It is vital that MPs, whether they are from Eastbourne or from elsewhere, are able to question and scrutinise Ministers on major Government announcements. That is exactly what we seek to do; although this Session is not even yet a year long, we have already given almost double the number of oral statements that the previous Government gave in their last year in office. I am also very conscious that where announcements have a particular interest for a part of the country, we should make sure that local MPs are told about them in advance.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Given the essential lead-in time required for organising and protecting the Prime Minister's visit to Glasgow, where he spoke extensively about these issues, is it not clear to the House that the

Government made a deliberate decision to pre-empt the statement to the House and show contempt for the processes of the House?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry, but I do not accept that. There is a big announcement today. We are making a statement to the House this afternoon. As I said earlier, the House was in recess until nearly two hours ago. We are laying the document before the House and are not in any way trying to shirk scrutiny, questioning or anything—we are incredibly proud of this document, which is the first SDR in a long time. It will set out the future of our defence sector for many years to come. We are really proud of it and proud to lay it before the House this afternoon.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My constituents will wonder about a Government who promised to do things differently. They said that they would be transparent and be whiter than white—then they behave like this. One almost feels sorry for the Leader of the House, because she is trying to defend the indefensible.

It is not enough to express regret that journalists were given access to the document in full before Privy Counsellors, the Leader of the Opposition or the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, or that this trailing in full went on days ahead. What we need is action. Further to the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), will the Leader of the House commit to looking into the issue, whether through a formal inquiry or not? Secondly, will she meet one to one with the Prime Minister to express her clear opinion that what has happened is not acceptable? I would like specific answers to both those questions.

Lucy Powell: To reiterate—the Minister for the Armed Forces is sitting next to me—Members from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties were offered briefings this morning. *[Interruption.]* That is what I understand. These questions can be put later. I am also hearing for the first time that reading rooms were made available for members of the press during previous SDRs as well.

We do take our responsibilities to the House incredibly seriously. We are coming forward with more statements than the right hon. Gentleman's Government did. We are raising standards in the House when it comes to MPs' behaviours and the code of conduct for Members. He and I have talked about this before: his Government tried to change the rules when one of their MPs was found to have flouted them. His Prime Minister was found to have been in contempt of Parliament by proroguing it and—one of the most serious offences that a Member can commit—to have misled Parliament. We are turning the page on that era; the right hon. Gentleman might not agree with me, but we are. We do our very best to uphold and respect the House whenever we can.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Leader of the House will be aware of my complaint, at times, when matters pertinent to Northern Ireland are announced in the media. Strangford businesses contact me for details that it is my role as an MP to provide—it is the role of all of us—yet I am unable to provide them, as the media seems to know more than the House. I acknowledge

that sometimes embargoed reports are uploaded too quickly, but there is clearly more at play. This is a political venue, but we must never play politics with the rules of the House, which solidified our role as the mother of all Parliaments and the home of democracy rather than a propaganda wing. How will the Leader of the House assure Members that their position will be considered rather than letting the timings of the news cycle take precedence?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is one of the most formidable constituency MPs in the House, never missing an oral statement or opportunity to raise matters on behalf of his constituents. I applaud him for that. I want to ensure, as I try to do, that he and every other Member has ample opportunity to do that, whatever the issue of the day is; that statements are brought; and that we have time for Government business and all the other important business of the day. I continue to look forward to working with him to ensure that we do that.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice on the following, as I seek to set the record straight. At the weekend I became aware of an email sent to a group of journalists from the Ministry of Defence, which stated:

“We will have a reading room open for you from 1030 to Horse Guards”

on Monday.

“You will have the opportunity to read through the full embargoed SDR publication”.

After seeing that, I emailed the Secretary of State's office on Sunday afternoon and asked whether, given that journalists would see the publication at 10.30, we could be sent a copy at 9 am. They refused. They told us we would get a copy of the statement—that is, the oral statement to the House—in the usual way. I then repeatedly asked the Minister for the Armed Forces, who is present in the Chamber, if we could get a copy of the SDR. He refused. I have now been told something else, which is that representatives of industry were allowed to see the SDR at 10.30. This is a multibillion-pound industry that is highly market-sensitive.

Mr Speaker, can I ask your advice on this point? As I understand it, the Vote Office has multiple physical hard copies of the strategic defence review, which I have not read at all, my colleagues have not read and no other parliamentary colleagues have read. It was given to me only as I came into the Chamber, so obviously I have not been able to read it. Journalists have had five hours. It is unacceptable. Can I ask if the Vote Office could, exceptionally, be asked to release it now?

Mr Speaker: I am going to come to that, but there are a couple more points. I am very disappointed. If the industry has seen this strategic defence review when Members of this House and members of the Defence Committee have not seen it, something has gone fundamentally wrong here. I really believe we need the answers. It is up to the Leader of the House, and I do not want to press her, but it might be worth her going away and getting some answers and coming back to the House. The fact that journalists, as well as defence people who have skin in the game, have been allowed to see it before MPs makes me very concerned.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You may have noticed that I briefly exited the Chamber to see whether copies of the SDR were available in the Vote Office, and I was told, quite rightly, that no, they would be made available immediately after the Secretary of State had made his statement. If we were to have the press conferences the day after statements—not the day before, or on the same day—everybody would have time to read the report, we would have an initial stab at it, with very little sight of it on the day, and then we could go into it in more detail subsequently, as we usually do.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that that is a good point of clarification on the way forward.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have just seen the headline in *The Telegraph* that dropped at just after 10 o'clock this morning which says, "I've read the Defence Review". This journalist must have been fully briefed and handed a copy of it, long before anybody else. Surely that is an abuse.

Mr Speaker: I call Helen Maguire.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder if the Minister wants to correct the record because, yes, I was offered a private briefing this morning, but it was absolutely clarified that I would not receive the SDR until the Minister stood up. I received it 40 minutes ago.

Mr Speaker: I call Simon Hoare.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the seriousness of the issues—the defence of the realm is the first duty of Government, as we know—is there any merit in you, sir, considering suspending the House to allow those who are to be called to speak on behalf of their respective parties at least the courtesy that has clearly been extended to industry leaders and journalists? I believe that there is a precedent for that.

Mr Speaker: I call Stuart Anderson.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Is there any way we can have a list of the commercial companies who have had sight of the review ahead of anybody else, because commercially sensitive decisions might be made that impact the defence industry and give people a market advantage?

Mr Speaker: You make the point that I was hinting at before. I am very concerned that people who have skin in the game may be able to take advantage of what is in

the report. I hope that no trading has been done on the back of it, because that would be a real concern. I find it quite appalling that Members still do not have the report. The Leader of the House could, if she wishes, suggest that we allow the report, so that Members have the chance to read it. It is totally out of order that we know the report is sat there and could have been made available, but nobody has been given the chance to read it. Rather than my suspending the House—time is tight—people could go and collect a copy of the report now, and could be reading it before the next urgent question. Does the Leader of the House agree?

Lucy Powell: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. My understanding—I will check with the Defence Secretary—is that these things are normally published when the Secretary of State sits down; it is a bit like the Budget. I understand that the Opposition Front Benchers have a copy of the report now. The Defence Secretary is here; I do not know whether he is happy for it to be published earlier.

Mr Speaker: I was offered a briefing this morning, but I had already read it all in *The Times*; the only thing I was not offered is a copy of the strategic defence review. Business and the media have seen it. Who else might come out of the woodwork who has seen it? It is only right that Members of this House should now have an opportunity to see it, so that their questions can be informed by what is in the review. Secretary of State, are you happy to ensure that?

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. We have followed—[*Interruption.*] You want an answer from me, Mr Speaker, and I will certainly give you this: we have followed the procedure from the last defence review, when the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), was a Defence Minister. I was the shadow Defence Secretary at that time. We had no advance copy of the defence review. We were not offered a briefing, which I have offered him and the other Front Benchers. I am really concerned to ensure that the House has proper access to the report, but we have been following convention. You are quite right, Mr Speaker, that copies of the defence review are in the Vote Office, as is established procedure. They would normally be made available when I sat down after my statement. In these circumstances, following your encouragement, I suggest that Members of this House be given access to them in advance of my statement.¹

Mr Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State for that, and I am sure that Members will receive their copies as we speak.

1.[*Official Report*, 23 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 903.] (Correction)

UK Nuclear Deterrent

4.32 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Chair of the Defence Committee for this chance to set out the Government's total commitment to the UK's nuclear deterrent, which has been the bedrock of our national security for nearly 70 years. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary will shortly outline the details of the strategic defence review to the House, and that review will be underpinned by our nuclear deterrent, which is part of our blueprint for a new hybrid Navy, in which next-generation Dreadnought nuclear-armed submarines, and up to 12 SSN-AUKUS conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines, will serve alongside best-in-class warships, support ships and new cutting-edge autonomous vessels, building on the £15 billion investment set out for the UK's sovereign nuclear warhead programme in this Parliament. This is not only a manifesto promise delivered; it is our most important military capability secured for generations to come. This investment will also deliver a defence dividend of highly skilled, well-paid jobs across the country. Our nuclear warhead programme alone will create and sustain over 9,000 jobs, along with thousands more in supply chains.

To ensure that the demands of our nuclear programme can be met, we are working closely with industry partners, and are aiming to double defence and civil nuclear apprenticeship and graduate intakes. That will mean 30,000 apprentices over the next 10 years; they will be part of this historic renewal of our nuclear deterrent and our communities across the country.

The first duty of every Government is to keep their people safe. In a more dangerous world, peace and security are best achieved through deterrence and preparedness. As the son of a Royal Navy submariner, I thank our outstanding submariners who patrol 24/7 to keep us and our allies safe. We know that threats are increasing, and we must act decisively to face down Russian aggression in particular. Our nuclear deterrent is the ultimate guarantor of our security. The Defence Secretary will momentarily make a statement giving further details, but our proposals are possible only because of the Government's historic decision to increase defence spending to 2.5% of our GDP by 2027—the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. The Government have the will, the plan and the means to secure the nuclear deterrent for generations to come. We are making Britain secure at home and strong abroad.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for his response, and your good self, Mr Speaker, for kindly granting the urgent question.

Following the report in *The Sunday Times* that the Ministry of Defence is looking to purchase American fighter jets that are capable of deploying tactical nuclear weapons, it is essential that the House gets clarity on the Government's nuclear deterrent policy—an issue of critical

national importance. How have the media got hold of such sensitive information on future nuclear deterrent plans, and what steps are the Government taking to investigate the leak?

If the Government are pursuing an air-launched tactical nuclear capability, that is a huge deal. It would represent a significant shift in the UK's nuclear posture. Indeed, it would be the UK's most significant defence expansion since the cold war. This raises serious concerns about our sovereignty when it comes to nuclear weapons, about strategic coherence with our current doctrine, and about the principle of continuous at-sea deterrence.

Despite the defence nuclear enterprise accounting for around 20% of the defence budget, it remains largely outside meaningful parliamentary scrutiny, including by our Defence Committee. This must change, so will my hon. Friend the Minister explain how Parliament will be enabled to scrutinise changes to the UK's nuclear programmes? Have discussions taken place with the US, and what role would it play in this capability? Will the Minister confirm that the UK will retain full operational control over any nuclear weapons? Given that tactical nuclear weapons lower the threshold for nuclear weapon use, what assessment has been made of the risks of escalation? Will the Minister confirm that only the Prime Minister would have authority to use them, and only in extreme self-defence? Finally, has there been consultation with NATO allies on this potential shift? Decisions of this magnitude must be transparent. The future of our nuclear deterrent must be based on clarity, credibility and, above all, British control.

Luke Pollard: I do not want to eat the Secretary of State's sandwiches, and I am acutely aware that the statement that he is about to make—

Mr Speaker: Don't worry: *The Sunday Times* did it for us.

Luke Pollard: The Secretary of State will shortly lay out more details of the strategic defence review, but I am happy to answer a few of the questions from my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee.

Parliament has the opportunity to scrutinise the outcomes of Lord Robertson's strategic defence review via the House of Commons Defence Committee. I know that my hon. Friend will have the reviewers in front of his Committee shortly and will be able to ask them difficult questions. I am aware that there are proposals for how we scrutinise more sensitive and classified issues, and conversations between the House and the Government on that continue.

We of course continue to have conversations with the United States—our most important security partner—and with our NATO allies, but my hon. Friend will understand that I will not be able to detail the precise nature of those conversations to the House at this stage. I reassure him that we retain full operational control of our independent continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent—the backbone of our national security.

As I mentioned, it is the first duty of any Government to keep our country safe. The nuclear deterrent is the ultimate guarantor of our national security and our safety. I can confirm that only the Prime Minister has the power to launch nuclear actions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, James Cartledge.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am grateful to the Chair of the Defence Committee for securing this important urgent question. Following comments in the press last month from Sir Simon Case, former head of the civil service, that the UK should consider air-launched nuclear capabilities, I wrote in the *Express* on 25 May that our nuclear deterrent needed to be made even more resilient, including the continuous at-sea deterrent, but also

“potentially, by diversifying our methods for delivering nuclear strike.”

I believe that it would be right to diversify our methods of delivering nuclear strike, because we have to recognise the threat posed by Russia in particular, and it has the ability to operate nuclear weapons at tactical and theatre levels. To deter effectively, we must be able to do the same.

We support in principle moves to widen our nuclear capabilities, on the assumption that we do so working closely with our NATO allies. However, I gently suggest to the Government that they may need our support to carry that decision. I remind the Minister that eight of his Front-Bench colleagues voted against the renewal of our nuclear deterrent in 2016, including the Deputy Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), and others. If the Minister was hoping that he could rely on the Liberal Democrats, let me say that not only did all but one of their MPs vote against Trident renewal in 2016, but as a condition of supporting the coalition Government, they shamefully demanded that we delayed the renewal of our nuclear submarines, leaving us to rely on older boats for far longer. That led to longer maintenance periods, and above all, directly contributed to the punishingly long tours of duty for our CASD naval crews.

Having had the privilege of serving as the Minister responsible for nuclear, and having chaired the Defence Nuclear Board, I understand why the Minister needs to choose his words carefully, but can he at least recognise that 204 days for a patrol is far too long, and that in addition to any plan to diversify the deterrent launch method, we must ensure that our strategic CASD enterprise has an effective and productive industrial base, delivering faster maintenance times? Finally, will he confirm what the estimated cost will be of delivering an air-launched option, and say by when he would expect that to be in service?

Luke Pollard: Let me again put on record my thanks to all members of our Royal Navy who go out on patrol, not just on our Vanguard-class submarines, but also on our Astute-class boats—and the previous T-class boats—that defend our deterrent while at sea. They guarantee our security by ensuring that there is a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent every day, and have done so for over 70 years. Every Labour Member was elected on a manifesto commitment to a triple lock for our nuclear submarines: first, we will continue to support the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent; secondly, we will build four Dreadnought-class nuclear submarines at Barrow, which we are committed to delivering; and thirdly, we will maintain and provide all the upgrades that are required

for the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent. That includes the renewal of our sovereign warhead, which the Defence Secretary will get to when he makes his statement on the strategic defence review later today. I am determined that we will guarantee our national security, and we will work across Government to do so.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Chair of the Defence Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), on securing this important urgent question. He and the Minister referred to the need for full scrutiny by the House of such sensitive matters—something that has been pursued for over a year, under the previous Government and this one. Can the Minister provide any reassurance that that is finally progressing, after some delay when there was a change of Government?

Luke Pollard: Yes, I can. The Defence Secretary is open to those conversations, though there may still be a difference of opinion about the best way of scrutinising some of our most sensitive matters. I encourage my hon. Friend to continue her conversations with him.

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

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): We face a once-in-a-generation set of threats, including an imperialist Putin and a completely unreliable President Trump, who we cannot depend on to support our defence. Our nuclear deterrent remains the best and ultimate guarantor of the UK's security. We must ensure that it meets the scale of those challenges, so it is right that the Government should look at ways to guarantee its effectiveness. Delivering the Dreadnought class on time is crucial to that, and I welcome the update that the Secretary of State provided before the recess on those timescales. Looking ahead, it is important that the House understands the purpose of any future addition to our nuclear deterrent, so will the Minister outline what discussions his Department has had on how further additions to the deterrent would positively bolster the UK's security?

Luke Pollard: The United States remains the UK's most important security partner: no two nations on earth are as integrated in their defence, intelligence and communications systems as the United States and the United Kingdom. That is a position that this Government intend to continue, because it is in our national interest to ensure we remain strongly connected with our partners in the United States. I am open to conversations about how we bolster our deterrence. Indeed, I believe the Defence Secretary may have more to add on that matter in his statement on the strategic defence review.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I support the increase in defence spending and I recognise the reasons behind it, but will the Minister indicate what impact it may have on the non-proliferation treaty?

Luke Pollard: This Government are proud to be increasing defence spending, with an additional £5 billion in our budget this year and an extra £13 billion by 2027, compared with the situation we inherited in cash terms at the last general election. It is right that we invest not

only in our nuclear deterrence capabilities but in others. As a nation that abides by the rule of law, we will continue to do so in all matters, including those relating to nuclear proliferation.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): The review has identified a gap in our capability to have tactical nuclear weapons in place, and that gap will have been noted elsewhere, among our adversaries. Will the Minister assure the House that the gap that has now been identified in British military power is being filled by other NATO allies until we are able to fill it ourselves?

Luke Pollard: This Government have a “NATO first” defence policy, so it is vital that we support and are enabled by our allies, especially those in NATO, and we will continue to do that. The strategic defence review may set out words in that regard. I do not want to get ahead of the Defence Secretary’s statement, so I will not give the full details here.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): There is a consensus in this place about the importance of an independent nuclear deterrent to keep us safe, but there is far less understanding about the need and use of tactical nuclear weapons. Does the Minister agree that we need to foster a much better understanding of how the logic of deterrence works, and how it can be and is being undermined by countries like Russia? Only then can we explain why our nuclear deterrence needs to change to remain effective in protecting us.

Luke Pollard: A fundamental part of the conversations about the strategic defence review that Lord Robertson and the review team have been having since the Labour Government came to power is how we reinforce the concept of deterrence, and why the concept of deterrence is so important to our security. Our armed forces—some of the best in the world—have capabilities that should deter any aggression, and we will be further enhancing that through the measures set out in the strategic defence review, as the Defence Secretary will announce shortly. We want to deter aggression but, if necessary, we need to have the capabilities to defeat it, and that is what the strategic defence review, which will be announced shortly, will detail to the House.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As it was this issue that brought me into politics many decades ago, it is an absolute pleasure to hear the full-throated commitment of both the Government and the Liberal Democrats to the strategic nuclear deterrent. If the future of the American commitment to NATO were not in doubt, we would not need to think about tactical nuclear weapons ourselves, because that role has always been fulfilled by US tactical nuclear weapons allocated to the defence of NATO. Will the Minister assure the House that we have sufficient confidence in the willingness of the United States, despite the present Administration’s attitude to NATO, that the co-operation that we need for the future of our strategic nuclear deterrent is not in doubt?

Luke Pollard: I can indeed. The defence partnership we have with the United States, particularly on nuclear deterrence, is a strong one. We know that President Trump and the US Defence Secretary, Pete Hegseth, have reaffirmed their support for article 5 of the NATO treaty.

As we build towards the NATO summit in The Hague, the UK will set out not only how we plan further to enhance our deterrence, but how we plan to ensure that collectively, across the NATO alliance, we are more lethal and more able to deter. The reason why that additional deterrence is necessary is the increased threats that we face as a nation, both conventional and cyber-threats, and increased nuclear threats.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The UK is one of five nuclear countries that are members of the non-proliferation treaty. Will my hon. Friend tell the House what steps his Government are taking to reduce the number of nuclear deterrents that our country carries, which is one of our obligations under the treaty?

Luke Pollard: As part of our commitment to non-proliferation, we continue to abide by all the measures of the treaties we have signed. Our renewal of our nuclear deterrent is necessary in a more dangerous world. As the ultimate guarantor of our security, it will be central to this Government’s defence plans in the future.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): In pursuit of deterrence, will the Minister recommit to first use when either the strategic or tactical situation demands it?

Luke Pollard: If I read out our nuclear playbook at the Dispatch Box, the right hon. Gentleman would be one of the first people to raise concerns, so I decline that polite invitation to detail our nuclear strategy. That ambiguity is absolutely certain, but we do not have a first-strike policy, as he will know. As the only European NATO member to dedicate our nuclear deterrent in the defence of all NATO member states, we maintain that capacity not only in support of the United Kingdom. That is an important part of our collective deterrence.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Far from the claims by successive British Governments that Britain has an independent nuclear deterrent, is the reality not that it is entirely dependent on the United States both technically and politically? Instead of spending billions more on nuclear weapons while public services face real budget constraints, should we not honour our commitments under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty by working towards the global elimination of nuclear weapons?

Luke Pollard: Every Member on the Government Benches stood on a manifesto in support of the renewal of our nuclear deterrent and in support of a continued at-sea nuclear deterrent, building four Dreadnought-class submarines and providing the upgrades necessary to ensure the effectiveness of that system. That is a manifesto commitment that we can all be proud of, and it is one that this Government will stick to.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): As the Minister has mentioned it, as has my predecessor as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), it is now over a year since the Public Accounts Committee produced a report on how sensitive scrutiny could be carried out in this House. This is really important, and it feels as though we are being given the run-around. Will the Minister commit to setting a date when the Government will give a decision on the matter?

Luke Pollard: As I replied to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), conversations continue between Members of this House and the Defence Secretary. He is open to further conversations to try to find a way forward, and I am certain that he would welcome a conversation with the hon. Gentleman.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): The Minister is right to highlight the nuclear deterrent as the cornerstone of our defence capability, but it is also a national effort. Will he join me in commending the unsung scientists and engineers at the Atomic Weapons Establishment for their world-leading and highly confidential work that ensures the ongoing independence of the UK's nuclear deterrent?

Luke Pollard: I am very happy to do so. It is not just the scientists and engineers at the AWE who support our nuclear deterrent, but the engineers and apprentices in Devonport in my constituency who refit our nuclear submarines. The entire supply chain, from Rolls-Royce to BAE Systems, Babcock and countless other companies and organisations involved in this national endeavour, helps to keep our country safe. I commend all of them for their work and their contribution to our national security.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): When we discuss the nuclear deterrent, we sometimes forget that this is the ultimate weapon of mass destruction, which, if it was ever deployed, would quite literally end civilisation as we know it. The Minister might not agree, but does he accept that opposition to nuclear weapons is a legitimate, moral position of conscience held by most people in most nations in the world? Will he and his Government colleagues stop trying to demean and insult those who simply and legitimately want nothing to do with these evil weapons and want them gone from their country and their community?

Luke Pollard: I recognise that there is a range of views on nuclear weapons. I also recognise that there are thousands and thousands of people in Scotland whose jobs are dependent on supporting our nuclear fleet, who do superb work at the bases on the Clyde and support not just the submarines, but our entire nuclear supply chain, through small and medium-sized enterprises and larger companies in factories, engineering workshops and other businesses across Scotland. I am certain that, although the hon. Gentleman and I might disagree on nuclear weapons, he was not speaking for those people when he made his point.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Earlier this year, along with a cross-party delegation of MPs on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I visited Faslane. That was a very important visit for me, because the nuclear reactors on the V-boats are made in my constituency, but it was particularly concerning to hear about deployments that are now lasting over 200 days. That is totally unacceptable, so can the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to reduce the length of those deployments while maintaining our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent?

Luke Pollard: As a Government, we are seeking to renew the contract between the nation and those who serve. In particular, for those submariners who are

involved with our nuclear patrols, reducing the length of those patrols is a key part of what we have to do. One aspect that I can tell my hon. Friend about in this House is the investment going into our nuclear submarine refits. Ensuring that we can refit the submarines in time, on schedule and on budget is essential to rotating between the four boats. Previous Governments delayed renewing our nuclear boats; we are taking the decision to support the Dreadnought renewal, which will provide the cutting-edge capabilities necessary for our nuclear deterrent to continue in the future. I commend all those involved in our nuclear enterprise, from engineers to the submariners who serve on our submarines, for keeping our country safe.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does the Minister agree that any party that aspires to government in this country should be wholeheartedly and unambiguously committed to our independent nuclear deterrent? I am afraid that that was not always the case when we had a coalition under the Conservatives because of our coalition partners, but I am very pleased that they have repented now. Is it not absolutely extraordinary that a party that now presents itself as some kind of alternative Government cannot even send a single Member of Parliament to sit in this House while we are debating this existential issue for the security of our country?

Luke Pollard: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that any party aspiring to government must not just understand how dangerous our world is, how the threats are increasing and how our nuclear deterrent is the backbone of our national security, but must also be part of those conversations. I note that Members from the party he refers to are absent from today's debate.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): We all want to live in a world in which a nuclear deterrent is not needed, but sadly we all recognise that we do not live in that world, and we are further from it than we were a decade ago. Does the Minister agree that whether we are discussing the UK's nuclear capacity or any other capacity, we must have a NATO-first defence policy and lead within the alliance? While I am here, can I also congratulate the Veterans Minister on his epic feat up Everest last week?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend's question gives me an opportunity to thank the Veterans Minister and celebrate his work in completing Operation Mountain Goat, the speed climb of Everest. I commend him and all those who did so on their aspiration to raise £1 million for veterans' charities—that is something I think we can get behind on a cross-party basis.

It is absolutely essential that we continue to support our national security. The more that we can do so on a cross-party basis, the more the power of our deterrence is something we can shout loudly and proudly about, especially when it relates to directing increased defence spending towards UK companies, creating jobs nationwide and using defence as the engine for growth that it truly is.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I am in favour of this new method of delivery, which gives us more options and probably makes it less likely in the long run that nuclear weapons will be used. However, cost is key,

and with 20% of the defence budget already taken up by the defence nuclear enterprise, it is clear that our conventional capabilities are suffering. Can the Minister tell us whether the increased cost of these new warheads will come out of the Ministry of Defence's budget, or out of a special Treasury reserve, as has sometimes been the case previously?

Luke Pollard: The increase in defence spending that we have secured, which the Prime Minister announced in February, provides us with the opportunity not to just renew our conventional capabilities, but look at how we can further support our nuclear deterrent and build our cyber-capabilities. Taken together, that is how we will build that collective responsibility. I do not want to give the hon. Gentleman an incorrect answer, so I will write to him about the point that he raised.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his robust stance on the UK nuclear deterrent, which I welcome. From a Whip's perspective, I am interested to know how he plans to bring his parliamentary party on side when so many have voted against the nuclear deterrent and Trident.

Luke Pollard: Well, it was a question of two halves. I agree with the hon. Lady on the first half, and I am grateful for the cross-party nature of what we can achieve here. It is a source of great pride to all Defence Ministers that our strong support for our nuclear deterrent and our national security was in the Labour manifesto, which enjoyed incredible support at the last general election. We are not only bringing forward a strategic defence review that will update our capabilities, but bringing forward our commitment to spending 2.5% of GDP to April 2027—three years before anyone thought that was possible. It is thanks to the brave decision by the Prime Minister that we can renew our capabilities and increase our deterrent capability as a country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): It was a Labour Government led by Harold Wilson in the 1960s that initiated the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and it was during the cold war that the number of nuclear warheads was reduced by the five declared nuclear weapon states. This announcement by the Secretary of State, and today's talk of increasing nuclear warheads, is in breach of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and is at variance with the global nuclear ban concept of getting rid of nuclear weapons. How is the world made safer by the ability to destroy it more times over than exists at present? Where is the strategy for nuclear disarmament? Where is the strategy for peace?

Luke Pollard: I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman's question comes from a heartfelt and personal belief in nuclear disarmament. On this side of the House, we

support international disarmament obligations to the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and the obligation to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to nuclear disarmament. I gently say to him, however, and to all hon. Members, that we are facing increased nuclear threats as a nation not just from established nuclear powers, but from the risk of proliferation of nuclear technology, especially as that technology becomes more mobile, portable and miniaturised. It was precisely for that reason that that featured as part of the strategic defence review that the Defence Secretary will detail further shortly.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): We are not due to hit 2.5% of GDP for two years, and 3% is by no means guaranteed. With the continuous at sea deterrent ringfenced, spending on conventional forces is well under 2% and in the bottom third of NATO countries. Introducing an air-launched nuclear weapon into our arsenal is a significant change to our doctrine and might fundamentally change the way that all our forces operate. We spend less on defence than other NATO nations with a nuclear deterrent, so when will we achieve parity regarding spending on conventional forces specifically?

Luke Pollard: I am normally reasonably impressed by the hon. Gentleman on defence matters, but let me say politely that we have £5 billion extra in the defence budget this financial year thanks to the decisions by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. By 2027, we will have over £13 billion more in cash terms compared with the situation that his party left. When it comes to increasing defence spending, we are doing it three years earlier. It is worth reminding him that the last time this country spent 2.5% of GDP on defence was under the last Labour Government. It is something that his party never achieved for a single day when it was in power.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Most military operations require an element of surprise, and the Government certainly achieved that by delivering the news of the return of tactical nuclear weapons through the medium of *The Sunday Times*. That marmalade-dropping moment aside, what impact will the apparent purchase of F-35 Lightning fighters from America have on the global combat air programme that we are putting together with Italy and Japan—or should I wait for the “You read it here last” strategic defence review?

Luke Pollard: In the spirit of the day, I suggest that the hon. Gentleman waits for the Defence Secretary's statement that is coming soon. I am very aware that when people go to a gig, they want the main act, not the warm up, so I look forward to him speaking in due course.

Strategic Defence Review

5.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the strategic defence review. I have laid the full 130-page review before the House, and I am grateful for the opportunity to do so and to make this statement on our first day back from the recess.

The world has changed, and we must respond. The SDR is our Plan for Change for defence: a plan to meet the threats that we face, a plan to step up on European security and to lead in NATO, a plan that learns the lessons from Ukraine, a plan to seize the defence dividend resulting from our record increase in defence investment and boost jobs and growth throughout the United Kingdom, and a plan to put the men and women of our armed forces at the heart of our defence plans, with better pay, better kit and better housing. Through the SDR, we will make our armed forces stronger and the British people safer.

I thank those who led the review, Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, General Barrons and Dr Fiona Hill,

“a politician, a soldier and a foreign policy expert”,

as they describe themselves in their foreword. They, alongside others, have put in a huge effort. This is a “first of its kind”, externally led review, the result of a process in which we received 8,000 submissions from experts, individuals, organisations and Members on both sides of the House, including the shadow Defence Secretary. I thank them all, and I thank those in the Ministry of Defence who contributed to this SDR. It is not just the Government’s defence review, but Britain’s defence review. The Government endorse its vision and accept its 62 recommendations, which will be implemented.

The threats that we face are now more serious and less predictable than at any time since the end of the cold war. We face war in Europe, growing Russian aggression, new nuclear risks, and daily cyber-attacks at home. Our adversaries are working more in alliance with one another, while technology is changing the way in which war is fought. We are living in a new era of threat, which demands a new era for UK defence. Since the general election we have demonstrated that we are a Government dedicated to delivering for defence. We have committed ourselves to the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war, with an extra £5 billion this year and 2.5% of GDP in 2027, and the ambition to hit 3% in the next Parliament. However, there can be no investment without reform, and we are already driving the deepest reforms of defence in 50 years. Those reforms will ensure clearer responsibilities, better delivery, stronger budget control and new efficiencies worth £6 billion in this Parliament, all of which will be reinvested directly in defence.

Our armed forces will always do what is needed to keep the nation safe, 24/7, in more than 50 countries around the world; but in a more dangerous world, as the SDR confirms, we must move to warfighting readiness, and warfighting readiness means stronger deterrence. We need stronger deterrence to avoid the huge costs, human and economic, that wars create, and we prevent wars by being strong enough to fight and win them. That is what has made NATO the most successful defence alliance in history over the last 75 years. We will

establish a new “hybrid Navy” by building Dreadnought, AUKUS submarines, cutting-edge warships and new autonomous vessels. Our carriers will carry the first hybrid airwings in Europe. We will develop the next generation Royal Air Force with F-35s, upgraded Typhoons, sixth-generation Global Combat Air Programme jets and autonomous fighters to defend Britain’s skies and to be able to strike anywhere in the world, and we will make the British Army 10 times more lethal by combining the future technology of drones, autonomy and artificial intelligence with the heavy metal of tanks and artillery.

For too long, our Army has been asked to do more with less. We inherited a long-running recruitment crisis, following 14 years of Tory cuts to full-time troops. Reversing the decline will take time, but we are acting to stem the loss and aiming to increase the British Army to at least 76,000 full-time soldiers in the next Parliament. For the first time in a generation, we have a Government who want the number of regular soldiers to rise. This Government will protect our island home by committing £1 billion in new funding to homeland air and missile defences, creating a new cyber-command to defend Britain in the grey zone, and preparing legislation to improve defence readiness.

As Ukraine shows, a country’s armed forces are only as strong as the industry that stands behind them, so this SDR begins a new partnership with industry, innovators and investors. We will make defence an engine for growth to create jobs and increase prosperity in every nation and region of the UK. Take our nuclear enterprise. We will commit to investing £15 billion in the sovereign warhead programme in this Parliament, supporting over 9,000 jobs. We will establish continuous submarine production through investments in Barrow and Derby that will enable us to produce a submarine every 18 months, allowing us to grow our nuclear attack fleet to up to 12 submarines and supporting more than 20,000 jobs. On munitions, we will invest £6 billion in this Parliament, including in six new munitions factories and in up to 7,000 new long-range weapons, supporting nearly 2,000 jobs. The lives of workers in Barrow, Derby and Govan, where the Prime Minister and I were this morning, are being transformed not just by this defence investment but by the pride and purpose that comes with defence work. In the coming years, more communities and more working people will benefit from the defence dividend that this SDR brings.

Ukraine also tells us that whoever gets new technology into the hands of their armed forces the fastest will have the advantage, so we will place Britain at the leading edge of innovation in NATO. We will double investment in autonomous systems in this Parliament, invest more than £1 billion to integrate our armed forces through a new digital targeting web, and finance a £400 million UK defence innovation organisation. To ensure that Britain gains the maximum benefit from what we invent and produce in this country, we will create a new defence exports office in the MOD, driving exports to our allies and driving growth at home.

The SDR sets a new vision and a new framework for defence investment. The work to confirm a new defence investment plan, which will supersede the last Government’s defence equipment plan, will be completed in the autumn. It will ensure that our frontline forces get what they need, when they need it. The plan will be deliverable and affordable, and it will consider infrastructure alongside

capabilities. It will seize the opportunities of advanced tech, and seize the opportunities to grow the British economy.

As we lose the national service generation, fewer families across this country will have a direct connection to the armed forces, so we must do more to reconnect the nation with those who defend us. As the SDR recommends, we will increase the number of cadets by 30%, introduce a voluntary “gap year” scheme for school and college leavers, and develop a new strategic reserve by 2030. We must also renew the nation’s contract with those who serve. We have already awarded the biggest pay increase in over 20 years and an inflation-busting increase this year, and now I have announced that we will invest £7 billion of funding during this Parliament for military accommodation, including £1.5 billion of new money for rapid work to deal with the scandal of military family homes.

This SDR is the first defence review in a generation for growth and for transformation in UK defence. It will end the 14 years of the hollowing out of our armed forces. Instead, we will see investment increased, the Navy expanded, the Army grown, the Air Force upgraded, warfighting readiness restored, NATO strengthened, the nuclear deterrent guaranteed, advanced technology developed, and jobs created in every nation and region of this country. The strategic defence review will make Britain safer, more secure at home and stronger abroad.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.16 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Before I turn to the substance, in responding to my point of order, the Secretary of State said that when he was in opposition,

“We were not offered a briefing”,

and

“We had no advance copy of the defence review.”—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Please! It has not been a good day so far, and I do not want any more interruptions.

James Cartlidge: The Secretary of State said that this occurred when I was a Defence Minister. Actually, in March 2023, before I became a Minister, he was invited to a reading room on the morning of publication. On the Defence Command Paper refresh in July 2023, when I was Minister, he said he did not get a copy. I can confirm, and I am happy to substantiate this, that a hard copy was dropped off at his office at 9.30 am that morning. I asked for a copy of the SDR repeatedly on Sunday and earlier this morning, and we were not given one. I have not even read the document, and I am the shadow Secretary of State. I can add that some of the biggest defence companies in this land were given copies at 8 am this morning. They have had hours to read it; I have not read it at all. This is meant to be a democracy and this meant to be a Parliament. How can we hold the Government to account?

While the Government may have tried to hide the document from us for as long as possible today, they cannot hide what has happened in plain sight, which is a total unravelling of their strategic defence review because, quite simply, they do not have a plan to fund it. An SDR without the funding is an empty wish list. The ships and

submarines it talks of are a fantasy fleet. The reviewers were clear in *The Telegraph* today that the commitment to 3% “established” the affordability of the plan. On Thursday, the Defence Secretary said in an interview with *The Times* that reaching 3% was a “certainty”, but by the weekend he had completely backtracked to 3% being just an “ambition”. Today, the Prime Minister was unable to give a date by which 3% would be reached. Why? Because the Treasury has not approved a plan to pay for it.

The Secretary of State and I have both been Treasury Ministers and Defence Ministers, and he knows as well as I do how this works. For the Treasury to approve a plan, it will have to feature billions of pounds of cuts to existing MOD programmes, so this SDR has dodged the big decisions on existing capabilities. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the so-called defence investment plan to be published in the autumn will set out the cuts needed for the Treasury to agree a plan to get to 3%? We should have had those details in the SDR today.

Can the Secretary of State also confirm that the total budget for new measures announced in this SDR over the next five years is less than £10 billion? That is less than we will be spending to lease back our own base on Diego Garcia. Is it not the hard truth that the Government are unable to guarantee the money our armed forces need, but the one plan they can guarantee is to give billions to Mauritius for land we currently own freehold? And can he finally tell us what percentage of the payment for Chagos will be met by the MOD? He has never told us before.

Let me suggest an alternative path to the Secretary of State: first, guaranteeing to hit 3% and doing so in this Parliament, not the next; secondly, getting a grip on our welfare budget, rather than competing with Reform to expand it; thirdly, saving billions by scrapping their crazy Chagos plan. That is a plan to back our armed forces and make our country stronger from the party that actually last spent 3%, in 1996. The terrible shame of this SDR unravelling is that this was an extraordinary—[*Interruption.*] It was a Labour Government who came in, in 1997; I do not know what Labour Members are laughing about. The terrible shame of this SDR unravelling is that this was an extraordinary opportunity to overhaul our armed forces in a world of growing threats.

Only yesterday, we saw the Ukrainians once again demonstrating, with their audacious attack on Russian nuclear bombers, how profoundly war has changed. And yet it is true that some of the best long-range one-way attack drones used in Ukraine have not been built by Ukraine, but by UK defence SMEs. We are incredibly well placed to be a leading nation in the development of uncrewed forces, but how many military drones have the Government actually purchased for our own military since the general election? In a written answer to me, the answer was not 3,000 or 300, but three. They have purchased three reconnaissance drones since the election and not a single one-way attack drone. That is the reality. For the past year, the Treasury has used the SDR to effectively put MOD procurement on hold. That is absolutely shameful when we need to rearm at pace and at scale. At least the Secretary of State for Defence knows how the rest of the country feels: totally let down by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

[James Cartledge]

If there is one capability that matters more than any other, it is people. We agree on the critical importance of recruitment and retention, which is why I did so much of the work to buy back the defence estate so we could rebuild it and rebuild the substandard defence accommodation. But the Army is down by 1,000 since the election. If the Government really want to address recruitment and retention, would it not be total madness to scrap the legislation protecting our Northern Ireland veterans from a new era of ambulance-chasing lawfare? Surely nothing could be more damaging for morale, recruitment and retention than to once again pursue our veterans for the crime of serving this country and keeping us safe from terrorism.

To conclude, the Secretary of State says he wants to send a strong message to Moscow, but the messages he is sending are profoundly weak: surrendering our fishing grounds for an EU defence pact that does not offer a penny in return; surrendering the Chagos islands, to the delight of China and Iran; surrendering our Army veterans to the lawyers; and to cap it all and after so much hype, producing a damp squib SDR that is overdue, underfunded and totally underwhelming. Our armed forces deserve a lot better than this.

John Healey: I see the way the world is changing. I see the way the Chancellor is fixing the economic foundations after 14 years of failure under the Conservative Government. I have to say to the House that I have no doubt that we will meet our ambition to hit 3% of spending on defence in the next Parliament. It is something that the Prime Minister this morning reinforced. He said that the SDR can be delivered, because our commitment to 2.5% was built into the terms of reference. He said this morning that we are committed to spending what we need to spend to deliver this review.

The shadow Secretary of State talks about unfunded promises. He knows about unfunded promises. His drone strategy was unfunded. It was 12 pages, with more pictures than words. His munitions strategy was unfunded and even unpublished. His party's commitment to 2.5% on defence was never in Government Budgets. It was a gimmick launched four weeks before they called the election—they dither, we deliver.

