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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 4 June 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

North Sea Oil and Gas Licences: Economic Growth

1. **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of not issuing new North sea oil and gas licences on levels of economic growth in Scotland. [904317]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): This is the first opportunity I have had to apologise to the House for using an inaccurate figure on previous occasions. I had told the House that the Scottish Government had received a record settlement of £47.7 billion this year, but Treasury figures show that the block grant for this year is actually £50 billion. That is the highest ever settlement in the history of devolution, with bells on. That £50 billion is more money for schools, hospitals, policing and housing; it is an end to austerity. That is the Barnett formula in action—the formula that both the SNP and Reform have announced this week that they want to scrap.

Oil and gas will remain a crucial component of our energy mix for decades to come. Our workforce is the most talented in the world, and we are committed to ensuring its future. We have consulted on support for the energy transition in the North sea, including on these issues, and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero will respond to that consultation shortly. Economic growth in the UK in the first quarter of the year beat all forecasts, reaching 0.7%—the highest in the G7. Growth in Scotland is more sluggish than in the rest of the UK; if Scotland's economy had grown at even the low rate at which it grew under the Tories, it would be £10 billion larger. That makes it even more astonishing that the Opposition parties oppose the EU, US and India trade deals.

Joe Robertson: Ministers across various Departments have repeatedly said that oil and gas is here to stay for many years. Issuing new North sea oil and gas licences would support tens of thousands of jobs, return millions in tax revenue to the Treasury and help to grow the Scottish economy. Why are the Government refusing to issue any new licences?

Ian Murray: A consultation on Rosebank and Jackdaw is concluding, and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero will report on it in due course. There is also the North sea transition consultation,

which has concluded, as I mentioned earlier, and which will take into account all those issues. It will be published in due course.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Labour's windfall tax on North sea energy profits is designed to make us less reliant on people like Vladimir Putin. When I was campaigning in Hamilton last week, voters asked me why the SNP, the Tories and Reform were so against our windfall tax. I could not explain. Can the Secretary of State?

Ian Murray: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the question. What astonishes me more than anything is that the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland was the Energy Minister when the energy profits levy was brought in.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but he was the Energy Minister. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) may remember, the leader of the SNP in Westminster, the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), did not support the levy, then did, then did not, and then put in the SNP's manifesto that it would be extended to every single Scottish industry. I am at a loss, as is my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: We come to the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie: I start by congratulating the famous Aberdeen football club—the only team in red I like to see winning—and the manager Jimmy Thelin, the players and all the coaching staff for winning their eighth Scottish cup a week and a half ago, qualifying for the Europa league in the process. The pride and jubilation on the streets of Aberdeen last Sunday show just how much the club means to the north-east of Scotland. Even more important to the north-east than Aberdeen football club is the oil and gas industry. What does the Secretary of State make of the report published by Robert Gordon University this week that warns of 400 job losses every two weeks in the North sea?

Ian Murray: I join the shadow Secretary of State in congratulating—through gritted teeth—Aberdeen on winning the Scottish cup. Speaking as a big Hearts fan, it is always nice to see the smaller clubs doing well in national competitions. *[Interruption.]* I do not know whether I have lost or won the House there, Mr Speaker.

We have this discussion across the Dispatch Box a lot during questions. We are aiming for clean energy by 2030, and setting up GB Energy in Aberdeen—something that the shadow Secretary of State voted against, of course—to ensure a transition. We have a declining and mature base, and we need to create the jobs of the future and the future industries in Scotland. He should support that, rather than voting against it. The EPL was brought in by his Government.

Andrew Bowie: To be absolutely clear, there is no transition under way. It is not the Conservative party saying that; it is the Robert Gordon University Energy Transition Institute. These mythical jobs in renewable energy simply do not exist yet. There is a slowdown in

offshore wind deployment and a steep decline in offshore oil and gas activity as a direct result of Labour's ideological policies—400 job losses every two weeks, a steep decline in skilled roles, nowhere for supply chain jobs to go but overseas, and a decline in the workforce of 25%. Why? Because of massive investor uncertainty due to negative sentiment around oil and gas as a result of the ban on licences and the EPL extension. When will the Secretary of State and the Scottish Labour party grow a backbone, stand up to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, and stand up for Scotland and Scottish workers?

Ian Murray: I do not know whether the hon. Member agrees with net zero anymore—certainly, his party leader does not seem to believe in it—but that is where the jobs are for the future. There is a declining base in the North sea. Companies are making that transition already, and we need to ensure pace; that is the big issue. We need regulatory change and investment, and GB Energy is there to ensure that. The National Wealth Fund is making investments as well. We have seen £600 million invested in Scottish Power's infrastructure. Things are starting to happen, but we need cross-party support on this.