On Diego Garcia, I say this to the shadow Defence Secretary. This deal is a great investment in the defence and intelligence base that we share with the Americans. It is essential for activities that cannot be undertaken elsewhere, and that we do not undertake with any other nation. It is a deal worth 0.2% of the defence budget. The US backs the deal. NATO backs the deal. Five Eyes backs the deal. Australia backs the deal. India backs the deal. So how, on this national security issue, have the Opposition got themselves on the wrong side?

As far as the SDR goes, this is the defence moment of a generation. With threats increasing and defence spending rising, we now have a plan for transformation—a plan that will link the best of advanced technology with the heavy metal of our platforms; a plan that will drive the defence dividend to increase jobs and business support across the country; and a plan that puts people in defence right at the heart of our defence plans for the future, with increased pay, better housing and better kit to do the job of deterring our adversaries.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Given the growing instability in Europe and beyond, and the fact that, among other things, the UK is the third most targeted nation on the planet by cyber-attacks, I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's intention to turn the tanker around and increase the focus on defence. However, the strategic defence review is only as effective as the spending review that will follow this month. To ensure that this SDR does not suffer the fate that has befallen some of its predecessors, how confident is my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary that his and the Prime Minister's ambitions will be fully matched with a correspondingly ambitious spending review?

John Healey: My hon. Friend rightly raises the scale and nature of the increasing cyber-attacks that this country faces. When I had the privilege of taking this job 10 months ago, I was taken aback to find that in the last year, defence across the piece had been subject to more than 90,000 cyber-attacks that could be linked directly to other states. That is why in this SDR, we pick up the recommendation to establish a new cyber-command, so that we can build on the pockets of excellence across defence and ensure that we can more effectively defend against and use offensive cyber to deter such attacks.

On funding, the spending review next week is an important moment for the Government, but the Prime Minister settled the funding for defence in his statement in February. The Chancellor has already put an extra £5 billion into the defence budget this year. We will hit 2.5% of GDP three years before anybody expected us to, and we have an ambition to hit 3% in the next Parliament. As the Prime Minister confirmed this morning, we will spend what is needed to deliver the vision of the strategic defence review over the next 10 years and beyond.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Defence Secretary for advance sight of his statement, although I am more than disappointed that I only received the SDR two hours ago at 3.30 pm, after the journalists.

The Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister are absolutely right. We have entered a new era—one defined by international instability, geopolitical conflict and global uncertainty. Perhaps not since the end of the cold war have we faced such myriad threats to our defence: a barbaric Russian imperialism under Putin threatening Ukraine's freedom and NATO's security; a Trumpian White House defined by its total indifference to, and even antagonism towards, the defence of Europe; and the rising threat posed by China, as well as by regional pariah states such as Iran and North Korea. Taken together, these threats pose a once-in-a-generation risk to our country's defence. Meeting generational risks will require making generational commitments, so I welcome the Government's readiness to accept all the recommendations outlined in today's strategic defence review.

It is frankly staggering, however, that we still do not have a clear answer to the vital question: where is the money coming from to fund these ambitions? This is a shopping list without the money to pay for it. The Government have flip-flopped on whether we can expect

defence spending to rise to 3% of GDP—the figure on which the proposals of the SDR are premised. Putting the cart before the horse when it comes to funding the nation's defence sends entirely the wrong message to Putin and our other adversaries. Will the Secretary of State commit to holding cross-party talks on how to reach 3%?

While I welcome the announcement of new funding for military housing and urgent repairs, fixing our recruitment crisis and doing right by our service personnel requires more than sticking-plasters. Will the Government legislate to require all military homes to be brought under the decent homes standard? It is desperately disappointing that despite having had 11 months to consider how to stem the decline in the number of soldiers in the Army, the Government appear to have sat on their hands. The shameful decline in troop numbers has only continued on their watch. Does the Secretary of State agree that if the Government are serious about delivering for Britain's defence, reversing the utterly reckless troop cuts overseen by the Conservatives must begin now?

John Healey: I welcome what the hon. Lady said on Ukraine. She will recognise that this Government have been supported by all parties in the House in providing steadfast support to Ukraine to fight Putin's illegal invasion. She will also recognise that since this Government were elected in July, we stepped up the support for Ukraine. I hope that she will recognise that we have also stepped up the leadership that the UK can offer on European security more widely. As well as convening meetings, I chaired the first Ukraine support group meeting after 26 meetings in which the US had led the way. Alongside the French, we are convening the 30-odd nations that are looking at securing a long-term peace in Ukraine, if a ceasefire can be secured. This week at NATO, I will continue those discussions with Defence Ministers.

The SDR is a vision for the next 10 years and beyond. It can be delivered within the spending commitments that this Government have made. As the Prime Minister underlined this morning, those spending commitments were baked into the terms of reference, and have been confirmed by the reviewers. As he has said, we will spend what we need to deliver this review, and I am totally confident that we will meet the ambition of 3% in the next Parliament.

On military homes, the hon. Lady is right to mention the scandal, which has gone on for years, of making the families of those who serve live in substandard homes, which are often mouldy and damp, with leaking roofs and doors. We can change that, and we have acted to start to do that. This year, for the first time, we bought back family military homes, and we now control 36,000 of them. Last month, also for the first time, we set out a consumer charter, with the basics of what people can expect from the MOD as their landlord. We have also confirmed an extra £1.5 billion over this Parliament to deal with the worst military family homes. We can start to develop for the long term, and build the homes that we need for our forces, and in the country more widely. We will be able to use better the huge asset that MOD land offers.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to Lord Etherton, who died recently; his review on the injustice to LGBTQ+ veterans was enormously important.

I really welcome this review from the Secretary of State. I have been around long enough to have seen the words "review", "defence", "strategic" and "modern" used many times. As the Secretary of State highlighted, the nadir was reached when the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) was Secretary of State, in a report that had more pictures than text. This report will live only if all Members of this House agree that it is long term, because as the Secretary of State knows, chopping and changing and stopping and starting programmes can cause real problems for our men and women on the ground. Does the Secretary of State agree, and what is he doing to make sure that we embed the review for the long term?

John Healey: I welcome my hon. Friend's welcome for the strategic defence review, which recognises the threats that we face and maps out the framework for the investment decisions that will deliver it, make our forces stronger and make the British people safer. I will work with Members from all parties in the House whenever national security and the safety of our people are at stake. I welcome her support.

I also welcome my hon. Friend's chairmanship of the Treasury Committee. I hope that her Committee will take an interest in the defence investment at the heart of the SDR and at the heart of our plans. The record defence investment that the Government are making in this country not only reinforces our national security, but can drive economic growth and bring a defence dividend that will drive the mission of this Government to increase economic growth and bring jobs, business and new tech to every part of the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): History repeats itself. In 1935, we spent just 3% of national wealth on defence, and because we rearmed almost too late, we almost lost civilisation. By 1945, we were spending 52% of national wealth on defence. Given that we face a crisis in Europe, with an unparalleled Russian rearmament almost as great as that of Germany in the 1930s, will the Secretary of State do the right thing by history and give this House a firm commitment to 3.5%, not as an ambition, but by a set date?

John Healey: Given the points that the right hon. Gentleman makes, there are two things that I am surprised he has not welcomed. The first is the historic increase in defence spending that this Government have already put made, with an extra £5 billion in our first year in government alone; he will remember that when his party came into power in 2010, it cut defence spending by £2 billion in a year. We also have a commitment and plan to increase spending to 2.5% in two years' time and to 3% in the next Parliament, which is an ambition that I am confident we will fulfil. He is right to say that if we are to meet the challenges of the SDR, and the challenges of reinforcing our industrial base and our armed forces, we cannot do it alone. We are not doing it alone; we are one of 32 nations in NATO. The second thing that I am

[John Healey]

surprised he has not welcomed is our security and defence partnership agreement with the European Union, which is potentially a first step to working with other European nations in the EU, and using financing that may be available in Europe to do exactly as he urges.

Michelle Scrogham (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House is in no doubt about just how proud we are in Barrow and Furness to be building the submarines that keep our nation safe. The commitment to expanding this country's submarine programme, with up to 12 SSN-AUKUS boats to be built in our shipyard, is the start of the next chapter of that illustrious career. Does my right hon. Friend agree that defence spending under this Labour Government means investment in British companies, in local supply chains and in the very fabric of our communities?

John Healey: I do indeed; my hon. Friend is right. She is a strong champion for Barrow and its shipyard. As she will know, the investment programme that we have confirmed is about increasing the ability to produce more submarines more rapidly, and reaching the point where we can look to design, build and launch a new attack submarine every 18 months. That will allow us to respond to the threats that we anticipate in 10 and 20 years' time, and to meet our NATO commitments.

We will succeed to the extent that we have a Government ready to invest, and a town in Barrow and a supply chain of proud workers from across the UK who are willing to lend their professional expertise to this most important mission: securing our nation's defences for the future; contributing to a stronger NATO; and reinforcing our ability to generate jobs and prosperity, including in Barrow.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. When I worked on defence reviews at the Ministry of Defence, they all had up and down arrows. From what I have read of this defence review in the brief time we have had with it, there seem to be a lot of up arrows; I could really find only one down arrow, which was about not extending the Dreadnoughts' out-of-service date beyond 2050. Does the Secretary of State want to roll the pitch a bit and indicate where capabilities might be de-emphasised, or indeed lost?

John Healey: The strategic defence review sets out a vision and framework for decisions over the next 10 years and beyond. It can be delivered only because of the historic increase in defence spending—the largest since the end of the cold war—that this Government have made. That is the basis on which we will make our decisions, and on which we will deliver the SDR's recommendations.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): It is a proud day for us in the home of the British Army: Labour is investing more in defence—and more than we saw in 14 years of Tory Governments. It is clear that we need more innovative financing solutions to support the new defence technologies mentioned in the SDR, such as the technologies being developed at Cody business park in Farnborough, which I visited this morning. Will the Secretary of State support my campaign for a multilateral defence, security and

resilience bank to help power more investment, jobs and opportunities in Aldershot, Farnborough and right across the country?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is proud of the Government and of the SDR, and we are proud of her—the first Labour MP ever for the town of Aldershot, home of the British Army. She serves that community and the Army with great distinction. She is also doing extremely valuable work on how we match the significant increase in taxpayers' investment in our defence with more private sources of investment. I have been following her work in developing those ideas, and am looking at them closely; I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is, too.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Like many in the House, I have only had a chance to skim-read the SDR. Fundamentally, it seems to be heading in the right direction, but why is it so timid? Why is it so slow? If, as the right hon. Gentleman says, we face an era-defining moment, why not move with the pace that the era demands? Why not commit to 3% within a meaningful timescale, to give industry and the forces a serious opportunity to plan, and to make this a document worth its name, rather than saying, "Let's see how little we can get away with while keeping the papers happy"?

John Healey: I reject that characterisation completely. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman recognises that the SDR is going in the right direction; it certainly is. He will recognise that it is a complete break from what the Government of whom he was a leading member, less than year ago, presided over—14 years of hollowing out and underfunding our armed forces. It was defence with no vision for the future, and it has ended now. This is a plan to use the very best innovative technology to reinforce the strength of our armed forces and the traditional hardware that we have. The SDR will deliver that vision, and we will deliver it.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): This SDR underpins the reason that I left the Royal Air Force: to be part of a Government who take their commitment to defence and security seriously and will bring about the end of the hollowing-out of our armed forces that took place under the last Government. The measures taken within this SDR reverse fundamental and damaging delays caused by the previous Government within our defence programmes, supports our personnel and provides a clear and credible path to meeting the challenges presented to us by Russia. But as General Barrons has said, the greatest threat to this SDR is in its delivery, so can my right hon. Friend provide us with an understanding of what measures are being put in place to ensure that we deliver the SDR and the defence proposition that underwrites our defence, our security and our prosperity?

John Healey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the contribution he makes to debates in this House and to the determination of the Labour Government to deliver this SDR. I said in my opening remarks that there cannot be investment without reform, and from day one reform was a top priority for me as Defence Secretary. It does not bring photo opportunities and front pages, but it potentially brings the results that we need in the future.

We have set up a military strategic headquarters; we have the Chief of the Defence Staff now commanding the chiefs for the first time; we have a new national armaments director; we have a single investment budget; and we now have budgetary control that was not there before. These reforms are in place, and we will drive further reforms that the SDR reinforces and endorses. This is how we will give ourselves the best chance to deliver the vision set out by the reviewers so ably in the strategic defence review report.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): What is the difference between the Chancellor's black hole and the Defence Secretary accepting 62 recommendations from the SDR without committing the funds to pay for them?

John Healey: The Prime Minister and the Government have committed the funds—[*Interruption.*] We have committed the funds. We have built them into the terms of reference that will allow this strategic defence review to be delivered over the next 10 years and beyond. That is the confirmed view of the reviewers, and that is exactly what my job as Defence Secretary will be to do.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Secretary of State's support and his leadership in this time of increased threats. We saw over the weekend that Ukraine had managed to destroy, it says, as many as 40 Russian bombers deep inside Russia, with a value, it would say, of £5 billion. That is almost as much as we are raising the defence budget by. We have to get after innovation, and this SDR does that. In particular, I want to ask the Secretary of State about page 59, which talks about "rapid commercial exploitation". It mentions the need to

"pull latest technology into operations",

and to

"unlock private equity and venture capital".

My question is this: do we need to change the commercial competition laws within the civil service to allow that to happen, or can it already happen?

John Healey: We certainly have to change the procurement system. The Chancellor and I have already announced in the spring statement the way that we will ensure that the sort of innovation my hon. Friend talks about can move to contract far faster than it has done before, and that we can ensure that the sort of spiral development that the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), first started to look at in Government can be pursued and put in place. We will do that; it is part of the procurement reforms that we are bringing into place. Pace, innovation and the new companies that have so much to offer are part of how we will do this in the future.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Mark Rutte, the head of NATO, has said in the last few days that all NATO nations must achieve 3.5% of GDP on defence spending. I respect the Secretary of State a lot, and he has known me for a long time in this House. When he said on Saturday that there was "no doubt" that UK defence spending would rise to 3% by 2034, I nodded in approval and thought, "Great, they have a commitment." By Sunday, however, that

appeared not to be the case. Nobody here wants this strategic defence review to succeed more than I do, as I have never agreed with the idea of the peace dividend from start to finish. Russia, China, North Korea and Iran are all seen as threats, so will he now please get to the Dispatch Box as the character that he is and say that to achieve this we will need at least 3%, if not more, and that this Government will be committed to spending it?

John Healey: I say to the right hon. Gentleman: do not take it from me at the Dispatch Box—take it from the Prime Minister when he said that we will spend what is needed to deliver this review. He has made that commitment in the House; he has made that commitment today. The vision of this strategic defence review now becomes the mission of this Government to deliver.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): Much of the new hardware pledged today will not be delivered for some years and will not be effective without the personnel to operate it. What more will the Government do right now, not in 2034, to ensure that our armed forces recruit the service personnel who these long-term plans will rely on?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is right. In many ways, defence is a special case; we need to take many decisions now to secure the future of subsequent generations, and to develop and secure the capabilities that we will need to do that in 10, 20 and 30 years' time.

The hon. Gentleman is also right that it is the people who are at the heart of this. He will recognise the 14 years of failure leading to the recruitment and retention crisis that we were left with last summer. He will know that I have removed over 100 of the rules that prevented some people from applying to join the forces. He will know that I have introduced direct entry for those with cyber talent to join and contribute to our defences. He will also recognise that we are looking to retain those who are valuable to us by paying better, by looking to upgrade the housing and, where needed, through special retention payments.

This is going to take time. We are closing the gap and I am determined that we will reverse that long-term decline. For the first time, this is a Government who want to increase, not further cut, the size of our Army.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): The review is welcome. Where the last Government hollowed out our armed forces, we are rebuilding. Russia's northern fleet and China's polar silk road ambitions have seen both countries focus and co-operate in the High North. As the framework nation for the joint expeditionary force, the UK has limited surface fleet capable of operating in the polar ice. Can my right hon. Friend confirm whether the new hybrid Navy will see that capability scaled up?

John Healey: I can. My hon. Friend plays an important part in debates in this House, including on the Defence Committee. She recognises that, as we can see from Ukraine, it is the nations that are able to bring together the rapid innovation in new technology with the hardware of established weaponry and platforms that will have the combat edge in the future. I am determined that Britain will be at the leading edge of innovation in NATO, that our forces will be better equipped in the future, and that we will reform and rebuild our British industry to equip them for exactly that.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I very much welcome the aspirations of this strategic defence review and welcome the statement on page 7 that,

“We will develop a new Defence Investment Plan”.

However, as the Secretary of State knows from all the Budgets and fiscal events he has sat through, he cannot give the House a categorical assurance over future spending commitments, so will he make it clear to the House what decisions he is prepared to make with respect to the existing commitments such that he can secure that additional funding at subsequent spending reviews and Budgets? I hope that when he comes clean completely to this House, he will make clear that there will be considerable ongoing investment in the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down, which does an enormous amount to secure understanding of future technologies in the defence arena.

John Healey: The delivery of the SDR vision can only be done because of the commitment that this Government have made to increase defence spending. The defence investment plan is a new investment framework and a new investment programme, developed in the context of and defined by this SDR vision. The work on the new investment plan will be completed and published in the autumn.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): There is much in this strategic defence review that will be of interest to my Committee. I welcome the report and in particular the recognition that science, innovation and technology are an opportunity as well as a threat. Can he confirm that the numerous references to AI in the report are to a sovereign AI capability, whether publicly or privately developed? Having spent last week in Brunei as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, observing the amazing work of the Royal Gurkha Rifles, will he also confirm that despite this tilt back to NATO, he recognises the contribution and strategic importance of that base in the South China sea?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. The approach at the heart of this strategic defence review and at the heart of this Government's commitment to our collective deterrence and defence in the Euro-Atlantic is NATO first, but it is not NATO only. Alliances and partnerships such as the global combat air programme and AUKUS, and partnerships we have with other nations, remain important.

On innovation and the British base, my hon. Friend will recognise that, as part of warfighting readiness, we require an industrial readiness. That industrial readiness—that industrial deterrence that is part of preventing our adversaries from considering attacks against us—means that our companies must be able to innovate and scale up production if we are faced with conflicts in the future. That will be a touchstone for the way we will take many decisions as we invest in the future.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): This defence review gives us a long shopping list of technological advances—the cyber command, digital backbone, drones, AI—and that is right and proper, but the British military is tiny. Recently, the Select Committee heard that if we had to fight tonight, we could scratch together five ships and 30 planes. The person who told us that was the

former head of the MOD's own strategic net assessment office. Does the Secretary of State agree that the lesson from Ukraine is that to fight and win wars, we need to have a mass of force—a large force—with tech that is good enough, rather than a small, perfectly formed, high-tech force? Is that lesson being heeded in the review?

John Healey: The short answer is yes. The longer answer is that we do not fight alone and we do not plan to fight alone. We are a leading member of NATO, a 32-strong alliance that has never been bigger and has never been stronger. As we approach the NATO summit later this month, there will be a discussion about the capabilities that each nation contributes and develops in the years ahead, so that we can strengthen that collective deterrence, avoid the wars that we do not want to fight, and strengthen our collective and our UK defence.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Anyone who heard Carsten Breuer, Germany's Chief of Defence, speak at the weekend will have found his words deeply sobering, so I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the SDR, which is modernising our defence, from Atlantic Bastion to the transformation of our defence and a tech-driven approach. I particularly welcome the cyber and electromagnetic command. He spoke of a stronger deterrence. Will he confirm that there is a need now for stronger offensive cyber-work by our forces?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. He will be aware of the national cyber force that we are developing further. He will also be aware that I have confirmed, and the SDR recommends, the establishment of a cyber and electromagnetic command, which will be in place and do exactly as he suggests: it will reinforce our capacity, our expertise and our ability to do both defensive and offensive cyber as part of the deterrence and the defence that we need for this country.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I welcome the defence review—it sets a direction and there is much in it—but I do not agree with paragraph 20 on page 68:

“Defence should only run training and education itself when it cannot be obtained externally at suitable quality and cost.”

I think that ties in with paragraph 4 on page 105:

“As it reconsiders its training estate needs, the Navy should ensure there is ‘capacity by design’”.

I worry that that would mean the closing of the Dartmouth academy. Let me explain why I have linked those two statements. I am sure the Secretary of State has visited the United States naval officer training academy in Annapolis. The model there brings a real fellowship to people who want to stay in the armed forces because of all the things offered through the degrees and so on. I will perhaps expand on those comments when we have a further debate, but will the Secretary of State give a reassurance that great institutions and buildings such as Dartmouth will not be closed under this review?

John Healey: This SDR and the plans that will follow will only build further on the proud professional tradition and reputation of our Navy, RAF and Army training. I look forward to the further debates that the right hon. Gentleman promises.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I welcome the calm assurance that my right hon. Friend has brought to the House. Our country is safer and stronger for the decisions that he has announced today. But if we are to be more prosperous, too, we will need clear objectives for the spending that he has announced to drive more jobs, more innovation and more economic growth here in our country. Will he set out clear targets for each of those objectives when he brings forward the defence industrial strategy a little later on this year?

John Healey: I will take my right hon. Friend's well-informed observations into account. I will take the observations of his Select Committee into account. I welcome the attention he has given to this review as we develop our thinking for the defence industrial strategy.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): There is a serious lack of answers here. Apparently there is going to be further clarity in the forthcoming defence industrial strategy, financial services strategy, defence diplomacy strategy, reserve personnel strategy, defence housing strategy and defence estate optimisation programme. The Secretary of State cannot even provide clarity on where the money is coming from. Will he provide some answers on what on earth the Government have spent the last year reviewing?

John Healey: We have spent the last 10 months delivering for defence. We have put in place the largest increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. We have given the armed forces the biggest pay rise for more than 20 years. We have voted for £1.5 billion to increase the standard of armed forces housing and we have brought back 36,000 military homes. We have invested in stronger support for veterans. We have also struck the deepest defence agreement, in the Trinity House agreement with Germany. We are delivering for defence. The Government will do more, and the SDR gives us the vision and direction to do that.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome the SDR, in particular the reference to an increase in investment in the defence medical services. Given that 70% of veterans have a clinical mental health condition, will my right hon. Friend explain how the interface with NHS mental health services will be managed?

John Healey: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Just as the NHS contributes to our armed forces, so members of our armed forces often work full time in our NHS. It is a synergy that few understand and few appreciate, and it is a strength that we need to build on. I will work with my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary in the coming months to advance the recommendations and the vision for reinforcing the readiness and strengths of our armed medical services.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I welcome the NATO-first strategy in the SDR, and the fact that we are looking to lead in NATO. Last week, I was at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Dayton, Ohio, where the NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said that 3% will not be a credible solution to defence—he is going to set this out at the NATO summit this month—and that 3.5% is required to be credible, with another 1.5% on defence-related funding. If that is what NATO says a credible commitment is, will the Defence Secretary commit to 3.5%?

John Healey: Those discussions are for the NATO summit later this month. We go into that summit having made a record commitment to invest and to increase defence spending, in two years' time, to a level that we have not seen in this country since 2010, with an aim to get to 3% in the next Parliament. The NATO summit will be a discussion about how we spend, how well we spend and the capabilities we can contribute to NATO, just as much as it will be about spending commitments.

I say to the hon. Gentleman and to the House that we make an extraordinary contribution as a nation to NATO, and we will step that up through pursuing the SDR vision. Of course, at the heart of it is something we contribute that no other nation does: in full, we commit our UK nuclear deterrent to NATO, as the ultimate guarantor not just of our own national security but of the security of our NATO allies.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Under the previous Government, only two out of 49 major defence projects were being delivered on time and on budget. Does the Secretary of State agree that this Government are getting to grips with the financial mismanagement and failed procurement system we inherited? Given that the extra defence spending has come from the aid budget, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is even more important that additional money delivers frontline capabilities and jobs, and is not lost in the system or to the bottom line?

John Healey: It is always important that public money is well spent and that we can demonstrate good value for money. We still have some way to go on the reform of defence, but the steps we have taken already and the action we plan in the future will help us to ensure that we can get better value for the British taxpayer and better value for the British forces.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The review describes responsibility for space policy within Government as "fragmented", so its proposal for a "reinvigorated Cabinet sub-Committee" to set the strategic approach to space is to be welcomed. That will clearly have significant implications for the development of a vertical-launch satellite facility at Saxa Vord spaceport in Shetland. Will the Secretary of State ensure that hardwired into that Sub-Committee is a process of engagement for the operators at Saxa Vord and the communities that host them, so that both might be empowered to deliver on this most important strategic objective for the country as a whole?

John Healey: At the heart of the SDR's insight and recommendations is a new relationship between Government and industry—one that we have already started to put in place and that allows industry and potential investors to see the challenges that we face and contribute their ideas and innovation to solving them. That principle will be applied just as much in space as it will in other areas of new capabilities that we need to develop.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): The procurement system that my right hon. Friend inherited from the Conservative party is in chaos, with only two major defence projects out of 49 being delivered on time. What is my right hon. Friend doing to get to grips

[Clive Efford]

with that situation? New technology needs to be delivered on time; otherwise, it risks being outdated by the time it is put into use.

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right, and he is sitting next to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), who chaired the Public Accounts Committee that quite rightly saw and branded the defence procurement system as “broken”. The overhaul required is a measure of the extent of the reform. We have begun that and we will complete it.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Recommendation 26 sensibly calls for the expansion of in-school cadet forces. Will the Defence Secretary work with the Department for Education to reverse its penny-pinching cuts, and reinstate school staff instructor grants to help extend cadet forces into more state schools?

John Healey: We will indeed work with the Department for Education in delivering the recommendation and ambition set out, quite rightly, in the SDR, which is to increase the number of cadets by 30% by 2030. It offers a unique opportunity for many young people to gain skills and experience that make a transformation to their lives and prospects.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): This is unquestionably an important moment and a significant review, so I find it incredible—astonishing, in fact—that once again for this important statement Reform Members have gone AWOL. They clearly do not give a damn about the defence of our country.

On page 32 of the review, an overview of the dependencies and threats includes critical minerals such as lithium. Does the Secretary of State agree that the most effective way to reduce dependency on such critical minerals from the likes of China, is to invest heavily and urgently in domestically produced and processed critical minerals such as tin, lithium and tungsten in Cornwall?

John Healey: I am not sure whether my hon. Friend has tin, lithium and tungsten mines in his constituency, but he is right to point to those natural reserves in this country in Cornwall. He makes a powerful case to the House this afternoon.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that the Democratic Unionist party, and the people we are privileged to represent from Northern Ireland, are hugely supportive of our armed forces. He should know that as a region, we disproportionately provide more personnel than any other part of our country to those armed forces. I was encouraged to hear him talk about every region and nation of the United Kingdom benefiting from the SDR, but although we heard about Derby, Govan and Barrow, there was a slight omission regarding Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State knows how pivotal companies in my constituency were for Ukraine in its initial phase of defence, with the NLA and latterly with Starstreak, so can he confirm that Northern Ireland will indeed benefit from strategic and significant investment?

John Healey: I can, and as the right hon. Gentleman knows, Northern Ireland is benefiting already as a result of decisions that this Government have taken, not least with the lightweight multirole missiles that are produced in his constituency, and which we are ramping up to deliver more to Ukraine during this year. The £6 billion that I announced in munitions for the next five years will include another six munitions and explosives factories, and I hope he will welcome that. He will know that in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, munitions production is already the source of skilled, long-term, well-paid and trade-unionised jobs, which is something I know he will welcome for the future.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): The importance of good cyber-security is referenced throughout the SDR, and it is critical for our defence. Ebbw Vale college has an excellent course in that sector, so to address this threat, will the Secretary of State please advise how the Government plan to get more young people into roles in cyber-security for the future?

John Healey: I would encourage my hon. Friend to take a hard look at the plans. The first recruitment is under way at the moment for the new direct entry of young people who have gaming skills, coding skills, computer skills—the sorts of skills that are invaluable for our armed forces in that wider mission of defending the country, with the direct entry route that our new cyber-force recruitment is making available. I know there will be talented young people in his constituency who have a part to play and an interest in helping the nation.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Questions are very long, and the answers are getting longer as well. We need to get many colleagues in, so can we please keep it short?

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is tempting to remind the Secretary of State about the 4.5% to 5% of GDP that was spent on defence by Conservative Governments throughout the cold war years of the 1980s, but instead may I ask whether, like me, he would endorse what Admiral Lord West wrote in the national press last week, when he stated that the Chagos deal was a “disgraceful decision”, and that as a former chief of defence intelligence, he did not accept that the move is “absolutely vital for our defence and intelligence”

as the Prime Minister claims? He is a former Labour security Minister and current House of Lords representative on the Intelligence and Security Committee, so he knows what he is talking about, doesn't he?

John Healey: On the contrary, Madam Deputy Speaker, this deal is essential to safeguard operational sovereignty for the UK of the base on Diego Garcia, to allow us to protect within the 20 nautical-mile radius of that base, and the ability to safeguard that for the future. It is essential to our and American intelligence and defence operations, and it is a linchpin of the special relationship that we have between the US and UK on intelligence and defence matters, of which the right hon. Gentleman is always such a strong champion.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): While the Government pledge to raise defence spending to 3% of GDP, funnelling hundreds of billions in public money to arms companies and their shareholders, and continuing to arm Israel's genocide in Gaza, they are at the same time slashing disability benefits, keeping millions of children in poverty through the two-child benefit cap, and cutting winter fuel support for pensioners. How do the Government justify finding billions for war, while claiming there is nothing for the poor?

John Healey: The first duty of any Government is to defend the country and keep its citizens safe, and we invest in defence in order to deter and prevent the war that brings such extreme human and economic costs. I ask my hon. Friend to consider this: if we cannot defend the country, where will we be with an NHS without power, and with submarine cables that mean data does not work? Strong national security is fundamental to a stable economy, a strong society, and I hope she will recognise that it is imperative and important for the country that we pursue the vision in the SDR.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It was right that the Secretary of State recognised the military communities who serve across the UK, and that we recognise those communities that support them. The strategic defence review recommendations that the Government have accepted will have a direct impact on communities across the UK, but when we will know, so that communities such as Leuchars in my constituency are aware of the implications of the defence review when thinking of things such as education, transport, health and other infrastructure?

John Healey: From today, armed forces communities, including in the hon. Member's constituency, will be able to read the report for themselves, and draw out the implications for them and their families.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I am proud that my constituency of Carlisle and north Cumbria is home to Europe's only electronic warfare tactics facility, and proud that this Government have set out steps in the SDR to strengthen our electromagnetic and cyber-defences. Will the Secretary of State say a little more about why those elements of our defence are so critical?

John Healey: The facility in my hon. Friend's constituency plays an essential role in our national security, and I welcome her support. She will recognise that the decision to set up a cyber and electromagnetic command is part of what the SDR does, drawing lessons from what we can see about the way the nature of warfare is changing week by week in Ukraine.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The document says that

"this will allow us to grow our nuclear-powered attack submarine fleet to up to 12."

Is not the truth—and let's speak the truth—that that is the ask to the Treasury, and the spending review has yet to decide what the defence programme will be? I hear what the Secretary of State says, when he says with his full force and sincerity that "we will fund this defence review", but how will he achieve that without much more significant cuts to other budgets? No Government

can afford to spend and borrow much more, if anything at all, so how will he get the necessary cuts through to fund this big increase in defence spending, beyond 3.5% because we all know we will need more than that?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman asks me about the attack subs: our investment is in production capacity, so that we can build at a faster rate and have a double production line in Barrow, which will allow us to build the number of new subs that we will need to deter future threats and meet our NATO commitments. I am glad that he welcomes that.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement about this significant investment in the security of our nation. I was thrilled that the Prime Minister announced that there will be up to 12 new attack submarines, boosting growth in Scotland and keeping the UK safe for years to come. However, I was astonished to read over the weekend that the SNP Government in Holyrood are blocking investment in a specialist welding centre in Glasgow by withdrawing a £2.5 million grant. If the SNP continues to block funding for that centre, will the Secretary of State confirm that this Labour Government will step in?

John Healey: I was astonished to learn over the weekend that the SNP Government are withholding £2.5 million in support for Rolls-Royce to set up a specialist welding skills centre. The centre is essential not for munitions, as the SNP Government say, but for shipyards across the board, which act as a pipeline to bring wealth and jobs to Scotland. I can confirm to my hon. Friend that if the SNP will not change its view and will not step in to make the skills centre possible, then we will.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): My constituents in Gosport will be keen for the Secretary of State to clarify two points. First, the line on page 105 about reconsidering "training estate needs" will concern many, so will he confirm that the outstanding training establishments at HMS Sultan and HMS Collingwood, which employ so many, will not be under threat? Secondly, when will the promised funds for accommodation come through? The previous Government spent £400 million on upgrading accommodation, which was beginning to filter through, but some 69 service family accommodation units in Gosport are now empty because they are deemed not fit for human habitation, and that is getting worse under his watch.

John Healey: We are doing further work on the nature and needs of our defence estate. It is right that we do that; because we now have a long-term view, we will be able to take better long-term decisions on that estate. The homes that the hon. Lady mentions are among the 8,000 empty family military homes, many because they are unfit for families to live in. I hope that she will welcome the extra £1.5 billion that we will create in this Parliament for overhauling the worst, as well as the longer-term plan in the defence housing strategy that we will publish, because we can—and we must—do much better for our military families.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): As a veteran and on behalf of my constituents in North East Derbyshire who are serving or who have loved ones in the armed forces, may I say how much I welcome the commitment to supporting armed forces personnel in the review? It recognises that we need to improve the defence medical services, proposes £1.5 billion for housing, and commits to a second, above-inflation pay rise for our personnel. That will mean that for the first time in a long time, no member of our armed forces will receive less than the national living wage—it is shocking that that was ever the case. Does the Secretary of State agree that while the Conservatives left us in this mess and Reform Members could not even be bothered to turn up to the debate, this review shows that Labour is the party for our armed forces personnel?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right: Labour is the party of defence and Labour will put defence people at the heart of our plans for the future, with better pay, housing and kit to serve in the jobs that they volunteer to do to defend us all.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): This Government seem to have confused security with spending more on weapons, but warheads do not buy a safer world—they make it more dangerous. Instead of wasting £15 billion on nuclear warheads—weapons that must never be used and that should be as unacceptable as biological and chemical weapons—at a taxpayer subsidy of more than £1 million per job created, why not instead spend that money on real security that must involve defence and diplomacy and development? Real security means decent housing and public services, tackling the challenges of the climate crisis and pandemic-preparedness because—

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

John Healey: We are strengthening our armed forces to secure the peace, not to fight the war. We deter the attacks that we fear by being strong enough to defeat our enemy. I say to the hon. Lady that our deterrent has helped to keep stability and peace in Europe for over 75 years, it has been the ultimate guarantee of our national security and it is what Putin fears most. We are the only European nation in NATO that commits its deterrent in full to the protection of other NATO allies. We play a unique role and we make a unique contribution. I would like the hon. Lady to recognise that, even if she cannot support it.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I was pleased to read in the SDR about the importance of building on the 2024 joint declaration on the Norwegian-UK strategic partnership, which recognises the autonomy of both countries and the strength that comes from working together. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that important partnership would be further strengthened if Norway decided to purchase the Type 26 frigates—the best frigates in the world—that are built in Govan, in Glasgow South West, and Scotstoun, in my Glasgow West constituency?

John Healey: They are indeed the best frigates in the world, and I have been working hard to persuade the Norwegians that joining the UK, with our Type 26 frigates,

is about reinforcing the deep partnership that we already have, as two nations, alongside the US, protecting the north Atlantic and the high north from Russian aggression.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The statement has been going on for well over an hour and we will have to conclude in the next 20 minutes, so questions will have to be short, as will the answers.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): The Secretary of State has set out an ambitious strategic defence review. As soon as possible after the spending review next week, will he set out a defence investment plan in some detail, so that the Public Accounts Committee can examine whether the funds match the equipment that he has talked about today, and whether the ambitious plan can be delivered and is affordable?

John Healey: As Chair of the PAC, the hon. Gentleman knows the problem with the previous Government's defence equipment plan. As I said in my statement, the work on a new defence investment plan will be completed and published in the autumn.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The review puts shipbuilding firmly in the UK's future defence plans, particularly in the high north, as I have mentioned in the House many times, and looks towards a Royal Navy that is powerful, cheaper and simpler. The workforce at the dockyards in Rosyth, in my constituency, is ideally placed to deliver this. Just last week, we saw the roll-out of HMS Venturer, the first Type 31 frigate for the Royal Navy. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he is committed to shipbuilding in Scotland, including in my constituency, in contrast to the SNP, which just this week turned down the opportunity to bring new skills to that sector in Scotland?

John Healey: We are totally committed to shipbuilding in Scotland. I pay tribute to the workers in his constituency in Rosyth for their pride, professionalism and sense of purpose, and the contribution that they make to our national security.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The service personnel and their families at Bicester garrison, in my constituency, are victims of the scandal of military family housing to which the Secretary of State referred. The investments highlighted today are therefore welcome, but to reassure my constituents, will the Secretary of State commit that military housing will reach the decent homes standard? Will he give the date by which the defence housing strategy will be published? And will he confirm that he has accepted the recommendation in the SDR that all proceeds from housing developments on Ministry of Defence land will be reinvested in military housing?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this long-run scandal. I am sure he will recognise that we cannot turn this round overnight. I hope he will also recognise the steps that we have already taken this year—the 36,000 military homes brought back into public control and the plans we are putting in place for

the future. That allows us in this Parliament finally to put an end to the scandal that we have seen of military families being forced to live in such substandard accommodation.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's confirmation that the Government will invest £15 billion in the nuclear warhead programme at the Atomic Weapons Establishment in my constituency. Not only is that crucial for national security, but it will be transformational for Reading West and Mid Berkshire, supporting jobs and boosting our local economy. Will he set out in greater detail the plans for that investment and the expected benefits to my constituents? Will he come with me to Aldermaston, Burghfield or Brimpton to meet some of the brilliant staff who work there?

John Healey: I will, and I look forward to that visit with my hon. Friend. As the constituency MP, she will know the essential and unique work that the AWE undertakes and know that it supports more than 9,500 jobs. She will recognise the defence dividend that that can bring to not just her area, but the wider supply chain with the increase in defence investment that this Government are making.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): While it is welcome that the SDR refers to the need for more routine protection of subsea cables and pipelines and of maritime traffic, there is no specific mention of the same commitment to the protection of North sea oil and gas platforms, rigs and floating production, storage, and offloading vessels. They are just as important to our energy security, which is our national security, and there could be much more catastrophic consequences if they were attacked. Will the Secretary of State confirm that those structures will be included in any plan for the routine securing and protecting of critical national infrastructure?

John Healey: Yes.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Our British fleet of submarines are the most awesome and lethal machines in the world, keeping the peace unseen and unheard below the waves for generations. As my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary said, the power in that punch comes from Derby's Rolls-Royce workers, who give them their nuclear reactor cores. Will the Defence Secretary tell Members how we can be involved in the recommended "national endeavour" public communications campaign to make it absolutely clear how fundamental our at-sea deterrent is to our national security?

John Healey: In many ways, my hon. Friend is doing exactly that in the House by reinforcing the importance of the deterrent at the heart of our security and its importance to jobs, technology, businesses, the supply chain and the strength of economic growth. She is making the case that defence investment can drive economic growth, and we will ensure that it does.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Can I push the Secretary of State on the

answer that he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) about HMS Collingwood? My constituents will look for reassurance that it will have a long-term place in the defence estate.

I also ask the Secretary of State about recommendation 40, which says:

"The Royal Navy should explore alternative approaches to augmenting the Royal Fleet Auxiliary to deliver a balanced, cost-effective fleet that maximises the UK's warfighting capabilities."

The RFA is already stretched; I have been on visits to the RFA where it has told me that it is stretched with the operational requirements placed on it. It sounds to me like this is a loss of operational independence. Will the Secretary of State commit to an expansion of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary consisting of ships managed purely by the Royal Navy under the defence estate?

John Healey: We are proud of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. It increasingly does tough jobs that in the past we would have expected the Royal Navy to undertake. Its role and contribution is under-recognised, and I am keen to see its role reinforced and for it to have greater recognition. We will ensure that we do that as we pursue the SDR's vision.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The 1st Division, which is headquartered in my constituency, impressed on me the importance of our diplomacy and soft power and the excellence of the training provided to our armed forces. We have heard a lot about hard power today, but will the Secretary of State ensure that we put serious resources into soft power—the diplomacy that is so important in de-escalating risk? Will he also ensure that we continue that training in my armed forces city of York?

John Healey: My hon. Friend's city of York has a proud military history, and she speaks strongly of that this afternoon. She is right to recognise the role of diplomacy alongside hard defence, but perhaps she could do more to recognise the fact that military and civilian defence personnel have an important diplomatic role to play alongside the Foreign Office. One of the things we are doing is working much more closely together in this Government compared with the way in which Foreign Secretaries and Defence Secretaries have been at loggerheads too often in the past, rather than working co-operatively.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Sleaford and North Hykeham is home to RAF Cranwell, RAF Digby, much of RAF Waddington and Beccingham training ranges. This defence review will be read with interest across the constituency. Many of my constituents serve in the armed forces, are veterans or work in the defence industry. Will the right hon. Gentleman give a commitment to the expansion of RAF Digby that is planned? Will he ensure that he supports the Greater Lincolnshire regional defence and security cluster, which was established in 2023?

John Healey: I cannot give the hon. Lady a commitment at the Dispatch Box today, but I can say that I take those arguments seriously and hear what she has to say. She is speaking up for her area, and they have some great strengths in her part of Lincolnshire.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The 12 new nuclear-powered AUKUS submarines will almost double the UK's fleet of such submarines. Given that those submarines are to be shared with non-nuclear Australia, does that not go against the UK's obligations under the non-proliferation treaty? As they are part of the AUKUS treaty—a treaty with the USA as well as Australia—and focused in the Asia-Pacific, does that not risk adding to the growing tensions between the USA and China and make us all less safe?

John Healey: No and no. The AUKUS partnership is entirely consistent with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and our obligations. The answer is no, because it reinforces regional stability and security. It reinforces regional deterrence and makes conflict less likely, not more likely.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Leonardo, based just outside my constituency, has been left as the sole bidder for a major defence contract worth up to £1 billion. The project could contribute more than 12,000 jobs to the UK supply chain, including 1,500 skilled jobs, some of which would be in Glastonbury and Somerton. Can the Secretary of State confirm the timeline for decision making on the procurement of the new medium helicopter?

John Healey: I can confirm that the process is under way. We are giving it our full attention, and we will make any decisions as soon as we can.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that I have been raising concerns about the state of our air and missile defences. I welcome that air and missile defence is a key focus in the SDR, which will make the UK secure at home and strong abroad. Notwithstanding previously announced initiatives to bolster collaboration on air and missile defence with our allies, can the Secretary of State give us more detail on what conclusions the SDR drew on this vital aspect of national defence?

John Healey: The SDR drew the conclusion that we need to take potential threats to our homeland more seriously than we have needed to do in the past. That is the reason why I have made the commitment that we will invest £1 billion in this Parliament to further strengthen in particular radar, communications and the integration of our missile and air defence. My hon. Friend will appreciate that part of the UK's air and missile defence is provided by our NATO allies, and we have great protection in the fact that our frontline is not on the coast of the UK: our frontline with Russia is on the borders of the eastern flank.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The strapline on the front cover of the review says, "Making Britain Safer". I trust the Secretary of State means "making the United Kingdom safer". On page 87, it says that

"The connection between the UK Armed Forces and wider society is the longstanding and necessary foundation for the defence of the country."

In the light of that, will this review reverse the rundown in armed forces personnel in Northern Ireland, where today, according to answers given in this House, there are five Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel stationed?

Of all the services—all three together—there are only 1,305 personnel in Northern Ireland, yet we supply a huge number of personnel to those services. Will the review reverse that rundown and make sure that every part of this United Kingdom shares in the provision of the armed services?

John Healey: The hon. and learned Gentleman knows well the scale and depth of the recruitment and retention crisis, and he knows very well that over the past 14 years we have seen consistent cuts in the strength of our full-time forces. This is the first Government for a generation who want to see an increase in the size of the full-time British Army, and that is what we will work to deliver.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I was pleased to join the Secretary of State this morning in Glasgow, where he met some of the workers building the Type 26 frigate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) said, the Norwegian Government are considering placing an order for that frigate, so can I ask the Secretary of State to do everything he can to encourage our Norwegian friends to order the frigate?

John Healey: I am, and I will.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): The Defence Secretary has just thrown into doubt the future of the new medium helicopter. I am very concerned to hear that that programme clearly may not go ahead. Can he tell the House whether he plans to reduce the number of RAF Chinooks, which—as he knows—are very important both to our special forces and to our Army? Are there any plans to reduce the number of Chinooks?

John Healey: I encourage the hon. Gentleman not to read what he has into my remarks. I was simply stating the facts as they are: there is a process under way that has to conclude. That is what I said to the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke). This review is not about cuts—it is the first review since the end of the cold war that has taken place not in the context of cuts, but in the context of a decade of rising defence expenditure. It is about enhancing what we have for the future; it is about building out, not hollowing out. I hope the hon. Gentleman will take that as the signature of the strategic defence review that we have published this afternoon.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It was really good to see the Secretary of State come to MBDA in Stevenage recently, where its workers were refitting Storm Shadow missiles for Ukraine. I very much welcome what the SDR has to say about a partnership with industry to create an engine for growth for our defence sector and our wider economy, but those tools require effective personnel. Last week, I was in Poland with the armed forces parliamentary scheme visiting our RAF personnel, and we were told, "Look, we cannot speak for ourselves. We need you to champion us." What can the Secretary of State say today to champion our armed forces?

John Healey: First, I hope my hon. Friend will pass on my appreciation to the workers at MBDA in his constituency. They are exemplars of the high-skilled, highly committed and highly productive workforce that

contributes so much to the defence of this country. I hope he will be able to say to those workers that this strategic defence review is the first of its kind—one that challenges us to think afresh, recognises the threats that we face, learns the lessons from Ukraine, and makes sure that in the future we can strengthen our armed forces and keep the British people safer. I hope he will recognise that the publication of this strategic defence review is a significant contribution to what he urges on the Government.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): In the last decade, China has expanded its military to a degree only matched since 1945 by the USSR in the cold war era. In the past decade, the previous Government did not read the signs coming from Russia; this Government must read the signs coming from China. Ukraine does not have five years, and neither does Taiwan. I again invite the Government to bring us to the table, and let us find 3% now.

John Healey: We have increased defence spending this year by £5 billion. We will reach 2.5% in the year after next, and we aim for 3% in the next Parliament. That is a record increase in defence spending—one that has not been matched at any time since the end of the cold war. The hon. Gentleman could do more to recognise that basic fact.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and his leadership. In Edinburgh South West, we have Redford barracks, Dregghorn barracks and RAF Kirknewton, so I want to focus my comments through the lens of our service personnel. Recommendation 17 rightly links retention to accommodation and, in particular, the number of moves that staff often have to make throughout their service. This can be a particular issue where children are involved and both parents are serving, so when developing his policy in this area, can the Secretary of State commit to working with groups such as Forces Children Scotland to make sure that the voices of service children are heard in this debate?

John Healey: We will indeed. My hon. Friend makes a very powerful case for that organisation, but it is one among many. We are involving the voices of forces families in our defence housing strategy, and we will do the same in other areas, which will help us to put forces families and forces personnel at the heart of our defence plans.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): With reference to recommendation 46, the US's 2025 marine aviation plan, published earlier this year, outlined that the US Marine Corps—by far the biggest user of the F-35B—has changed its programme of record, reducing orders for F-35Bs by 73 aircraft in favour of the F-35C. The upshot is that the unit price of each B aircraft is about to increase by tens of millions, and we have not yet committed to a second tranche. What assessment has been made of the current queue for the F-35A, despite the decline in its fully mission-capable rate with the US air force, and—following on from my many written questions—what assessment has been made of converting our remaining B orders to F-35C and modifying our carriers to CATOBAR, which would also extend their range and therefore increase their survivability in a near-peer conflict?

John Healey: As the hon. Gentleman says, the SDR recommends commencing discussions with the US and NATO on enhancing the UK's participation in NATO's nuclear mission. We have accepted that recommendation, as we have the other 61 recommendations in the review. I will not comment in public on those discussions, but this is what putting NATO first looks like.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this excellent review, and ask whether he will do all he can to use this new focus on British industry to choose AERIALIS as the replacement for the Hawk jet, meaning thousands of jobs in the UK; final assembly, production and testing in Prestwick in my constituency; the opportunity for exports; the first British-built jet in 50 years; and our Red Arrows being British and Scottish?

John Healey: I know that my hon. Friend will welcome the strategic defence review, and the reviewers' reinforcement of how valuable our British Red Arrows are to the nation. He has made a very powerful case for the capacity to look for a replacement Hawk trainer in his constituency. The SDR makes the commitment and sets the vision that allows us to say, "We will ensure that there is a defence dividend for the defence investments we make in the future. We will do more than we saw under the previous Government to direct British taxpayers' investment first to British jobs, British-based businesses, British innovation and British tech."

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I rise to speak as a proud member of the armed forces covenant family; my husband Paul is a naval veteran, and my daughter is a reservist. I am really pleased to see the whole-society approach in chapter 6 of the defence review, but what actions are being taken to make a career of service in the armed forces more attractive to young people and to address the specific issues raised by those leaving the service, particularly how the nation fails to treat them as the heroes that they are?

John Healey: The hon. Lady makes a very powerful case, and I pay tribute to the members of her family who make their own contribution to service. I encourage her to do more of what she has done: speak up, explain, and help us close the gap that has been growing in recent years. A wide range of people in society no longer have any personal or family connection to the forces. We need them to understand, recognise and pay tribute to the service and the sacrifice of those who do serve—those who put on the uniform and provide for us all.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Last month, I had the honour of visiting RBSL—Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land—in Telford. Along with many defence companies and organisations, it is so proud of its effort to help Britain to defend itself here and around the world. The SDR provides certainty to industry, but we need to go further to ensure that every Government agency, body and Department—from skills and infrastructure to planning and the availability of land—gets behind its ethos. Does the Secretary of State agree that creating growth cluster zones will provide certainty to local communities and assist in that mission?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is a powerful voice and advocate for that approach and for Telford. He will welcome the additional UK investment under this Government, which means that we will have a new gun barrel factory in his constituency that will bring new jobs and prosperity. That is part of defence investment driving future economic growth in this country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The world is in the midst of an arms race. Last year, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, \$2.7 trillion was spent on arms—a 9% increase on the previous year. The Secretary of State is proposing a substantial increase in defence expenditure by this country. I find it sad and disappointing that in the review there is no analysis, documentation or process for how we reduce tensions around the world, bring an end to existing conflicts, and enhance and empower the world's institutions, such as the United Nations, to avoid conflict in future, so that we can deal with the real issues of insecurity—poverty and hunger—that force so many people around the world to become refugees. Surely we could be doing things in a way that brings about a more peaceful world, rather than just pouring more and more money into weapons.

John Healey: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's argument and point of view. He overlooks the fact that the strategic defence review draws on more than 8,000 submissions, which were part of the material on which the reviewers based their recommendations and vision. I simply say to him that we deter those conflicts that have such massive human and economic costs by being strong enough to defeat the adversaries who would do us harm. That is why NATO has been the most successful defence alliance in history over the last 35 years, and that is why we will step up and play a more leading role in NATO for the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Andrew Pakes to ask the final question.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for his leadership on this issue since we came into government. Many people know that when it comes to defence, it is about not just the money we spend, but how it is spent. One of the challenges under the previous Government was that the investment did not create jobs and opportunities in the UK. Before I entered the House, I had the great privilege to serve much of our defence manufacturing workforce as deputy general secretary of the Prospect trade union. Alongside our armed service personnel, I thank our defence workers. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is not just the kit that we buy, but the jobs, opportunities and apprenticeships that we create that will mark the success of this important review?

John Healey: My hon. Friend hits at the heart of the strategic defence review with a different view of the investments we make. Those investments will not just strengthen our armed forces but help to drive growth in our economy. I pay tribute to Prospect, GMB and Unite, and the members and the workers in the defence industry who contribute so much.

I apologise to hon. Members on both sides of the House that, despite nearly two hours at the Dispatch Box, we have not got to everybody's question. If any Member wants to raise points with me, they should please do so directly, and I will provide them with answers.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to add to what I said in my earlier point of order and to seek your guidance. I reiterate how incredibly disappointing it is, as the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, on the day of the SDR, not to be able to read it before having to stand up and respond to the Government.

I said earlier that we knew of one major defence company that received a copy of the document at 8 am this morning. I have been told of another major prime—one of the largest—that received a copy at 8 am this morning. That means that at the time that I was messaging the Minister for the Armed Forces and begging him to let us have a copy, and he was saying that we could not have one, they were reading the SDR over breakfast.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you heard Mr Speaker refer to the phrase “skin in the game”; he was very concerned about a document being given early in the morning to big defence companies that have skin in the game. Can you advise us on what more we can do to probe this point and hold the Government to account on commercial sensitivity?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of that point of order. The House will be aware of the importance that Mr Speaker, and indeed all occupants of the Chair, place on statements being made to the House first and on adequate notice being given. The hon. Gentleman has put his point on record.

BILL PRESENTED

SHORT-TERM LETS (PLANNING PERMISSION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)
Ben Maguire, supported by Andrew George, Steve Darling, Martin Wrigley, Richard Foord and Caroline Voaden, presented a Bill to introduce a requirement for a grant of planning permission to change a residential home to a short-term let in England; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 4 July, and to be printed (Bill 251).

Bus Services (No. 2) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 14 May, 26 March, 12 March and 22 February, on Buses connecting communities, HC 494; and written evidence to the Transport Committee, on Buses connecting communities, reported to the House on 13 May, 1 April, 25 March, 18 March, 25 February and 4 February, HC 494.]

6.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I start by thanking my friend, the Minister of State for Rail, for being an excellent advocate and custodian of the Bill as it made its way through the other place. As someone who started his career on London's world-famous red buses, there was no better person in the country than the noble Lord Hendy to kick-start the Government's bus reform journey. I am proud to call him my friend, and I am grateful every day for his wise counsel, frank advice and gentle good humour.

What we saw in the other place, and what I hope we may be able to secure in this House, is constructive cross-party support. We all recognise how buses connect us to the things that matter most: work and school, friends and family, essential services and the weekly shop. The billions of bus journeys each year—equivalent to over 100 every second of every day—are the difference between vibrant communities and boarded up high streets, between aspiration and isolation, and between getting on and being forced to give up.

The Bill represents years of work in opposition and now in government to discard the failed 40-year model of deregulation in favour of putting passenger needs, reliable services and local accountability at the heart of the industry.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I wholeheartedly agree with the Secretary of State on the importance of buses for connectivity. I note that the Bill talks about “socially necessary” services, but it would be helpful to have a better understanding of the definition of what they are beyond my own interpretation. For example, if a constituency does not have a train station, can we therefore have a greater assurance that we will see no loss in our bus services?

Heidi Alexander: Through the Bill, we will be giving local transport authorities the power to determine socially necessary local services. That relates to access to employment, jobs, things like health facilities, and education. That power will lie with local authorities and it will be for them to determine.

Wendy Morton rose—

Heidi Alexander: I will make some progress.

Before I come to the Bill's key measures, I will briefly set out the context. Although it may be tempting for me to lay the blame for the current state of buses entirely at the feet of the last Government, that would be neither right nor fair. They too inherited a broken, deregulated system that forced passengers to navigate multiple operators on similar routes, but with different tickets. They, too,

faced declining patronage, with 1.8 billion fewer journeys outside London last year than in 1986, and, to their credit, they tried to fix that. The national bus strategy, bus service improvement plans and greater powers for mayors were all steps in the right direction to improve services for passengers.

Wendy Morton: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Heidi Alexander: I am going to make some progress.

However, in some areas such as franchising, the last Government did not go far enough, so this Bill will not only build on previous reforms but go further—much further—in fixing the faults that are still holding the industry back from meeting the needs of local people. I hope that Members in all parts of the House will see the merits of the approach that we are taking. After all, we have all heard from constituents about jobs not taken and opportunities missed because bus services are too unreliable, or do not operate on Sundays, or do not cater for night-time shifts.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In London we have benefited for a long time from bus services that are better than those in the rest of the country, and I wholeheartedly welcome my right hon. Friend's desire to level that up, but in London we also have floating bus stops. I know that matching the needs of cyclists, of whom I am one, with those of others involves a delicate balance, but for someone who is blind, visually impaired or encumbered by, for instance, a buggy, getting off a bus at a floating bus stop is very dangerous. What plans has my right hon. Friend to tackle the issue across the country?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend may know that in the Bill we commit ourselves to producing design guidance for local authorities so that they can look at what is best practice. She may also know that in the other place the Rail Minister said we were committing ourselves to a non-statutory pause on the type of floating bus stop that requires a passenger to alight directly on a cycle lane. I hope that that gives her some reassurance.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the work that she is doing in this regard. I am pleased to hear that the Bill requires guidance to be produced to enable authorities to make floating bus stops safe and accessible, but many blind and partially sighted people, including me, have experienced problems with them. Could a proper assessment of their safety be carried out to ensure that no passenger who uses a bus, whether it is to go to work or to attend a health appointment, will experience the challenges that so many people currently experience when trying to navigate them?

Heidi Alexander: We will be looking carefully at this issue. I am very conscious of the needs of the visually impaired community, but I am also very conscious of the need to protect cyclists and pedestrians on our roads, so I am keen for us to look at the issue in the round.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Heidi Alexander: I am going to make a little more progress, but I shall be happy to take interventions later.

[Heidi Alexander]

I was talking about the problems caused by bus services that are unreliable, do not operate at weekends or, perhaps, do not cater for individuals working night shifts. We all know that each of those stories is the story of a life frustrated, but, taken together, they constitute an anthology of wasted potential, of living standards and growth held back. That is why improving bus services underpins our plan for change, and it is why, despite difficult choices made across Government, we confirmed more than £1 billion in funding in the last Budget to protect vital routes and keep fares down.

Wendy Morton *rose*—

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green) *rose*—

Heidi Alexander: I am not going to give way again to the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). I will give way to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire.

Ellie Chowns: Does the Secretary of State recognise that rural constituencies such as mine have particular needs, and that the funding needs to reflect the extra costs associated with rurality, as well as the demographic demands? Young people, older people and people on low incomes rely on buses more than others. Will those factors be taken into account in the funding mechanisms for bus services?

Heidi Alexander: I can reassure the hon. Lady that we have taken those issues into account in our allocation of this year's funding.

Let me now explain our approach. Funding, even record funding, without reform means throwing good money after bad, and that brings me to the Bill. Our reforms are not ideological. Regardless of what some may say, this is not about public ownership versus private enterprise. It is about enabling more people to use buses, about ensuring that those services are safer, more reliable and more accessible, and about harnessing the best of devolution.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for introducing the Bill. Sarah, one of my constituents, is here today. Her work with the National Federation of the Blind of the UK and its street access campaign has demonstrated the difficulty that blind and partially sighted people experience in accessing buses. They cannot make the choice that others make to pass their driving tests as soon as they reach the age of 17 so that they can travel to their local colleges, schools or hospital appointments. I want to draw attention to that fantastic campaign, and to ask for the Bill to make clear to local authorities that they must work to ensure that all buses are accessible—not just to people with sight impairments but to those who need to access a bus in a wheelchair, like my friends who cannot travel together and are often whizzed past by the driver, and have to wait longer than the rest of us.

Heidi Alexander: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point so powerfully. I can reassure her that the Bill will introduce a duty for local transport authorities to consult disabled passengers and disability organisations

before initiating a franchise scheme. It will standardise the current disability training requirements that operators will need to fulfil, and it will give the Government new powers to require operators to record data on that training. I think that, taken together, those measures should represent a positive improvement in the way in which the bus network is designed to ensure that everyone can use it.

As I was saying, the Bill was designed to harness the best of devolution. That means transferring power away from central Government and operators, and towards local leaders—those who know their areas best—and giving them the tools to deliver buses on which communities can rely. Whether we are talking about the franchising that has worked so well in London or Jersey, about the local authority bus companies that have thrived in Nottingham and Reading or about the excellent examples of enhanced partnerships in Brighton and Norfolk, it is clear to me that one size does not fit all. The Bill will expand the options available to local authorities so that each area has the bus service that is right for it, while also safeguarding the needs of passengers, particularly the most vulnerable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I know that the Secretary of State is committed to ensuring that buses are environmentally friendly and meet the net zero targets that we all want to be met. Wrightbus in Ballymena, in Northern Ireland, is a leading producer of hydrogen buses, which provide safe, reliable, cost-effective transport. Has the Secretary of State been able to have any discussions with Wrightbus—which supplies buses in London and elsewhere in the UK—with a view to ensuring that everyone in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can take advantage of that innovative technology?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the innovative technology developed by Wrightbus. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), has not only met representatives of Wrightbus but visited its facility.

Let me now explain how we are going about fixing the broken franchising process.

It cannot be right that it took Mayor Andy Burnham years to bring just one bus under public control, after being frustrated at every turn. With bus services in Greater Manchester now part of the Bee Network, usage is up by 14%, and revenues and punctuality are also moving in the right direction. However, franchising remains too complex. Proposed schemes need to jump through myriad hoops, and they still require my consent to proceed—which is odd, to say the least. The idea that I understand what passengers in Leicestershire or Cornwall need better than their local leaders do is for the birds. In December, we opened up franchising to every local authority. Through this Bill, we will further streamline the process, making it simpler for franchise schemes to be granted and assessed.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Secretary of State referred earlier to placing certain statutory duties on county councils. When she considers that, will she consider including in those duties the maintenance of companion bus passes for people with learning difficulties

who cannot travel on their own? It is not much good for them to have a free bus pass if they cannot take a companion with them.

Will the Secretary of State join me in expressing our sadness and commiseration over the recent passing of Mr Andrew Wickham, who spent more than 40 years in the transport industry and over a decade as managing director of Go South Coast, which operates Bluestar buses in New Forest East? I always found him to be a marvellously attentive correspondent, and he was someone who worked until almost the very end.

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and he gives me the opportunity to place on record my thanks to Andrew Wickham. I have the privilege of representing the constituency of Swindon South, and he ran Swindon's Bus Company. He was the epitome of professionalism and kindness to me—not only as a Member of a Parliament, but when I was a candidate—and I pass on my condolences to his family, his friends and his colleagues.

The right hon. Gentleman raises a fair point about the importance of companion travel for individuals with disabilities. He will know that the decision to add extras to the English national concessionary fare scheme is taken by local authorities.

I was talking about our desire to make the franchising system simpler. Of course, the model will not work everywhere, which is why this Bill also strengthens enhanced partnerships and removes the ideological ban on establishing new local authority bus companies. Furthermore, by giving local authorities the power to design and pay bus operator grants in their area, the Bill gives greater protections for socially necessary local services, securing the lifeline routes that keep communities connected.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In our communities we have nearly full employment, but a lot of people are on extremely low wages. Before the bus fare cap came in, the bus fare from Kendal to Ambleside was the second highest in the entire country, costing people a quarter of their salary to get to work. As the Secretary of State makes sure that devolution happens and that franchising is done in a way that is fit for purpose in each different area, will she ensure that she does not abdicate her responsibility to fully fund the bus fare cap, so that people like my constituents can actually afford to get to work?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is a spending review under way, but I can confirm that I fully appreciate the importance of having an affordable and accessible bus route. He will be aware that zero funding was allocated to fund the bus fare cap beyond the end of last year, and this Government stepped in with our commitment to the £3 fare. Although it applies to only one in six journeys—because a number of people who travel regularly will use a travelcard for a week or a month—I am aware of the importance that his constituents and others attach to the cap.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State and her team, including the Minister in the other place, on bringing this Bill before the House. Since 2010, we have seen 2 million fewer bus miles ridden in Hampshire. In Oakley, Chineham, Black

Dam and South Ham, I have heard stories of missed appointments, work shifts and social engagements as a result of poor service. Can she confirm that this Bill will give every part of England the opportunity to take back control of its bus services? Can she explain what will happen with the devolution process and whether the powers will pass to the new unitary authorities or mayoral authorities, or has that yet to be decided?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is a fearsome advocate for his constituents, and I know the importance that he places on local bus services. Under the new devolution arrangements, local transport authorities will be the part of local government where the new powers lie. It is for local transport authorities to decide whether franchising or an enhanced partnership is the route for them to deliver the services that their communities need.

Running buses should always be about serving passengers, and I want to say something about safety and what we are doing, through this Bill, to put the needs of passengers first. We want to keep passengers safe at any time of day or night, and at any point in their journey, be it waiting at bus stops or when on board. That is why this Bill includes powers for local transport authorities to crack down on fare dodgers and tackle antisocial behaviour; requirements for drivers of school services to pass enhanced criminal record checks, closing an existing loophole; and mandatory training for bus staff to help tackle crime where it is safe for them to do so.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I want to return briefly to the socially necessary services that the Secretary of State mentioned. Two issues in my constituency are of great importance: the first relates to the fact that school-only buses are often more expensive than regular services; and the second relates to operators, who tell me that the current SEND transport model is unsustainable and that children with special educational needs and disabilities are being left with a poorer service. Will the Bill seek to address those concerns?

Heidi Alexander: There are not specific criteria and provisions in this Bill, but I can assure my hon. Friend that my ministerial colleagues and I are very aware of those issues. Although school-only bus provision is provided in a slightly different way, I would be happy to talk to him about the particular issues in his constituency.

I want to say something about accessibility. For many, buses are a route to a better, more independent life, yet the current patchwork quilt of standards and regulations can further disable passengers, rather than enable them. That will change through this Bill, because local authorities will be required to produce a bus network accessibility plan and to consult disability organisations on changes to services, as I said earlier. New statutory guidance will make stopping places more accessible, including floating bus stops, which came up earlier. However, after listening to concerns, we will press pause on those that are perceived to be poorly designed.

Chris Vince: Part of the issue with bus stops in Harlow has been caused by the redevelopment of sustainable transport corridors, which we absolutely welcome. Bus stops are being forced to move, making them less accessible. Is that something that the Bill takes into account? Even if it is a temporary bus stop or bus station, we need to ensure that it fits the criteria.

Heidi Alexander: The Bill will improve the ability of local transport authorities to deal with precisely that sort of situation.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Heidi Alexander: I will make some progress. I am conscious that a number of Members want to speak, and I would like to allow as many people as possible to make contributions.

I want to say something about our commitment to meeting our net zero targets. This Bill will restrict new non-zero emission buses on most local services in England from no earlier than January 2030, and I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Transport is already speaking to the industry—not just about securing an orderly transition, but about the opportunity for British bus manufacturers to meet new demand both at home and abroad.

Finally, several non-Government amendments were added to the Bill during its passage in the other place, which is why I was unable to make a statement of compatibility with the European convention on human rights. That was the result of clause 40, which was not tabled by the Government. It requires recording violent behaviour on buses and sharing that data with the local transport authority, and it also requires consulting trade unions on staff safety. The personal data requirements are incompatible with ECHR obligations; as such, the Government will seek to address this matter as the Bill progresses.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned that the Minister for Local Transport is taking responsibility for the net zero side, and I was delighted to welcome him to my constituency to see the work of Wrightbus, which is repurposing diesel buses with its new powertrains. Could she provide reassurance that buses repurposed as net zero buses will also be eligible for Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government funding for decarbonisation of the bus fleet in the future?

Heidi Alexander: If I may, I will write to the hon. Gentleman to confirm that point, but I understand why he is keen to raise it.

In conclusion, I would say that for too long and in too many places a degraded bus network has been symbolic of wider national decline, with each poor service reinforcing a sense of things not working as they should. That ends now. This Bill represents a brighter future for bus travel. For the first time in 40 years, we are taking back control of our buses, transferring power from operators to local leaders and from Whitehall to the town hall, where it belongs. I truly believe that the transport needs of my constituents in Swindon are different from those of passengers in Scunthorpe or Southend. That is why buses will rightly look and feel different across the country, reflecting the identity and priorities of local areas.

This Bill is just the start of the journey. Throughout its passage and following Royal Assent, we will continue to work with the bus industry, passenger groups and colleagues in both Houses as we set out further regulations

on the standards that we and millions of daily passengers expect. Better buses are around the corner, with increased reliability, greater accountability and services that passengers can finally depend on. I commend this Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

7.21 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Buses are the most popular form of public transport in the country, carrying passengers on twice as many journeys as trains and serving thousands more stops nationwide. As the Secretary of State said in her opening remarks, from the centre of London to the remotest areas, they can get teenagers to school, allow pensioners to visit friends and connect people to jobs that they would not otherwise be able to take. They keep town centres alive, connect our communities and ensure that those with mobility issues, as well as the most vulnerable, can get around.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gareth Bacon: It is a little bit early, but I will give way.

Peter Swallow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was just curious why, if buses are so popular and important, as he rightly says, so few of his Back-Bench colleagues are lining up to speak in this important debate?

Gareth Bacon: It is because there is no Division later. It is not because nobody cares, but because there is not going to be a Division.

The previous Conservative Government recognised just how vital local bus services are to keeping communities connected. From 2020 to when we left office last summer, the previous Government committed £4.5 billion to support and enhance bus services, including more than £2 billion to help local authorities implement their bus service improvement plans. Perhaps most importantly, we also introduced the £2 bus fare cap.

Wendy Morton: Just to be absolutely clear, there are Conservative Members who wanted to ask questions of the Transport Secretary, but she seemed a little unwilling. On the specific point of fares and affordability, can my hon. Friend help to ensure that passengers, whom the Bill should focus on, see value for money from this Bill? In the west midlands, Mayor Parker, under his plan to take back control of our buses, is actually taking money from our pockets and increasing fares by 8.6%?

Gareth Bacon: Yes, indeed. We are very interested in doing that, which is why we inserted a purpose clause in the other place to ensure that the key focus of this Bill is solely on passengers.

By maintaining the £2 bus fare cap, we ensured that bus travel remained affordable and accessible to as many people as possible, while helping families manage the cost of living. We have voiced deep concerns in both this Chamber and the other place about the impact, particularly on the most vulnerable, of Labour's decision to scrap the £2 cap and raise it to £3. Make no mistake: this is bad for those in work, who will be £3,500 worse off because of this Government's jobs tax, and bad for pensioners, who have seen their winter fuel payments cut and their energy bills rise, despite repeated promises from Labour to cut their energy costs by £300.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): One of the things that feels so pernicious about scrapping the national “Get around for £2” bus fare cap is that, while certain parts of the country that were given long-term settlements under the last Government—sometimes of up to five years—have been able to maintain the cap, large parts of the country have not been able to do so. Does that not go to show that the last Government were prepared to work with people from all political parties, but this feels particularly pernicious because it is really targeted at areas that have not traditionally been Labour-supporting?

Gareth Bacon: As always, my right hon. Friend gets to the heart of the matter, and I have to say that I agree with him.

I would like to make one thing abundantly clear from the outset: we do not oppose franchising in principle. When implemented properly, franchising can be a powerful mechanism for improving services, addressing local transport challenges and delivering the quality services that passengers rightly demand and expect.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gareth Bacon: I will make a bit of progress.

However, the Bill in its original form does not do that. The Secretary of State has acknowledged, and I agree, that the Bill does not mandate franchising everywhere, and that is a sensible step, but the Bill does not prioritise passengers, and nothing in it guarantees an improvement in service standards. The truth is that this Bill appears to be driven by political nostalgia. It is in many ways a thinly veiled attempt to recreate the municipal model of the pre-1986 era, without fully considering the financial and operational realities of today.

Sir Ashley Fox: The Highbridge bus passenger group in my constituency has raised the issues of Sunday services either not existing or starting so late that people cannot get to work, bus services being put on in the summer during the tourist season but not being available in the winter, and poor connections for rural communities. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, without additional funding, this bus Bill will not solve those problems?

Gareth Bacon: Yes, my hon. Friend is completely correct, and I will come to that a bit later in my speech.

While we do not oppose the franchising of bus services, we do oppose a particular assumption that underlines this legislation, which is that the public sector is the solution to everything. Some local authorities may have the expertise and resources to successfully franchise passenger bus services, but let us be clear that many do not. The very central premise of the Bill—giving every local authority the unchecked power to implement franchising, regardless of its resources or capacity—is not an act of empowerment; it is irresponsible. By removing the need for the Secretary of State to consent to franchising, as required under the previous Conservative Government, this Government are eliminating crucial safeguards.

Wendy Morton: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gareth Bacon: With respect to my right hon. Friend, I will not, because I am conscious that lots of Members want to speak.

Those safeguards are designed to ensure that franchising serves the passengers who rely on our bus services and the taxpayers who pay for them. The expertise required to design, manage and operate franchised networks is not readily available in most councils. That is why the Bus Services Act 2017 limited franchising powers to mayoral combined authorities, which are bodies with the scale, resources and democratic mandate to take on such responsibilities.

Crucially, the legislation we enacted to pave the way for mayoral combined authorities to issue franchising models also required those authorities to demonstrate that franchising would deliver genuine benefits for passengers. The removal of that requirement by this Bill is concerning, and it betrays the view held by those on the Government side of the House that the public sector is inherently infallible. Members will not be shocked that I do not share that view, but they do not need to take my word for it.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gareth Bacon: I will make some progress and then give way.

Members should take the word of Centre for Cities, which has made it clear that expanding franchising could expose councils to serious financial risks, because after decades of deregulated services, many transport authorities simply lack the skills and capacity to manage a comprehensive bus network, yet would be financially responsible if an undertaking goes wrong.

These are not just hypothetical concerns. The experience in Greater Manchester illustrates just how easily costs can spiral, leaving the taxpayer out of pocket. The Secretary of State will no doubt be aware that initial projections published in Greater Manchester combined authority’s transport revenue budget put the cost of transitioning to a franchised system at £134.5 million for 2024-25. That figure has since ballooned, with ongoing operational costs now forecast to exceed £226 million per year by 2025-26, which is a 68% increase in one year. Over four years, the scheme could cost up to £1 billion—far, far more than anticipated. Moreover, the House will know that the annual level of bus subsidy in London last year amounted to £646 million. Greater London is the most heavily populated and most economically active area in the entire country. It also has the highest level of bus use. Yet even with all those advantages, it requires that level of annual subsidy just to keep the network running.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): When my hon. Friend talks about the increased risk smaller local authorities would face through franchising, he could be talking about my local authority, Isle of Wight council. Does he see anything in the Bill that is appealing to small unitary authorities, or is this really just a Bill for bigger metropolitan areas and large towns?

Gareth Bacon: The risk of the Bill is that it does not come with substantial funding attached. That is the problem. It is mismanaging the public’s expectations. I expect we will hear from a parade of Labour MPs talking about how it will transform services in their local area. Without the required level of funding, it simply will not.

Victoria Collins: It is really important that we stop the vicious cycle. In my area of Harpenden and Berkhamsted, the X5 has been cancelled for commercial reasons. The bus company says it is no longer commercially viable, but that has left people who work in the local hospital saying, “I might have to move house or leave my job.” There are children who now have to wait at school or who cannot get back from school because the bus goes too late. We need to stop the vicious cycle and make sure the funding is there, and this is a good start to help bring buses back to the communities that need them.

Gareth Bacon: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), which is that without substantial extra levels of funding from the Government, that simply will not happen. Local authorities may have the powers to do it, but they simply will not have the ability.

The Government have talked about the amount of money they are putting into the Bill and the Secretary of State referred to it in her speech, but it is a mere £1 billion, of which £700 million has been earmarked for bus planning documents, not actual services. Less than 30% is being directed toward the delivery of bus services themselves, which will not touch the sides. Giving local authorities the legal power to do something without the money is mere window dressing. If these challenges can emerge in Greater Manchester and Greater London despite all their resources, planning and political leadership, what should we expect elsewhere? The truth is that we do not know, and that highlights the danger at the heart of the Bill.

On a connected vein, through franchising, we may end up extinguishing a number of highly successful private sector businesses, reducing them to operating for a fee and doing what the state instructs them to do in terms of routes, services and fares. Quite aside from losing the expertise that the private sector brings to the network, the Government risk removing any incentive for the private sector to invest in our bus networks, potentially leaving the taxpayer with ever greater burdens.

Despite my various concerns about this legislation, I would like to recognise that the Bill we see before us was greatly improved during its passage through the other place—improvements driven notably but not exclusively by Conservative peers. The purpose clause, which obligates the Secretary of State to consider service performance, quality and accessibility, was a much-needed addition, as was the amendment requiring an assessment of the impact of ending the £2 fare cap. Successful amendments requiring the Secretary of State to review bus services to villages in England, to develop a programme to eliminate serious injury during bus operations, and to require bus operators to record all data regarding assaults and violent behaviour, were all tabled by peers from other political parties to His Majesty’s Opposition and, collectively, they improve the Bill. The latter amendment was tabled by the noble Lord Woodley, a Labour peer and former joint general secretary of the Unite trade union. It was, bizarrely, opposed by Labour peers, but it succeeded with the support of Conservative peers and those of other parties.

A further successful Conservative amendment was passed, mandating a review of the national insurance burden on special educational needs transport, following

the increases announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I must say that it is deeply regrettable that Labour peers were whipped to vote against a measure designed solely to protect some of the most vulnerable in our society. In opposing the special educational needs transport amendment in the other place, the Government asserted:

“The Government do not expect the changes to national insurance to have a significant effect on home-to-school travel for children with special educational needs and disabilities, so it would not be proportionate to conduct the assessment that this amendment suggests.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 March 2025; Vol. 844, c. 1756.]

Leaving aside the breathtaking arrogance of that statement, it is directly contradicted by the very providers tasked with delivering these vital services. The chairman of the 24x7 Group, one of the largest operators of SEND transport in the country, has warned that changes to national insurance contributions could significantly raise employment costs, making some contracts unviable. That has the potential to leave thousands of children without access to the transport they rely on to attend school. To oppose even a review of such consequences is not just shortsighted; it speaks to a worrying indifference about the impact of this legislation on vulnerable passengers.

The Opposition were also disappointed that Labour peers voted against introducing a safeguard against repeated franchising assessments for the same geographical area, which risks wasting public resources and creating instability for operators and passengers alike. Similarly, it was disappointing to see Labour peers not support plans to ensure that floating bus stops do not threaten the safety of those who are blind and partially sighted.

Likewise, if improving passenger services is at the heart of the Bill, I fail to understand why Labour peers were whipped to vote against the amendment that would give the Secretary of State the power to intervene when franchised services fail due to poor local management. Does the Secretary of State really believe that passengers should be left stranded simply because a local authority is unable to deliver? I do not believe that to be the case and I look forward to her amending the Bill as it proceeds through the House.

Why did Labour peers vote against those measures? Once again, it would appear that ideology took precedence over passengers. That is why we will push to reinstate these prudent amendments as the Bill proceeds through the House. The Liberal Democrats supported many of the measures in the other place and I sincerely hope they will do the same in this House, for the benefit of passengers.

In conclusion, franchising may well play an important role in improving the bus networks of the future, but the Bill alone will not get us there. That is because the Bill does not prioritise those who matter most: the people who rely on buses every single day to get to work, attend school, reach appointments and stay connected with their communities. While we welcome the positive changes made by peers in the other place and we will not divide the House on Second Reading, we cannot vote for a Bill that lacks basic safeguards, ignores the risks and prioritises ideology over impact. We will therefore seek to improve the Bill as it proceeds through the House. I urge the House to consider not just the political implications of this legislation, but its real-world consequences for the millions who depend on these services every day.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before I call the Chair of the Transport Committee, it might be helpful to indicate that after the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, there will be a five-minute time limit. I do not propose to drop it any further than that and, given the number of Members here, many may be disappointed.

7.37 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the first Commons debate on the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, which I welcome. The new Transport Committee decided that its first inquiry would be on “Buses connecting communities” to address the rural and non-city services across England outside London. We have completed our evidence gathering and our report will be published before too long. The oral and written evidence we received is tagged to today’s Order Paper and is available via a link on the Committee website.

Poor bus services affect the constituents of almost every constituency in England outside London, judging by the interest in the issue during the election of the Chair of the Committee last September and in the attendance today. Whether Members’ constituencies are rural, mid-sized cities, suburban or in the London commuter belt, the interest in this issue is significant. In England outside London, there has been an overall decline in bus use of 63% since 2002. Car travel is now not only the main form of travel, but in many places it is the only way to get around, particularly early, late and at weekends. For those who are unable to drive or access a car, the lack of decent, or indeed any, bus services means that they are stuck at home or at the mercy of family, neighbours or expensive taxis.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): My hon. Friend could be describing my constituency of Mid Derbyshire, many parts of which are poorly served by buses. Does she agree that the way forward is to give local leaders the power to determine routes and support them to work with private companies?

Ruth Cadbury: I will come on to that, but yes. For a Labour Government with a focus on growth, opportunity and clean energy, it is essential to transform bus services across England to make them more reliable, more accessible and better integrated into the fabric of local communities. That is important to ensure that residents of rural areas are not left behind, to support the growth and regeneration aspirations of our towns away from major conurbations, and to make sure that the most vulnerable have equal access and ability to travel.

In its inquiry, the Committee has received valuable evidence from a wide range of stakeholders. When we looked at the impact of declining bus services, we heard evidence that described local bus services in 2025 as a “barrier” to opportunity rather than an “enabler”. We heard that the future of many services remains “precarious”. From a local authority perspective, the situation was described as “challenging”. We also heard about the economic hit to many town centres from fewer buses; if people cannot travel, they do not spend in local shops

and businesses. This Bill is not a magic wand, however. For instance, the Local Government Association told us that

“successful implementation will require practical support and local flexibility from central government.”