National Wealth Fund: Glasgow City Region

2. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on priorities for the National Wealth Fund's strategic partnership with the Glasgow city region. [904318]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): The National Wealth Fund has made its first Scottish investment in the Glasgow city region, which is one of four areas across the UK selected for a strategic partnership with the fund to unlock private investment opportunities. The Secretary of State meets the Deputy First Minister regularly to discuss economic growth, which is this Government's No.1 priority.

Martin Rhodes: Does the Minister agree that in recent years, we have witnessed the benefits of further devolving power to cities and city regions, which have created tailored policies to better serve communities? In Holyrood, however, devolution appears to have stalled, and there is little appetite to pass power down to our cities, towns and communities. Does she agree that the recent Glasgow city region devolution proposal makes a compelling case for further devolution to that city region?

Kirsty McNeill: It does, but I am afraid that the SNP seems determined to hoard powers and funding, rather than passing them to communities. There is no better example of that than the Labour-run council in South Lanarkshire proposing £8 million for Hamilton town centre, only for the SNP to vote against that. That is why, tomorrow, voters in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse should back a real local champion, Labour's Davy Russell.

Veterans

3. **Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What steps he is taking with the Scottish Government to support veterans in Scotland. [904319]

12. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking with the Scottish Government to support veterans in Scotland. [904330]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): I wish to thank veterans for their service, and their families for the sacrifices that enabled it. As it is Volunteers Week, may I place on record my thanks and those of the whole House to the volunteers who do so much for our military charities? I welcome the announcement of the new programme, Valour, which is giving veterans across the UK easier access to essential care and support. The Minister for Veterans and People is leading work across the UK Government to ensure that veterans and their families have sufficient access to health services, housing, employment and other forms of support.

Sam Rushworth: I regularly speak to veterans in Bishop Auckland and, although they mostly reflect positively on their military service, they often mention the need to improve homes for forces families. Will the Minister welcome this week's announcement that Labour will improve 3,000 forces family homes in Scotland as part of a £1.5 billion investment, and does the Minister agree that all those who serve our forces in this United Kingdom should have a home fit for a hero?

Kirsty McNeill: I am pleased to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the strategic defence review, which was launched by the Prime Minister in Scotland on Monday and included more than £400 million of investment in military accommodation in Scotland. I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend will be appalled that the First Minister snubbed a confidential briefing on that strategic defence review to go campaigning, during a by-election campaign, at a charity whose funding he had slashed.

Emma Foody: A local charity in my area supports women veterans. Recently, it was supporting a woman who was rehomed in general-purpose supported accommodation for veterans in Scotland. The accommodation was entirely unsuitable for her as a survivor of sexual violence, and it led to her being subjected to a further sexual assault by a man who was also housed there. Can the Minister assure me that her work with the Ministry of Defence will ensure appropriate support for women veterans?

Kirsty McNeill: First, I am truly sorry to hear about the experiences of my hon. Friend's constituent. Support services and accommodation across the UK must reflect the needs of all our veterans, including women. That includes the provision of safe, suitable and appropriate housing. If she writes to me, I shall ask the Minister for Veterans and People to get in touch with her.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The previous Conservative Government had a dedicated Minister of State for veterans sitting at the Cabinet table, but that job was taken away by the new Administration. How are the interests of veterans in Scotland being raised in Cabinet under the new Government?

Kirsty McNeill: The Minister for Veterans and People is doing sterling work. His advocacy has helped to ensure that Labour will improve 3,000 forces family homes. We are making a £1.5 billion investment across the whole UK. I am sure that when the strategic defence review was launched, in Scotland and then in this

Chamber, the hon. Member was full of admiration for what the Minister is doing for veterans and those who currently serve us with such distinction.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Scotland-born veteran Betty Gallagher joined the Army when she was 17, but eight months later she was dishonourably discharged for what were referred to as “lesbian tendencies”. Today, Betty runs the thriving BourneOut LGBT hub in Eastbourne and founded Eastbourne Pride. Will the Minister thank Betty for her service to our country, and advise on how she and other veterans can seek justice for the discrimination that they were subjected to?

Kirsty McNeill: I am delighted to join the hon. Gentleman in thanking Betty for all her efforts. He will know that, in the review, work has been undertaken on justice for LGBT people in our armed forces, and we are pleased to commend that to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) about the success of Aberdeen football club. The strategic defence review makes it clear that housing must be a priority, and that the money from the sale of housing must be reinvested, but veterans continually come to me who have been discharged into homelessness. Can the Minister reassure us that we will ensure that houses that are sold or redeveloped are available to veterans’ families?