I will address four key areas, the first of which is improved integration and co-ordination. Passenger groups told us that they need a system that works together as a whole, rather than the patchwork of disconnected services that they see at present. I therefore welcome the focus on enhanced partnerships and franchising powers for local authorities. The franchising model has long been used in London, and it has been seen more recently in Greater Manchester through the Bee Network. Franchising and even enhanced partnerships should make for co-ordinated timetables, simplified fare structures and greater accountability in service delivery so that passengers no longer have to navigate a confusing web of different operators, routes and fare structures.

Anna Dixon: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ruth Cadbury: I will press on, because I will be frowned at if I take too many interventions.

On community engagement and local needs, our inquiry was told that services should be shaped by the voices of those who rely on them, ensuring that routes are designed to connect communities, not just city centres, and that they connect rural and isolated communities. I welcome the inclusion in the Bill of local bus service improvement plans, which will ensure that local authorities can work with operators to tailor services to the unique needs of the communities they serve. Will the Bill ensure that service user groups are an integral part of both the design and the review of local services?

I move on to sustainability and green transport. The Transport Secretary reiterated just now that buses have a vital role to play in the transition to greener and more sustainable transport, as well as in cutting pollution in busy streets and reducing car dependency. If my constituency experience is anything to go by, getting adequate EV charging capacity to bus depots must be a priority. Although that is perhaps not a feature of the Bill, I use this opportunity to ask whether the Minister will work with bus operators and power networks to address that challenge for bus depots.

On affordability and accessibility, if there is to be transformational change to the bus system in England, buses have to be there for those who cannot drive or cannot afford to own and run a car. A not insignificant proportion of the population are left out, yet they need to get to work, to college, to the shops, to services and to doctors’ appointments, and they have to have a social and family life. Even if a local area is served by reliable bus services, that is no use if people cannot get on or off them, if they do not feel safe or if they cannot afford the fare.

Although I welcome references to affordability and accessibility, I have some questions based on our buses inquiry and the evidence to it, and on our “Access denied” report, the work on which was mainly completed by our predecessor Committee. Clause 14 requires local transport authorities operating in enhanced partnerships to identify socially necessary services. That is welcome, but in their evidence to us, operators and local authorities

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

had questions about how that would play out. Having defined those services, will local authorities be held to ransom for their continuation, regardless of cost?

Accessibility means more than the design of buses and bus stops; it includes the usability of digital information, maps and timetables, without excluding those who do not have a smartphone or cannot get a mobile signal. We were told that guidance on accessibility must encourage rather than discourage innovation. Although clauses relating to staff training in accessibility are welcome, we were told that guidance must set out clearer expectations about the nature of training that is to be provided. It must be of a guaranteed minimum standard and proven effectiveness, not a tick-box exercise that enables people to say that they have done the training.

The Bill does not appear to address the accessibility barriers that prevent most people who use class 3 mobility scooters from travelling on bus services. Furthermore, will it make reference to the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000?

As has been mentioned, it is also unclear whether express coaches and closed-door school services are covered by the Bill.

On amendments passed in the other place, will the Secretary of State have another chance to look at implementing a “Vision Zero” deaths and injuries goal for the bus sector?

The elephant in the room is funding. There is not a country in the world that has a self-funding bus service. We went to Ireland, where Government policy provides that the vast majority in rural Ireland are linked to their nearest town by at least three return bus journeys per day. Even London’s buses survive on cross-subsidy from the tube system. Unless and until we have a robust economy where local authorities have the funding to deliver an Ireland level of bus provision, this Bill is the start and not the magic bullet in delivering the affordable, accessible and comprehensive bus network across England that we all aspire to.

7.47 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): As other Members have noted, buses are the most used form of public transport, and in much of the country they are the only option available. Outside London, however, bus use is in sharp decline, with more than 1 billion fewer passenger journeys in 2023 than in 2015. That is not because of insufficient demand, but because of the Conservative policy of deregulation that put profit before people, allowing private operators to cream off the valuable routes with scant regard for the needs of the wider community, resulting in increased fares and reduced or completely abandoned services for many—unless, of course, the local authority, starved of access to the profitable routes, met the costs of the unprofitable ones.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): That is exactly what has happened in Cornwall. The No. 11 and No. 12 bus served lots of rural towns and villages to Derriford hospital, but it has been salami-sliced—I have just got off the phone to Go Cornwall Bus—after years of underfunding. My constituent Mary in Padstow relies on that service to get her breast cancer treatment at Derriford, and she can no longer afford to get to

the hospital, which would involve spending hundreds of pounds on taxis. Does my hon. Friend agree that in rural areas like mine, we need ringfenced funding to protect those key healthcare routes?

Mr Kohler: Those are exactly the kinds of issues that must be addressed, and this Bill does not do enough to achieve that. I will come back to that in a moment.

In rural areas, the story is often one of total disconnection, with communities cut off and people unable to get to work or hospital appointments, or to visit friends or relations.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that in rural constituencies like mine, bus routes are an absolute lifeline and a route out of poverty? When the 84 and 85 bus route was cut last year, it meant not only that people could not get to medical appointments or to work, but that students had to drop out of the college courses that would have enabled them to escape from poverty. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to make sure that this Bill enables an affordable, joined-up and genuinely useful rural transport network?

Mr Kohler: I completely agree. The point is that this is about not only getting people out of poverty but growing the economy. People need access to bus routes; otherwise they are left with expensive and much more environmentally damaging private transport.

Put simply, a poor or non-existent bus service is not just an inconvenience. It is a barrier to opportunity, a brake on economic growth, and an obstacle to achieving net zero. Given the decline in local bus services under the Conservatives, my party and I warmly welcome the Government’s renewed focus on this issue. The Bill includes measures that are long overdue and that my party will support.

Anna Dixon: Much has been made about the decline in bus usage. The pattern is similar in West Yorkshire, where between 2011 and 2022 there was a reduction of some 60 million journeys. There has been lots of mention of Greater Manchester, but West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin’s bus service improvement plan has already seen a 4% increase in bus usage. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that approaches that devolve responsibility and make it easier for mayors and local authorities to take over public control through franchising are the route to improved usage and, ultimately, the delivery of better buses?

Mr Kohler: I do agree. It is also about funding, which we must explore; but, yes, my party believes in localism—bringing things down to the local level is crucial.

It needs to be stated from the off that the Bill does not go far enough. It falls short of delivering the comprehensive, transformative change that our bus network desperately needs—and thus, I urge the Minister, even at this late hour, to be even more ambitious.

I will now outline the measures in the Bill that my party supports. Local government, not Whitehall, know what is best for their area. That is why my party has long championed localism, which is all about providing communities with the necessary tools to realise their potential. The Bill’s provisions to improve, streamline

and extend franchising rights to all local transport authorities is consequently long overdue and supported on the Liberal Democrat Benches.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the community in north Taunton on getting the first No. 1 bus of the morning—the 6.22 am service—restored? I had the joy of experiencing it this morning, tinged only with the tiredness that results from having got the 6.22. Does he agree that we need specific funding so that bus services can properly connect with hospitals, such as Taunton's Musgrove Park hospital and many others?

Mr Kohler: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the community on its success, and I agree that we need funding for these critical services.

The placing of socially necessary services on a statutory footing is a beneficial change to the enhanced partnership model, as it ensures that local authorities assess the impact of service changes and consider alternatives. The Bill also rightly lifts the outdated, ideologically-driven ban on municipally-owned bus companies, empowering local authorities who wish to use it, rather than infantilising them. Taken as a whole, the measures create an improved set of options from which local authorities can choose the approach that works best for them.

As the Secretary of State noted, it is important to realise that this is not, and must not become, a one-size-fits-all approach. Not every local authority will wish to pursue franchising, establish a bus company or abandon the partnership model. What works for Greater Manchester or London may not work for Oxfordshire or Cornwall. It must be up to local leaders and, ultimately, local communities to decide what works best for them. I welcome the fact that the Government are not mandating a certain approach.

Therein lies the challenge: empowering local authorities in law is one thing, but enabling them in practice is quite another. Although the Bill hands councils a set of keys to a new bus network, it does not ensure that there is fuel in the tank. Franchising is complex, resource-intensive and unfamiliar to the vast majority of local authorities. It requires legal expertise, commercial understanding, operational planning and, above all, funding. The Department for Transport has acknowledged those difficulties, yet this legislation provides little to help overcome them.

The Government's laudable desire to increase their own capacity to advise councils is welcome, but I am not convinced that they are doing enough. The recently established Bus Centre of Excellence, which we will no doubt hear much about during the passage of the Bill, is a positive development, but does it really have the necessary capacity and resources to provide meaningful support to all those who might need it? If we are to see franchising become a viable option beyond a handful of combined authorities, we must take bolder steps to offer councils without either the expertise or the finances more than just a helpline or homilies on best practice.

Every hon. Member in this House knows how overstretched their local authorities are—with the exception of our colleagues from Reform, of course, who are sadly absent from today's debate, no doubt too busy frantically searching for the untapped resources and savings they confidently promised they would discover

in their new fiefdoms. As for the rest of us, we know that most local authorities lack the finances, expertise and bandwidth to use the tools the Bill provides. As a result, only the local authorities that already have the capacity to do so will use them, which will exacerbate regional disparities, not reduce them.

Even if we overcome such problems, that will not remove the continuing role of central Government in securing access and affordability. That is why the Government's reckless decision to raise the national bus fare cap from £2 to £3 casts a dark shadow over the Bill. The original £2 cap was not only popular but effective. It reduced costs for passengers and helped to bring people back on to the bus network. It was precisely the kind of policy of which we need more, not less. Increasing fares by £1 per trip may not sound prohibitive, but for those on low incomes or families making multiple journeys, the change represents a significant cost increase, adding £20 to the cost of a weekly commute to anyone who has to take two buses to work while only saving the Government £150 million.

Let us be clear: this increase is regressive. It will hit the poorest hardest, particularly at a time of a cost of living crisis. Surely the Government should commit to preserving affordability, not undermining it, as raising fares in the absence of service improvements risks entrenching decline, not reversing it. Even more worryingly, rumours are now doing the rounds that the fare cap may be removed altogether. That would be a catastrophic mistake. We must not allow the progress of recent years to unravel in a Treasury-pleasing piece of virtue signalling that will only save the Exchequer a further £150 million.

A thriving, affordable bus network is not a luxury but an essential public service. This Bill must ensure that that is the case. Nowhere is that more true than in our rural areas. As we have seen for years, the current unregulated bus market is failing small villages and remote hamlets, serving them neither efficiently nor sufficiently.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to do more to protect section 22 community bus services such as West Oxfordshire Community Transport, which are now facing a mountain of bureaucracy to re-tender for routes that it built up from scratch against commercial bus operators that have all the abilities to pitch and win, leaving community bus operators high and dry?

Mr Kohler: I do agree. We must do all we can to reduce bureaucracy. The Bill goes some way towards that, but it needs to do more.

The Bill as it stands provides nothing specific for rural areas—no dedicated rural funding stream and no obligation to maintain coverage. It is clear that if we are to be ambitious and achieve the economic growth that rural areas need, we must ensure that local authorities have the ambition and financial means to improve public transport. The Bill is missing an opportunity in failing to do so.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): One of the consequences for my constituents of losing services like the 84/85, the T2 and the 622 is that they are cut off from health services. Does my hon. Friend agree that

[Claire Young]

such access should be a priority for investment, and that a focus on the increase in passenger numbers when judging investment choices disadvantages rural areas?

Mr Kohler: I agree. We must not focus only on passenger numbers. It is also about connectivity, and about making sure that rural areas thrive.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I would like to concentrate not just on purely rural areas, but on places like Surrey. In my constituency, the 514 bus connects Esher and Molesey, two important centres of our community, but it runs only twice on weekdays and once on a Saturday. On Sundays it is never to be seen. The service was severely cut back in 2016. To travel a distance of a mile and a half, people have to get a bus more than five miles into London and out again, which takes 40 minutes—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I have made this point before, but interventions really must be shorter than that. There are many hon. Members who wish to get in.

Mr Kohler: I will simply say that I agree with my hon. Friend.

Hon. Members have spoken about rural areas suffering. From 2015 to 2023, Shropshire lost 63% of its bus miles, the largest decline in any part of England. No doubt that was one reason among many that Shropshire voters decided that they had had enough of the Conservatives. In May, they voted a majority Liberal Democrat administration in for the first time.

Although the bus service in Shropshire is one of the worst in the country, it is by no means an isolated case. I have heard from colleagues and residents across the country, just as the House has heard today, that in rural areas such as Norfolk, Somerset and Hampshire, having no buses—or one bus a day, if residents are lucky—has sadly become the norm for many villages. This is not just inconvenient; it is holding back our rural economies and stifling growth. I fear that the measures in the Bill will not be sufficient to reverse that decline.

Lastly, I want to address accessibility, an issue on which my Liberal Democrat colleagues in the other place and other noble Lords have made good progress and have secured a number of improvements. As originally drafted, the Bill included positive provision on the mandatory training of staff, both in supporting disabled passengers and in tackling antisocial behaviour on board. We support those measures, but the Liberal Democrats believe that true accessibility means more than awareness training; it means fully accessible vehicles, clear signage and announcements, and accessible journey planning tools. Critically, it means accessible infrastructure, from bus stops to ticket machines.

The excellent amendment to ensure accessibility guidance on the provision of floating bus stops, which if badly designed can prove a real hazard to disabled people, was inserted after representations from the Lib Dem transport lead in the Lords, Baroness Pidgeon. The inclusion of bus network accessibility plans, after pressure from Baroness Brinton among others, is an important amendment that will go some way towards helping us to

understand the barriers that disabled residents face in accessing a vital lifeline. We must not be complacent, however. I anticipate that more work will need to be done in Committee, as the Secretary of State has intimated, to probe the Bill's provisions and ensure that they are as effective as they can be.

I will conclude where I began. My party and I welcome many aspects of the Bill. After years of Tory neglect, provisions to give local authorities more control of and input into their local bus networks are long overdue and clearly sensible, but we cannot give local authorities tantalising new powers without a practical means of using them. That will require sustained investment and reform of the funding models. I acknowledge that the Government have promised to include longer-term funding settlements in the spring spending review, but noises off suggest that those are unlikely to address the shortfall in local government funding.

The Bill will provide the necessary tools, but if councils are to build something effective with them, they will need not just legislation, but the finance, expertise and flexibility required to give effect to their vision and address their communities' needs. I urge the Secretary of State to go back to the Treasury and ask for more, because financing a viable bus network is key to growing our economy.

8.4 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary and her team for bringing forward this important Bill. Local bus services are fundamental to the lives of so many people, from providing access to work and leisure opportunities and social inclusion to cleaning up our air, reducing congestion and curtailing transport emissions. For many of our constituents, they make the difference between being able to seize opportunities and being denied them. Put simply, buses are too important to get wrong, so I wholly welcome the Bill and this Government's ambition to finally put things right after decades of fragmentation and under-investment.

As the MP for Heywood and Middleton North in Greater Manchester, I have seen the far-reaching benefits of bringing local bus services back under local control. I am incredibly proud that Greater Manchester is the only place outside London to have re-regulated its bus network, as part of creating a fully integrated public transport network—the Bee Network—for the people of our city region.

A recent report produced by IPPR North highlights just how much the city region has turned its bus network around. The IPPR says:

“Franchising is already delivering better services for people in Greater Manchester, but it was an uphill battle to get there. It's time for the government to get on board with better buses and support local leaders on this journey.”

This Bill demonstrates that the Government have got on board. I welcome the steps that it is taking to finally empower local leaders to make the decisions that they are best qualified to make.

When it comes to the Bee Network, the achievements of Greater Manchester are considerable. It makes the world of difference in my constituency and across the city region. Interventions made in partnership with local people meant that there were 17 million more bus

journeys across the city region in 2024 than in 2023. The network now carries more than 170 million passengers a year in Greater Manchester.

An example from my area illustrates what the Bill can practically offer. At times, Heywood and Middleton North has failed to benefit from Greater Manchester's rising prosperity. Because local people have a bigger role in devising transport policy under franchising, however, I am now able to make a strong case for an express bus service from Norden and Bamford down to Heywood and Middleton and ultimately into Manchester city centre. That is something my constituents have gone without for far too long. It is time to finally rebalance the scales in their favour.

After consulting with local people, who are determined to see the express bus service reinstated, and after producing a report setting out our case, I have been engaging consistently with Transport for Greater Manchester to see what can be done. I put on record my thanks to the mayor and his team for taking seriously the calls from my constituents, including the parents and teachers who understand the value of the route to Edgar Wood school. I look forward to conversations about the service being reinstated. At its core, that is what the Bill is all about. It will put buses back at the heart of communities, identify gaps in provision, set about addressing them, enhance connections and fundamentally shape routes to fit around people's lives.

I would also like to raise the issue of accessibility. Our buses should be for everyone, but we know that many blind and deafblind people, and disabled people more broadly, encounter numerous serious challenges when using public transport. One issue that comes up time and again—it has already come up in this debate—is floating bus stops. I know that some organisations assess the risk of harm around such stops to be very low, based on the total number of incidents, but I would argue that one incident is one too many. We must consider that the figures may be so low because disabled people, as a result of the expansion of floating bus stops, are sometimes being deterred from travelling altogether, and many collisions undoubtedly go unreported.

The issue has been raised in the other place, as the Secretary of State says, but I ask her what engagement, to learn from the lived experiences of blind and partially sighted people and the organisations that represent them, has been carried out by the Department in devising clauses 30 and 31. We must continuously seek to build public transport systems for all, not just when it is convenient to do so.

Finally, I wish to raise the issue of safety on public transport. I commend the measures in the Bill to enable workers across the sector to develop their skills, including by supporting them to respond effectively to violence and abuse on the network. What engagement has been carried out with trade union officials regarding those measures? What further steps could be taken to ensure that bus drivers, interchange staff and others are themselves safe from harassment and abuse?

I thank the Secretary of State once again for developing this legislation and ensuring that buses are at the heart of our communities and that they serve and reflect the needs of our constituents.

8.9 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have campaigned politically in North Norfolk for nearly a decade; all the while, people have been sharing with me their frustrations with our local public transport network. Since the age of 11, I have been watching different operators' buses leapfrog each other along radial routes and trying to work out a better way of doing things for everyone.

Too many people find that the current system is not enough of a network to get from where they are to where they want to be at the times they need. One young person in Briston in my constituency is studying to work in childcare. She is eager to secure an apprenticeship at a local nursery, but she cannot get to the nursery in question until 9 o'clock—far too late for the 8 am start time. That has caused her to miss out on a promising opportunity, and her transport options mean that she continues to struggle to break into the sector. Another constituent told me how she had moved to her village because it had a bus service and she hoped that it would give her disabled son the opportunity for greater independence. But the village has since lost that service—and with it, the independence of the residents who relied on it.

Our local buses are so much more than just vehicles for ferrying people from A to B. They are the key to training and employment for those entering the world of work. They are an antidote to loneliness, allowing people to see their friends and family and to take part in community groups and activities. They also have to get our older people to their vital medical appointments. For example, to get to the main hospital in Norwich, someone has to go all the way into the city centre and change buses. That means that bus users in most of my constituency can attend a clinic only in the middle of a whole-day trip.

If only the local authority had the power to design the routes and times that work for the needs of the population—putting on direct services between busy hubs, for instance. This is the problem: for far too long, the importance of bus networks in our area has not been reflected in how they have been treated by those in power.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): In my constituency, Reform-led Warwickshire county council has still not appointed a transport portfolio, a month on from the elections. While it dithers and delays, a rural community suffers: bus timetables are being reduced and routes are being cut. Those who rely on public transport most are obviously being punished. Does my hon. Friend agree that bus transport in rural areas deserves urgent and serious attention?

Steff Aquarone: I certainly agree. Much as I will slag off Norfolk county council at times, at least it has someone driving a bus, in contrast to her council.

The problem is how the issue is being treated by those in power. It is not the fault of bus operators; I have been grateful for the time and engagement that they have provided me on this issue and they are a valuable source of counsel as we look to the exciting future for rural services.

[Steff Aquarone]

I am also a huge fan of demand-responsive transport, which could be opened up to serve a much wider range of needs with some common-sense simplification of the rules. No, it is politics that has prevented a bright connected future, not bus operators. The last Government's funding mechanism for local transport was completely unsustainable, making councils compete for pots of funding rather than supporting long-term strategy. That made for a perfect storm in the Conservative-led council in Norfolk, which could trumpet quick wins from the grants, all the while lacking a comprehensive and overarching vision or strategy for how we create a proper rural public transport network.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I really recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman raises. Under the Conservatives, Bracknell Forest council saw bus miles per head fall from 10.9 to 6.3 miles—a reduction of 42 %. Only under a Labour council have routes now been expanded. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that we work closely with bus companies through enhanced partnership models—if that is right for the local area, as it is in Bracknell Forest—to improve local services for our residents?

Steff Aquarone: The hon. Gentleman has helped me make progress because the issue is all about attitude and mindset. In Norfolk, a former leader even eagerly told the council that Norfolk is a car county. If only the council had realised earlier that its pipe dream of a quarter of a billion pound link road through a site of special scientific interest was never going to happen, it could have spent the £50 million it has poured down the drain in the past five years while pursuing its fantasy on buses instead.

I hope that the powers promised in today's Bill are seized on in Norfolk. Bus franchising can be an important first step to what we need in my constituency of North Norfolk. At present, our buses do not link up well with our one train line. There is no opportunity for integrated ticketing and no meaningful link between how the profit generated by the most popular routes can be used to provide those that are socially necessary. A radical rethink of how we deliver these services is needed. I hope that whoever gets control of these powers after the reorganisation of our local government is willing to do it. If those powers were to fall into our hands at Norfolk Liberal Democrats, we would be ready to show what a successful model for rural public transport looks like, just as we have seen happen in our cities.

The Government need to come clean on how bus franchising will be funded. I hope that through the Transport Committee's inquiry on connected communities, my colleagues and I will help unlock a public transport revolution in every corner of the country.

The ask from the people in North Norfolk who are concerned really is not difficult: they want to be able to catch a bus to the places they want to go at the times they want to travel. This can be our chance to move away from outdated thinking. It is time to create the transport network that would really revolutionise the experience of local passengers. Let's make North Norfolk's buses great again!

8.15 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Bill because it finally lets local communities take back control. Communities in Birmingham Edgbaston and the Bartley Green, Harborne, Quinton and North Edgbaston wards that I represent will welcome its measures. I speak as the daughter of a bus driver—that time-worn political cliché—who was born and raised in her constituency and today still relies on the same No. 11 bus route.

Those who, like me, have lived in Birmingham and the west midlands for decades have seen the decline of our bus services at first hand. Thanks to a failed Tory ideology, Britain has become one of the few places in the developed world to hand power to operators to slash bus services and to hike fares, with little say for the communities who depend on them. In Birmingham, our bus services are mostly run by private providers with an enhanced partnership with Transport for West Midlands.

Over the years, I have exchanged many letters and had many meetings with one of the providers: National Express. I have campaigned to extend the X21 bus in Bartley Green, improving connectivity in our area. I surveyed Bartley Green residents on changes to the 23 and 24 buses, and have continued to fight to restore the iconic 48 bus route on which my constituents relied before it was rerouted.

The problem remains that in a privately run bus network, communities have no democratic control over routes and feel shut out of the process. But the new powers in the Bill mean that that system is coming to an end. The Bill matters because buses are more than just a mode of transport; in some wards in my constituency, over 40% of households do not have access to a car. Buses services are a lifeline to thousands of people who need to get around for work or to go into town, see friends or visit their doctor—I would know, because I am a non-driver too.

Poor services leave our communities feeling isolated and disconnected. The average life expectancy of a man can drop by seven years within nine bus stops in some parts of Birmingham. Opportunities within a city should be felt by everyone. But connecting people to those life chances needs a strong public transport network. That is what this Bill is about.

My constituents' complaints are too familiar: our buses are unreliable and frequently late. It is no wonder that 50% of Brummies choose to use their cars compared with 15% of people in London. In January, National Express put up our fares in Birmingham by 40%; last week, it put up them up again to the maximum £3 fare. The current system lets private operators set the terms.

Finally, a Labour Mayor working with a Labour Government will franchise our buses, giving communities new powers to set routes, fares and services. Mayor Andy Street refused to take buses back under his control, but Richard Parker is changing that. Instead of subsidising the deregulated model with £50 million a year to ensure that services are not axed, he will take back control of fares and routes. Under his leadership, the franchising process will begin this year.

Clauses 13, 23, 27 and 28 of the Bill will be pivotal to the combined authority plan. From 2010 until 2023, the miles clocked by buses across the west midlands dropped by a third. The promised upgrade failed to materialise,

and in 2014 the last Government's promise of a rapid transit scheme along Hagley Road in my constituency delivered only 300 metres of tramline in 10 years. Under this Government, we are already on the road to fixing our broken bus system.

The new franchising powers are just the next step. The truth is that deregulation has meant little more than a race to the bottom for places such as Birmingham. Brummies have seen what forward-thinking leaders such as Andy Burnham have been able to do with the Bee Network in Manchester, and we want that too. We need this legislation and continued central Government funding to make that a reality. This Bill will help my community of Birmingham Edgbaston realise our ambitions. That is why I will be supporting it on Second Reading.

8.18 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I declare an interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association and the granddaughter of a London bus driver. Bus services have been reduced to a dire state in my North Shropshire constituency in recent years—most drastically under the watch of the previous Conservative Government. We are one of the worst-served constituencies in England for public transport, having seen a staggering 63% reduction of our bus miles since 2015; that compares with an English average reduction of just 19%. A person in Market Drayton who wants to get to the Princess Royal hospital in Telford, which is a 20-minute car journey, is looking at something like a five-hour round trip on the bus. Only one service operates on Sundays in the whole county, between the market towns of Oswestry and Chester. In short, the current situation is unacceptable.

Just before recess, I met students from Lakelands academy in Ellesmere at Parliament's education centre and answered their questions. One young woman asked me what we were doing to make bus services better, because she could not go with her friends to any after-school clubs due to her bus not running back to St Martin's past 3.30 pm. I recently met members of the Oswestry Youth Forum, and they raised similar concerns. Young people in rural communities are now presented with a childhood confined to the small village or town they live in, and they are left with a lack of choice over their education, a lack of opportunity for socialising and taking part in activities outside school, and shrinking horizons. Ultimately, their options for employment can be significantly curtailed—unless, of course, their parents can afford to give them a car.

Meanwhile, older or disabled constituents who are no longer able to drive, or simply cannot afford to, are fully dependent on family members and friends to get them to where they need to be. I think everybody in this House would agree that this is driving deep and fundamental inequality, as well as holding back the economy in rural areas. That is why I am broadly supportive of this Bill.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): The hon. Lady is painting a picture that will be very familiar to my constituents in Dartford. In my case, we have deteriorating services under Kent county council, with 30 years of Conservative rule meaning that buses have got worse pretty much every year. I have written to the new Reform-led administration in Kent county council asking them to undertake to use the powers in the Bill to improve bus services in Dartford and across Kent. Would she agree

that the new Bill offers huge opportunities for local authorities to improve bus services and transport networks for the benefit of residents in my constituency and hers?

Helen Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I was about to say that I am broadly supportive of this Bill and the empowerment of local authorities to franchise bus services for those reasons. That should enhance accessibility and safety and allow local authorities to establish new bus companies, which they have not been able to do before. It is critical that local authorities can protect and establish routes that ensure access to employment, healthcare and town centres, which is one of the main aims that my own bus services Bill—Bus Services Bill No. 1, if I may be so cheeky—seeks to address, but with these new powers rightly being given to local government, I have real concerns about the ability of rural local authorities to find the funding to drive the meaningful change we so need.

In November, the Government allocated £1 billion of funding for buses, and the then Secretary of State for Transport said that the funding for rural areas would be “unprecedented”, but Shropshire council received just £1.4 million in capital funding and £2.5 million in revenue funding for this financial year. That was the 53rd lowest of 73 allocations for one of the worst-served counties in the country. That funding allocation is a tiny fraction of Shropshire council's bus service improvement plan, which outlined the need for £73.5 million of bus funding across three years to transform the county's bus network to an acceptable standard. The cost of franchising is also likely to be prohibitive to local authorities such as mine. The Government who promised a new formula based on need, deprivation and bus mileage to end the postcode lottery have so far made it abundantly clear that living in a rural area means less money, less public services and less opportunity.

There is a clear need for better transport in Shropshire. A third of North Shropshire's children are growing up in poverty. Our deprivation may be hidden by our beautiful leafy setting, but it certainly exists, and by limiting the opportunities of these children, it is being perpetuated. The council spends around 80% of its budget on care, a percentage that is forecast to rise, and its costs for delivering services are high. At more than 1,200 square miles, Shropshire covers an area 27 times the size of Greater Manchester. The roughly 325,000 people who live there are relatively evenly distributed across the area, adding to the cost of delivery of those services.

I support the principles of the Bill, but there must be recognition of the desperate situation that local council finances are in, particularly in large rural areas such as mine. The looming rise of the bus fare cap from £2 to £3 is especially concerning, forcing people to fork out a significant amount every week for return travel to their job. In rural communities such as North Shropshire, alternatives to bus travel are few and far between. For the financially vulnerable who rely on buses to access services, the impact of the hike to £3 is going to be devastating.

I support the Bill's aims, and I can see its success in cities such as London and Greater Manchester, but it is essential that rural areas are not left behind and crippled by the cost of delivering social care over a large geographical area, as they have been by previous Administrations. Buses are the best way to reduce inequality for people in

[Helen Morgan]

rural areas and, critically, to unlock the economic growth they can offer. I hope the Minister will listen and work with his colleagues in the Treasury to help transform the opportunities for people in rural areas.

8.25 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): It is an honour to be called to speak in this debate on an issue that I know many of us care so deeply about. I congratulate the Secretary of State and her team on producing the Bill and, as a member of the all-party parliamentary group for bus and coach and a bus nerd, I am very excited to support it. Growing up in a village, I knew that our local bus service was not just a “nice to have”; it was a lifeline. For those of us too young to drive or for families without a car, it meant everything. It connected us to school, our work, our family and our friends. Without it, we were cut off.

In recent weeks, I fear I have become one of those people in this place who often talks about the good old days. Only a couple of weeks ago, I found myself reminiscing about the youth services we used to have in Worcestershire, particularly in Redditch, but the truth is that even the bus service I grew up with and depended on was frankly not that great. I was forced to leave my home, like many of my constituents are now, to get to a job or to go on to the next level of education. And let's be honest, things have only got worse as public transport subsidies became an easy target for local government cuts during austerity. The shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), is not in his place any more, but of all the numbers he listed in his response to the Secretary of State, he failed to mention that the number of bus routes in England fell by half during the last Government—something that people who relied on buses were deeply frustrated about.

In 1986, the Thatcher Government promised that deregulation and privatisation would lead to lower fares, more services and more passengers, but for towns such as mine in Redditch and the surrounding villages, the opposite happened. We lost services, fares went up, passengers disappeared and communities were left behind. Many of the routes I once used as a teenager simply no longer exist. That story is not unique. It is echoed in towns and villages right across this country. Why are we surprised that services struggle to retain numbers when those services are unreliable, expensive and fragmented? How many times must our constituents explain to their boss why they are again late for work because the bus did not turn up, or apologise to a lecturer after missing the first part of a class because the timetable changed at the last minute?

Only last week, I was speaking with local businesses who told me they are desperate to recruit but cannot find staff who can actually get to them. Are we surprised? Are we surprised that our night-time economies—our bars, restaurants and live venues—are struggling, when people cannot rely on a bus to get them home safely? Dare to have a drink after 7 o'clock? Nope. Dare to have a night out past 10 o'clock? Nope. And at a time when patients are asked to go further for treatment as specialised services are centralised, we do not have the level of bus services required to ensure that the sick and the most vulnerable arrive on time, so many people simply pay for taxis they cannot afford.

In Worcestershire, the local bus system has become so complex, with different operators, inconsistent timetables and confusing routes, that you need a PhD in public transport to figure it out. Luckily I have a constituent, Jack Fardoe, a local student expert, who I swear could be dropped in any corner of the constituency and still find a route home, but most people simply give up. That is why I strongly welcome the opportunity this Bill presents.

Removing the ban on local authority-owned bus companies and expanding the power to franchise services is long overdue. It will give local authorities like mine in Worcestershire the chance to take back control—it feels weird saying that—and design bus services around people's needs rather than a centrally governed timetable. It will mean that services can be planned properly with routes that serve communities, not shareholders, that are both urban and rural, and that match people's lives and needs. It means that residents in Harvington, Dodderhill, Inkberrow and Astwood Bank could have a fit-for-purpose service that meets their actual needs, so they do not have to waste four hours on a 10-minute trip to the post office. People might once again rely on bus services to get where they need to be without the stress, without the guesswork and without the fear of being stranded.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a passionate speech in defence of buses and the importance of the Bill. Does he share my disappointment that just like they missed the statement earlier on the strategic defence review, not a single Reform MP is here for this important debate? Does he take it in the same way that I do: that, just like defence, they just do not care about buses?

Chris Bloore: I do not want to second-guess the motivations of those on the Opposition Benches, which are quite sparse for a couple of different parties, but perhaps it shows their priorities rather than anything else.

Finally, many people talk to me about wanting to play their role in reducing car journeys—how wonderful would it be if they could do so by relying on their local bus network? I wholeheartedly support the passage of the Bill. My constituents and our local businesses support it because this is our chance to build a bus network that genuinely works for everyone. Will it be easy? No. But surely we can replicate the success of our international partners in building an affordable and comprehensive bus network that is fit for the 21st century.

8.30 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): This Bill does not apply to Northern Ireland, so some might wonder why I would bother to speak in the debate. The reason is very simple: the ramifications could be positive for the whole of the United Kingdom because of the Government's vision within the Bill for decarbonising bus travel.

There are presently 36,000 fossil fuel buses on our roads in the United Kingdom. If the vision of the Government and of this Bill is secured, there is a lot of conversion and replacement to be done. If that is to happen, then I represent in my constituency the primary company that can help the Government towards that goal. I have the privilege of representing North Antrim, which of course has Wrightbus at its very

heart. Not only is it involved in electric buses; it is a leader in hydrogen buses and can still produce diesel buses when needed.

I say to the Government that we have had many experiences in this United Kingdom of missed opportunities for our own industries, not least in the bus sector and the electric sector where we have seen Chinese supply. If the Government are serious about this, let us build in a prioritisation for British built buses as a prerequisite to the refurbishment of the industry.

The second thing I want to say to the Government is that with so many diesel buses across this nation, and with the expense of replacing old with new, the middle option of refurbishing diesel buses as electric buses needs to be grasped and explored. Again, Wrightbus is a leader in reimagining and resupplying electric into diesel, and that is a necessary step forward.

Given that in England, so many of these matters are devolved to mayoral areas or local councils, I ask the Government whether they are prepared to embrace metro mayors being able to pursue joint procurement not just for their own area, but working with others so that they can have the delivery that comes from larger orders. That would benefit all concerned.

I say to the Government that they have an opportunity not just to help the regions that the Bill will directly affect, but to bring benefit to the whole United Kingdom. Of course, it is not just Northern Ireland that is the primary bus manufacturer; there are also large suppliers in Scotland. There is an opportunity, and I trust that the opportunity will be grasped and that it will be underscored by the need to prioritise local United Kingdom build when replenishing our bus services and our buses across the United Kingdom.

8.34 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): The Bill will restore, for the first time in decades, the power of local authorities across the country to create new, publicly owned municipal bus companies. When bus services are run in the public interest, they work better and they work for everyone.

In Warrington South, we already know the difference that that can make. Warrington's Own Buses is a fantastic example of what a publicly owned bus company operated under a Labour-run administration can achieve. It is rolling out a fully electric fleet and continues to offer a flat fare of £2 for adults and £1 for under-22s. It provides free travel for care leavers and maintains essential services that the private sector would walk away from. It is a bus company run for the public good, not for private profit. It is locally managed and accountable to the people it serves. It delivers social value, environmental gains and a surplus back to the local authority.

We must protect municipal bus companies that already serve their communities and give local authorities the freedom to use them as part of new franchising arrangements. I urge the Minister to ensure that the Bill and its guidance reflect the principle that where public ownership works, as it does in Warrington, we back it and build on it, because that is how we will reverse the long decline in our bus services under successive

Conservative Governments and start to deliver the modern, affordable, low-carbon transport system that our communities deserve.

8.36 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is great to see this Bill come to the Commons. I applaud its desire to improve the quality and availability of bus services. Buses are at the core of our public transport system and are often wrongly neglected in favour of what some—although definitely not me—would describe as sexier and more alluring methods of transport, such as trams and trains.

As we have heard, there is much that is good in the Bill—particularly the empowerment of local authorities to operate their own services and the provisions to implement services for socially necessary routes—but it could do more to address the needs of rural areas, including through VAT exemptions for small public transport vehicles to encourage demand-responsive and community transport schemes. It could do more to help local authorities to transition to net zero vehicles. As has been said, we should look again at restoring the £3 bus fare cap to a £2 cap.

In Oxfordshire, the county council feels that its bus partnerships with operators are delivering improvements, particularly when it comes to Oxford Bus Company and Thames Travel, which serve my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage. Franchising has the potential to bring further improvements, although it is good that the Government have acknowledged that we do not necessarily need a one-size-fits-all approach. Franchising will be viable only if local authorities are given long-term funding certainty and support to acquire the expertise and capacity in their passenger transport teams.

We Liberal Democrats consider access to primary healthcare facilities to be socially necessary routes. In my constituency, the decision was made in the past few years to change the route of a bus going through the village of Harwell and into Didcot town centre. The change meant that people who live in Harwell can no longer catch one bus to the GP surgery in Didcot, despite it being only 2 miles away. That is the sort of thing we need to consider.

Much about the current bus provision in my constituency is good. The integrated rail and bus terminal at Didcot Parkway enables a convenient interchange. There are decent bus frequencies and journey times during the daytime between Didcot and Wantage, Grove, Oxford and Wallingford, and between Wallingford and Oxford. There are good examples of partnership working between the major employment centres at Harwell campus and Milton Park and the Oxford Bus Company and Thames Travel. For example, Milton Park's £20-a-year bus pass offer for people who work there is leading to measurable achievements in encouraging modal shift. There is generally decent daytime village provision.

But there is also much that needs to improve. Many villages have no evening or Sunday service, particularly Stanford in the Vale, which has seen significant housing growth. The buses that serve Culham campus, which the Government have proposed as an AI growth zone, are meagre, with no evening or Sunday service. In the evening, service frequencies drop on all routes, meaning that the integration between train and bus at Didcot

[Olly Glover]

works less well. Reliability can also be patchy, particularly on routes that involve Oxford, although that is mostly due to road congestion.

I am delighted to be a member of the Transport Committee. In April, we visited Ireland to understand the reasons for a significant increase in rural bus patronage, which increased fivefold between 2022 and 2024. That was achieved through increased public funding and by engaging communities—particularly the local equivalents of town and parish councils—in the design of routes. The core principle is, as a bare minimum, to have the restoration of morning, early afternoon and early evening services—there are also late evening services in many instances to address the issue that was mentioned earlier in respect of pubs—to create a viable alternative to driving.

Ireland has set itself extremely ambitious targets to grow its public transport youth share, from 8% today to 19% in 2030. That would nearly match Swiss levels, which are the highest in Europe. To achieve that, Ireland is investing large amounts in high quality continuous bus corridor infrastructure in urban areas, particularly in Dublin, and there are longer-term plans for significant journey time reductions for inter-city train routes to improve integration between bus and rail. As well as all that, people told us that they are concerned about the social, environmental and economic objectives that they are trying to hit, rather than looking simply at the cost in isolation.

There are good examples in the UK of the Ireland approach. I was on holiday in North Yorkshire in April, and North Yorkshire council had taken over a route abandoned by a private operator, using its own minibuses—route 11 between Clitheroe and Settle. It offers a two-hourly service, and connects well with hourly train services between Clitheroe and Manchester.

Integration is critical to making public transport more accessible and attractive, as Switzerland has shown. For those reasons, the Government's integrated transport strategy is eagerly awaited, and will be an essential component in achieving better use of our public transport system, to the benefit of the economy, the environment, and reducing social exclusion. Although the Bill goes a long way towards improving bus services, there are a lot of things that the Liberal Democrats would like the Government to go further on, so that we can achieve our ambition for our transport system and ensure that it fulfils our social, economic and environmental needs.

8.40 pm

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Building better buses is in my blood. Growing up, my dad was chair of Barnsley passenger transport; South Yorkshire had a world-class bus service, thanks to our Labour county council. Labour knew then, as we know now, that buses are for the people. The Conservatives and Reform just don't get it, as is demonstrated right now by those empty Opposition Benches.

When they were in government, the Conservatives promised South Yorkshire a London-style transport system. Instead, after 14 years of their neglect, our constituency has lost 53% of its bus services, including the vital SL1 Supertram service link connecting Stocksbridge and Oughtibridge to Sheffield. The crucial number 57 and 57A

was left frequently running late, or failed to turn up at all, and the cuts to the number 43 and 44 buses seriously affected my Dodworth constituents. The reality for our rural neighbourhoods is even more stark, as constituents at my community event on transport told me—villages such as Bolsterstone are entirely cut off, Ingbirchworth loses bus connectivity after certain hours of the day, and the number 21 from Penistone to Barnsley is a route crying out for urgent improvements.

Our Labour Government know that buses are a lifeline that connects our families and communities across Penistone and Stocksbridge. That is why I am proud that through our better buses Bill, we are empowering communities by ensuring that buses serve local people rather than distant corporate interests. The Bill will remove barriers to public control and franchising, placing decisions over bus routes, times and fares back into the hands of communities. Our Labour South Yorkshire Mayor, Oliver Coppard, has been driving change locally. His franchising consultation involved nearly 8,000 people, with 75% strongly supporting it. The plans allow profits to be reinvested directly into better, more reliable services. That is why I am proud that our Transport Secretary has announced a landmark £1 billion fund to transform England's bus services, including £17 million specifically for South Yorkshire.

This issue matters deeply to local people in my constituency. Older and disabled constituents often tell me that they are left stranded, enduring painfully long waiting times due to unreliable services, and facing distressing situations including toileting issues and missed NHS appointments because buses simply fail to appear. That is unacceptable. That is why it is right that the Bill will deliver a more accessible and inclusive bus network, as well as introducing a £3 maximum cap on bus fares until 2026, to encourage more people to use public transport.

After years of broken promises, our Labour Government are taking urgent action to rebuild Britain's bus services, ending the postcode lottery and delivering a public transport system that is affordable, accessible and dependable, enabling South Yorkshire to bring back lost bus routes. I am committed to working with our Labour mayor and the leader of Sheffield city council to secure the return of the quick, reliable SL1 supertram link and our local hopper bus. We need bold bus solutions now, while we await the long-term infrastructure improvements I am advocating for, like the tram-train extension to Stocksbridge via Oughtibridge, Wharnccliffe Side and Deepcar.

Every single one of us has the right to use buses to travel to work and to see our families and friends. Public transport is fundamental to achieving social justice, so that young and old, in our rural areas—our towns and villages from Gilroyd to Grenoside, High Green to Hoylandswaine and Chapeltown to Ecclesfield—can depend on public transport for work, education and access to healthcare. I commend the Bill to the House.

8.45 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): In Tunbridge Wells, buses are not a luxury: they connect schoolchildren to their classrooms, the elderly to their communities, carers to patients, and people unable to drive to jobs, shops and healthcare. When those links are weakened, lives are disrupted and communities start to fracture. If lockdown taught us anything, it is that social isolation

is not just lonely, but incredibly damaging to mental health, and that has knock-on effects throughout our whole society. Without a reliable bus service, people are stuck at home. Dependable public transport is not just a convenience; it is an economic, social and health imperative.

In my constituency, schoolchildren take the 267 from Horsmonden—a route cobbled together by merging disconnected services. It winds slowly through villages and regularly arrives late, meaning that children often miss the start of school. This is a failure to support our children's educations. Worse, the price of a child's annual bus pass in Kent is extortionate: parents pay £550 per child for them to arrive late or not at all. Now, with the £2 fare cap rising to £3, a commuter making two journeys a day, five days a week, will pay an extra £500 extra each year, on top of the cost of living crisis, with soaring bills, rent and food prices. That is why the Liberal Democrats have called for the fare cap to be reinstated at £2.

It is not just schoolchildren and commuters; many elderly and low-income residents rely on buses to maintain independence and reduce social isolation, yet services are still being cut. In Tunbridge Wells, the 289 no longer runs on weekends, isolating residents from Southborough to Showfields. People can commute to work, they might be able to squeeze in a shop on a Tuesday and perhaps they could meet some friends for a drink on a Friday, but if they want to go out on Saturday, they are stuck. There is no bus and no connection—nowhere to go. For those who do not have time to shop or socialise during the week, it is tough luck.

In Paddock Wood, a town of 7,500 people, there is no direct service to Pembury hospital on a Sunday. What message does that send to NHS workers and patients without cars? The lack of weekend service is a constituency-wide issue that disproportionately affects the elderly, disabled people and low-income families. It is not just inconvenient—it is unfair.

Rural villages have seen services slashed. The 255 once connected Hawkhurst to Lamberhurst to Tunbridge Wells, but its removal now cuts communities off from rail, shops, pharmacies, GPs and each other. There is no bus at all to Ashurst, a village five miles from Tunbridge Wells, the nearest shopping and rail centre. Parents drop children to neighbouring villages to catch the bus to school, but still pay £500 for the privilege.

My constituents are waiting for buses that never come, or watching their routes disappear. Over 25% of passengers in Kent are dissatisfied with their bus service and 27% of buses are either late or cancelled. That is why I welcome the provisions in the Bill to empower local authorities to protect socially necessary routes—those that get people to school, healthcare or work. Such measures are absolutely essential, but we must go further; we need to restore and expand services to tackle frustration and isolation.

I welcome the £23 million pledged by the Government to Kent county council for bus service improvement, but that was under the Conservatives. Reform is now running Kent county council, but frankly I would not trust it to run a bath. Its priorities are not public services. Last night we saw the announcement of a DOGE—a department of government efficiency—starting at Kent county council. That is a bit of a joke when we consider that the new Reform administration decided to cancel the first iteration of the audit and governance committee; one assumes that would fulfil the same function as a DOGE.

We must have proper local consultation to ensure that the £23 million is spent appropriately and responsibly by the Reform administration in Kent. With the right investment and priorities, focused on children, the elderly and healthcare, we can bring in a network that brings people together and does not leave them behind.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With a birthday contribution, I call Alex Mayer.

8.50 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think buses are brilliant, so I am delighted that this Bill is coming forward on 2 June, because, as you said, it is my birthday. I thought it was the Minister's way of wishing me many happy returns—and singles also!

For too long, buses have been in decline. It is great that the Minister has been clear for months that he wants to fix that and that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. December's guidance on varied franchising approaches was excellent, and I welcome how the Bill simplifies franchising, as well as the Government's review of enhanced partnerships and the plans in the Bill to strengthen them. We need—and I believe that this Bill will help to deliver—tailored, practical options that can work for people in every kind of town, village and city.

We can already see some EPs delivering that change, with real, substantive control over network design. From 24/7 routes in Portsmouth and a 50% zero-emission fleet in Leicester to profit-sharing arrangements and repainted buses that build identity and loyalty and encourage interchanges, EPs already encourage innovation and partnership. In the west of England, “birthday buses” offer residents free travel across 500 square miles throughout the whole of their birthday month. That is a great gift and, more importantly, a successful scheme that targets non-bus users in order to embed long-term behavioural change. That happened without the need for new legislation, but with the need for vision.

I will always call for greater public investment in buses, but I am realistic about the economic pickle that we have been left in by the Conservatives. If we want sustainable networks, we have to grow farebox revenue. The Department's bus service improvement plan guidance is absolutely spot on here, correctly making the vital point, in line with the national bus strategy, that:

“Almost all social, economic and environmental objectives for the role of the bus...can be boiled down to the simple, practical and measurable objective to grow bus patronage.”

With that in mind, might I suggest the odd tweak to the Bill to better reflect that spirit?

We have talked about clause 1 and the purpose of improving “performance, accessibility and quality”. That is good, but my constituents certainly want quantity as well as quality. Perhaps “availability” could be added to focus minds on growing patronage. Clause 11 has some fantastic language about consulting disabled “users or prospective users” of buses. I think the term “prospective users” could be deployed elsewhere—for instance, the Transport Act 2000 requires consultation ahead of franchising with only

“those representative of users of local services”,
not prospective users.

[Alex Mayer]

Clause 30 gives the Minister powers to set standards for bus stops to improve safety and accessibility. That is great, but why stop there? Would the Minister not also like to have some standards aimed at increasing ridership? According to the Campaign for Better Transport, poorly maintained bus stops and bus shelters put off 23% of people from using buses.

I have looked at clause 23, on grants. I wonder whether local transport authorities could be incentivised to design grants to increase passenger numbers? It is clear that we need a virtuous circle of more passengers and more fare income, not the spiral of decline that we have seen previously.

That brings me briefly to socially necessary routes, which are important but mainly unprofitable. I absolutely agree with the Minister that the new list he is introducing will bring some certainty, but I wonder whether alongside that list, LTAs could also be required to produce a transparent and ranked formula for how they calculate whether a service is socially necessary, which they could use in turn to allocate funding. That would rightly give local leaders flexibility, but would also allow residents to see what is being prioritised and why, and where the cut-off for taxpayer support lies. If we also included the number of journeys in that formula—if that was made a criterion—it could allow residents to save a bus by using it. It would prevent lists from becoming fossilised and reduce the risk that those who shout loudest get the better services, with funding determined by data, not decibels. Fundamentally, LTAs should not be pigeonholed as a place of sticking-plaster solutions; success will lie in a network-wide approach.

Finally, I know that the Minister does not plan to create any new passenger transport executives, but I believe that—just as we are bringing track and train together—there is a real case for bringing bus and bus lane together, particularly as more strategic transport authorities are created. This is a really good Bill, and I think it is a great birthday present.

8.55 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I declare an interest as a long-time passenger on Eastbourne's 1, 1A, LOOP, Dotto train and 12 bus routes, the latter of which—with its views of Birling Gap—was voted one of the UK's top 10 most beautiful bus routes by passengers. As the birthplace of the world's oldest municipal bus service in 1903, we in Eastbourne expect the very best local bus services, and in the light of all these bus-based assets and traditions, us Eastbournians are ambitious for this Bill to go even further in supporting operators to improve the reliability of our services. Our local drivers and staff, such as Gary Womble Bartlett and Loreleye, are legends, but operational issues that are out of their control and poor regulation are leaving many residents waiting some time for delayed buses and, indeed, buses that do not show up at all. Only recently, Valerie Lee got in touch to tell me that she has been forced to scale steep hills back home because her No. 4 bus was a no-show.

I want to highlight the especially profound impact that unreliable bus services can have on those who are neurodiverse. This is what Ann, whose son is autistic, said to me via email: "My son has recently contacted me to say that the 14.54 bus his school have agreed for

him to catch each day did not turn up at all. The bus after that was also late. He is extremely stressed and is melting down with the lateness of getting home and frustrated by the protracted wait for his bus home. I've had to leave him to cry it out, as interventions will just exacerbate how he feels. He is shouting, swearing and banging his head against the wall—it's really not a great situation. He is so overwhelmed and so stressed, Josh; it's really dreadful here right now. He sat an English Language GCSE this morning and all he wanted was to be back home as soon as possible. For a now-hourly service, these extensive delays are totally unacceptable and I must again highlight the impact this has on our vulnerable community, especially SEN children such as my son." I hope the Government and operators hear that loud and clear.

Poor bus services and connectivity hit another vulnerable group in our society: patients. Eastbourne district general hospital, where I was born, has lost core services to the Conquest hospital in Hastings over the years. That hospital is 20 miles away, requiring at least two buses and the best part of a day to get there and back around an appointment. A hospital trust in nearby Kent has collaborated with operators to create a direct bus route between two of its hospitals, and although ultimately I want—and our hospital deserves—core services reinstated, in the meantime we deserve a Kent-style hospital bus at the very least. I urge the Government to upgrade their Bill to make such routes a reality.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): My hon. Friend talks about collaboration across borders and county councils. I have an issue in my constituency because of a proposal to close the GP practice in Westbourne, but there is no bus service for all the patients in Westbourne to get to Emsworth, which is over the border into Hampshire county council. Does he agree that there should be provision in the Bill to ensure that local authorities work together? People do not see the local authority borders.

Josh Babarinde: Indeed, what is happening in Westbourne sounds very similar to what is happening in Eastbourne. I implore the Government and local operators to ensure that people's health needs are baked into the Bill.

We owe it to all our constituents, particularly the most vulnerable, to improve bus services for local people. I stand ready to work with the Government, our local authority, our NHS trust, local operators and, of course, passengers to make that happen.

9 pm

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I welcome the Bill that the Secretary of State introduced this evening. It has the potential to transform public transport for communities across the country, especially in South Dorset. In towns and villages across my constituency, passengers—or indeed, would-be passengers—rely on buses to go about their daily lives. For many, they are the only affordable way to get to work, school, hospital, the train station or the town centre, or to see family and friends.

Growing up, I took the bus 10 miles up the road from my home in Wyke to sixth form most days. It was a reliable service, which meant that I could get to class, so I know that reliable buses matter in South Dorset.

Yet in recent years, we have seen routes cut, services reduced and the reliability of services deteriorate, leaving many people feeling isolated and unable to access essential amenities and services. Far too often, as has been mentioned, private bus operators seem to have put profit before passengers.

Constituents in Winfrith Newburgh, Lulworth and the surrounding villages say that they face poorly connected bus services to Wareham and Wool train stations, making it difficult to access the national rail network. Even more troubling, there is no direct bus link to hospitals in Poole or Dorchester, leaving many constituents without transport to essential healthcare.

In Crossways in my constituency, although some services exist, there is growing concern that the current bus network will not meet the demands of new housing developments. We cannot build homes without building the bus infrastructure that is needed to connect those new homes with nearby towns and services. Across the Grove on Portland, there is no longer a bus service at all. The Grove community have repeatedly told me that they feel left behind and cut off from the rest of Portland and nearby Weymouth. That has been hugely isolating and has a huge impact on the ground.

Finally, in Southill, cuts to bus services have had a devastating effect, especially on elderly constituents who now face real isolation. For some there, it has become almost impossible to get to Weymouth town centre or to see a GP. In each of those communities, we need a change of direction. The Bill gives us the tools to do that and to end the postcode lottery of Britain's broken buses.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned his elderly constituents, and I have similar issues in my constituency. People are telling me that they cannot even do their shopping anymore because of bus cuts in Shildon. One person feels that she will have to leave the village that she has lived in for decades because she is losing her eyesight. Does my hon. Friend agree that as local authorities get that control, it is important that they use it to look at people's needs and to put on bespoke services, such as to shops and hospitals?

Lloyd Hatton: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's overview. The new bus services that councils look to put in place must link people with services such as GP appointments.

With that in mind, I hope that the new powers granted to local authorities such as Dorset council under the Bill will enable them to franchise their bus services, and crack down on antisocial behaviour and fare evasion. I also hope that the council can make buses and bus stops much more accessible, particularly to passengers living with disabilities. From now on, I want the future of bus services in Winfrith, Lulworth, Crossways, the Grove and Southill to be defined by local need and local passengers rather than profit. The Bill will enable Dorset council to work with passengers in each of those communities to deliver bus services that are finally fit for purpose. Fundamentally, the Government's reforms will support integrated travel, helping to link rural areas with larger towns and essential services such as hospitals and, in particular, our national rail networks.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I have been campaigning for a reliable, affordable bus route to Bournemouth airport. As a fellow Dorset MP, does my hon. Friend recognise the need for a dedicated service to the airport every 30 minutes, especially as it increases the number of flights that it will be handling?

Lloyd Hatton: I am happy to support my hon. Friend's campaign, and I will be meeting him shortly to discuss how I can best do so. Given that Bournemouth is the airport nearest to my constituency, my constituents would certainly benefit from that bus connection.

I am desperate for the Bill's reforms to be introduced as rapidly as possible across South Dorset, which is why I plan to write to the leader of Dorset council to encourage the council to take advantage of the new powers as soon as possible. I look forward to sitting down with its officials to finally improve bus services for the communities in Winfrith, Lulworth, Crossways, the Grove and Southill. I know that other bus passengers and communities throughout my constituency will be looking to the council to use its new powers to improve bus services in their neighbourhood. We cannot keep treating public transport, especially our buses, as an afterthought. For communities across South Dorset, Labour's bus services Bill provides a chance to finally reconnect and to deliver good-quality bus services to many more passengers. It is time to crack on.

9.6 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Buses are often seen as a service for the elderly, and they are vital for older residents, especially in rural areas where isolation poses a serious threat to health. Buses can be a social lifeline, but in those rural communities they are also a vital connection to education, healthcare and work. The number of bus journeys in Devon has fallen by 40% since 2015, and in my large rural constituency many communities have been left behind by unreliable, infrequent or inadequate bus services. Many villages have no bus service at all, while others feel lucky to get one a day.

The Stagecoach Gold bus runs between Paignton and Plymouth. Stagecoach withdrew the early morning service last year following consultation with local transport authorities, because low passenger numbers meant that the service was no longer commercially viable. It may not have been "standing room only", but cutting that service is just not good enough for those who start their shifts before sunrise and keep our communities running. One bus driver was left with no choice but to buy a car to get to work, as he would have lost his job if he could not get to Totnes by 7 am. Another constituent said:

"These changes disproportionately affect key workers, particularly those in sectors such as healthcare, retail and hospitality, who depend on early or late bus services to commute. Many of these workers have few if any alternative transport options. These individuals, likely among the lowest paid in our community, will face increased financial and logistical challenges as a result of these cuts."

When Stagecoach relocated the Dartmouth bus depot to Plymouth, the early-morning 92 route was cut. Students could not get to college, and local drivers lost their jobs. Stagecoach also cut the 17 route in Brixham, so no visitor, holidaymaker or hospitality worker can get home after 6.30 pm. That is hardly a late night out.

[*Caroline Voaden*]

I welcome the principles behind the Bill. It is right to give more powers to local authorities, and it is right to acknowledge that socially necessary routes must be protected. However, the Bill must go further if it is truly to deliver the “bus revolution” that the Government claim. Local authorities must have the power and the funding to keep services running, and a duty to implement socially necessary services. This is not just about commuting to work; young people in South Devon depend on buses to get to college, but also to access that crucial first Saturday job—to build independence, to gain skills, and to put something real on their CVs. How are those who live in a small village with no shop, no café and no reliable bus service meant to get any experience if they cannot travel? This is vital to the Government’s skills agenda.

A well-funded and reliable rural bus network does not just support today’s economy; it builds tomorrow’s workforce. We have seen in Ireland what is possible: rural bus use has increased fivefold since 2018, because the Irish Government invested in rural transport and created new services where they were needed. That is the kind of ambition we need. Let us grow our economy by revolutionising rural transport with regular, clean, green buses. I wholeheartedly support giving real franchising powers to all local authorities, with simple, integrated funding and a focus on net zero buses, but let us not pretend that those powers alone are enough. Councils need the funding, the staff and the backing to use them.

Raising the fare cap from £2 to £3 is a false economy. For a student or someone on minimum wage, it is a real barrier to access. The cap must be restored and made permanent if we are serious about affordability, ridership and ironing out inequalities. I would also like to see local authorities, such as Devon county council, have the power to introduce integrated transport passes like the ones we use in London, so that people in rural areas can get the bus to a station, and then take a train, in a joined-up, cost-effective and user-friendly way.

This Bill has potential, but it must be backed with the ambition and investment that rural communities like mine desperately need. Buses are for everyone—young or old, and in cities, in villages or even on Dartmoor—and this House must deliver an ambitious, modern system that reflects that.

9.11 pm

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): I will say at the outset that I will not use my full five minutes. I will not take interventions, so hopefully more people can give their speeches, too.

Buses are a vital route to connecting people with each other and with opportunity, which is why this Bill, which will improve bus services, is so important. In the Filton and Bradley Stoke constituency, our story is very mixed. For those who live near a route served by a Metrobus, a Y bus or a T1, it is usually pretty quick to get into Bristol city centre, but problems arise when trying to get across our towns and villages on the outskirts of the city, where many of our places of work and study are based, as are many of our loved ones.

For many people, including those unable to drive, getting to Southmead hospital, which is just next door in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member

for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), is all but impossible using public transport, because, like our communities, it is outside the city centre. It is not uncommon for what should be a 10-minute drive to take around an hour on a bus, either because of the route or because one needs to change buses at the University of the West of England or Bristol Parkway. Often these stops are in the wrong direction and the travel times are simply not realistic, so people do not feel that they can leave their car at home, even when they want to. As a frequent bus user, I know how frustrating all this can be when, through no fault of our own, we are made late because of a ghost bus that did not show up, and we are left figuring out what to do at the side of the road. We have also had route changes, including to the No. 73. Instead of taking people to the mall at Cribbs Causeway, where many people work and shop, the bus now stops partway there—and these are the parts of our community that have regular access to a bus.

We now have the bizarre scenario in which residents in Winterbourne are finally being served by a bus, but only because buses are being redirected through the village while the motorway bridge is being rebuilt. I am glad that our new Labour West of England Mayor joined my long-standing calls, and those of the community, for a proper solution for people in Winterbourne. I am also incredibly glad that our new Labour Government are giving local leaders and communities the opportunity to take back control of local buses through this Bill, and I was proud to campaign for that ahead of the election.

I encourage fellow residents to fill in my latest survey about their experiences of local buses. After years of Tory under-investment nationally and a real lack of understanding of how important buses are, vital routes have been lost, but I am optimistic that if other regions can do this—just look at Manchester, Liverpool, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire, which are all at different points in their journeys but taking great strides forward—so can we. We must, because people in our community deserve the same opportunities as anyone else, anywhere else.

9.14 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): For many years, rural bus services have been dying a slow death by a thousand cuts. In my constituency of Horsham, we have lost about a third of our services since 2010, and funding has fallen by as much as 43% in some areas. This is how it works: we cut the timetable, which means fewer people use the service, so we cut the timetable again—rinse and repeat. In many villages, it is simply impossible to live without a car. Even if we did put a bus service back into those villages, no one would use it because the only people who live there are car users. It is no wonder that economic inactivity in rural communities is nearly 2.5% higher than in urban centres. Good jobs and an education are literally out of reach. How can we reverse this downward spiral?

It is clear that if local authorities step back and rely on commercial operators to decide routes by themselves, it is not going to work, but that is exactly what we are seeing in West Sussex. Commercial operators have to keep to their timetables or face a fine, but to achieve punctuality on the No. 17 route meant that the village of Partridge Green had to be dropped altogether at

certain times of day. Pensioners now have to walk over a mile to the nearest stop or pay for expensive taxis. Residents were not consulted about the cuts, and they found out only a few weeks in advance, with no time to make other arrangements. Half the village turned out to a church meeting to protest, and if only we could have harnessed that enthusiasm in time, we might have saved the service, but of course it was too late. Now the same thing is happening all over again, with cuts to the No. 63 bus through another village, Slinfold, which will make it impossible for local commuters to link to Horsham station. Again the excuse was punctuality, again there was no consultation and again residents had just a few weeks' notice.

This gets to the heart of why our rural bus services have been in terminal decline. County councils, the bodies we would expect to have residents' interests at heart, can all too easily hide behind a commercial bus operator and say that it is all out of their control. No one wants to admit responsibility. We all keep saying that we want to take traffic off the roads and cut pollution, but in reality, local councils such as West Sussex have been presiding over a policy of managed decline. Will the new Bill do enough to reverse it? The Bill certainly moves in the right direction by empowering local authorities to franchise routes, run their own bus companies and trial demand-responsive transport schemes, which are good building blocks for a more flexible, responsive system.

However, when I look at West Sussex, it is clear that these freedoms by themselves will not be enough, even if there was more dynamic leadership in the council. Setting up its own bus service is a high-risk, high-investment strategy for a council. I can see how big urban centres may have the wherewithal to take advantage of these new rights, but more rural authorities such as my own are already on budgetary life support and there is no way they can take on such a gamble. This is going to take something more from the Government, and that something is more funding to kick-start a revolution. So let us fund bus services properly, empower local councils to make the right decisions and ensure that affordable, accessible transport remains a lifeline for all our communities.

9.17 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): If I had £1 for every time someone mentioned to me that buses were not going to where they needed to go or when they needed to go there, I could probably afford to restore most of the bus services we have lost in High Peak over the last decade. Under the Conservatives, thousands of vital bus services disappeared and local communities have been left powerless, with no tools to hold the operators to account. In High Peak, we have lost—wait for it—the 202, 236, 239, X18, X57, 61A and, recently, the 271, leaving many students and commuters where I live in Hope valley unable to get to work or college in Sheffield.

This trend has continued throughout Derbyshire, where there was a reduction of over 5 million miles—do not check my maths—in the distance driven by buses between 2010 and 2023. To put that in context, it is the same number of miles as travelling to the moon and back 10 times. However, this problem is more than statistics; it is lives ruined. I think of the elderly lady in Whaley Bridge who was able to get to her monthly

hospital appointments only thanks to the kindness of her neighbour, the assistant manager in Glossop who could not take a promotion to be a manager in Buxton because the 61 bus did not run late enough for them to be able to get home, and the lady in Buxton who loves the theatre but often has to leave shows in Sheffield early because she cannot get home any other way.

The first campaign I ran as a newly selected, significantly less grey, candidate was for students in High Peak to be able to get free bus travel to colleges in Greater Manchester like their classmates over the border. Working with Claire Ward, Labour's East Midlands Mayor, we were able to save High Peak families hundreds of pounds a year and ensure that cost was not a consideration for young people when deciding what courses to do at college and what careers they dreamed of doing.

These challenges also present themselves with tourism in High Peak. In part thanks to a TikTok craze to photograph sunset and sunrise over Mam Tor, communities where I live in High Peak have been plagued by illegal parking. I am co-ordinating a response to these issues with local stakeholders, such as the Peak park, police, and councils. A key tranche of what we need to do is deliver better bus services that are integrated with local train services.

The Bill will transfer powers away from Westminster and empower local communities to take the decisions necessary for our commuters to get to work, our students to get to college, our vulnerable to access the healthcare they need, and our honeypot villages to manage tourism sustainably. For too long, people in High Peak and Derbyshire have been let down by a Tory Government and a Tory council who only delivered cuts and isolation. This better bus Bill does exactly what it says on the tin. I look forward to better bus services delivered by our local transport authorities using these powers across High Peak.

9.21 pm

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): For my Cramlington and Killingworth constituency, like for so many others as we have heard today, buses are vital. They are often the only source of public transport. They are essential for accessing work, health appointments or seeing family and friends. That is why I launched my big bus survey earlier this year, hearing from hundreds of residents. The response was clear: too many people feel let down due to unreliable and inaccessible transport. That is especially true for people with disabilities, families and older people.

Under the previous Government, far too many routes were withdrawn, reduced or made less direct. I thought I would share just a few experiences from my residents. In Holywell and Seaton Delaval, they spoke of the withdrawal of the No. 19, which they relied on to reach local shops, healthcare and social activities. In Cramlington, local people described long waits for buses and no services at all on Sundays. Many shared concerns that while services into city centres exist, there is a lack of connectivity between local areas. One constituent told me that while her workplace is a mere 10-minute drive away, taking the bus requires travelling in the opposite direction first, doubling the journey time. Some told me they work from home instead of the office more often,

[Emma Foody]

because they just do not want to face the buses. Another, when their car broke down, took a week's leave rather than have to face the bus.

Residents in East Hartford told me that replacement services sometimes skip stops entirely without warning. In Shiremoor, another resident told me that to travel just 2.5 miles they have to take a metro and then a bus because no direct route exists, massively increasing costs. In Wideopen—where I am from and grew up—and Seaton Burn, residents shared how few services come through the villages compared with a decade ago. In another case, a resident told me that rather than face the delay of the bus, they ran two miles to the nearest metro to avoid being late for jury service. In Backworth, people described frustration at the lack of regular services, while others expressed a desire to switch from car use for environmental reasons, but they simply cannot without reliable information, real-time updates and dependable timetables.

The Bill could not be more timely. For too long, too many people in my area have been let down by bus operators favouring profits for commercial companies over delivering the public transport local people need and deserve. I share these stories because they are important. Every time the bus does not turn up, every time the route is cut back, every time it does not stop, it chips away at people's independence, with every act stripping local people of their dignity bit by bit, forcing them to either rely on others or to do without. I glad that this Government will now to shift that balance, giving local people a greater say in their transport.

People across the towns and villages of my constituency have told me that the system is not working and has to change. Buses in my area are a lifeline, not a luxury. I am pleased, on behalf of those constituents, that we are taking action to ensure they get the services they deserve. Frankly, they cannot come soon enough.

9.24 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is highly unusual for major legislation on buses to be introduced so early in the life of a Government; in fact, I think it may be unprecedented. Buses are by far the most used means of public transport, but they have traditionally received less political attention than other modes, and Ministers deserve great credit for securing this legislation so early in this Parliament.

It is difficult today to capture the extent of the hostility to bus regulation that existed in Government a little more than a decade ago, when the spirit that animated the Transport Act 1985 was still a moving force in transport debates. Although franchising could boast a successful record in London, there was visceral and ideological opposition to extending it. The coalition Government were actively hostile. Ministers even sought to exclude areas that pursued franchising schemes, then known as quality contracts, from receiving funding—an echo of the bad old days when the Thatcher Government threatened to strip the west midlands passenger transport authority of metro development funding unless its municipal bus operations were sold off.

That lingering attitude changed when George Osborne struck a devolution deal with Richard Leese and the late Howard Bernstein that included franchising in

Greater Manchester. That was less a turning point than a complete reversal. In fact, it was widely rumoured at the time that the Department for Transport did not know what the Treasury had agreed. That welcome revolution in thought, which found expression in the Bus Services Act 2017, was, however, imperfect and incomplete. Franchising powers were made available only to mayoral authorities that were picked and chosen in Westminster.

The Act contained a delayed and vindictive sting: clause 22, which sought to bar new municipal operations, despite the great success of surviving municipal operators in places such as Nottingham and Reading. Reputedly, the clause was a very late addition to the drafting of the 2017 Act—so late that it had not been quality assured by Government lawyers. Indeed, Conservative Ministers were forced to concede that the clause would not prevent an authority from

“acquiring shares in existing bus companies”,

nor would it prevent the repurposing of an existing company that was unconnected to bus services. Despite the flaws in its drafting, clause 22, which was born out of spitefulness and political posturing, has had a chilling effect on authorities that might have otherwise pursued a municipal operation. This Bill remedies both failings, and we will have better bus services and better law as a result of its passing.

There are other welcome provisions in the Bill. It will make it easier for operators and authorities to tackle antisocial behaviour and misogyny. It will make services more accessible for disabled passengers and accelerate the transition to cleaner, low-emission vehicles. All these measures will make a positive difference in my constituency, which sits at the intersection of Birmingham and the county of Worcestershire. It is a place where there are relatively low levels of car ownership, where a lack of audiovisual announcements makes it harder for some people to use the bus and where connections between our neighbourhoods are the poor relation to routes into the city centre.

In May, under the leadership of the Mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, the combined authority made the welcome decision to bring bus services back under public accountability and direction. That will enable better timetables, integrated ticketing and services that better connect the areas of highest unemployment with the business parks where new jobs are being created. It will also mean new powers over fares.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Laurence Turner: I will not; I am sorry. I do not wish to deny another Member time to speak.

A few days ago, under the version of the nBus scheme agreed by the previous Conservative mayor, Andy Street, operators exercised their legal right to hike seasonal fares, which they did by 8.6%. Low-paid bus commuters deserve better, and that is why we need the new powers that Labour is introducing in this Bill to better protect passengers from such increases in the cost of living.

One of the great pleasures of following other members of the Transport Committee is that they have made points about the forthcoming inquiry report much more eloquently than I can. I hope that that report is published

in time to shape the final drafting and implementation of this important Bill, which I look forward to supporting through its later stages.

9.29 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Shrewsbury has waited 10 years for a Labour Government to bring forward this Bill. Over the course of the last Government, our county of Shropshire lost over 63% of our bus routes, meaning that two out of three buses have been withdrawn. That was due to the savage privatisation that forced bus companies to pursue profits over passengers. For my residents, this meant that bus routes were stripped away from villages and they are now cut off from vital health and education services, work and leisure. It means that we have no buses after 6.30 pm anywhere in my constituency. It also means that we have no buses anywhere on a Sunday. In fact, in Shrewsbury we have not seen a Sunday bus for 10 years.

I do not know how familiar Members are with my wonderful, beautiful constituency, but Shrewsbury is a market town of 65,000 residents. It is the county town of Shropshire and hosts health, public and cultural services for 19 market towns and 400 villages, yet we are the only county town in this country not to have a Sunday bus service. It is a disgrace, and it is a painful symptom of the impact that the last Government had on public services in towns like mine up and down the country.

The lack of evening services puts severe constraints on our night-time economy and the potential for residents to get home safely after work, travel or an evening out. Not everyone can afford to run a car or is medically able to drive. The population in Shropshire is nine years older than the national average, so many older residents have given up their vehicles and find themselves stranded in the evenings and at weekends. In some villages, they are left completely socially isolated.

One of my constituents, Christine Hart, is in her 70s, lives in a residential suburb of Shrewsbury, and is a very active volunteer in her local community. Following her knee replacement operation last month, she became reliant on buses. She could not be happier with our new on-demand electric minibuses in her area funded via the Government's bus service improvement plan. She is such a convert that she plans to keep using them even after her recovery. However, she explained to me that although she could get to a 5 pm doctor's appointment, she has no way of getting home because there are no evening buses in Shrewsbury.

I am regularly contacted by employees who tell me that by the time they finish work at 6 pm, they cannot get across to the bus station to catch the last bus home. We are preventing residents getting to and from employment, putting a real block on economic growth. This is corroborated by my local chamber of commerce, which runs a quarterly business survey with its businesses. We receive regular feedback every single quarter that the primary barrier to recruitment is the lack of bus services that run early enough and late enough to support people—young people in particular—to access employment opportunities. My sorry tale from Shrewsbury is of a beautiful place that is very often cut off from the communities and individuals without a car, and the last thing we want to encourage is even more congestion in our historic town centre.

We must try to rebuild our public transport system, which was dismantled by the Conservatives during their time in office. They should hang their heads in shame for every one of the 5,000 miles in bus routes that they cancelled in towns like mine, for every youngster who cannot access a job opportunity, for every pensioner who cannot visit their family on a Sunday, and for every village cut off from public services.

Ten years is a long time to wait to be reconnected to the outside world, but the good people of Shrewsbury will today be celebrating as we debate this Bill, which will give back to local authorities the power to run services for passengers, not just for profit. The Bill has a clause that allows for socially necessary routes to link up medical, educational or public services to the local community at stops and times that empower them, not just the operator.

By changing the law to move away from exclusive privatisation, we can move forward to a responsive, community-led model for our public transport authorities. The Bill will not just improve lives in Shrewsbury, but transform lives, aspirations and the wellbeing of my residents, who have waited a decade for a Labour Government to give us back our Sunday service.

9.34 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in support of the Bill. As a public transport user, I know that our buses do not always work for the people and communities that they purport to serve. For many of us, a privatised system with only a handful of companies running routes and setting fares has led to rising ticket prices, without the reliability to go with them.

London's relatively well-run and highly regulated system has been an outlier in Britain until recent years—that is, until we have had some Labour metro mayors, who have made changes. Despite Huddersfield having had the busiest bus station in West Yorkshire before the pandemic, its bus services declined by more than a fifth between 2010 and 2023. This decline is not just a local issue; it reflects a wider pattern of regional under-investment.

The historical disparities between London and the north on transport spending are stark. In 2017, London received £944 per person on transport spending, while Yorkshire and the Humber received just £335. If the north had received the same amount per person as London between 2008 and 2018, it would have had £66 billion more spent on it. The Bill is long overdue as a starting point to turn things around.

A few weeks ago, at a coffee morning with local residents in Netherton, the key issue raised was buses. Inconsistent timetables, unreliable services and the withdrawal of the local village route have made it harder for people to get to work or appointments or to see family and friends. I therefore welcome the Government's investment in transport in our region, including £36 million for West Yorkshire's buses. As part of that investment, I was glad to see the recent launch of the fully integrated Weaver transport network—a nod to our textiles heritage—by our West Yorkshire Mayor, Tracy Brabin.

We know that funding alone is not enough, however. We need a system that gives local areas the power to design services around local need. The Bill will take us in the right direction: in West Yorkshire, we will see the first buses going under public control from 2027. It will

[Harpreet Uppal]

allow more flexible and locally responsive integrated mass transport networks and we will finally get a tram in West Yorkshire, which is fantastic.

It is worth recognising local employers such as Camira in Huddersfield. When you sit on a bus, Madam Deputy Speaker, the fabrics on it are likely to have come from a textile firm in Huddersfield. Camira's fabrics are used on buses, trams, trains and the London tube, which shows how transport investment supports not just passengers, but skilled jobs in towns like mine.

I want to mention a couple more things, including safety. For many people, accessing bus stations, bus stops or buses at night is very difficult, so ensuring that we have CCTV and safe travel officers will be really important. We also know that there has been inequity in bus service cuts, which have been deeper in low-income areas than in more affluent areas. That is not just unfair, but bad for growth, bad for health and bad for quality.

The Bill is a foundation for getting the implementation right. With strong local powers, fair funding and a focus on equity, we can rebuild trust in our bus network and create a system that truly works for everyone.

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

9.37 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): This has been a really enjoyable debate. One of the great benefits of winding up is that we are forced to sit and listen to absolutely everything. Most speeches I enjoyed, but there were one or two that I did not. It is up to hon. Members to work out whether I am talking about them.

The contributions to this debate have been enlightening, because they have exposed some clear differences of economic and political philosophy among the parties. The Liberal Democrats, one after another, argued for improved services, particularly rural services, but were less clear about how to fund them. On the Labour Benches, there was huge optimism and enthusiasm under the perhaps mistaken belief that the Bill, in itself, will improve passenger services for their constituents. The truth is that when we look at the terms of the Bill, it is clear that the focus of its reforms is not primarily on improving bus services for passengers—quite the contrary.

In the other place, Labour whipped its peers to vote against what is now clause 1, which makes the improvement of the performance, accessibility and quality of bus passenger services in Great Britain the purpose of the Bill. I send birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) and make a plea on her behalf for her Whips not to be too harsh on her for her support of clause 1. Perhaps she was unaware that it was opposed by her own party in the other place.

Why do the Government not want to put performance improvement at the heart of the Bill? Because that is not the Bill's primary intention. Labour's true focus was set out in its background briefing to the King's Speech. It is about

"accelerating the bus franchising process...building on the success of...public bus services still in operation."

No mention there of passengers, performance, improvements or cost control; it is the structure of the bus providers that has excited the Government. They intend to increase the number of municipal bus companies, presumably because they think that civil servants are better equipped to run efficient bus companies than private sector operators. I can see that, in some examples, that is possible. I spoke to the managing director of the Warrington bus company last week and I was impressed by the performance figures, although they are very unusual.

However, the Government's faith does not translate into confidence that the new municipal bus companies could win a competitive tender, as the Bill, perhaps inadvertently, allows local authorities to do away with competition. Extraordinarily, as currently drafted, it would allow any local authority to first create a new municipal bus company and then grant itself a franchise, without any competitive process. If that is deliberate, it really would be the triumph of socialist political ideology: that the state is somehow better.

Franchising is an alternative solution, potentially allowing greater co-ordination of transport provision, but it comes at a cost. It takes commercial risk away from the bus operators and puts it in the hands of local authorities. It requires dynamic contract, design and management skills. It is necessarily complex and, if done badly, risks the removal of the innovative power of the private sector, replacing it with state direction.

Let me say again what my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) made abundantly clear at the opening of this debate: we do not oppose bus franchising in principle. We support it, in fact, when it delivers value for money and, above all, when it improves services for passengers. But what we have seen from the Government today is a refusal to engage with the very real risks embedded in the Bill. The existing 2017 legislation has been referred to more than once during the debate. It recognises that mayoral combined authorities have the scale and resources needed to manage the development of franchise model. However, even here, political ineptitude and mayoral hubris can make a mess of things.

Andy Burnham's Bee Network has been touted as the socialist example to follow—[*Interruption.*] I hear it from the Government Front Bench right now, but let us have a look at what has actually happened in Manchester. Buses that cost the private sector £180,000 cost Andy Burnham £220,000. Bus depots that cost the private sector less than £4 million cost Andy Burnham more than £12 million—in fact, nearly £13 million. Private sector bus companies train sufficient staff for their needs while Andy's team, having failed to secure enough trained drivers, is in the absurd position of having to pay more than 400 agency staff to drive their buses at inflated hourly rates and with accommodation costs on top. The cost to the taxpayer is estimated at £17.4 million a year and rising.

Who is focusing on cost reductions in Manchester? Well, it is not the bus companies—it is not their job to reduce costs any more. In fact, the bigger the overall contract cost, the more profit they make. Require them to give above-inflation pay rises to unionised staff, as Andy Burnham has done? No problem. It goes on the bill, and they get a profit percentage on top. Require them to donate to charity, as Andy Burnham has done? No problem. Just add it to the bill, and get a profit

percentage on top. Profits go up as the size of the contract increases. While Labour claims to have increased value for money because of the much-touted reduced profit percentage, the taxpayer is quietly fleeced. This is the doublespeak of Labour's "value for money".

What is the real cost of Labour's return to "On the Buses"? Had Andy Burnham stuck to his own business plan, the Bee Network should have been profitable after the transition period, but because of his self-aggrandising hubris and statist ineptitude, the loss for this year alone is forecast to be £226 million and it is likely to rise further in the years ahead—that is £1 billion in under four years. And that is in a mayoral combined authority, although admittedly a Labour one.