Kirsty McNeill: I am very pleased to offer the hon. Lady that reassurance.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I join colleagues in congratulating Aberdeen FC, despite the impact of their victory on my beloved Dundee United. I also congratulate Arbroath FC on securing the Scottish league one championship title. The Scottish Government have reinstated the winter fuel payment for up to 88,000 pension-age veterans in Scotland, but the Prime Minister has said that it was right to slash the winter fuel payment. Was the Prime Minister right to slash it?

Kirsty McNeill: The hon. Member will be perfectly aware—as, indeed, everyone in the House will be—that questions about the winter fuel payment in Scotland are devolved to the Scottish Government. Decisions made in Scotland are the responsibility of the Scottish Government, but I am pleased to reiterate to the House what the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have said. This was a difficult decision, and now that we have a little more breathing space, we are very pleased to make changes to help more pensioners.

Stephen Gethins: I see that we are not going to get a straight answer out of the Minister, just as the people in Hamilton did not get a straight answer out of Labour’s candidate. That will be why Labour is sinking without a trace. Let me put it this way: does the Minister think that the Prime Minister was right to slash the winter fuel payment for up to 1 million veterans across the UK?

Kirsty McNeill: When this Government took office, we inherited a £22 billion black hole, which required emergency action. We said at the time that our decision on the winter fuel payment was a difficult one that we did not want to make, and we are very pleased to be in a position to reconsider it.

Higher Education

4. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on support for the higher education sector in Scotland. [904320]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): Scotland’s universities are of course world-class, but I am very concerned about the financial difficulties faced by several of them. As the hon. Lady will know, higher education is a devolved matter, and Scotland’s universities, their staff and their students all need a Scottish Government with a proper plan to turn this crisis around.

Wendy Chamberlain: International students are hugely valuable, not just when it comes to sharing cultures and knowledge, but to our universities and local economies. In North East Fife in 2021-22, that value was estimated at £159 million. What discussions has the Minister had with the Scottish Government about the economic impact of the reforms relating to international students in the immigration White Paper? Can she update the House on whether an economic impact assessment has taken place?

Kirsty McNeill: We are in ongoing discussions with the Scottish Government and Scottish universities, but I want to be absolutely definitive about this, because there has been some confusion in the press. Education policy is devolved, and the international student levy will not apply in Scotland unless the Scottish Government decide to introduce it. I met Universities Scotland just this week and made that very clear, and I am pleased to do so again today.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): The university sector is important for growing the Scottish economy, but so is tourism. Can the Minister enlighten me about the jet safari trips from Clacton to Scotland that have taken place, allowing former bankers to patronise the locals, miss the big picture and be back in England for a pint of warm beer by lunchtime?

Kirsty McNeill: I think I did hear something about the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) getting lost in Hamilton this weekend, and sculking behind the bins before he was sent packing by the good people of South Lanarkshire. Of course, the only local candidate in that by-election is Labour’s Davy Russell, who will stand up for his community against the division peddled by both the SNP and Reform.

School Standards

5. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on school standards. [904322]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): The right hon. Gentleman will have heard me remind the House on a number of occasions that John Swinney said that education was the “defining mission” of his SNP Government, but earlier this year we got the news that standards of attainment in Scotland’s schools are declining across the board and, shamefully, outcomes for young working-class kids are getting worse. The attainment gap is widening. The Scottish Government have failed a generation; they cannot be allowed a third decade in power to continue that damage. Scotland’s teachers, parents and pupils all deserve better standards in our schools.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What has caused the system, which was once the benchmark for all others, to become such a disappointment?

Ian Murray: There is a simple answer to that question: the SNP Scottish Government.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): When my right hon. Friend discusses with SNP Ministers, through announcements made this week, the huge employment opportunities that this Government have created for young people in Scotland, will he impress on them the urgent need to finally tackle the persistent—and in some areas widening—attainment gap faced by pupils from poorer backgrounds, not only in Fife but in South Lanarkshire? These concerns are often raised by residents of Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse.

Ian Murray: The House may not know that last year, 1,351 pupils left high school in Scotland without a single qualification to their name, and one in six Scots is not in education, employment or training. That is the legacy of the SNP Scottish Government. What have they done about jobs and growth? They are against the defence industry and against the trade deals with the EU, India and the US. They are against young Scots in Scotland.

Economic Co-operation: Scotland and Northern Ireland

6. **Alex Easton** (North Down) (Ind): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on improving economic co-operation between Scotland and Northern Ireland. [904323]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): Our recent trade deals with the United States, India and the EU will improve access to vital markets for businesses in both Scotland and Northern Ireland. These are deals with the most populous country in the world, the richest country in the world and our most important trading partner. I recognise the importance of economic co-operation between Northern Ireland and Scotland. Indeed, earlier this week I met the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) and a local business to discuss exactly this issue.