Has this worked to increase traveller numbers? Between 2022 and 2024, Greater Manchester has experienced a 34.34% increase in ridership, according to Government figures, but let's look at my county of Norfolk, which has a Conservative county council: its enhanced partnership has increased ridership over the same period by 43%. Let's look at Essex—again, a Conservative-run council with an enhanced partnership, which has increased ridership by 52.3%. In the wider context, Greater Manchester has in fact underperformed.

Why does the Bill remove the crucial safeguards that ensured franchising was rolled out by authorities with at least a notional capacity to deliver? Why has Labour walked away from giving the Secretary of State the power to intervene if the worst happens and services fail? Why does the Bill not require a competitive tender process when local authorities decide to run their own bus companies? Labour appears content to let any council, regardless of size, experience, expertise or cash reserves, take on these huge financial and organisational risks. That is not empowering local government; that is setting it up to fail. And that is before we talk about money.

These franchising powers are meaningless without the money to implement them. As my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington made clear, just £243 million of the £1 billion promised by Labour is destined for actual bus services. That does not even satisfy Andy Burnham's bus habit for a year. What about the rest of the country? Without billions—literally billions—of pounds to back up this Bill, it is just posturing. So where is the money? The answer is that there isn't any. The Government have scrapped the Conservatives' £2 bus fare, which was genuine financial support focused 100% on passengers, and now it is rumoured that even the £3 bus fare is due for the chop. Perhaps the Minister could confirm that. The Government tell us they have a plan for passengers, but it seems that their plan for passengers is to make them pay more.

The Bill needs to have the improvement of passenger services at its heart. It needs to encourage the innovation and efficiency of the private sector. It needs to consider vulnerable SEND children and their educational needs. It needs to recognise the huge financial risks of franchising and municipal bus ownership, and to provide appropriate oversight and support. Most importantly, it needs a Government who are prepared to think again in Committee and be open to improvements to the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the Minister, can I just remind Members—I appreciate that I am largely preaching to the choir here—that they

are expected to attend for the wind-ups when they have spoken in a debate. Today, many Members have not had the opportunity to be called, but have sat here throughout; perhaps they will point that out to their colleagues.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I thank all Members for their participation in today's lively debate, spanning across the House. I do not intend to take interventions due to time, and out of courtesy to Members who have spoken already, I intend to respond as best as I can. I would like, first of all, to wish my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) a very happy birthday. This Bill was indeed a birthday surprise just for her!

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out why the Government have introduced this important Bill. Buses are the country's most popular form of public transport, making up to 58% of all public transport trips in England in 2023. They connect people to opportunities and to jobs they would not otherwise be able to take, and they give freedom to those otherwise facing isolation. Yet despite all this, many communities have experienced the familiar pattern of bus services being cut and fares going up, with the deregulation of buses in the 1980s leaving local areas with few options. We understand that local leaders are best placed to make decisions about how to improve bus services in their areas, and through this Bill we are giving them the tools to do so. We have engaged with stakeholders in developing these measures, and implementation will give us a further opportunity to engage on the detail of implementation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell) and the hon. Members for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) and for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) spoke about franchising. To make decisions effectively, local leaders need all possible options on the table, and that includes bus franchising. Franchising allows local transport authorities to take control of bus services by determining the routes, service specification and performance targets for operators.

Greater Manchester, the first area in England outside of London to franchise, has seen notable successes so far with punctuality and patronage up across the network, but I recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to franchising. Different models, such as the Jersey model, may suit rural areas better. The Government are determined to put power over local services back in the hands of local leaders across England. That is why the Department recently allocated over £700 million of bus grants to local transport authorities in 2025-26.

I want to address the comments made about the cost of franchising for Greater Manchester. According to data from Transport for Greater Manchester, franchising was delivered on time and to the agreed budget of £134.5 million. That included the whole process, including the acquisition of assets like bus depots. Let us be clear: without the changes made in Greater Manchester under franchising, the bus network would be smaller, less attractive to passengers and more expensive to run and use.

A number of hon. Members referred to socially necessary local services and rural services. Transport authorities that provide their services under an enhanced partnership

[Simon Lightwood]

agreement will need to identify socially necessary local services in their area and include them in their enhanced partnership. Local transport authorities will need to consider the alternative options that are available to mitigate the negative impact on bus users, including demand responsive bus services and community transport, which may work better for rural areas. By increasing the level of transparency around decision making on route changes and requiring consideration of alternative arrangements, the impact of any changes to bus networks will be fully assessed.

The issue of rural services is an important one. As I mentioned before, no one-size-fits-all solution exists. Local transport authorities in rural areas better understand the needs of their local communities, and it is right that they are given the opportunity to determine what is right for their area.

The hon. Members for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for Orpington and for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) referred to the fare cap. The Secretary of State set out that the Government have confirmed over £1 billion of funding to support and improve bus services in England and to keep fares affordable. We also took the first step towards consolidating bus funding by bringing together funding for bus service improvements and supporting services under one authority bus grant for the first time. My officials will work with stakeholders to develop and implement a new bus grant allocation for future funding. I ultimately want to create a fairer and simpler formula for bus funding that takes into account local needs.

A number of hon. Members raised important points about accessibility and floating bus stops. The Government are committed to safe and accessible bus transport. The matter was debated in great detail in the other place, and the Government fully appreciate the concerns raised about the accessibility of floating bus stops. The goal is to ensure that all passengers can travel with confidence that bus stations and stops will meet their access needs and that design features will be incorporated that promote their personal safety. We know more needs to be done to make these installations accessible for all. The Department is working with Active Travel England and Transport for London to provide further guidance and undertake research to address gaps in the evidence base.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) mentioned the innovative zero emission buses being produced here in the UK. This Government are supportive of the efforts and innovation of UK manufacturers, from which about 60% of zero emission bus regional area—ZEBRA—funded buses are typically procured.

In March, I chaired the first UK bus manufacturing expert panel, which brings together industry experts and local leaders to ensure that the UK remains a leader in bus manufacturing. Moreover, the Government are supportive of bus repowering as a viable and sustainable option to help the transition to zero emission buses. I commit to write to the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock on the eligibility of those buses for the MHCLG funding that he mentioned.

This Bill is about choice—choice for local leaders to decide how their bus networks can best serve local people. It is a passenger-first approach. I think a picture paints 1,000 words, and the picture of the Conservatives tells me that they do not really care about buses. The Bill is a critical part of the Government's bus reform agenda. I thank all those who contributed to today's debate, which has been wide-ranging and a useful opportunity to discuss the important issues. I look forward to continuing the discussion in Committee—perhaps with a few more Opposition Members.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

BUS SERVICES (NO. 2) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 8 July 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.

BUS SERVICES (NO. 2) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill [Lords], 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 any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Increase of Borrowing Limits) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 23 April, be approved.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

Question agreed to.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS

Ordered,

That Rachel Blake be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Helena Dollimore be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Shivani Raja be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Rebecca Paul be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION

Parking enforcement measures on Hurstcroft Road and Eddish Road in the constituency of Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North

9.56 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents living on Hurstcroft Road and Eddish Road. They have had to endure years of inconsiderate parkers blocking their drives and, in some instances, directing their abuse and frustrations at residents. This is grossly unfair to my constituents. My constituent Dana Ali stated that the behaviour of the road users around the school has caused great distress and inconvenience to many on the road. That is why the petitioners

“request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with both West Midlands Police, and Birmingham City Council, to set out greater enforcement for parking violations around Lea Forest Academy, on Hurstcroft Road, and Eddish Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc..”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents on Hurstcroft Road and Eddish Road, B33

Declares that West Midlands Police, in collaboration with Birmingham City Council, must seek to address the persistent parking offences around Lea Forest Academy School, between the hours of 8AM-9AM, and 2:30PM and 3:30PM, to help improve the wellbeing and lives of local residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with both West Midlands Police, and Birmingham City Council, to set out greater enforcement for parking violations around Lea Forest Academy, on Hurstcroft Road, and Eddish Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003076]

Arms and Military Cargo Export Controls: Israel

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

9.58 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I rise to speak about British arms and military cargo export controls—specifically, our exports to Israel amid one of the most devastating conflicts in modern memory. “It’s horrific. Gaza has become a slaughterhouse. That’s what it is: a slaughterhouse.” Those are the words of Tom Potokar, a British doctor working in Khan Yunis, as he urged world leaders to “stop talking and do something”.

Since 7 October, Israel has killed tens of thousands of Palestinians. As a father, the thought of the loss of a single child is heartbreaking; the estimate of more than 50,000 children killed or injured in the Gaza strip is inconceivable. Yet despite the scale of this destruction, our Government have continued to export weapons to Israel, without pause, without transparency and without apparent regard for international humanitarian law. Despite the UK Government suspending around 30 of 350 export licences in September 2024, a new report, “Exposing UK arms exports to Israel” uses data from the Israel Tax Authority to reveal the sheer volume that we continue to send.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): A report in *The Guardian* last month suggested that despite the suspension of key arms export licences to Israel back in September, UK firms have exported thousands of military items, including munitions, to Israel.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Warinder Juss: The exports have included items such as bombs, grenades, torpedoes, mines, missiles and similar munitions of war. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is completely conceivable that those weapons have been used to kill and maim children in Gaza, and therefore the only humane and reasonable option is for us to suspend all arms export licences to Israel, and ensure that no British manufactured munitions are going to Netanyahu’s Israel?

Steve Witherden: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, which is easy for me to respond to—yes, I agree wholeheartedly. Since October 2023 there have been at least 14 shipments of military goods from the UK to Israel. Those include over 8,500 munitions, bombs, grenades, missiles, and 146 armoured vehicle parts. In October 2023 alone, the UK exported 150,000 bullets.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Since October 2023, analysis by Action on Armed Violence identified more than 500 RAF-linked flights from Akrotiri to Israeli airspace. While described as “reconnaissance”, the Ministry of Defence refuses to confirm whether any carried military cargo. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister

[Kim Johnson]

must confirm without delay the exact purpose of those flights? Have any of them transported military equipment to support Israel? Has the UK conducted surveillance over Gaza, and has any intelligence been used with the Israel Defence Forces? If RAF assets were operating during such incidents, is there not clear evidence of serious international humanitarian law violations, and a duty to share all relevant intelligence with the International Criminal Court without delay?

Steve Witherden: That is something I will touch on later in my speech, but I also hope that we will be getting some answers on those exact points in due course. Between October and December 2024 this Labour Government approved £127.6 million in single-issue arms licences to Israel, which is more than the total approved from 2020 to 2023 combined. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) was accused of “sensationalism” for highlighting that to the Foreign Secretary, but these are the Government’s own figures. Included in that total is £60 million in incorporation licences, up from just £2 million in the previous quarter. That prompts the question: why have single and incorporation licences surged both since we took office, and after the so-called suspension? Open licences are not included in those figures, meaning that the true scale of UK military exports to Israel remains unknown and unaccountable. The report also exposes that despite pledging to halt F-35 part shipments directly to Israel, evidence suggests that the UK continues supplying crucial components. These jets, 15% British made, fuel relentless attacks on Gaza, registering over 15,000 flight hours since October 2023, and dropping bombs that kill hundreds of people indiscriminately.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): One horrific example of why we must stop supplying the parts for the F-35 fighter jets is the al-Mawasi attack last July. F-35s dropped 2,000 lb bombs on a designated safe zone in Gaza, killing 90 civilians and injuring 300. The use of such powerful munitions in densely populated areas is clearly a violation of international humanitarian law. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) said, key parts of the F-35s that carried out that attack may well have come from Britain; they clearly have done in other attacks. If we want to avoid any complicity in such Israeli war crimes, do we not need to stop these exports immediately?

Steve Witherden: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am very glad that the al-Mawasi attack has been mentioned and I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiments he expressed.

Freedom of information data reveals that the F-35 open general export licence was used 14 times to export to Israel in 2023—three times as much as in any other year. Israel is heavily reliant on F-35s for its attack on Gaza and is expanding its fleet. Without UK components, those jets could not fly.

The latest report from the Palestinian Youth Movement further details the F-35 supply chain. It shows that subassemblies and parts for F35s, including those used for repairs and maintenance, are all “logged and documented”, and that the global supply chain for the US-run F-35

maintenance programme has “robust traceability”. Therefore, the Government’s claim that it is impossible to halt supplies of F-35 components to Israel without undermining the global F-35 supply chain does not stand up to scrutiny. That raises serious questions around the UK’s legal duty to prevent genocide, yet the weapons continue to flow.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Does the hon. Member share my concern that some equipment, such as drone engines, may be being exported to Israel without the need for export licences and are potentially getting into the hands of military organisations, perhaps not directly to drop bombs but to engage in other military activity, such as providing reconnaissance and decoys? Does he support requiring all exported items that can be used within a military conflict zone to have a full licence, so that the public know exactly where UK businesses are engaging?

Steve Witherden: The hon. Member raises some really important points and I am in agreement with her intervention.

When reviewing arms export licences to Israel, the UK must also consider violations across the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including the west bank, where Palestinians face home demolitions, forcible displacement and settler violence—actions breaching the fourth Geneva convention and risking UK legal obligations under the arms export criteria.

The Foreign Secretary’s recent condemnation of Israel’s actions as “monstrous” was welcome but incomplete, because the very same Government continue to facilitate such actions. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot condemn atrocity while simultaneously fuelling the machinery that enables it. We cannot claim to uphold international law while profiting from its breach. I urge the Minister to respond fully—not with platitudes but with clarity, honesty and, above all, accountability.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. I spoke to him beforehand and he gave me permission to intervene. He will understand the need to bring an end to this war and to bring hope to the children of the region. However, will he acknowledge that Israel is still under daily attack and cannot be left without any means to defend itself from those who hide among civilian targets? We must ensure that actions taken here do not simply reset the gauge of casualties.

Steve Witherden: I agree with the hon. Member that all countries have the right to defend themselves. I have condemned the vile events of 7 October in other places, and do so again here. All countries have the right to defend themselves, but no country has the right to commit war crimes.

Despite the International Court of Justice’s ruling that there is a “plausible risk of genocide” in Gaza, the UK continues to authorise arms exports to Israel, making us in potential breach of our obligations under the genocide convention, the Geneva conventions and the arms trade treaty.

In the hearing of *Al-Haq v. Secretary of State for Business and Trade*, it was revealed that the Government decided there was no serious risk of genocide back in July 2024, yet in Parliament we are told that the Government are waiting on a court determination. In court, we are told that it is not for the courts to decide, as those treaties are not incorporated into domestic law and are Parliament's responsibility. If it is not Parliament or the courts, who are the Government accountable to for the decision to continue to transfer arms to Israel, potentially breaching international law and facilitating a genocide? Will the Government publish their most recent assessment of the risk that Israel is committing genocide?

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for his very powerful speech, and I echo his call for the Government to publish their most recent assessment of the risk of genocide. Does he agree that it makes a mockery of our obligation under international law to prevent genocide if our Government say that they can only judge it after genocide has been conclusively proven in court to have happened? Does our obligation to act to prevent genocide not mean that we should stop all arms exports to the Israeli Government now, in the face of the clear evidence of war crimes and, indeed, genocide occurring in Gaza?

Steve Witherden: I am in especial agreement on the importance of preventing those things. I am very eager, as I am sure the hon. Member is, to hear from the Minister in relation to those comments.

Let us turn to the Government's own assessments. In the same hearing, it was revealed that by September '24, Israel had launched tens of thousands of air strikes and killed more than 40,000 Palestinians in Gaza. The public are being told to trust our judgment on the weapons that this country is sending to a state conducting a genocide. This is the same Government who, after reviewing 413 incidents, determined that only 0.5% of them potentially violated international humanitarian law. Not a single incident involving only the deaths of Palestinians was deemed even possibly unlawful.

While the Foreign Secretary repeatedly talks about the UK's "robust" licensing regime, the reality is that British export data is notoriously opaque. Can the Government confirm whether they have reached a new assessment since September? If so, can they disclose it to the public? If the Government are truly confident in the legality of their exports, will they publish custom codes, product descriptions and a full paper trail from sender to end user? Would this level of opacity be tolerated if it were British civilians under the rubble?

We are repeatedly told that the UK arms exports are "defensive in nature", reduced to nothing more than "a helmet or goggles", but let us be clear: the Government have never defined what "defensive" means, especially when exports include components for F-35 fighter jets capable of dropping 2,000-lb bombs on densely populated areas. Since September 2024, there has been no evidence that UK exports were limited to non-lethal equipment or that they were not intended for use in Gaza. The Government do not claim that it is too difficult to track where these weapons end up; instead, they invoke vague concerns about "international peace and security", as though suspending exports to Israel would somehow

endanger global stability, including support for Ukraine, but that is a false dichotomy. Palestinian lives are not less valuable.

The F-35 programme is one of the most sophisticated supply chains on earth. If we wanted to, we could track every part. The real question is: do we want to? How do the Government define a weapon as defensive? What precisely makes an F-35 component defensive? Is it the Government's position that the need to continue to supply F-35 components outweighs the risk of genocide? If so, is there any circumstance that would lead to the UK stopping that supply? The Government have claimed that there are red lines that would trigger a halt to exports, but Gaza is already a slaughterhouse. Children are emaciated or dying of hunger, hospitals have been intentionally destroyed and Israel's leaders vow to wipe out Gaza, and still the weapons flow, so finally, Minister, where is our red line? I call on this Government to suspend all arms exports to Israel, to ensure that no British-made weapons are used in Israel's brutal plans to annex, starve and ethnically cleanse the Palestinian population. The credibility of this House depends not just on what we condemn, but on what we enable, and history will remember that we enabled too much.

10.15 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): I am responding on this issue on behalf of the Government tonight, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) for securing this important and timely debate. Let me address the House this evening by first setting out the Government's policy, and then setting out our approach to transparency, which formed a key part of my hon. Friend's contribution.

It is accepted on all sides of this House that, as the Government have made clear, what was witnessed on 7 October 2023 was not an act of liberation, but an act of barbarism by Hamas. Over the many months of this conflict, the UK Government have made the case for an immediate ceasefire, the release of all the hostages detained, the protection of civilians, access for aid and aid workers to Gaza, and the need for a path to long-term peace and security in the region. The responsibility of Hamas is clear, but so too is the appalling humanitarian crisis that has since unfolded in Gaza as a result of Israel's subsequent actions. The way in which Israel is conducting its operations is indefensible, disproportionate, and—in the view of the UK Government—counterproductive to any lasting peace settlement.

The Government's policy remains that the only way to secure peace and stability is through an immediate ceasefire, the release of the hostages held captive by Hamas, the protection of civilians, and the lifting of all Israeli restrictions on aid being sent into Gaza. Last month, at the United Nations Security Council, the UK Government made the case for urgent humanitarian aid to enter Gaza, and expressed our outrage at both the killing of Palestinian Red Crescent workers and the strikes on the UN Office for Project Services compound in March. We also issued a statement with 27 international partners on the mechanisms needed to deliver those vital aid supplies, and together with the leaders of France and Canada, we made clear our strong opposition to the latest expansion of Israel's military operations.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Alexander: Let me make a little progress, and then I will be open to interventions.

I turn next to the actions taken by this Government in support of those statements. We have supported the restoration of funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency; we have suspended arms licences; we provided £129 million in humanitarian assistance to the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the last financial year; and we have decided to suspend negotiations on the upgraded free trade agreement with this Israeli Government.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): In the week before last, the Foreign Secretary said that we were suspending arms negotiations with the Israeli Government, yet just last week, we had a trade envoy—Lord Austin—visiting Israel and saying how wonderful it was to be there. Can the Minister please explain how those two matters do not contradict each other?

Mr Alexander: There are long-standing relationships of trade and economics with Israel—for instance, as I understand it, one in eight of the prescribed drugs available through the national health service is provided by an Israeli company. We have taken a clear position of not upgrading the free trade agreement but recognising, for example, that those supplies are important. The trade envoy roles are accountable to the Secretary of State in the Department for Business and Trade, and we were clear that Lord Austin would not directly deal with the Israeli Government when he was there and has no responsibility for the free trade agreement negotiations that otherwise would have been taking place in the coming months.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Alexander: Let me make a little more progress, then I will be happy to take further interventions.

I will turn to the specific issue of export licences. On coming into office, the Foreign Secretary commissioned an immediate assessment into Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law. On the basis of that assessment, on 2 September, we suspended arms export licences for items to the Israel Defence Forces that could be used in military operations in Gaza.

As a result of that decision, licences were suspended for a range of military equipment, stopping the export of F-16 fighter aircraft components, of targeting systems and of licensable parts that make unmanned aerial vehicles. That measure is still in place. I reiterate that based on our current assessment of potential breaches of international humanitarian law, we are not licensing military equipment provided directly to the IDF that could be used for military operations in Gaza.

It is right to acknowledge that our export licences granted in relation to Israel cover a wider remit than simply those items that may be used in Gaza. There are a relatively small number of licences for the IDF relating to equipment that we assess would not be used in the current conflict, including, for example, parts for air defence systems that defend Israel from acts such as the major aerial attack from Iran in April 2024.

We also think it is right to continue to provide military grade body armour used by non-governmental organisations and journalists, and to provide parts of the supply chain that are ultimately re-exported out of Israel to support the defence of our NATO allies. The Government are fully committed to upholding our responsibilities under domestic and international law, and have acted in a manner consistent with our legal obligations, including under the arms trade treaty and the genocide convention.

On the global F-35 programme, we are of course facing a critical moment of European security, with war on the continent at our neighbours' doorsteps. Undermining the F-35 programme at this juncture would, in the Government's view, disrupt international peace and security, NATO deterrence and European defence as a whole.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Alexander: Let me finish the explanation, then I will be happy to take interventions.

Our exporters provide components for the F-35 aircraft to a global spares pool and the common production line for new aircraft, where they have no sight and no control over the specific ultimate end users for their exports. Put plainly, it is not possible to suspend licensing of F-35 components for use by one F-35 nation without ceasing supply to the entire global F-35 programme. It was therefore judged necessary by the Government to exclude F-35 components from the scope of the suspension.

Let me be very clear, however, that the UK Government are not selling F-35 components directly to the Israeli authorities. The licence that allows the export of F-35 components was amended in September to specifically make it clear that direct shipments to Israel for use in Israel are not permitted.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) mentioned the Government's red lines. The Secretary of State for Business and Trade said that there were red lines that would make the Government stop sending F-35 parts, but the Minister has just been clear that it is not possible to stop sending those parts. If the Secretary of State says that there are red lines—and how are we not at those red lines, given what is happening in Gaza—what exactly is going on?

Mr Alexander: We are not directly sending parts to Israel for the F-35s. We are continuing to support the global component pool of the F-35 programme for the reason that I have set out. We as a Government judge that there is a material risk to the security of our NATO allies, and more broadly to European security, if the F-35 aircraft that are used by a number of our allies were no longer able to secure the supplies and the aircraft were therefore no longer able to fly.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I want to understand who is making the rules about the spare parts pool. Surely if we are trading into that pool, we have a right to set the rules. If those components are going on to F-35s that are being bought by Israel, we have a right to block those parts or to kick Israel out, as we did with Turkey in 2019.

Mr Alexander: We make approximately 15% of the components that contribute to the F-35 programme; it is an international programme of which we are but one partner. We continue to supply the programme because our judgment as a Government is that not doing so would undermine the continuing functioning of the programme, which is in the Government's view, as I say, of critical importance to European and global security.

Richard Burgon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Alexander: I have given way several times on that point, so I am keen to make some progress. The Government have made these judgments calmly and soberly, and will continue to do so with full awareness of our responsibility.

Let me now turn to the question of transparency. As the UK Government, we publish quarterly official statistics and an annual report about export licences granted and refused. We provide a searchable database allowing users to produce bespoke reports, drawing on this data, and we are committed to openness on strategic export licensing, which provides the means for Parliament and the public to hold us to account.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Alexander: I am keen to make a little more progress before I take further interventions.

Because these are exceptional circumstances, the Government have heard requests from Members on both sides of the House for us to release further details, including information on licence applications in progress, and as full information as we can disclose on the types of equipment that are covered by each extant licence. Recognising the exceptional nature of this issue and the importance of providing transparent and robust information to ensure that Parliament and the public can hold the Government to account, in December we laid in the Library of the House an exceptional release of export licensing data focused specifically on Israel, setting out plainly how many licences remained extant at that time, how many had been granted since June 2024, and how many had been refused.

In summarising that release, let me assure Members that remaining licences relate to non-military items, military items for civilian use, or items not for use in military operations in Gaza. These licences also extend to components in items for re-export to other countries—that is, those that then leave Israel. Ongoing licensing applications are also decided on that basis. In fact, of the 352 licences extant for Israel, as of 6 December 191 were non-military. They included commercial aircraft components, equipment for private manufacturing firms, and parts for submersible vessels for use in scientific research. That left 161 licences

relating to military equipment. However, less than half those related to the Government of Israel or the IDF. Most related either to UK components that private Israeli companies would incorporate before re-exporting an item to a third country, or to military-grade equipment for civilians such as body armour for journalists and NGOs.

I can advise the House that recent reporting on this topic does not provide distinctions between items for civilian and for military use, or between items remaining in Israel and those for re-export. The UK is not allowing the direct export of arms for use in Israel's military operations in Gaza.

Richard Burgon: The Minister is giving a detailed response, but may I return him to the issue of the international pool of F-35 spares? Is it the Government's contention that a conditional licence is impossible—that is, that we could provide F-35 spares, but on the basis that they are not then sent to Israel to be used in Gaza?

Mr Alexander: I am acutely conscious of the time, Madam Deputy Speaker. The exclusion from the suspension decision for F-35 components should not, in principle, apply to licences for F-35 components that could be identified as going to Israel for use by Israel. Exports of F-35 components directly to Israel are therefore suspended unless they are for re-export.

Let me return to the specific point that I know has been the subject of much scrutiny in relation to recent reporting outside the House. The majority of military licences approved last year are for components of military items for re-export to third countries, including the UK's NATO allies, of about £142 million-worth of military goods licensed for Israel and in 2024. The vast majority of that overall value was supporting the production of items for use outside Israel. That includes more than £120 million, or about 85% of the total licence value, for components to support exports of military items from Israeli companies to a single programme for a NATO ally.

These remaining licences have no utility in military operations in Gaza. The suspension of such licences was not required by our export licence criteria, and would have done nothing but harm UK companies and UK businesses engaged in authorised and legal trade. Since September, we have refused all licence applications for military goods that might be used by Israel in the current conflict in line with the suspension decision. More applications were refused in 2024 than in the preceding four years combined.

Question put and agreed to.

10.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 2 June 2025

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Decriminalising Abortion

4.30 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700014 relating to decriminalising abortion.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. The petition creator is Gemma Clark, and this is what it says:

“I am calling on the UK government to remove abortion from criminal law so that no pregnant person can be criminalised for procuring their own abortion.”

Gemma became involved in campaigning on this issue during the pandemic. She was particularly alarmed by the tactics of some campaigners harassing women trying to access abortion in Scotland. She also has a friend who experienced a stillbirth but was investigated by the police.

Gemma is worried that there is a lot of misinformation about abortion, especially late-term ones, and that that is linked to the rise of extreme ideologies and misogyny. She is a primary school teacher and is fearful that the young girls she is educating now will have fewer rights when they grow up than she does. I thank Gemma and the more than 103,000 people from across the UK who signed her petition. That includes 152 from my constituency of Folkestone and Hythe. I also thank 55 of my constituents who emailed me to express their views on the issue. That has fed into this speech.

How is abortion criminalised in the UK? It depends on where we live. Abortion is, in effect, decriminalised in Northern Ireland, whereas long-standing laws maintain the criminalisation of abortion in England, Wales and Scotland with two main offences: procuring miscarriage under section 58 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861, and child destruction under section 1 of the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The hon. and learned Gentleman is describing the law. One of the justifications for the Abortion Act 1967 was that it would end back-street abortions; indeed, whether we like it or not, we have abortion on demand in safe environments. If the proposals we are discussing go ahead and, de facto, it becomes possible to have an abortion at home up to birth, does he not think that could endanger women's health? Is he not worried about that, or are the movers of the petition not worried about that?

Tony Vaughan: I am not aware that following the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland there has been a strong current to re-criminalise it, which might be expected had a situation such as the right hon. Gentleman referred to actually occurred. It is not my understanding that that has happened.

For each of the two offences I described, sentences of up to life imprisonment apply. A person is guilty of the offence of child destruction when the pregnancy is of at least 28 weeks and they commit a wilful act to cause the child's death; it is a defence if the act was done to preserve the mother's life. The offence of procuring miscarriage can be committed at any stage of gestation when a person uses a poison or instrument to induce miscarriage. As the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, there are defences, variously, under the Abortion Act when two registered medical practitioners authorise abortion in an approved clinic in broadly four situations. The first is when there is a risk of injury to the mother's physical or mental health up to 24 weeks—that was the exception expanded during covid, so that women could access pills for medical abortions at home, following a consultation, for pregnancy of up to 10 weeks.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. and learned Member made a point about Northern Ireland. It is important to note that Northern Ireland does not have at-home abortions—pills by post—and much of the discussion about decriminalisation of abortion in England, or here in the mainland, is focused on at-home abortions. Northern Ireland has a very different context, which should not be used in the same train of thought.

Tony Vaughan: I note the hon. Member's point.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is also worth noting that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has explicitly called for telemedicine to be made available to women in Northern Ireland. Given that we have a human rights framework in Northern Ireland, the Government have to respond to that or risk being taken to court again by the chief commissioner for failing to uphold the human rights of women in Northern Ireland to access a safe and legal abortion. We have no such protections here in England and Wales as yet. Is that not the case?

Tony Vaughan: My hon. Friend is right, and of course it was a 2018 Supreme Court decision that showed that the rules that were then in force in Northern Ireland violated the human rights of women. That has to be at the centre of our considerations.

Let me finish listing the exceptions so that I can get to the point. Risk of grave or permanent injury, risk to the mother's life and substantial foetal abnormality are exceptions without any gestational time limit.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Tony Vaughan: I will press on, because I am conscious of the time. Maybe we will come back to this.

Jim Shannon: We have three hours.

Tony Vaughan: All right then.

Jim Shannon: The reason I knew that is because before the debate I checked with you, Mr Vickers, that we would have ample time to speak. It is important to put something on the record about the abortion legislation in Northern Ireland. I say this respectfully to the hon.

[Jim Shannon]

and learned Gentleman, who knows that that is the way I always try to make my points: the legislation in Northern Ireland was imposed by Westminster because we did not have a Northern Ireland Assembly that was working at the time. The elected representatives therefore could not have an input into the process, and, according to the polls, the people of Northern Ireland were very much against the type of legislation coming in. He refers to the Northern Ireland legislation, but it is Northern Ireland legislation that the Government here imposed; Northern Ireland had no input into it.

Tony Vaughan: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I come back to what I said to the right hon. Member for Gainsborough: whatever the position at the time of the law's coming into force, I am not aware of there being a movement or democratic support for changing the law back to what it was before. When we talk about whether laws meet the current standards and societal norms, that is the most important thing.

Let me turn to how the law is applied in England and Wales. Until 2022, it was believed that only three women had been convicted of having an illegal abortion in the 150 years since the 1861 Act, under which most illegal abortions are prosecuted, but there has been a recent increase in the prosecutions of women for procuring miscarriage under the Act. The Crown Prosecution Service reports that in the period January 2019 to March 2023, six people were charged with child destruction and 11 were charged with procuring miscarriage under section 58 of the 1861 Act.

One of those people was Nicola Packer, who took home abortion medication following a teleconsultation, believing that she was less than 10 weeks pregnant. She was in fact 26 weeks pregnant, and was accused of having an illegal abortion. On 7 November 2020, she was in hospital. The next day—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Order. May I clarify whether this is a live case?

Tony Vaughan: My understanding is that the case has been disposed of. Ms Packer was found not guilty of those charges last month, I believe.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the best way of keeping women's protections to have an abortion and to stop the criminalisation of women, which he has been talking about, is to support new clause 1, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) has tabled, to the Crime and Policing Bill?

Tony Vaughan: I agree, and I will support the new clause.

Ms Packer was in hospital one day, and arrested the next, and it took five years before the courts could dispose of that case. Another case is that of Carla Foster, a mother who was jailed for illegally taking abortion tablets to end her pregnancy during lockdown. She was initially sentenced to 28 months in prison. She was a mother of three who was of exceptionally good character and had suffered from poor mental health. She had quickly admitted to police that she had provided incorrect information during a consultation, and the Court of Appeal reduced the term to 14 months and suspended

the sentence. However, by that point, she had already served 35 days in prison and had been denied any communication with her children, one of whom is autistic. In reducing her sentence, the judge said that the case called for “compassion, not punishment”, and that there was “no useful purpose” in keeping her in prison.

Kim Leadbeater (Spenn Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. and learned Friend for introducing this important debate. Does he agree that at the heart of this discussion are some key principles, such as compassion, which he mentioned, as well as choice and bodily autonomy? Whatever stage we are at in our lives, it is important that we are allowed to make choices about our own bodies, free from the fear of criminalisation or judgment.

Tony Vaughan: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and thank her for her work on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which engages that principle of autonomy. I find it hard to read about the cases I just mentioned and not feel that the time has come to abandon the practice of criminalising and imprisoning women for choices they make about their own pregnancies.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank all those who signed the petition to make sure that we had this debate. Is my hon. and learned Friend aware that more than 200 women have been investigated for this? Does he agree that some of the police tactics used—crime scene tape, excluding families from their own homes, and removing children even in cases where no charges are brought—are extremely traumatising to the family and the woman who has suffered the loss of a child, whether by her own decision or because of a miscarriage?

Tony Vaughan: I thank my hon. Friend for that statistic, which I was not aware of. Criminalisation involves traumatisation from the moment of investigation to charge, arrest and all the way through the system.

The time has come to abandon these outdated practices. I struggle to see how it can be a good use of the scarce resources in our criminal justice system to prosecute and imprison women in these situations. Our laws cannot be fixed relics of the past, but must reflect social attitudes and societal norms. A YouGov poll of 2,098 adults in September 2023 found that 52% of respondents believed that women should not face prosecution for having an abortion, while only 21% of respondents believed that prosecution was appropriate.

At the international level, and as the petition creator, Gemma Clark, has rightly reminded me, the World Health Organisation's 2022 guidelines on safe abortion recommend removing medically unnecessary policy barriers to safe abortion, such as criminalisation. More than 30 organisations representing medical practitioners in this country support decriminalising abortion, including the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing, the Faculty of Public Health, the Centre for Reproductive Rights, the Royal College of Midwives and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Dr Ranee Thakar, the president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, has said:

“Abortion that happens outside of the current law generally involves very vulnerable women—including those facing domestic abuse, mental health challenges or barriers to accessing NHS care. Yet alarmingly, prosecutions of women have been increasing

in recent years...Abortion is an essential form of healthcare and should be subject to regulatory and professional standards like other medical procedures, not criminal sanctions.”

As I mentioned, Northern Ireland repealed provisions criminalising abortion. Similarly, my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) have tabled new clauses to the Crime and Policing Bill that would disapply such provisions, eliminating the risk of prosecution for women who self-manage abortions or seek care beyond current legal limits. Under the new clause of my hon. Friend the Member for Gower, access to abortion services would remain exactly as it is, as I understand it, including time limits, grounds for abortion and the requirement for two doctors. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow is in a much better position than me to talk about her new clause, which follows similar principles, so I will not stray into her territory by saying more at this stage.

The key point is that although we should maintain regulation, criminalisation is a very different matter. I appreciate that there are organisations passionately opposed to decriminalising abortion. I believe that decriminalisation does not mean deregulation. My hon. Friends the Members for Gower and for Walthamstow propose to maintain a body of rules on access to and provision of abortion, such as the existing time limit, which would remain in force.

Some people claim that decriminalising abortion would lead to significant increases in the number of women performing dangerous late-stage abortions at home, as the right hon. Member for Gainsborough suggested, but I think that would be highly unlikely. The latest figures available, from 2022, reveal that 88% of abortions were performed at under 10 weeks gestation. I have not seen, as I said in response to interventions, evidence to suggest that removing the criminal law deterrent would motivate swathes of women to have abortions after 24 weeks. Indeed, I have not heard of any campaigns in Northern Ireland to re-criminalise due to unforeseen consequences.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. and learned Friend for the excellent speech that he is making. Many of my constituents have contacted me about this issue, and I, too, support the new clauses. Does he recognise that decriminalisation would bring us in line with other countries, including France, Ireland, Canada and Australia?

Tony Vaughan: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which is noted.

Carla Lockhart: In reference to other countries, the hon. and learned Gentleman says that there is no evidence that decriminalisation will increase abortions. What is his response to the example of New Zealand, where abortion was decriminalised in March 2020, and in that year there was a 43% increase in late-term abortions, between 20 weeks gestation and birth, compared with 2019?

Tony Vaughan: I am not aware of that statistic. It may be that I can look into it and say more about it in closing.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): This Parliament must protect women's fundamental healthcare rights. That is what nearly 200 of my constituents said in signing this petition, and it is why I co-signed new clause 17 to the Crime and Policing Bill, proposed by our hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy).

We face a global backlash against abortion access. The US vice-president has criticised our buffer zones, citing a case in my Bournemouth East constituency. I visited the clinic identified by the vice-president and met staff there. They deserve safety and freedom from harassment, but they are concerned about tampering and vandalism of their vehicles and rising hostility. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that my constituents deserve fundamental human rights? We must lock in those rights and put them beyond the reach of politicians, to prevent future roll-backs. Does he agree that we need to end the threat of prosecution, and decriminalise abortion?

Tony Vaughan: I agree with my hon. Friend. As our hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow and I have said, these are human rights issues, and courts have highlighted incompatibilities where that has been the case. It is important that those principles guide our approach. I am in favour of the regulation of abortion, but I am also in favour of decriminalising it, so that abortion can once and for all be treated by the law as a matter of healthcare, not criminality, and individual rights to bodily autonomy can be exercised without fear of prosecution at one of the most physically and mentally vulnerable points in any woman's life. I look forward to hearing the contributions of other Members and the Government.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I remind Members that they must bob if they want to catch my eye.

4.47 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not often that I come to Westminster Hall and find myself the first person to be called after the Member in charge, in this case of the petition. I am pleased to be able to comment on where we are on the petition. In this world, I try to be respectful to everyone—that is the nature of who I am and what I do. I probably have a very different opinion from the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), who spoke on behalf of the petition, and other Members who will speak afterwards.

It is one of the quirks of this place and our procedures that we find ourselves debating this petition today, when in all likelihood we will have a similar debate in the next few weeks on new clauses tabled to the Crime and Policing Bill in the main Chamber. Our debate today is almost a rehearsal for what will come in a few weeks' time. You will be pleased to hear, Mr Vickers, that I will not digress too much into discussion of the specifics of the new clauses, but it is safe to say that they are deeply concerning to me and many thousands of my constituents. I referred to where we are and our position in Northern Ireland. My constituents have made me aware of their position, so in speaking today I will represent that and the position of many other constituents across Northern Ireland.

I should say at the outset that I find it tragically ironic that proposals have been made to further liberalise a law here in part on the premise that the law is more liberal, more permissive, and supposedly more progressive in Northern Ireland. That suggestion has been made today. Of course, the change to the law on abortion in Northern Ireland was only brought about as a result of overreach—I use that word on purpose—by Westminster,

[*Jim Shannon*]

undermining the constitutional value of Northern Ireland and its elected representatives, who should have been allowed to make decisions on this matter. On a personal level and on behalf of my constituents, it is important to place that on record in this Westminster Hall debate.

Hon. Members know my position on abortion; it is a matter of public record. In coming up to 15 years here, there has not been a question or a debate on this subject that I have not participated in or had a question on in the Chamber. That is for the record. I will not go into much detail, save to say that in my view every abortion is a tragedy for both the woman and the unborn child whose life is cut short. I hope that my view will be respected in this debate, as I respect those who hold a very different view from my own. This is a very sensitive subject and deserves to be considered in that light, but it is also important that we consider this debate in the round.

There is no right to abortion in international law. It is worth noting at the outset that, contrary to what seems to be a popular belief both in the media and among some hon. Members, even academics who take an opposing view to mine on abortion acknowledge that there is no right to abortion directly enshrined in any key international human rights instrument. That is their opinion. I put that on the record as well, because it is important to discuss these matters in full. Although this is often cited as the impetus and imperative for change in the UK, the recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women are not binding on the United Kingdom. We can and should determine our own laws on this subject. It is neither required nor determined that we should go down the path of further liberalisation.

Abortion is not simply medical treatment. This is not a simple matter—it certainly is not for me and my constituents and those of us who represent this point of view.

Carla Lockhart: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point. In contrast, human rights laws grant protection to the unborn. The preamble to the UN convention on the rights of the child, to which the UK is a signatory, states that the child

“needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth”.

Does he agree with me that in every case both lives matter?

Jim Shannon: That is exactly the point. I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for that intervention. Her mind is the same as my mind and that of the people we represent across the Province and in our constituencies.