Alex Easton: Will the Minister set up a meeting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to consider creating a trade fair focusing on trade between Northern Ireland businesses and Scottish businesses? That would create networks, would possibly create jobs, and would be great for the economy in both Northern Ireland and Scotland. It would certainly go down well with businesses in North Down and right across the UK.

Kirsty McNeill: I would be delighted to see more trade between Scotland and Northern Ireland. I will happily meet colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office to explore that.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Scotland and Northern Ireland are set to benefit from the Government’s trio of trade deals. Does the Minister agree that it is astonishing that the SNP stands with the Tories and Reform against an EU trade deal that is good for Scotland, and that after almost 20 years in government, the SNP has no plan for Scotland? One in six Scots is on an NHS waiting list; Ayrshire ferries are late and are costing £1 billion; one in six Scots is not in education, employment or training; and the SNP has no plan for the defence of our Union.

Kirsty McNeill: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is astonishing that we see ranged on the Opposition Benches numerous people who have talked down the potential of Scotland’s exporters, and who have said that there is no benefit to be had from these deals for a Scottish business sector that is desperate to grow and export, and is delighted with the three trade deals, which will make such a difference to them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): For years, there has been under-investment in Scotland’s roads. The A9, A96, A77 and A75 are all in dire need of upgrading or dualling; work on all of them has been delayed or even cancelled by the SNP. In the spirit of improving economic co-operation between the nations of the UK, and specifically between Scotland and Northern Ireland, and given how vital the A77 and A75 are to individuals, businesses and hauliers, will the Minister seek the ringfencing of the Barnett consequential that will arise as a result of this morning’s announcement by the Chancellor, so that the SNP must spend that money on improving roads in Scotland?

Kirsty McNeill: We are in conversation with all the relevant parties, but yes, we would like an increase in trade, and in the transport infrastructure that supports it.

Town Centre Regeneration

7. **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to regenerate town centres in Scotland. [904324]

9. **Becky Gittins** (Clwyd East) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to regenerate town centres in Scotland. [904327]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): As a former publican, I know that these are hard times for businesses on the high street. We are investing £200 million in our plans for neighbourhoods in Scotland, with £20 million-worth of funding for towns including Irvine, Greenock, Kilmarnock, Coatbridge, Clydebank, Elgin, Dumfries, Arbroath, Peterhead and Kirkwall. Of course, it would help if the Scottish Government extended business rates relief to retail and leisure businesses, as has happened south of the border. Many businesses in Scotland are asking where that money went.

Dr Sullivan: Does the Secretary of State agree that it was astonishing that the SNP voted against the £8 million to regenerate Hamilton town centre and that only Labour's Davy Russell will stand up for local people, jobs and services?

Ian Murray: I have brought glasses to see if I can find an ounce of credibility in the SNP's candidate in Hamilton for voting against that £8 million. The SNP candidate is a councillor from Cambuslang who stood for election twice in Rutherglen, sought selection in Shettleston and then voted against £8 million for the Hamilton town centre before seeking selection there. In Scotland, we are allowed to elect councillors with a single transferable vote; she appears to be the SNP's single transferable councillor.

Becky Gittins: A proud industrial heritage, a strong community spirit and an overwhelming feeling of being let down and under-invested in by the previous Conservative Government unite towns in my constituency with those across Scotland, including those in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse. In Wales, Labour's transforming towns programme has invested in Holywell in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling on the SNP to U-turn and finally back Labour's plans to invest in Hamilton town centre?

Ian Murray: What a wonderful representative my hon. Friend is for her constituency. I could not agree more. The SNP candidate is yet to explain to voters in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse why she voted against the much needed £8 million investment in Hamilton town centre. I hope she will explain before tomorrow's vote. If she does not, everyone should back Labour's Davy Russell.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I will tell the Secretary of State what is bad for town centres, and that is job losses. On this Government's watch, Robert Gordon University has been forced to publish a report that outlines that there could be 400 job losses in the North sea every two weeks. That is a Grangemouth-type shutdown every two weeks. How many jobs have to be lost in my constituency for his Government to act?

Ian Murray: The leader of the SNP in this House voted against the setting up of Great British Energy in his constituency, which is creating jobs in Scotland. He is against the EU trade deal, he is against the US trade deal, he is against the India trade deal; he is bad for jobs and should go.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Towns and villages across north-east Scotland, such as Aberdeen, and Inverurie, Kintore and Ellon in my constituency, will all need regenerating in future if the Secretary of State's Government keep decimating the oil and gas sector. The best thing his Government can do for the north-east of Scotland is allow new licences and cut the increase to the energy profits levy. Will he commit to that? Otherwise, more and more money will need to be put into north-east Scotland to regenerate our towns in future.

Ian Murray: This Government are putting money into Scottish towns to regenerate them. As we keep saying from this Dispatch Box, oil and gas will be with us for decades to come. The industry itself is making

the transition, and we have to make sure that it happens, and happens for the benefit of workers in the north-east and all over Scotland. I am not even sure, however, that it is a transition that the hon. Lady and the Conservative party now back.

NHS Funding: Barnett Formula

8. **Anneliese Midgley** (Knowsley) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the impact of the Barnett formula on levels of funding for the NHS in Scotland. [904325]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): Following the spring statement, it was confirmed that the block grant for Scotland this year was a record £50 billion. That was no thanks to the SNP and Reform, which both voted against that massive funding boost for Scotland and want to scrap the Barnett formula that delivered it. Despite that record funding, the SNP still has no plan to get waiting lists down, when one in six Scots are stuck on an NHS waiting list and the educational attainment gap is growing by the day.

Anneliese Midgley: Despite the record funding provided by the Labour Government, the SNP plans to downgrade the neonatal intensive care unit at university hospital Wishaw, which could force the families of sick babies to travel as far as Aberdeen for treatment and support. Does the Secretary of State agree that the SNP cut should be reversed?

Ian Murray: As the father of an 18-week-old daughter, I am absolutely horrified by those proposals and I know that they will be causing anxiety for families across Lanarkshire. That is why it is so disappointing to see the SNP candidate in the Hamilton by-election back the plans to downgrade the Wishaw neonatal unit. The way to send a message to the SNP that that is unacceptable is to vote for Davy Russell tomorrow in the Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse by-election.

Local Authority Funding: Barnett Formula

10. **David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the impact of the Barnett formula on levels of funding for local authorities. [904328]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): The Chancellor's autumn Budget delivered the biggest settlement in the history of devolution for the Scottish Government—£50 billion. I want to see that cash reach the frontline services that have suffered years of cuts under the SNP. That record settlement is possible only because of the Barnett formula—something opposed not only by the Scottish nationalists, but by the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), whose Reform circus was sent packing from Hamilton this week.

David Smith: The largest ever devolution settlement—£50 billion—is great news for Scotland and its local authorities, but under the SNP there are 840,000 cases on NHS waiting lists. This affects people in my constituency in North Northumberland, many of whom use cross-border healthcare and dental services, so does the Minister

agree that the SNP needs to sort itself out and start delivering change to the NHS, as Labour is doing in England?

Kirsty McNeill: I could not agree more. In England, waiting lists have fallen since Labour came to office less than a year ago, while in Scotland they continue to rise, and we now see nearly one in six Scots waiting for treatment. John Swinney has, in total desperation, announced that the SNP Government's fifth NHS recovery plan in less than four years, but the reality is that patients, staff and we all know that Scotland desperately needs a new direction.

Mr Speaker: Before we start Prime Minister's questions, I would like to welcome to the Gallery the Speaker of Bahrain and his delegation: a big welcome to you.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904402] **Clive Efford** (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 4 June.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Today we are investing £15.6 billion in the transport infrastructure of the north and of the midlands. We are decisively turning the page on a failed economic model of low investment, and we are backing the talent and prospects of the whole country. Over the coming weeks we will set out plans for further investment and renewal.

Our strategic defence review shows that this Government will never gamble with our national security. Through the biggest sustained funding increase since the cold war, we will transform our defence, strengthen our nation and invest in jobs and industry across the United Kingdom.

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

Clive Efford: We all remember the glorious summer of 2012 when the world's greatest athletes came to London to compete in the Olympics and the Paralympics. It showcased Britain at its best, not just in track and field, but as a country that can host major cultural and sporting events. My right hon. and learned Friend has been written to by over 200 of our top athletes—some of them are members of Cambridge Harriers, who meet in my constituency—and they are calling for the Government to support the bid for the 2029 world athletics championships to take place in London. If successful, it will lift the whole nation—[*Interruption.*] If successful, it will lift the whole nation, inspire a generation of new athletes, showcase Britain on the world stage and put £400 million into our economy. What's not to like?

Mr Speaker: I think the race has finished. Go on, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: One of the greatest achievements of the last Labour Government was the 2012 Olympics in London, and we all remember it—[*Interruption.*]

Given that response, can I pay tribute to the extraordinary contribution of Tessa Jowell to those games? I agree that there have been huge economic benefits from hosting major sporting events as well as an important legacy.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Three weeks ago, the winter fuel policy was set in stone. Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister U-turned. Today, the Chancellor is rushing her plans because she just realised when winter is. So, on the behalf of the pensioners who want to know, can the Prime Minister be clear with us here and now: how many of the 10 million people who lost their winter fuel payments will get it back?