Abortion is not simply a medical treatment. It is not a simple matter. One of the underlying rationales behind the push for decriminalisation of abortion is worth addressing. Abortion is not a mere medical treatment that should be treated akin to other matters of healthcare. However uncomfortable this may be to confront, my view and the biological reality is that there is more than one life involved in any abortion. It is essential that that is reflected in the law and in the penalties that result from breaking that law. Of course, laws send messages and shape culture.

Emily Darlington: I completely agree that we need to be respectful in this debate as people hold views on all sides. But does the hon. Member agree with me that when we criminalise women, their bodies and abortions, we get absolutely mad circumstances as we have seen in the US, where a woman cannot be saved in the emergency room or in A&E because it might facilitate losing the child, or she is kept alive by machines against her family’s wishes just because she was nine weeks pregnant at the time of her accident?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I understand the point that she makes. I mentioned earlier that in every abortion two lives are involved. There is the life of the mum and the life of the baby—two lives that have to be considered. We also have to be concerned about backstreet abortions and where they can sometimes lead.

Laws, as I said, send messages and shape culture. More broadly, they are a reflection of our core values as a society. Although calls for abortion decriminalisation are repeated and vocal, I truly think—I say this with great respect—that many people do not understand the implications of decriminalising abortion. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) has her opinion and I have mine—I certainly have a different interpretation of what she refers to.

Ms Creasy: I hope the hon. Member knows that, although I disagree with him on this matter, I have always done so respectfully, and fought for his right to be heard. However, I want to challenge him on the idea that we can have only an opinion on what actual decriminalisation and the human rights framework would look like. We have seen what it looks like in Northern Ireland since 2019, and we now have a body of work by a commissioner at the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, including court cases in which she has intervened to uphold that human right, to see the implications of decriminalisation. We may differ on whether the impact is one we would like to see in this society, but we cannot deny that there is now a body of evidence about what a human rights framework and approach to abortion access would look like.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that. She and I have debated this at some length over the years from two different points of view. I think that decriminalisation leads to deregulation, and I have concerns about where we will end up. As I said, I aim to represent the views of my constituents, as well as the views of other Members’ constituents. Another three hon. Members from Northern Ireland who have similar views to my own have been driven by their constituents to respectfully give their point of view in the Chamber today.

Decriminalising abortion by disapplying the provisions of existing penalties under sections 58 to 60 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, or the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929, or by repealing these provisions altogether, would be a seismic change. I use the word “seismic” on purpose, because I believe it reflects the size and magnitude of what has been proposed. To be clear, regardless of whether the specific provisions of the Abortion Act 1967 are touched on by amendments to other legislation, gutting the laws that underpin that Act would have the same effect. Depending on the

model of decriminalisation, the effect could be wide enough to include de facto access to abortion for woman up to the point of birth for any reason. There would, for example, be no enforceable prohibition on abortion on the basis of the sex of the unborn baby that would have criminal repercussions.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree that Britain already has very liberal abortion laws? It is double the 12-week average in any member of the European Union. Polling by Savanta ComRes, a highly respected polling company, has shown that 70% of women support a reduction in the abortion time limit, and 91% want an explicit ban on sex-selective abortions.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Many moons ago, we were friends in the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well as the council, and we are still friends at Westminster. I am aware of the Savanta ComRes polls, which were taken over a period of time. They cannot be ignored, because they provide focus for where we are.

Without criminal repercussions, or new restrictions on abortions that are carried out by a woman or a malignant professional up to birth, are we truly ready to take such a radical step? I do not want to belabour the point, but I find it deeply worrying that a child born prematurely, for example at 22 or 24 weeks, would be treated as a legal person with full rights, while decriminalisation would permit abortion at the same gestational age with no legal recourse.

I said earlier that there are two people in this: the mother and the baby.

Ms Creasy: Under our current criminal legislation, there are exemptions from prosecution for abortions that take place up to 24 weeks, and in some instances further, if there is a threat of death to the mother or the child. What the hon. Member is talking about are the 3,000 abortions that happen every year after someone has had the worst news possible—when they are told after their 20-week anomaly scan that the baby they really wanted will not make it past birth. I do not think the hon. Member is a cruel man, and I do not think he wishes to advocate that women should be forced to carry children they know will die to term, but that is not affected by our current regulations. He is putting at risk women's access in that moment by advocating a reduction in the time limit.

Jim Shannon: Obviously, the hon. Lady and I have slightly different opinions about decriminalisation. I have been concerned over a period of time, and still am, about examples of cases involving Down's syndrome children, including one in Northern Ireland—a lovely, young Down's syndrome child who would not be here today had her parents not decided to ensure that she had the opportunity to have a life. We are talking about those things. Ultimately, we are talking not solely about what is ethically or morally good or bad, or right or wrong, but about what would be permissible under the law without criminal sanction. That is what I and other hon. Members are talking about: the reality in law, and an increase in late-term unsafe abortions.

Decriminalisation sounds innocuous but, as the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton) referred to, when the public is polled on its effect, the results are plain: only 1% of the public support abortion being permitted up to birth, which is what decriminalisation of abortion would permit without legal consequence, against the views of the majority—99% of people. Hon. Members may be interested to learn that following the decriminalisation of abortion in New Zealand in March 2020, which my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) referred to, late-term abortions—those occurring after 20 weeks gestation—increased by 43% compared to the previous year. That is not scaremongering; it is evidential fact. We are asking that all hon. Members take on board that information.

As the evidence from overseas shows, the risk of decriminalising abortion is not only that more abortions may take place but that the dangerous, unsafe abortions that supposedly prompted the introduction of the Abortion Act 1967 in England and Wales will occur. To date, none of the legislative proposals for decriminalisation, including the proposed new clauses of the Crime and Policing Bill, contains safeguards that would effectively guard against women seeking abortions while subject to coercion or abuse. Given the operation of the pills-by-post system, it is also not clear to me or to some hon. Members in this Chamber that there can be any guarantee that a woman's gestational age or her general health would be effectively ascertained under a decriminalisation regime.

Whatever view we take on the principle of abortion, there is a general public consensus that fewer abortions taking place is a good thing, so I am concerned that the decriminalisation of abortion would lead to the normalisation of late-term—or at least later-term—abortions, and have a chilling effect on the broader discussions about the viability and value of life.

I am coming to the end of my speech—we have three hours for the debate, but I am conscious that other hon. Members want to speak. Given the ready availability of pills by post without the requirement for an in-person consultation—which I believe is critical—the bitter irony of the decriminalisation of abortion is that it would place women at greater risk of harm. Not all choices should be entirely free or unfettered. We accept limits to our choice in many areas of law, and this one should be no exception. The criminal law on abortion safeguards women by providing clarity and a regulatory framework. Decriminalisation does the opposite, and in a way that is much more damaging and much more critical to the debate. Decriminalisation is not a simple matter of choice and autonomy. If we reduce the debate to that, we will fail in our duty to protect women and the babies.

I urge hon. Members, irrespective of their views on the principle—which, as I said, may be very different from my own—to consider the full ramifications of decriminalisation of abortion. It will harm more than help, and those who suffer will be women who endanger their own safety and that of the unborn children, who are equally important. We must protect both equally. Decriminalisation of abortion would fail to accomplish that.

5.4 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I pay tribute to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for opening this very important petitions debate. I thank the petitioner, Gemma, and everyone who signed the petition. It is a real privilege to speak in this timely debate.

Abortion remains a criminal offence in England and Wales under a law written in 1861. That means that in those two jurisdictions, still, in 2025, women can be criminally prosecuted and imprisoned for ending their own pregnancies. That is not a theoretical consequence of a law passed before women even had the right to vote; it is happening now at an increasing rate.

Since 2020, around 100 women have been criminally investigated, six have faced court and one has been sent to prison on suspicion of illegal abortion offences. Those investigations are dehumanising and prolonged, and the women forced to endure them are often extraordinarily vulnerable: victims of domestic abuse and violence, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, girls under the age of 18, and many women who have suffered miscarriage, stillbirth or who have given birth prematurely. They are victims but they are treated as suspects and subjected to invasive investigations that inflict profound long-term harm.

Because of this law, women are being dragged through police cells after having given birth and forced to wait up to six years for a court date. Mothers are being torn from their existing children and new babies—sometimes for years. Some are still fighting to get them back. Women have received death threats. They have self-harmed, been denied access to the mental and physical health care they require following their trauma and been forced to spend every single penny that they and their families have earned just to defend themselves. Just what public interest is that serving? It is not justice; it is cruelty. Yet now, under new guidance from the National Police Chiefs' Council, officers are being told that they can seize women's phones and search their messages, internet history and even health apps if they are suspected of ending a pregnancy outside of the law. It is state-sanctioned surveillance, and victims are being treated like criminals.

That is why the law has to change. I have tabled new clause 1 to the Crime and Policing Bill to put an end to the prosecution of women for ending their own pregnancies. It is backed by 115 cross-party MPs and 50 sector organisations. My new clause simply disapplies the criminal law related to abortion from women acting in relation to their own pregnancy. Despite what those on the opposing side scaremonger, my new clause is narrow and targeted. It changes absolutely nothing about the provision of abortion services and the conditions laid out in the Abortion Act 1967, including the time limit and the need to meet certain criteria and to obtain the approval and signatures of two doctors. It maintains existing punishments for both medical professionals and violent partners who end a pregnancy outside of the law.

Instead, new clause 1 simply removes the threat of criminal liability from women who end their own pregnancies, enabling them to get the care and support that they need. As has been mentioned, it would bring us into line with Northern Ireland, Ireland, France, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. The reality is that

no woman wakes up 24 weeks pregnant or more and suddenly decides to end their own pregnancy outside a hospital or clinic. But some women, in desperate circumstances, make choices that many of us would struggle to understand. What they need is compassion and care, not the threat of criminal prosecution.

As hon. Members will be aware, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) has tabled new clause 20 to the Crime and Policing Bill in this regard. She and I share the same interests and overarching objective—to remove women from the criminal law related to abortion—but her new clause is markedly broader in terms of the scope of change proposed to the long-standing settlement that provides for abortion services. This framework is complex. Hard-won battles have cemented women's access to abortion in this country into primary legislation. Parliament has, up to now, remained resistant to changes that constitute a rollback. I have concerns about overturning that entire framework at the current time and replacing it with a mechanism that would leave power in the hands of a single Minister. Does the Minister agree that such powers would mark a sea change in the long-standing, underlying framework that provides for abortion in England and Wales?

The Abortion Act 1967 is also related to the underlying criminal law on abortion in England and Wales. Repealing that law in its entirety would bring the continued practical operation and enforcement of the Act into question. Will the Minister comment on the likelihood of that leaving a regulatory gap?

We are lucky enough to live somewhere where abortion is accessible to the vast majority of women—and rightly so. We must ensure that we preserve that, particularly given the current political climate in the world. I would also expect any proposed changes on this subject to be consulted on and to include input from the sector, the essential work of which is underpinned by the current settlement.

I am staunchly pro-choice, and as much as I believe that future reforms on abortion provision are needed, we must not lose sight of the current moral imperative and its urgency: vulnerable women being dragged from hospital bed to police cell on suspicion of ending their own pregnancies. That can be stopped by disapplying the criminal law on abortion in relation to women.

New clause 1 has the explicit backing of every single organisation that represents abortion providers in England and Wales. It is also supported by the Royal Colleges of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Midwives, General Practitioners, Psychiatrists, and Nursing. Countless groups on violence against women and girls, including the End Violence Against Women Coalition, Refuge, Southall Black Sisters, Rape Crisis England & Wales, Imkaan, and the Centre for Women's Justice, are also behind new clause 1. It is also supported by today's petitioner—thank you, Gemma.

The public supports this change. This petition, signed by more than 103,000 people, is a stark reinforcement of that fact. It is time to ensure that those desperate women who are failed by the law or access to abortion can safely turn to healthcare in their time of need—often the worst moments of their lives—without fear of being turned in to the police by their own doctors. Those women deserve the care and compassion that they need. We have spoken today of the case of Nicola Packer. There must be no more Nicola Packers.

5.12 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I thank the Petitions Committee for selecting this timely topic for debate.

From my experience running a women's refuge and serving on the Women and Equalities Committee, I have seen how our criminal justice system disproportionately lets down vulnerable women. Since 2020, 100 women and girls have been investigated by police on suspicion of having illegal abortions. Very concerning, that number is rising.

New guidance from the National Police Chiefs' Council reminds police officers to search women's houses for drugs related to ending pregnancy and to seize their digital devices to check internet search history and messages to friends and family, and even to access health data through their menstrual cycle and fertility tracking apps—subverting the very tools that are designed to keep us healthy. The guidance goes on to suggest how police officers could bypass the requirements of a court order to access NHS medical records. Who are the suspects that need such interrogation? Often, they are women who have suffered stillbirths, miscarriages and premature labours. Can we honestly say that it is right for police to be targeting women for criminal investigation at a point of such trauma?

That is what happened to Sammy. After a traumatic birth, she was resuscitating her newborn baby when seven police officers arrived at her house, ahead of any paramedics or medical staff. Her home became a crime scene, and she became a suspect. The police raided her bins, suspecting that she had illegally taken abortion medication. Her phone, computer and all communication with her partner were blocked by police. She provided forensic samples that did not show the presence of abortion drugs, but despite that, she remained under police investigation for a year, during which time she was allowed only limited supervised contact with her baby. To those in this debate who emphasise the life of the child, I ask, what benefit does such separation from a mother bring to a newborn?

Sammy's story is not an isolated incident; it is part of a disturbing pattern that is creating a culture of fear around women's reproductive rights. Sophie, a teenager, was arrested in the middle of the night following a police raid on her parents' home. She was held in custody for 19 hours. Despite her age and vulnerability, she faced two trials, and it took six years for the charge that she ended her own pregnancy to be dropped. Sophie is not the last. We have already heard of the case of Nicola Packer.

Emily Darlington: I thank the hon. Member for her powerful speech and for reminding us about the mothers who are absolutely traumatised; often, they have other children, who are also traumatised. The tactics being used by the police are increasingly worrying, and I wonder whether the hon. Member shares my worry that the escalation we have seen in the last few years seems to mirror the escalation in the United States? We do not want to be in a position like the US, where women are literally dying because healthcare professionals are worried about intervening, given that they could lose their licence and be put in jail.

Alex Brewer: I absolutely agree; that is a fear that I share.

Nicola went to hospital to seek care, but was instead passed to the police. She was charged with carrying out an illegal abortion, a nightmare that lasted four and half years before she was acquitted unanimously by a jury. These incidents reflect a system that increasingly criminalises women for seeking healthcare, and we cannot let it continue.

Carla Lockhart: The hon. Lady referenced Nicola Packer. Would she not say that the solution in that case is not decriminalisation, but to reinstate the gestational age checks for pills by post?

Alex Brewer: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, but I do not agree.

To overcome the fear and anxiety that many women face when seeking medical support, we must instead build a society rooted in compassion and centred on safe, supportive healthcare, where such healthcare is treated as part of women's services, and not treated with suspicion or stigma.

One route to decriminalising abortion is through new clause 1, which has been tabled to the Crime and Policing Bill. New clause 1 would bring England and Wales in line with Northern Ireland and countries such as France, Ireland, Canada and Australia, where women are not criminalised for abortion. The new clause is backed by End Violence Against Women, Refuge, Rape Crisis England & Wales, and many others. It would not change time limits or legal safeguards, but would simply remove the threat of prosecution for women.

As 88% of abortions in England and Wales occur before 10 weeks, the idea that decriminalisation would lead to many more late-term abortions is simply not supported by evidence. At a time when reproductive rights are under threat globally, we must act. Decriminalising abortion is a necessary step towards equality, compassion and justice.

5.19 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. As mentioned, abortion is currently a criminal offence in England and Wales under the Offences against the Person Act 1861, and unless certain conditions are met, we have the harshest punishment in the world for illegal abortion: life imprisonment. That is despite the fact that the UK is an overwhelmingly pro-choice nation, with a recent YouGov poll showing that 87% of the British public say that abortion should be allowed in the UK, compared with just 6% who say it should not.

Like that overwhelming majority of the country, I fully support a woman's right to choose. Having been a frontline healthcare worker for 20 years, I can say with experience and conviction that access to safe and legal abortion is a fundamental aspect of any modern healthcare system. It is crucial that women and girls around the country have access to safe, high-quality healthcare that supports their wellbeing—and that must include their sexual and reproductive healthcare.

That is why I was proud to sign new clause 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), to the Crime and Policing Bill. The new clause would

[*Sadik Al-Hassan*]

decriminalise abortion and make it clear that no woman should ever be prosecuted for ending her pregnancy within the widely agreed upon 24-week window. With over 90 MPs from eight parties now supporting the new clause, I am confident that we will finally right this historic wrong and stop this infringement upon women's rights.

This issue has been debated for far too long. It is an outrage that we have made such limited progress on updating a law that was passed 164 years ago, despite the immense societal change we have undergone in that time. Although the last Parliament made some limited progress on this issue, particularly by legislating for a safe access zone around abortion clinics and hospitals, it failed to legislate on what so many people are crying out for, which will forever be a stain on its record. Let us not repeat that mistake; let us make progress and finally bring this injustice to an end.

5.21 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Vickers. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Statistics show that one in three women in the UK will have an abortion at some point in their lives, and the vast majority, as has been said, are at under 10 weeks gestation. Although the Abortion Act 1967 makes abortion legal under strict conditions, abortion remains a criminal act under a law that dates back over 160 years. Life is very different now from when the Offences against the Person Act was introduced in 1861, but a growing number of women are being investigated today under that Victorian law for suspected illegal abortion. In fact, at least 100 women and girls have been investigated in the past five years on suspicion of having had an illegal abortion.

Under updated police guidance, such investigations for sudden pregnancy loss can include searching a woman's home, checking her phone and search history, and accessing NHS records without a court order, with many women treated like a suspect during a traumatising and likely devastating time—and all of that is happening while they are also physically recovering from that loss. Some women have even been put on trial, facing significant jail sentences.

Women should not face criminalisation for acting on their right to receive reproductive healthcare and for seeking medical help. What does that mean? Changing the law does not mean agreeing with the actions of an individual woman, and I say that as a mam-gu—as a granny—of neonatal babies. But it does mean recognising that criminalisation is not the best way to ensure that women have access to the care and support they need. Such a move would be far from unprecedented. Women are already exempt from the criminal law on abortion in Northern Ireland and in countries including France, Ireland, Canada and Australia, and that is also recommended by the World Health Organisation.

I commend my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for tabling a new clause to the Crime and Policing Bill to remove women from the criminal law for abortion. The new clause is supported by 50 medical bodies, charities and women's organisations. Removing the threat of criminal liability for women who end their pregnancies would allow them to get the care and support they need.

As the law stands, the criminalisation of abortion impacts not only women seeking abortion, but women suffering miscarriages, the trauma of stillbirths and, in effect, all pregnant women. Access to healthcare is a right; it is high time to make that a reality for women, without the threat of criminalisation.

One hundred and sixty-four years—it is amazing, isn't it?—is long enough. Over 100,000 members of the public have signed this e-petition calling for abortion to be decriminalised. It is time for the UK Government to listen and act.

5.24 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. This is an important debate for the many of us who have been campaigning on this issue for many years, because we feel passionately that the equal ability to control what happens to our bodies is the foundation of equality within society. I thank Gemma for her petition and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for setting out the law so well.

I want us to be honest with the British public about what we are talking about and, therefore, what we need to see happen if we want decriminalisation. I was the architect of the Northern Ireland legislation, and I want to be clear about what we did there and about the difference between the two proposals that will come before Parliament in the coming weeks. In Northern Ireland, we did not do what new clause 1 to the Crime and Policing Bill seeks to do. The new clause would not decriminalise abortion; it would disapply the law on abortion for some people, but would retain the abortion legislation. Those of us who support decriminalisation need to be clear that decriminalisation must mean repeal. We did that in Northern Ireland, and that is why we have been able to protect women who previously had no access to any abortion provision.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Lady mentioned Northern Ireland, and I accept that there are fundamental differences between our positions. She introduced the Northern Ireland legislation, but does she accept that the views there—among both the general public and their representatives—are quite different from those in Walthamstow?

Ms Creasy: The hon. Gentleman asks me about the view of people in Northern Ireland. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe pointed out, in the six years since that law was passed there has been no call to reverse it. I believe that human rights are universal, which is why I thought it was right for us in the United Kingdom Parliament to act for all those women in Northern Ireland whose rights were being denied by the previous status quo. There has been resistance, and we can learn from it; that is why we tabled new clause 20 to the Crime and Policing Bill.

I want to be very clear: anybody who claims that they are supporting decriminalisation by supporting new clause 1 is not telling us what decriminalisation really looks like. Decriminalisation must involve repeal, and that is why new clause 20 would repeal the legislation around abortion. That matters because, under the existing framework here, the police have already issued guidance

that talks about prosecuting women. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) that we do not want to see prosecutions. Many of us have been concerned for some years about the increase in investigations and prosecutions of women for abortion. We have not been able to get to the bottom of why there has been such a surge or why the police felt the need to produce that guidance.

New clause 1 would not stop subsequent guidance targeting the partners of people who had an abortion or the medics who provided the abortions, and it would not prevent demands for women to give evidence as part of that process. If we are to finally put to bed the notion that abortion is treated in the same way in this country as endangering the safety of railway workers or the possession of explosives—which it is under the Offences against the Person Act 1861—we must remove these offences from legislation. New clause 20 would do that: it explicitly says that there can be no investigation or prosecution under those offences. Therefore, it offers protection to all those involved in ensuring that women can access safe and legal abortions. That is why we took the approach that we did in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, there was no abortion service at all, but we wanted to fight for what an abortion service should be.

Those of us who consider ourselves pro-choice absolutely want to stop the investigations and prosecutions. Opposition Members have set out many of the arguments that are made to attack abortion access in this country, and that is where the human rights legislation came in. It is not true that when we passed the Northern Ireland legislation in 2019, there was immediately access to abortion. We had to fight tooth and nail against those who used their positions to thwart that legislation. The reason we were able to do that was that we had written into law a human rights lock, which meant that whenever people in the civil service, the police or the healthcare service did not approve of abortion and sought to resist the legislation, the Secretary of State had to stand up for the right of women in Northern Ireland to access a safe and legal abortion. I sat with the Secretaries of State at that point, who were not themselves particularly supportive of abortion access, as they admitted to me that they had to push through that legislation and ensure that provision.

I have read the judgments from the cases where the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission intervened directly and used the powers that we wrote into law to defend access to abortion. Why does that matter? It matters because we know that abortion is already under attack in this country. I know that many are concerned about the Americanisation of our debate here—I want to come on to that—but we have already seen millions of pounds being spent on anti-abortion activism in this country. We do not need to import those people from America; we already have people like Lord Michael Hintze and Lord Michael Farmer, who are more than happy to fund anti-abortion activism.

I pay tribute to the work of Dr Pam Lowe in identifying and tracking that. We can see from that work that there has been better co-ordination of anti-abortion campaigning, against decriminalisation, as well as the arguments made about the time limit and telemedicine—and, ultimately, in favour of the argument that we should be demanding to know why women wish to have an abortion. For no other healthcare provision do we demand that women explain and justify themselves before we provide it.

Whether it is the March for Life, the activities on our campuses or indeed the lobbying of MPs, anybody who was complacent about access to abortion in this country before we saw the Trump playbook being brought into British politics needs to look more closely at what has been happening.

When we legislate on abortion, we do not just need to properly decriminalise; we need to properly protect. That is why we tabled new clause 20, which has cross-party support. The anti-abortion movement never asks for abolition; it asks for more safeguards. It asks for more visits to doctors to delay the process of accessing an abortion. It makes a claim about medical technology. Of course, it is amazing when doctors are able to do wonderful things to save the lives of children born prematurely, but this is apples and pears. The people who have to make that horrible choice to have a late-term abortion are not doing so with the best of news in their hearts, but with hearts that are broken, because they have been told that their child will not live past birth. Who are we as a society, here in England and Wales, to compel those women to keep carrying a child to term that they know will die in a way that we do not do in Northern Ireland?

Carla Lockhart: I think the mask is slipping today. This is an attack on those who seek to lobby for the protection of life in this United Kingdom, and I for one want to stand up for those people in this debate. That is such an insult towards the many groups and organisations who value life, and who value both lives in every pregnancy. It is outrageous that those people have been demonised.

Ms Creasy: I am sorry that the hon. Lady feels like that. I hope she heard my words to her colleague, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I have always—it is on the record—defended the right of people who disagree with abortion to make their argument. I have always—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady is chuntering from a sedentary position. I have always defended the right of people to disagree. What I do not do is defend the right of people who disagree to harass.

Let me talk about another example of where abortion access is under threat. We fought tooth and nail in the previous Parliament to put safe access zones to abortion clinics in place. We absolutely uphold people's religious liberties, but no one has a religious right to pray anywhere they like that trumps the human right of privacy that a woman has when she has made the choice to have an abortion to go to a clinic. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) set out the consequences of that.

Nothing in new clause 1 would protect buffer zones. New clause 20 would explicitly protect buffer zones, because the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has intervened to protect buffer zones as part of human rights legislation. Some may argue, "Don't worry: because she made that ruling and fought that case for us in Northern Ireland, we can apply it to England and Wales." New clause 20 would put that beyond doubt. It is therefore not some untried and untested mechanism for defending abortion; it is about recognising that, if we want to protect abortion access, we have to repeal the relevant legislation and then say what happens next.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Creasy: I will of course give way—the hon. Gentleman gave way to me.

Jim Shannon: I cannot let the occasion pass without putting it on the record that silent prayer is very much just that: a silent prayer between the individual and their God. Nothing is ever said. With respect to the hon. Lady, it is totally erroneous for her to say that a silent prayer is wrong.

Ms Creasy: I understand the position that the hon. Member is taking. Many of us believe that somebody standing at an abortion clinic and feeling the need to pray there, rather than in a church or 150 metres away from the abortion clinic, is not silently praying but intervening on the privacy of the person accessing an abortion zone. That is why this Parliament—*[Interruption.]* I can hear the hon. Gentleman chuntering. I want to make some progress, but let me be very clear: those of us who recognise that safe access zones balance rights in the best way recognise that the hon. Gentleman is not alone in continuing to attack them. The vice-president of the United States has sought to attack our nation's ability to protect women's access to abortion clinics via safe access zones. The threat that we are facing is therefore not theoretical.

Emily Darlington: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, as have all hon. Members who have spoken today. I am lucky never to have had an abortion, but I have had two miscarriages, and I cannot tell you how vulnerable I was at that time. Anybody coming up to me at that point would have made me feel even more terrible than I already did. I have friends who have had abortions, and it is a terrible choice to make, for whatever reason anybody makes it. Whether the child would not survive or was a child of rape—for whatever reason that choice gets made, nobody makes it happily. Does my hon. Friend agree that the reason there are exclusion zones is that the human rights of that woman, who is going through one of the worst times of her life, must be protected at such a horrible time?

Ms Creasy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for giving that personal testimony. What she touches on is what we have seen in the debate in this country for several years now: the expectation that women should give a reason why they want to have an abortion or seek that kind of medical care. That is why the Trump playbook being brought into British politics—as we now see it is—is so dangerous in this context. When the leader of Reform, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage)—I note that he is not here to defend his views—talks about the “ludicrous” nature of our laws and calls for a reduction in the time limit, he is not thinking of all those people who get that horrific diagnosis. He is sending a bat signal to his colleagues and fellow travellers in America: that under his watch it would be open season in this country—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that if she refers to another Member, she should have given that Member advance warning.

Ms Creasy: I do apologise, Mr Vickers. I just thought that, given his recent pronouncement and the interest that he has shown in this matter, the hon. Member for Clacton would be here.

Let me talk, then, about the vice-president of the United States—I hope you will understand, Mr Vickers, that I could not have asked him to be here today. He is one of those fellow travellers who believes that there are votes to be gained by using women's bodies as a battlefield; that is what the debate about abortion in America has become. We are seeing American ideas—the concept of abortion until birth and the idea that women should be expected to explain themselves—being brought into our debates. I know that many of us will fight tooth and nail against those narratives and for equality, so I ask colleagues across the House: when people come for our abortion rights or propose further restrictions or “safeguards” for abortion, do we want the power of a human rights commissioner to back us up in those fights? This is our chance to have that: new clause 20 learns from a body of law and of practice in Northern Ireland about how we protect abortion properly. We do not just decriminalise it; the new clause would properly protect abortion.

I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower, and I urge her to reread new clause 20, because from what she said, I do not think she has read it properly. Rather than concentrating power in the hands of Ministers—precisely because of the risk that comes from any future Government that may seek to use secondary legislation powers—the new clause would actively restrict them. It has a triple lock and states, first, that regulations can be made only to uphold that human rights approach and, secondly, that they cannot be used to reduce access to abortion, or to amend section 1 of the 1967 Act—which new clause 20 keeps in play as a list for regulation rather than prosecution, so it does not touch the time limits either. The new clause then states that any attempt to undermine that human rights lock can be done only with the support of the entire Parliament.

Any new Member of Parliament here today has probably had the pleasure of sitting on a Delegated Legislation Committee in the last year and wondered quite what they are doing in a small Committee Room. The answer is that they are making law, but doing so in a Committee where the balance of power has been determined by the Whips and where the Government get to decide who sits on that Committee. Those are secondary legislation powers. It is entirely conceivable that new clause 1, if passed, would give those secondary legislation powers—they are in the policing Bill—to a future Government without any restriction.

Tonia Antoniazzi: This is not a competition between my hon. Friend and me—we both have the same aim—but it is interesting that more than 115 MPs have signed new clause 1, and it has been endorsed by the whole industry. Everyone has signed up to it. Has my hon. Friend had conversations with them about why they have not signed up to her new clause?

Ms Creasy: I am sorry that my hon. Friend feels the need to ask that question. She knows full well that despite me asking repeatedly to meet her and to talk to the campaigners she has been working with, that meeting has not yet been forthcoming. I am still open to meeting people, but we need to be very clear on the record: new clause 20 has in it a lock on the activity of Ministers, deliberately so, because this is a human rights issue. It should be a matter that is subject to the entire Parliament, and it should be clear that Ministers may only ever use the powers in this legislation to make human rights-compliant legislation. If they did not, the human rights

commissioner could challenge them on it and take the Secretary of State to court, just as was done in Northern Ireland.

Conversely, new clause 1 would allow Ministers to have secondary legislation powers without any restrictions. Again, I ask Members who are concerned about Ministers being involved in writing legislation to look at the difference in that constitutional role. I recognise that only those who have had the repeated pleasure of serving on secondary legislation Committees will understand the powers they can have. Certainly, I encourage people to look at how George Osborne used secondary legislation powers to change the student tuition fee rates and benefit rights. The previous Government used them under the retained EU law legislation. The scope of those powers has been broadening. Many of us respect the role of Government, but obviously we recognise that, should there be a Government with a more extreme agenda in the future, they will also have those powers. New clause 20 would lock those powers down.

I do not wish to detain the House any longer, because others wish to speak. What matters is that we are clear about why proper decriminalisation matters. Restricting access to abortion does not stop abortion; it stops safe abortion. Failing to protect access to abortion does not make it easier for people to have children; it simply means more pain, misery and heartache to be had. There is no right amount of abortions to happen in our society, but a basic human right is at stake here. Members of this House who are alive to the politics and the policy debates on abortion and in politics would do well to think about how they will feel in five years' time if what we see at the moment is the start, not the end, of assaults on abortion. I urge Members who care about decriminalisation to back new clause 20 and make sure that our constituents in England and Wales have the same human right that they do in France and Northern Ireland.

5.44 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank all those who have contributed to the debate today. My views differ from many who have spoken, and I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who outlined our case extremely well. For me, this is a debate on life. I believe that both lives matter in every pregnancy. The most basic human right is the right to life. I speak today with deep conviction on this issue, and a desire to restore life-affirming laws to this entire United Kingdom—laws that protect the most vulnerable in our society. It is important to outline that since the 1967 Act was brought into force in the United Kingdom, 10 million abortions have taken place. One baby is lost to abortion every two and a half minutes; that is 26 lives every hour—and this debate will last three hours. That is stark. I come at this issue from the perspective of life and the protection of life. In every pregnancy, both lives matter.

There are times in politics when one does not enjoy being right. Back in 2021, I wrote in *The House* magazine of my fears that the pills-by-post scheme for at-home abortions was leading to an increase in medical complications, dangerous late abortions and coerced abortions. Plenty of others expressed similar fears. Sadly, those fears have all proven to be true. A study based on freedom of information requests to NHS trusts found

that more than 10,000 women who took at least one abortion pill, provided by the NHS, at home in 2020 needed hospital treatment for side effects—equivalent to more than one in 17 women, or 20 women per day. Late last year, Stuart Worby was convicted of using abortion pills obtained by a third party through the pills-by-post scheme to induce an abortion of a woman against her knowledge or will.

All those cases could have been prevented if abortion providers had not lobbied, in the face of warnings about precisely those kinds of incidents occurring, for the removal of in-person appointments where health risks could be assessed and the woman's identity and gestational age accurately verified. It is that last point about ensuring that a woman's gestational age is accurately verified that has indirectly led to the debate we are having today.

The abortion lobby has acknowledged—I quote Jonathan Lord, former medical director for abortion provider Marie Stopes—that until recently, “only three women” had

“ever been on trial over the past 160 years”

for illegal abortions. Since then, there has been an increase in investigations and prosecutions, albeit still a very small number in the light of the more than a quarter of a million abortions we now have every year in the United Kingdom—a national tragedy.

Why has there been a small rise in prosecutions? It is surely not because the CPS or police have suddenly decided to handle the issue in a more draconian way; rather, the pills-by-post scheme has enabled women, either dishonestly or because they have miscalculated their gestational age, to obtain abortion pills beyond the 10-week limit when at-home abortions are legal and considered safe for women—they are, of course, never safe for the baby—and even beyond the 24-week upper time limit for abortions in this country. Tragically, that has led to viable babies' lives being ended. The responsibility for that surely lies with those who lobbied for the pills-by-post scheme.

What is the solution? Well, it cannot be to make matters worse by decriminalising abortion. That would be highly irresponsible, creating conditions where a woman could perform her own abortion, unsupervised, without any legal deterrent, away from a clinical setting, at a stage in pregnancy when doing so would carry great risks and when her baby would be viable. We would be de facto introducing abortion up to birth and reintroducing dangerous backstreet abortions. That is not pro-women, and it renders the time limit redundant in a context where pills can be obtained without any reliable in-person gestational age check.

There is a clear alternative solution: end the pills-by-post scheme and reinstate in-person consultations. Polling published by *The Telegraph* last year found that more than half of the public agreed that it should remain the case that a woman is breaking the law if she has an abortion of a healthy baby between the current 24-week legal time limit and birth; only 16% disagreed. The public does not support decriminalisation. Only 1% support abortion up to birth, which such proposals would introduce by the removal of offences prohibiting women from performing their own abortion at any stage. Polling has found that 71% of women support a return to in-person appointments, with only 9% in favour of continuing with the scheme.

[Carla Lockhart]

Decriminalisation is a convenient way to cover up the disastrous consequences of the pills-by-post scheme. I greatly fear that, just as my earlier warnings about the scheme have sadly proven true, if decriminalisation were introduced my warnings today would also come true and more women would take abortion pills away from a clinical context late in pregnancy, endangering their lives and leading to the tragic deaths of viable unborn babies. Permitting that would be profoundly irresponsible. Ideology would be trumping women's safety.

One final comment: I have rarely witnessed anything as cynical and disingenuous as the argument, put forward by its supporters, that decriminalisation would allow women in England and Wales to have the same so-called rights as women in Northern Ireland. When the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) hijacked the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act 2019 to impose abortion on Northern Ireland without democratic consent, she seemed to have no problem at all with the law in England and Wales, bemoaning how women in Northern Ireland were being discriminated against because they did not have access to the same law. She then, however, helped to introduce an even more extreme law for Northern Ireland than what we have here in England and Wales, and now cynically uses that more extreme law to argue that it is women in England and Wales who are now being discriminated against, despite the fact they can access abortions up to almost six months of pregnancy, essentially on demand. In my mind, that is politics of the lowest kind.

What is not often recognised is that introducing decriminalisation here would not bring abortion practice in England and Wales into line with Northern Ireland, because of this key difference: there is no pills-by-post scheme in Northern Ireland. It is the combination of the pills-by-post scheme, whereby women can obtain abortion pills without reliable checks for gestational age, health risks or coercion, while also removing any deterrent against women performing their own abortions right up to birth, that would make decriminalisation so dangerous and so irresponsible for the Government. I hope my warnings will not go unheeded this time.

5.53 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I am most grateful to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the Petitions Committee for this crucial debate. I also thank Gemma, the thousands of people who have signed the petition and the hundreds of constituents who have contacted me over the years, adding their voices to the call to end the archaic law that sees women who access medical services given some of the harshest sentences that our criminal system doles out.

Despite the surrounding issues, we have to be clear that the debate today is not specifically about changing the laws around termination limits. It is not about changing the eligibility for legal abortions, nor is it about changing the requirements for administering abortions. This debate is about changing antiquated laws from a bygone era that are no longer fit for our modern understanding of women's bodily autonomy or women's health.

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

The Abortion Act 1967 is now almost 60 years old. There are many things that have changed in terms of women's rights. In fact, it was not until 1991 that the idea that women could be raped by their husbands was accepted and the act was criminalised. This nearly 60-year-old law is in urgent need of updating so that it protects women and our right to bodily autonomy, rather than seeking to control it. Some of the other legislation that criminalises women for accessing healthcare dates from as early as the 1600s.

In 2020, I was pleased to join parliamentarians in voting to repeal legislation in Northern Ireland that prosecuted women for terminating their own pregnancies, yet in England, Scotland and Wales this type of legislation remains in place. The rest of the UK is dragging far behind the rest of the world: in England and Wales, we have the harshest criminalisation of abortion of any country in the world, and that includes countries that are actively anti-abortion, such as Poland and the USA. When President Trump announced his plans to criminalise women accessing abortion, he faced backlash from the Susan B. Anthony List, ardent anti-abortion campaigners.

In the past three years in England six women have appeared in court, charged with ending or attempting to end their own pregnancies. Abortion providers estimate that, for every woman who ends up in court, at least 10 others are subject to prolonged police investigations. When we talk about women being criminalised, we are not only referring to those who have accessed abortion beyond the legal term limit or even those suspected of doing so, but those women who have experienced miscarriages and stillbirths, who are being criminalised, investigated, and treated like criminals when they are going through a difficult and traumatic experience.

As someone who has experienced a stillbirth, I cannot express how traumatic it is. The idea that, during what can be the most difficult time in your life, you would be treated in that way—it just bears no understanding whatsoever. I remember that, very late on in my pregnancy, I was strongly advised—in fact, I felt under pressure—to terminate my pregnancy, and by doctors, not by anyone else. I was told that an injection could be given to stop my baby's heart, but that I would still have to give birth because of how late it was.

I said no—but what I want to point out here is that it was my choice. It is very important to stress that it was my choice. We spend so much time fighting for abortion rights and the right to healthcare that we often have no time to make the point that this is all about the choice women are given.

So many people come at this issue from a point of faith. We need to understand that the right to exercise one's faith in healthcare decisions is a human right. If that right is taken away and relinquished for one group of women who may choose to act for whatever reason, it is also relinquished for those who may choose not to move forward with an abortion. We have to keep stressing that: it is about choice. As a woman—as a black woman—I know that things have been done to our bodies for years without our consent. The rights we have now are about our autonomy, and we have to maintain them in whatever way we can.

It cannot be right that, while a woman is in this situation, the recent guidance from the National Police Chiefs' Council includes instructions to search her home,

internet history, text messages and even fertility tracking apps. That is awful. The guidance also, alarmingly, outlines ways in which the police can obtain abortion-related medical records from NHS providers, such as MSI Reproductive Choices UK, without a court order. Pregnancy loss is a devastating tragedy, and those who endure it deserve compassion and support—not criminalisation. It is grossly unacceptable to treat grieving parents as potential suspects in the loss of their child. This guidance risks compounding grief with the fear of prosecution, creating an effect that could deter women from seeking medical help or honest conversations with healthcare providers.

Equally, the decision to end a pregnancy can be devastating—a tragedy. Those who endure that also deserve compassion and support, not criminalisation. Access to healthcare should never be a criminal matter; making it so only puts lives at risk. Rather than targeting bereaved families, there should be a focus on improving maternal healthcare, addressing systemic failures, and ensuring that every parent receives the support they need during such a loss. As Louise McCudden, the head of external affairs at MSI Reproductive Choices UK, said:

“This guidance will be fuelling a culture of hostility and suspicion towards abortion and pregnancy.”

This policy is born out of a culture that demonises and criminalises women who access abortions, exercising their bodily autonomy, and it is sweeping up women who have seen their pregnancies come to an unplanned end. No one deserves to be investigated for ending their own pregnancy—and they certainly do not deserve it when they have lost their child. Those women and their partners need support during that time, but they will not get it if they are being treated like criminals. The continued criminalisation of abortion is antiquated, it lacks compassion and it needs to come to an end. This is about a choice, and every woman should be allowed to make that choice based on her views and beliefs. That is what our human rights are supposed to be about.