The Prime Minister: Well, I am glad to see the right hon. Lady is catching up with what happened two weeks ago. At the Budget, we took the right decision to stabilise the economy because of the £22 billion black hole that the Conservatives left. We took the right decisions and the growth figures are up, interest rates have been cut, and we have free trade deals. So we will look again, as I said two weeks ago, at the eligibility for winter fuel and of course we will set out how we pay for it, but because we have stabilised the economy, we on this side are committed to the triple lock, and that increased pensions by over £400 this April. The Conservatives say the triple lock is unsustainable. I think her position is that she wants to means-test it.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister clearly has selective amnesia. I asked him three questions about the winter fuel payment two weeks ago and he was floundering. The fact is he has not answered the question I asked him; he cannot tell us who will get the payments. All we see is U-turn after U-turn—his head must be spinning. Will he apologise now, including to his own Back Benchers, for taking the payments away in the first place? Can he tell us how he will pay for this?

The Prime Minister: We took the right decisions at the Budget because we needed to stabilise the economy. The right hon. Lady needs to apologise for the fact that the Conservatives left the economy in a terrible state, with a mini-Budget that blew up the economy, and we were left with a £22 billion black hole. When she gets up, perhaps she should apologise for that.

Mrs Badenoch: The Office for Budget Responsibility has said there was no such black hole. The Prime Minister has just given away £30 billion for the Chagos islands—that is his black hole. He has not stabilised the economy. Borrowing prices are higher now than at any time in the last Parliament. He has not stabilised the economy. He has no clear answers on what he is doing. It is just chaos, chaos, chaos. He keeps making announcements with no detail.

Let's move to another area of confusion. Can we get a simple answer: will the Government keep the two-child benefit cap?

The Prime Minister: I am absolutely determined that we will drive down child poverty. That is one of the proudest things of the last Labour Government. That is why we have a taskforce and that is why we have a

strategy, and we will set out that strategy in due course. But we drive child poverty down; under the Conservatives, poverty always goes up.

Mrs Badenoch: I did not ask the Prime Minister about a taskforce. I asked him if he will keep the two-child benefit cap, and he does not know—it is just chaos and uncertainty. He has no details. He is briefing something and causing a lot of confusion to the people out there. On that two-child benefit cap, I tell him this: I believe in family, but I also believe in fairness. On the Conservative side of the House, we believe that people on benefits should have to make the same choices on having children as everyone else. What does the Prime Minister believe?

The Prime Minister: I believe profoundly in driving down poverty and child poverty. That is why we will put a strategy in place. But the right hon. Lady talks about heads spinning. There is only one leader who been praised this week by the Russian embassy. If she carries on echoing Kremlin talking points like this, Reform will be sending her an application form for membership.

Mrs Badenoch: I asked the Prime Minister what he believes in. He had to look in his folder to find the answer. His MPs behind him know what they believe in—he does not know. He has been in government for nearly a year. It will only get harder and harder. The canned, forced laughter, the planted questions—all that will disappear because at every single point things are getting worse. He has to ask Morgan McSweeney what it is that he believes in, but the fact is that chaos is being felt in the economy. The Chancellor said she would not be coming back with new tax rises, but she will have to pay for all these U-turns she is announcing out there, won't she?

The Prime Minister: I am going to look in my folder because here I have the quote that the right hon. Lady said on Sky News—*[Interruption.]* I will read it, thank you. *[Laughter.]* It is what the Leader of the Opposition said—it is worth listening to. She said:

“Israel is fighting a proxy war on behalf of the UK, just like Ukraine is on behalf of Western Europe against Russia.”

Well, that was certainly noticed in the Russian embassy because they put out a statement saying that the Leader of the Opposition has

“finally called a spade a spade”.

It said:

“Ukraine is indeed fighting a proxy war against Russia on behalf of Western interests”.

It went on to say:

“The illegitimate Kyiv regime, created, financed and armed by the West, has been at it since 2014.”

So they endorsed—*[Interruption.]* They want the detail; I have given the quote. That is what Russia said in response. She asked me what I believe in. I believe in standing by Ukraine and calling out Russia as the aggressor.

Mrs Badenoch: It was our Government that stood behind Ukraine and led the way in Europe. Everything the Prime Minister has said this afternoon is total nonsense, obfuscation, and avoiding the question. He does not have any answers. It is disgraceful.