6 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for his powerful introduction to this very timeous petition debate. This is a conscience issue, and my Liberal Democrat colleagues may have very different views, but I find it ironic that it is a conscience issue as to whether women should have a choice over their own reproductive healthcare.

The petition calls on the UK Government to:

“remove abortion from criminal law so that no pregnant person can be criminalised for procuring their own abortion. The UK is out of step with World Health Organization who in 2022 recommended that barriers to abortion such as criminalisation, or approval of others or institutions should be removed. Amnesty International state that abortion is a human rights issue.”

I wonder how many people watching the debate, or at home this evening, are surprised that we still need to have this debate. They might be astonished that women in this country can be criminalised for having an abortion, because they believe that in 1967 the Abortion Act made abortion legal. Actually, what it did was to make it legal in certain circumstances, and more than half a century later we are still debating when and how it is appropriate

and when women can have the choice. As the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) said, so much has changed in the intervening years and so much about our society, laws and the political situation in which we live today is different from when that law was passed in 1967.

I believe that everyone, regardless of their gender identity, has a right to make independent decisions about their reproductive health without interference from the state or the law. Access to reproductive healthcare is a human right, as has been confirmed by the Supreme Court in relation to Northern Ireland.

Why are we debating this issue today? Because in this country we are seeing a rise in the number of prosecutions of women who have had abortions. We have heard about the tactics. In her powerful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) spoke about the stories of women like Sammy and Sophie, who are going through trauma because they made a decision. That is wholly unacceptable to me.

I find it unfortunate that at times today we have argued about how we decriminalise abortion and remove it from the statute books. Surely, the thing to do is to remove it altogether, not partially remove it or decriminalise it—to remove it altogether. The way we do that is by making it a human right, as it is in other countries. I also take issue with those who say that it is not a human right for women who have to go through an abortion when that goes against what their choice would be in other circumstances, often because they have been raped or because they have been told that it is a medical necessity. They deserve the protection of going through that in private and the right to do so. It should be a completely private personal choice and decision.

The hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill spoke about the right of women to decide not to have an abortion. That is as important to me as the right to have an abortion. I have often said in this place that I do not know what I would do in that situation. I have never had to make that choice. But I do not have the right to make that choice for any other woman; she has the right to make that choice based on her faith, her beliefs or her medical or personal situation and without any interference from me or anybody else.

The fact that we are still debating this question is a failure: a failure of our system to recognise the rights of every individual to their own healthcare decisions. The only way that we can effectively protect people from being criminalised is to make abortion a human right in the way that we did in Northern Ireland. I was part of that campaign, along with the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy). It is right that women in every part of the United Kingdom should have the same protection, choice and rights.

6.5 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank the Petitions Committee for enabling this debate and the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for opening it.

As shadow Justice Minister, I have spoken on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition in recent debates on assisted dying, and I do so again today on another complex issue that similarly draws on ethical, legal and moral

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

questions. I do not think that today's debate is a failure; it reflects the complexity of the issue at hand. Like assisted dying, calls to decriminalise abortion can trigger profound disagreement among families, friends and indeed, Members of Parliament of the same and different political parties. I deeply respect the perspectives of those advocating for this change and everyone who signed the petition, including 142 constituents of mine in Bexhill and Battle. I do not know the new hon. Members quite as well, but I have come to deeply respect the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on many issues, even if we do not see eye to eye on this.

If there were to be a vote, the historical position has always been that it would be a free vote. There are a variety of views among Conservative MPs, councillors and members, and His Majesty's Opposition would remain neutral. In my experience, the preponderance of Conservative thought, particularly among parliamentarians, has been caution about decriminalisation because, it is argued, it carries risks that could undermine the current balance of rights and protections enshrined in our legal framework.

Let me be absolutely clear to people watching, especially women who might be worried that the UK is somehow rowing back on our abortion provision: in England, Scotland and Wales, abortion is lawful, provided that the usual criteria in the Abortion Act 1967 are met. There are different criteria in Northern Ireland, but the previous Government introduced a new legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland to that effect. As hon. Members have said, the Abortion Act 1967 provides grounds for an abortion, exempting women from prosecution under the Offences against the Person Act and the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929.

The petitioners have asked us to consider whether abortion should be decriminalised completely, so that no woman, or potentially no individual who assists her, can be prosecuted for an abortion under any circumstances. When considering abortion, we are not just considering the wellbeing, autonomy and rights of the pregnant woman. Our society and legal system have also given consideration to the welfare of the unborn child. The phrase "unborn child" is, on the face of it, a clear and simple one, but in moral and legal terms it lacks the moral clarity we feel about the moral considerations due to a child after its birth.

Religious thought of all kinds very often ascribes moral rights of a high magnitude to an unborn child at any stage. More scientifically focused viewpoints try to give consideration to the level of development, sensitivity to pain and suffering, or the point at which an unborn child might survive outside the womb. I think it is fair to say that there is a very widely held view that a human embryo at any stage is afforded moral consideration beyond that given to any other collection of equivalent cells.

In the case of abortion, the law is designed to recognise that. Criminal law is the manner in which we safeguard the vulnerable and uphold the sanctity of life in our system. Abortion laws, as they stand, provide a structure to ensure the rights of everyone involved, including pregnant women and unborn children, are considered with a degree of fairness and that there is accountability.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I apologise for arriving late, Mr Dowd, and it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. My hon. Friend makes a salient point about the ethical issues around extinguishing the life of the unborn. There is another salient matter: the assumption on the part of the advocates of this move that individual autonomy—we see the same with the debate about the end of life—trumps all else and that personal interests, dressed up as rights, are more important than the obligations to others and society along with duties to the country and those greater duties to God. Would my hon. Friend like to comment on the philosophical rather than the theological aspect of that?

Dr Mullan: Although my right hon. Friend and I might not agree on where we draw the line on each of those very complex issues in different circumstances, I absolutely sympathise with the view that individuals sit within society and we have a wider obligation. Sometimes, laws and our customs are not there just for the benefit of individuals; they are there because of wider considerations.

Ms Creasy: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way and I recognise the points he is making. However, he says that criminal law is the way in which we give effect to the framework that he is talking about. Obviously, as we have discussed in this debate, there is no criminal underpinning to abortion in Northern Ireland, where abortion is a healthcare matter and is regulated as healthcare. For the avoidance of doubt, can I clarify that he would also accept that if we were to do as new clause 20 requires and introduce healthcare regulations that are human rights-compliant to replace the criminal regulation, there would be regulation and guidance about health services? It would not create a gap; it would be a replacement.

Dr Mullan: What I said was that traditionally in this country the nature of how we oversee and protect sanctity of life questions and those who might extinguish life is through the criminal law. Of course, the hon. Member is right to point out that in other jurisdictions, including in Northern Ireland, they might do it differently, but that is the tradition, certainly in England and Wales and, in most regards, in Northern Ireland, too. I do not think that it is fair for her to use an example of doing things differently to suggest that arguments different from that are not valid. In fact, generally speaking I found her remarks during this debate to be quite insensitive to the complexities of the issues at hand. She was tempted to focus more of her time on talking about Trump than on the very delicate balancing act that many people bring to debates about this morally complex issue. I will now continue with my speech.

We must also remember that ultimately any prosecution undertaken by the CPS must meet the test for being in the public interest. We must not confuse questions about the appropriateness of sentencing and the appropriateness of an individual decision to prosecute with an overall question about whether the criminal law itself is the right or wrong mechanism through which we regulate this activity.

Proponents of decriminalisation often cite the World Health Organisation's recommendation from 2022, which advocates removing barriers such as criminalisation.

Although such recommendations should, of course, carry weight with many, it is essential to view them through the lens of our unique societal context here in the UK. The bulk of the World Health Organisation's recommendations are very much focused on countries that have a much lower rate of access to abortion, in all sorts of different ways, and so they sit within a different context. Our abortion laws have evolved over time to reflect the delicate balance between the rights of pregnant women and the ethical considerations surrounding unborn life. I would caution against taking a universal recommendation from a global organisation as a litmus test for whether we are or are not doing things correctly.

When prosecutions occur, they are no doubt distressing for those involved. However, we also should be wary of changing the law in response to individual cases without looking at the operation of the law as a whole and, as I have said, without considering other elements, such as the operation of the law by the CPS, that have a bigger role to play than the law in itself.

Accountability is a cornerstone of ethical practice and criminal law serves as a mechanism through which accountability is ensured in many spaces. Without such safeguards, society is potentially less able to properly address situations where procedures are conducted wrongly. These are questions that demand careful consideration and proper parliamentary debate before any changes to existing laws are made. As I and others have already mentioned, debates about the new clauses tabled by the hon. Member for Gower and others will provide the opportunity for that.

In their response to the petition, the Government have stated that they have no current plans to change the law on abortion and I am sure the Minister will say more about that in her closing remarks. Although discussions about potential refinements to current laws are valid and deserve proper consideration, I suspect that a number of MPs would argue that the removal of criminal penalties must be approached with caution.

As I have said already, the hon. Member for Gower has tabled new clause 1 to the Crime and Policing Bill, and Members will know that debate on amendments tabled to the previous Government's Criminal Justice Bill did not happen because of the timing of last year's general election. Successive Governments have adopted a neutral stance on abortion and treated it as a free vote issue. However, I understand that the Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention was unable to clearly restate that assurance on Second Reading of the Crime and Policing Bill. I would welcome it if the Minister who is here today confirmed in her remarks that the Government will continue to be neutral on abortion.

Amnesty International has framed abortion as a human rights issue, advocating for its decriminalisation. However, all measures must be applied in a manner that respects the rights of all affected parties, including the unborn. The ethical and moral considerations surrounding abortion are multifaceted and these complexities cannot be overlooked.

Before I conclude my remarks, I will say something about the tone of this debate. As we engage with this issue over the next few weeks and months, it is imperative that we consider the diverse perspectives and experiences that shape opinions on abortion law. I hope that we will all strive to find solutions that uphold dignity, fairness and justice for all. The legal framework governing abortion

must maintain an emphasis on protecting both individual rights and societal values. As I said earlier, abortion is an issue that transcends simplistic policy analysis. It is a matter of ethics, justice and the principles that define who we are as a society. The Opposition believe that abortion law should remain robust, balanced and capable of addressing the complexities of these issues. It will be for individual MPs to decide how that balance is best struck.

6.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for opening this debate. I echo the comments of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), on the tone of the debate on this topic, as we move forward into the coming weeks. I thank all those who signed and supported the petition, and the petitioner, Gemma Clark, for raising this vital issue.

The petition calls on the UK Government to "remove abortion from criminal law so that no pregnant person—woman—

"can be criminalised for procuring their own abortion."

I recognise and respect that there are strongly held views on this highly sensitive issue not only in Parliament but across the country. I thank the more than 200 people in my constituency of Pontypridd who signed this petition.

I will make it clear at the outset that the Government maintain a neutral stance on changing the criminal law on abortion in England and Wales. I recognise that the Government's position of strict neutrality on this issue can be frustrating for all involved, and for none more so than me. If I were speaking in this debate as the Member for Pontypridd, my contribution would be very different, but thankfully my views on abortion are well known, and already proudly on the record. It is for Parliament to decide the circumstances under which abortion should take place, allowing Members to vote according to their moral, ethical or religious beliefs.

I emphasise that the Government are wholly committed to ensuring access to safe, regulated abortions. All women in England and Wales can have access to safe, regulated abortions on the NHS under our current laws. In England and Wales, that access is provided through legislation set by Parliament: the Abortion Act 1967. Hon. Members have already stated the facts of the criminal law on abortion in England and Wales, but it might be helpful if I also do so, and set out the three main offences that apply. When I refer to matters concerning the law on abortion, any reference is to its application in England and Wales. The law on abortion in Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved Administrations.

The Offences against the Person Act 1861 provides two criminal offences that apply specifically to cases of abortion. Section 58 makes it a criminal offence for a pregnant woman to intentionally

"procure her own miscarriage"

by unlawfully taking drugs or using instruments. It is also an offence for another person to unlawfully administer drugs or use instruments with the intention

[Alex Davies-Jones]

“to procure the miscarriage of any woman”,

whether or not she is in fact pregnant. Section 59 makes it an offence for a person to supply or procure a drug, poison or instrument with the intention for it to be used to procure a miscarriage.

The Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 deals with late-term abortions in England and Wales. Under section 1 of that Act, it is an offence for any person to intentionally “destroy the life of a child capable of being born alive”

before it is born, unless it can be proven that the act was done in good faith and only to preserve the life of the woman. Decisions to bring a prosecution under those provisions are for the independent Crown Prosecution Service. In deciding whether to bring a prosecution, the CPS will apply the two-stage test in the code for Crown prosecutors. The first stage asks whether

“there is sufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction”;

the second asks whether a prosecution is needed in the public interest.

The criminal provisions should be read in conjunction with the Abortion Act 1967, which provides exemptions to the criminal offences. Under the 1967 Act and accompanying regulations, women in England and Wales have access to safe, legal and regulated abortion services, which can be provided in an NHS facility or a place provided by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, such as an independent sector or clinic. In effect, lawful abortions can be provided in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy, where two doctors agree that the continuation of the pregnancy would involve risk of

“injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children of her family”.

Abortions beyond 24 weeks are permitted, if necessary, to prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman, where there is risk to the life of the pregnant woman, or if there is a substantial risk that the child would be seriously handicapped due to physical or mental abnormalities.

To reiterate, the Government maintain a neutral stance on changing the law on decriminalising abortion. It is for Parliament to decide the circumstances under which abortions should take place, allowing Members to vote according to their moral, ethical or religious beliefs. Hon. Members are aware that new clauses tabled to the Crime and Policing Bill would decriminalise abortion. Should they be selected, those new clauses will provide the House with a further opportunity for a full debate on this issue.

In answer to the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), I cannot and will not comment on the policy behind the proposed new clauses, but I may draw to the attention of the House any practical or legal issues with them. New clause 1, which was tabled by my hon. Friend, seeks to disapply criminal offences related to an abortion from a woman in relation to her own pregnancy at any stage of gestation. That would mean that it would never be a criminal offence for a pregnant woman to terminate her own pregnancy at any stage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) has tabled a separate new clause that would introduce a human rights framework for future

regulations related to abortion and protect existing abortion rights. New clause 20 would repeal several criminal offences in their entirety, meaning that it would never be a criminal offence for a pregnant woman or anyone else to terminate a pregnancy. While the stated intention is clear, the practical effect of the new clause is more limited and the powers are unclear, which could give rise to unintended consequences. Should these new clauses be selected, the House will have a further opportunity for a full debate on this issue, and if the will of Parliament is that the law in England and Wales should change, then the Government would not stand in the way of such change but would seek to ensure that the law is workable and enforced in the way that Parliament intended.

Ms Creasy: New clause 20 would introduce in England and Wales what we have done in Northern Ireland, and I know from the Minister's previous comments on the record that she has been very supportive of that legal and moral duty to act. For the avoidance of doubt, can she clarify whether her officials have met the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to understand how this operates in practice in Northern Ireland?

Alex Davies-Jones: I will come back to my hon. Friend with that information once I have spoken to officials to find out the exact details. The Government remain neutral on the policy, but we are looking at the workability and practicality of the new clauses. I will discuss that with her at a later date.

Wherever one stands on the issue of legislative change, I commend colleagues for engaging in this debate. While the Government are neutral on this issue, I want to close by thanking all hon. Members for their careful consideration of these issues and thanking the campaigners who share different perspectives, as well as by recognising the many people who have written to their MPs to share their personal experiences.

6.22 pm

Tony Vaughan: I again thank the petitioner, Gemma Clark, for starting this petition. As others have said, it is being debated at a crucial time given the proposed new clauses to the Crime and Policing Bill, which we have debated today to a degree. What is clear is that abortion investigations and prosecutions are on the rise, although they are still relatively small in number. However, what has come across in many hon. Members' speeches is that a culture of fear flows from the criminal law. We heard of Sammy's case. Victims are being treated as suspects; seven police officers raided a house and searched bins, phones and health apps at a time of deep vulnerability.

Many hon. Members referred to the centrality of choice and individual autonomy, as I did. Some Opposition Members mentioned the value of the life of the unborn child and said that autonomy was almost being treated as a trump card by those proposing decriminalisation. That is not something I hear or recognise. A human rights approach will always balance the competing rights that I have just referred to. That is what the Supreme Court did in the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission case when it found that the rules at that time were incompatible with the law.

There is always the backstop of preventing inhuman treatment, but there was no real rebuttal to the proposition that public attitudes in England and Wales overwhelmingly support decriminalisation. It follows that Parliament should respond to that. I again thank the petitioner for presenting this House with an opportunity to consider this crucial issue, and I thank everyone for participating in the Petitions Committee process.

Question put,

That this House has considered e-petition 700014 relating to decriminalising abortion.

The Chair's opinion as to the decision of the Question was challenged.

Question not decided (Standing Order No. 10(13)).

6.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 2 June 2025

EDUCATION

Apprenticeships and Skills Training

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

We have announced radical reforms to the skills system to support 120,000 new training opportunities this Parliament. We are continuing to invest in programmes designed to boost the workforce in key growth sectors and making changes to support opportunity for young people. Skills are an engine of economic growth, improving productivity and giving people the opportunity to thrive in work and life. To deliver on our plan for change, we need a skills system that is geared to deliver the skills we need, focused on economic priorities and supporting opportunity for learners.

Creating more opportunities for young people with the growth and skills levy

Last year, the Prime Minister announced a new growth and skills levy, which is now backed by its largest ever budget of over £3 billion. This will provide greater flexibility to employers and learners and widen the apprenticeship offer, helping more people gain the skills they need, fuelling business innovation, and providing high-quality pathways for young people.

The rate of young people's apprenticeship starts have fallen more dramatically than the overall decline over the last decade. We want to rebalance the programme back towards young people beginning their careers. As a first step, we are introducing new foundation apprenticeships, which are an employment-based training offer that give young people a route into careers in critical sectors, enabling them to earn a wage while developing vital skills.

The first foundation apprenticeships will be available from August 2025. They will be focused on industrial strategy priority areas including construction and the built environment, engineering and manufacturing, health and social care, and digital. They will be underpinned by an employer incentive payment to contribute to the extra costs of supporting someone at the beginning of their career, such as through coaching and mentoring. We will continue exploring how to make foundation apprenticeships work in other sectors like hospitality and retail too. We expect this to drive up to 30,000 apprenticeship starts across this Parliament.

This reform will be complemented by changes to the wider apprenticeships offer that we have already set out, such as shorter duration apprenticeships and more flexible English and maths requirements.

Creating more opportunities for young people at the start of their working lives means we need to prioritise public funding towards them, rather than those already in work with more prior learning and qualifications. That is why we announced our intention to move funding away from level 7—masters-level—apprenticeships, to support a more flexible offer at lower levels.

I am now confirming that we will proceed with this reform. We will continue to fund level 7 for those aged 16 to 21—when they start their apprenticeship—and support apprentices already on a level 7 apprenticeship through to completion. This change will apply from January 2026 across all sectors.

Skills England was asked to provide insight into the impact of defunding level 7 apprenticeships. They engaged with over 700 stakeholders from various sectors, employer representative bodies, and young people, which indicated that, in general, level 7 apprenticeships were high-quality and were well supported, by employers. Many learners who completed these apprenticeships saw higher wages one year after study, compared with the average UK salary. It was also clear that these apprenticeships are important for meeting the skills needs of the economy. However, alternative routes are well supplied and Skills England's evidence suggested there was unlikely to be a significant or unavoidable fall in the supply of these skills in the long term, post-defunding. Therefore, we will be encouraging employers to invest in upskilling their staff to this level, to enable levy funding to be rebalanced towards training at lower levels.

Skills England did not find a strong enough economic rationale to exempt a small group of level 7 apprenticeship standards from defunding. While level 7 apprenticeships can be a valuable route for some disadvantaged learners, a significant proportion are from non-deprived backgrounds and are significantly less likely to be deprived than apprentices at lower levels. Level 7 generally has a higher proportion of older learners than other apprenticeships, particularly the senior leader apprenticeship—where 99% are over 25—and standards with an embedded postgraduate qualification.

However, there are several exceptions which benefit young people at the start of their careers, like solicitors and accountancy or taxation professionals. This is why we have decided that younger learners, from all backgrounds, will continue to be funded under our reforms. Level 7 apprenticeships are a valuable entry point for young people into good careers, such as law, accountancy and town planning; we have seen thousands take advantage of these opportunities and this will continue under our new approach.

This decision was informed by a wide range of evidence, including Skills England's analysis of official apprenticeship statistics and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. We also considered wider data and representations and weighed this up against the Government's clear priorities.

This decision to prioritise young people is a crucial step in delivering the Government's plan for change and achieving its missions of driving growth and breaking down barriers to opportunity. We are prioritising funding towards young people and creating more opportunities for those entering the labour market, who need skills and training to get on in their careers, and powering growth across the country by providing the skills businesses need.

Expanding skills funding via the immigration skills charge

We are also expanding funding in the wider skills system to support growth and opportunity. In the immigration White Paper published on Monday 12 May, the Government confirmed a 32% increase in the rate of the immigration skills charge, which will be used at the oncoming spending review to support skills funding for

priority sectors to upskill the domestic workforce and reduce reliance on migration over the medium term. The increase in the immigration skills charge could help deliver up to 45,000 training places across this Parliament.

Boosting investment in skills for growth

We are also increasing investment in construction skills, building on more than £600 million announced by the Chancellor in March. We are boosting job prospects for adults interested in jobs in the sector, expanding training in priority sectors via skills bootcamps and free courses for jobs:

The Department will devolve around £14 million of additional adult skills funding for the construction sector to local mayors for next academic year, giving them the freedom to make the right choices for their areas. We expect this to deliver up to 5,000 additional adult learners on training courses.

For non-devolved areas, 13 new construction courses at level 2 will be added to the free courses for jobs offer available for adults so more people can upskill, improve their job prospects and earn a higher wage.

The Government are confirming £136 million for providing skills bootcamps across a range of priority sectors in 2025-26 at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-bootcamps-funding-allocations/skills-bootcamps-funding-allocations-2025-to-2026> providing training to over 40,000 learners. This is on top of £100 million over the next four years to expand skills bootcamps in construction, as announced at spring statement.

The Government are also launching technical excellence colleges (TECs) specialising in construction skills. Colleges will be able to apply to become construction TECs and the application process will open this term for 10, to launch in September 2025. These colleges will be leaders in delivering specialist skills, directly training learners and supporting other providers of construction skills across their regions—ensuring local people can benefit from this investment. They will serve as leaders in world-class skills training, combining excellent teaching standards with close working with industry experts.

Formal establishment of Skills England

These reforms will be driven forward by Skills England, which today becomes an Executive Agency of the Department for Education. Skills England will build our nation's world-class skills, enabling growth and opportunity by:

Understanding the nation's future skills needs and improving our skills offer.

Simplifying access to skills to boost economic growth.

Mobilising employers and other partners, co-creating solutions to meet national, regional and local skills needs.

To do this, Skills England will combine new functions with some of those previously undertaken by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE). On 15 May 2025, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Act received Royal Assent. This provided functions and assets to the Secretary of State that were previously held by IfATE, which has now been formally closed. These functions will broadly be exercised by Skills England and, combined with its broader work in the skills system, enable it to take its work forward as an Executive Agency of the Department for Education, with the approval of Cabinet Office and HM Treasury Ministers. Final accounts for IfATE will be presented to Parliament in due course.

The Government are also confirming board appointments to Skills England, and the latest analysis from Skills England is being published to help develop the Government's understanding of skills needs and how they can be met.

The reforms announced today mark an important step in Government's comprehensive strategy for post-16 education, delivering our youth guarantee, and our commitment to addressing skills shortages to drive growth while creating better opportunities for young people and adults across England.

[HCWS672]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Capacity Market: Consumer-led Flexibility

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I am tabling this statement to inform Members of a publication relating to the capacity market. The publication provides a response to the Government's recent consultation on improvements to capacity market rules and treatment of consumer-led flexibility. It sets out the Government's intention to proceed with all of the changes proposed in the consultation, after all received majority support from respondents.

This Government have committed to delivering clean power by 2030 and accelerating progress towards net zero, while ensuring continued security of supply. The capacity market is Great Britain's main mechanism for ensuring security of electricity supply by procuring additional capacity needed to meet peak demand ahead of time.

The funding provided through the capacity market incentivises investment in new and existing capacity, as well as interconnectors, batteries, and consumer-led flexibility. This capacity is acquired through annual auctions held at intervals four years ahead and one year ahead of their respective delivery years. The Government regularly amend the capacity market prior to auction cycles to ensure it remains fit for purpose, is cost-effective, and supports broader strategic objectives.

This Government response sets out our intention to proceed with policies to streamline how consumer-led flexibility, delivered by demand-side response mechanisms, participates in the capacity market. As participation in the capacity market from demand-side response portfolios increases, it is important that capacity market rules are updated to better incorporate and enable access from technologies that can respond flexibly to periods of high energy demand. In addition, the Government are also introducing a termination fee for demand-side response capacity market units that fail to demonstrate agreed capacity, improving delivery assurance to enable the capacity market to fulfil its central principle of ensuring security of supply.

The response also outlines our intention to move forward with changes to the capacity market rules to improve accessibility and provide policy intent clarifications. The changes confirmed in the Government response will enable capacity market units to change their opt-out status following a change in their operational circumstances and will remove rules on transitional and coronavirus arrangements which are no longer required. The proposed

changes also extend a policy to allow existing generators to use data older than 24 months to prequalify for auctions held in 2026 and clarify the role of the scheme's delivery body. These changes should increase participation in future Capacity Market auction and therefore increase competitiveness and value for money for consumers.

The Government intend to introduce these changes prior to the 2025 prequalification period for the next capacity market auctions. This will give participants clarity and certainty ahead of their entrance into the auctions and allow them to adapt to the changes we have made.

[HCWS671]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Africa Approach Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Africa (Lord Collins of Highbury) has today made the following statement:

Today, following the Foreign Secretary's (Mr David Lammy) announcement of a five-month consultation in November last year, the Government are publishing a summary of our consultations.

The summary reflects what we have heard in our discussions with partners in the UK, and over 47 national governments, 25 multilateral institutions, and over 600 organisations covering a range of sectors, from businesses and civil society to creatives and diaspora organisations.

We are grateful to all those who generously gave their time and contributed their ideas to the consultation. We are drawing on the evidence to shape and inform the new Africa approach.

This will be formally launched in the second half of the year. It will set out how the UK can partner with African countries to boost sustainable economic growth, combat the climate crisis, tackle insecurity, and address our migration priorities, drawing on our shared cultural and people-to-people links.

[HCWS674]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning Reform and Housing Delivery

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I am today providing an update on various measures the Government are taking to further reform the planning system and achieve our ambitious plan for change milestone of building 1.5 million safe and decent homes in this Parliament.

Speeding up build-out rates on large sites

Last year, the Government took decisive action to overhaul national planning policy through our December 2024 updates to the national planning policy framework. The changes made included the introduction of a new, mandatory standard method for assessing housing needs, and a new strategic approach to green-belt land designation and release that prioritises development on lower-quality grey-belt land. By allocating more land for development, the pro-growth framework that is now in place provides the foundation for higher rates of house building.

However, to significantly boost housing delivery we must close the gap between the amount of land allocated and permissioned and the number of homes being completed. The Competition and Markets Authority and others have concluded that most homes in England are not built as fast as they can be constructed, once permission is granted, but only as fast as the developer expects to sell them at local second-hand market prices. This leads to a build-out rate for large sites which can take decades to complete. While it is commercially rational for developers to operate in this way, the systemic impact is a lower level of house building than is needed.

As a result, the Government have published a "Planning Reform Working Paper: Speeding Up Build Out", setting out a five-part strategy and a series of proposals to speed up build-out. These include measures to support mixed-tenure development; the implementation of conditional confirmation of compulsory purchase orders; and, as a measure of last resort, exploring the case for a delayed homes penalty, for use in instances where build-out is falling significantly behind the agreed schedule without a reasonable justification.

Alongside the working paper, we published a technical consultation on implementing measures to improve build-out transparency to gather views on the introduction of a new statutory build-out framework, which requires developers to submit information at different stages of the planning and development cycle, and a power for local authorities to decline to determine applications submitted by developers who persistently fail to build out sites quickly. We will also make it easier for councils to issue completion notices, which require housebuilders to complete development within a reasonable period of time, else the planning permission will cease—a form of "use it or lose it".

Supporting small and medium-sized housebuilders

The Government are clear that we cannot achieve our ambitious house building targets without diversifying the housing market and making it more competitive. That means supporting a range of different developers, including small and medium-sized housebuilders.

The share of new-build homes delivered by SMEs has declined significantly since the 1980s, when smaller house builders delivered 40% of the country's homes. To arrest and reverse the decline of SME house builders, and so maximise the contribution they can make to new housing supply, the Government are acting to support them by increasing their access to land, providing further financial assistance and easing the burden of regulation.

In respect of land, the Government have launched a pilot of a new form of partnership between cities, developers and the private sector—a small sites aggregator—that will bring together small plots of land and accelerate their development. The pilot will be trialled in Bristol, Sheffield and the London Borough of Lewisham, with support from the relevant regional authorities.

Alongside this, Homes England will release more of its land exclusively to SMEs, and the Government have also announced a £1.2 million PropTech innovation fund for up to 12 tech innovators to share to work with industry on scalable solutions that accelerate housing delivery and unlock the development potential of small sites.

In respect of finance, the government is allocating up to £100 million of the £700 million extension to the home building fund announced in December to introduce SME accelerator loans. These will provide SMEs with the finance they need to acquire new sites while they are building out existing developments.

We have also provided longer-term certainty of access to finance for SMEs by committing to providing a range of funding tools for SMEs as part of a new national housing delivery fund. This will include revolving credit facilities, alongside loans and lending alliances, to provide unprecedented Government support and ensure SMEs have the access to finances they need to grow, invest and support delivery of 1.5 million homes. Further detail will be provided at the forthcoming spending review.

Lastly, in respect of regulation, the Government have published a “Planning Reform Working Paper: Reforming Site Thresholds” to seek views on reforming site size thresholds in the planning system to better support housing delivery. The working paper proposes a graduated approach to the planning system—removing and streamlining disproportionate requirements on small and medium sites, while maintaining and strengthening requirements on major ones.

The proposals would see minor developments of up to nine homes benefit from streamlined planning and eased biodiversity net gain requirements, alongside faster decisions being taken by expert planning officers, not planning committees. A new proposed category of medium development for 10 to 49 homes would come with simpler rules and fewer costs—including a potential exemption from the building safety levy, and simplified BNG rules that make it easier to deliver biodiverse habitats on these sites, delivering a win-win for nature and development.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has also launched consultations on how the implementation of BNG for small and medium developments could be simplified and improved, as well as BNG implementation for nationally significant infrastructure projects. The respective consultations can be found on www.gov.uk/government/consultations/biodiversity-net-gain-for-nationally-significant-infrastructure-projects

Planning committee reform

To further support the changes set out above, we have published our promised “Reform of Planning Committees: Technical Consultation”, providing detail on how we intend to implement the Planning and Infrastructure Bill provisions relating to the delegation of planning decisions, the size and composition of planning committees and mandatory training for members of planning committees.

The Government have been clear that planning committees have an integral role in providing local democratic oversight of planning decisions. However, in exercising that democratic oversight, we must ensure that planning committees operate as effectively as possible, focusing on those applications which require member input and not revisiting the same decisions.

Our detailed proposals for the operation of a national scheme of delegation involve directing the majority of minor and technical planning applications to expert local planning officers (tier A), while enabling all other planning applications (tier B), which will include all significant new housing and commercial developments,

to be determined by committee, if the local planning authority chief planning officer—or equivalent officer—and chair of planning committee mutually agree to depart from an assumed delegation. This will ensure that there is greater consistency and certainty across England about who in a local planning authority will be responsible for making planning decisions.

We believe these proposals strike the right balance between empowering professional planning officers and ensuring elected local representatives determine the most significant and contentious applications. I look forward to receiving feedback from hon. Members, local authorities, house builders and other important stakeholders.

[HCWS673]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Artificial Intelligence: Cross-Government Experiment

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I wish to inform the House of the findings from the recent Microsoft 365 Copilot experiment—a landmark Government artificial intelligence experiment, which demonstrates this Government’s bold commitment to harnessing cutting-edge technology to transform public service delivery and gain better value for the taxpayer.

The Government Digital Service led this cross-Government experiment using an AI-powered assistant from September to December 2024, involving 20,000 civil servants across 12 major Government organisations. The experiment used a robust methodology to evaluate whether AI tools could:

- improve user satisfaction at work
- reduce effort required to complete tasks
- improve task quality
- reduce time spent on routine activities

The eye-opening findings report will be published shortly on www.gov.uk, and will show that AI tools are liberating civil servants from repetitive administrative tasks, so that they can unleash their talents on strategic priorities that deliver greater value for Britain and British taxpayers.

Key findings

The most common benefits reported were increased productivity and reduced time searching for information. Importantly, many users indicated that productivity gains allowed them to spend more time on strategic and satisfying tasks.

Data received from the 12 participating Departments indicates a strong impact on time savings, with people saving an average of 26 minutes per day. Users reported increased work quality and motivation, as well as improving employee experience. In particular:

Adoption and usage: The experiment achieved an impressive 83% adoption rate within the first month. Adoption levels of around 80% were maintained throughout the experiment.

Time savings: the tool has a strong impact on time savings, with people saving an average of 26 minutes per day. More than a third of users reported to have saved more than half an hour a day.

User satisfaction: Users display a strong value attachment to using the tool and reported it increased work quality and motivation. 85% of users agree that the AI tool provides good value to the organisation. 82% of users would not want to go back to working without using an AI assistant.

Limitations: 17% of users did not notice any clear time savings. Professions that saved the least amount of time were those with the lowest satisfaction scores.

Conclusions: Priority should now be given to implementing an AI tool with groups showing the highest and lowest time savings, to better understand the tool's impact and limitations across diverse user segments and professions. Priority should also be given to exploring how AI tools can improve accessibility, on which we have got some anecdotal evidence, and implementing benefits tracking for deeper insights.

This experiment is just one example of how we are using technology to drive far-reaching reform across the public sector. By putting the power of AI to work for the British people, we are creating a Government who are more efficient, responsive, and equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century, aligning with our broader vision set out in "A blueprint for modern digital government" to harness the power of AI for public good.

In line with our commitment to AI adoption in the public sector, we will take these findings forward through the newly established AI adoption unit within the Government Digital Service, which will build and deploy AI into public services, grow AI capacity and capability across Government, and ensure trust, responsibility and accountability in all we do. As part of this work, we are exploring a range of AI tools to assess their benefits, recognising that different AI tools and technologies may add more or less value depending on the use case.

We will continue to update the House on our progress as we work to make Government more efficient, responsive, and fit for the digital age.

[HCWS669]

Public Switched Telephone Network Migration: Communications Campaign

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): The Government are publicly supporting the national telecare communications campaign, which has been funded by BT and Virgin Media O₂ and is being launched today. This campaign seeks to raise awareness of the migration of landlines from the old analogue copper landline, also known as the public switched telephone network, to digital voice over internet protocol.

The Government and industry want to appeal directly to vulnerable people and their friends, relatives and carers to ensure that they are migrated carefully. The national campaign is designed to raise awareness amongst support networks and encourage vulnerable individuals who use telecare alarms to identify themselves to their communication provider.

The campaign aims reach this target audience across the UK through various multimedia channels. It includes TV adverts, print, and community radio, with translations of the script to ensure that the campaign has a broad reach across the UK.

Further information for the public is available at www.digitalphoneswitchover.com as well as on www.gov.uk/guidance/uk-transition-from-analogue-to-digital-landlines

The PSTN is a privately owned telecommunications network, and the decision to upgrade it, which has been taken by industry, is a necessity due to its age and deterioration and is therefore supported by Government.

In the period April 2024 to March 2025, there were over 2,600 major incidents on the PSTN, each affecting 500 or more customers, posing risks to vulnerable individuals, such as those using telecare devices, as well as a risk to critical services such as power plants, traffic lights, and hospitals.

Over two thirds of PSTN lines have already been migrated to VoIP, leaving fewer than 5.6 million lines operational. However, it is imperative for their own safety that vulnerable people are safely migrated.

The previous Government secured voluntary charters in December 2023 and March 2024 from the major communication providers and network operators, pausing non-voluntary migrations. A non-voluntary migration is where a communications provider migrates a customer without their consent following multiple attempts to contact the customer using different means, as it is essential that everyone is safely migrated.

In November 2024, I secured safeguards from communication providers and network operators to protect consumers, particularly the vulnerable. This includes anyone relying on their landline for any reason, including where mobile coverage is lacking, such as in rural areas. These safeguards are set out in the non-voluntary migration checklist at

www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-switched-telephone-network-non-voluntary-migration-checklist/pstn-non-voluntary-migration-checklist

The checklist includes data sharing agreements with local authorities to identify vulnerable people; timely and repeated communications with customers; free engineering visits; and providing vulnerable customers with a battery back-up for use in the event of a power cut. At the same time, I secured commitments to protect our critical services through a critical national infrastructure charter.

For these safeguards to work it is essential that vulnerable people are identified. This is being facilitated by data sharing agreements between the communication providers, alarm receiving centres and local authorities. As of May 2025, over 96% of local authorities that provide telecare have signed a data sharing agreement with at least one communication provider, reflecting significant progress since the first agreements were signed in May 2023. I will be writing to all authorities that have not signed data sharing agreements to encourage them to do so.

Anyone who is concerned about what the PSTN migration means for them, or their friends and family, should contact their communication provider and let them know. They should do so particularly if they identify as vulnerable for any reason, including age.

[HCWS668]

TRANSPORT

UK Airspace Design Service: Consultation Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): The Department for Transport and the UK Civil Aviation Authority are publishing the response to the consultation to establish a UK Airspace Design Service, CAP 3106 <https://www.caa.co.uk/ukads>. The UKADS will act as a new single guiding mind to deliver a modernised and holistic design of UK airspace, enabling quicker, quieter and cleaner flights.

UK airspace is an invisible but essential piece of our national infrastructure. Its design has remained largely unchanged since the 1950s when there were around 200,000 flights per year in UK airspace, compared to 2.47 million in 2024. If UK airspace is not modernised, it has been estimated that by 2040 one in five flights could experience disruption and delays.

Airspace modernisation will ensure that the UK's airspace is fit for the future, enabling aircraft to fly more direct routes with optimised climb and descent profiles to and from energy-efficient cruising altitudes. This will benefit UK consumers through greater system capacity and better resilience to disruption. Crucially, it will help UK aviation achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

The Government and CAA have carefully considered the responses to the consultation last autumn. These helped to inform the decision to proceed with the creation of the UKADS and establishment of an airspace design support fund, announced by the Chancellor on 17 March 2025, and our aim is for the UKADS to be established and operational by the end of 2025.

NATS (En Route) plc—NERL—will be responsible for providing the UKADS. NERL is the only organisation in the UK with the necessary level of resource and design expertise to deliver the UKADS at pace.

The initial priority for the UKADS will be to design airspace for the London cluster of the airspace change masterplan. The London cluster has the most complex

airspace in the UK, and modernisation will unlock significant benefits. This would include any airspace change required for a third runway at Heathrow.

Airspace modernisation will continue to be funded by industry, following the user-pays principle. The cost of the UKADS will be met through a new UK airspace design charge, which will primarily apply to commercial airlines. This charge will also enable a new airspace design support fund to help unlock the benefits of modernisation around the rest of the UK.

Two statutory instruments will be laid before Parliament, using powers in the Transport Act 2000, to enable NERL to be tasked with delivering the UKADS. The CAA will consult on the charge as well as proposed changes to the NERL air traffic services licence.

Consultation responses also identified opportunities to streamline and simplify the regulatory framework, including the CAA's airspace change process and the Government's air navigation guidance and air navigation directions. DFT and CAA intend to start consulting by September 2025 on possible changes, which will continue to support safe and efficient airspace design; proper and proportionate assessment of environmental impacts, including noise; and engagement with local communities.

With the establishment of the UKADS, these measures will strengthen the UK's role as a global aviation leader and confirm this Government's support for airspace modernisation and the benefits it will bring for the country.

[HCWS670]

Written Correction

Monday 2 June 2025

Ministerial Correction

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Brain Tumours: Research and Treatment

The following extract is from the debate on Brain Tumours: Research and Treatment on 8 May 2025.

Ashley Dalton: In March, more than 80% of patients in England referred for cancer had it ruled out or diagnosed within 28 days—it is the first time that target has been met in years.

[*Official Report*, 8 May 2025; Vol. 766, c. 893.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton):

Ashley Dalton: In **February**, more than 80% of patients in England referred for cancer had it ruled out or diagnosed within 28 days—**we are now routinely exceeding the faster diagnosis target.**

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