I asked the Prime Minister about the two-child benefit cap; he is talking about the Kremlin. He is saying everything he can to distract from the mess he is making of our economy. The OECD has downgraded growth for the next two years. He cannot rule out tax rises. Police chiefs are saying that they do not have the money they need to keep the public safe, just as he is releasing more criminals on to the streets. His Cabinet are squabbling with each other, and they said that they have lost control of the borders, but he still managed to find £30 billion to give away the Chagos islands. This is total and utter chaos. Two weeks ago, he was crowing about his historic trade deal and how he got zero per cent tariffs on steel. Now the steel industry will face 25% tariffs unless he does exactly what President Trump tells him to. It is chaos, chaos, chaos—and isn't the root of the chaos that it is about this Prime Minister, his decisions and his judgment?

The Prime Minister: The only advice—*[Interruption.]* She gets up on a Wednesday morning, scrolls through social media and never does any of the detail. We are the only country in the world that is not paying the 50% tax on steel, and we are working on the rest. That will be coming down. She—*[Interruption.]* We are working to bring it down to zero; that is going to happen. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, let us listen to the answer, even if you do not believe you are getting one. It is how the Prime Minister wishes to do it.

The Prime Minister: She opposes the US deal, she opposes the India deal, she opposes what we are doing with the EU, and she opposes Diego Garcia. That is a vital intelligence and strategic capability, and it is absolutely clear that legal uncertainty would compromise that capability in a very short time. No responsible Prime Minister would ever let that happen. We have secured the long-term basis for the base. That has been welcomed by the US, NATO, Australia, New Zealand and India. They are our allies. It has been opposed by our adversaries, Russia, China and Iran—and into that column we have Reform, presumably following Putin, and the Tories following Reform.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): Anyone who saw the six-year-old girl fleeing the flaming shelter where her family were killed by an Israeli air strike will carry those horrific images with them forever. These are very dark days. Gaza is a stain on the soul of humanity, and it is a further shame that there is more moral clarity coming from Ms Rachel on YouTube than from many world leaders, who are complicit in silence. The Prime Minister said this week that Britain must be ready for war. I ask: after tens of thousands of deaths, after a generation of Gazans stunted by hunger and trauma, when will it be ready for peace? When will it help to stop this genocide? When will it hold the Israeli Government to account, and when will it recognise the state of Palestine?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising this. She is absolutely right to describe these as dark days. Israel's recent action is appalling and, in my view, counterproductive and intolerable. We have strongly opposed the expansion of military operations and settler violence, and the blocking of humanitarian

aid. The House will have seen that we have suspended the free trade agreement talks and sanctioned extremists supporting violence in the west bank. We will keep looking at further action, along with our allies, including sanctions, but let me be absolutely clear: we need to get back to a ceasefire, we need the hostages, who have been held for a very long time, to be released, and we desperately need more aid, at speed and at volume, into Gaza, because it is an appalling and intolerable situation.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I start by welcoming reports that the Chancellor will give winter fuel payments to more pensioners this winter, although because we still await the details, we will reserve our full judgment.

I recognise the efforts of the Prime Minister to pull out all the stops to avoid President Trump's damaging tariffs: a letter from the King, offering to water down online safety laws and even trying to send the Open to one of Trump's golf courses. The Prime Minister thought he had secured 0% tariffs for British steel, but now Trump is threatening us with 50% unless we comply with his new, five-week deadline. This is classic Trump—changing the terms of a deal he has already agreed. Does the Prime Minister share my fear that nothing will stop Trump messing the UK around, short of bunging a few hundred million pounds into his TrumpCoin?

The Prime Minister: We have a deal and we are implementing it. Within a very short time, I am very confident that we will get those tariffs down in accordance with the deal. I will come back to the right hon. Gentleman and update the House in due course, and I think the House will be very pleased at the outcome—[*Interruption.*] From a sedentary position, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) says no. This is zero tariffs on steel. [*Interruption.*] Let us come back to this in a couple of weeks when we have implemented it, but the Conservatives obviously do not want it. Labour has backed steel; the Conservatives laugh at attempts to do so. That is a big part of the problem.

Ed Davey: I had hoped the Prime Minister would now be beginning to see the sort of man Trump is and start getting tough on him, so we will come back to this issue.

I welcome the Prime Minister's remarks about Gaza, because I am sure that all of us are appalled by the latest scenes: starving people desperate for food, water and medicine, met with chaos and violence. The US-Israeli programme is clearly failing and nothing short of lifting the full blockade on aid will do. Given that the Netanyahu Government refuse to do that, will the Prime Minister take more decisive action today? Will he push at the United Nations Security Council for humanitarian corridors to get the desperately needed aid urgently into Gaza?

The Prime Minister: I give the right hon. Gentleman my assurance, because this is a very important issue, that we are working at pace with our allies on that very issue, to take whatever measures we can to get that humanitarian aid in. We have been doing that intensively over recent weeks and I give him my assurance that we

will continue to do that, because that aid needs to get in at speed and at volume, and he is absolutely right about that.

Q5. [904406] Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It has been over two decades since a Labour Government banned the cruel practice of fur farming, but the job is not done. Real fur and fur products are still being imported into the UK. This week, I delivered a petition to No. 10 with over 1 million signatures calling for a fur-free Britain. My private Member's Bill would deliver exactly that. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time to close the loopholes, ban the import and sale of real fur, and finally put the fur trade out of fashion?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her campaign. I know that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will have heard her representations. We have commissioned the expert Animal Welfare Committee to produce a full report on the responsible sourcing of fur to inform the next steps that need to be taken, and we are committed to publishing an animal welfare strategy later this week.¹

Q2. [904403] Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): My constituent, Molly, is a single mother caring for a child with cancer. She cannot work because of her caring responsibilities. Since January, she has tried to claim disability living allowance and universal credit, but faced constant Department for Work and Pensions bureaucracy. That bureaucracy continued right up until yesterday, when she received yet another frustrating letter from the DWP about her DLA. Will the Prime Minister assure Molly and others like her that his Government are doing all that they can to help? Will he visit Tiverton and Minehead to see these challenges at first hand and to work with me to find a solution?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this case and I am deeply sorry to hear about Molly's situation. We are improving the lives of those that need it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has just said to me that she will look into the case, so if the hon. Lady will provide the details, I will ensure that it gets proper attention so that we can deal with the particular problems she has raised. I am grateful to her, as I am sure Molly is, for raising this and I hope that we can now take the action that is necessary.

Q9. [904410] Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): Diolch, Mr Speaker. In Wales, we will never forget how our steel industry was neglected by the Conservative Government. They made unfunded promises, refused to make critical decisions and left Port Talbot on a cliff edge. I welcome the news overnight that this Labour Government have secured an exemption for our steel industry from the latest US tariffs—a deal secured by this Labour Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to update the House on what further work he is doing in order to support our steel workers across Wales and across our United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is doing great work with Welsh Labour colleagues to champion working people in Wales. The United Kingdom is the only country in the world that will not be subject to the

1.[*Official Report*, 5 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

additional tariffs announced today, and we are working with the US at this moment to swiftly implement the agreement we have reached, which will see the 25% tariffs removed. We want that—the Conservatives do not want it—and it is crucial for British jobs. We have fought tooth and nail for our steel industry, saving jobs at British Steel and improving the deal at Port Talbot, and we will continue to do so.

Q3. [904404] Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The Prime Minister has repeatedly told this House that it is not for him or his Government to determine what is and is not a genocide. That position is no longer tenable, because at the High Court recently, the Prime Minister instructed his lawyers to argue that in Gaza,

“no genocide has occurred or is occurring”.

The truth is that his Government have made a determination; the question is whether he has the courage of his convictions. Will he repeat from the Dispatch Box what he told his lawyers to argue in the High Court—that he believes that no genocide has occurred or is occurring in Gaza?

The Prime Minister: I have said that we are strongly opposed to, and appalled by, Israel's recent actions. We have been absolutely clear in condemning them and calling them out, whether that is the expansion of military operations, settler violence, or the dreadful blocking of aid—it is completely unacceptable. We must see a ceasefire, hostages must be released, and there must be aid into Gaza. However, the hon. Gentleman talks about peace and security. As I understand it, at this moment of global instability as we go into a new era, what does his party want to do? It wants to get rid of the nuclear deterrent—the single most important capability that we have to keep the UK safe—harming the industry and harming the country.

Q10. [904411] Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Carnegie UK, which was established by Dunfermline-born philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, has found that people under 49 are twice as likely to have been negatively impacted by the rising cost of living as those over 65. It is vital that we increase opportunities for younger people and help put more money in their pocket, but sadly this week, we saw the Scottish Government seek to close off an opportunity for young people by refusing to support new skills investment from Rolls-Royce, while the college sector in Scotland also warns of a funding crisis. What more is the Prime Minister doing to ensure that young people in Scotland get the opportunities they deserve, despite a failing and stagnant SNP Scottish Government?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. At a time of global conflict, it is staggering that the SNP policy is to block an £11 million investment for a new national welding centre on the Clyde. I was there earlier this week and saw the huge potential for apprenticeships, for job opportunities, and for young people. *[Interruption.]* I support it—the SNP blocks it. In England, we are backing 120,000 more apprenticeships with £3 billion of funding as part of our plan for change, but despite the highest funding settlement in the history of devolution, the SNP is cutting college budgets and blocking opportunities. It has no plan for Scotland's future.

Q4. [904405] Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Given the Prime Minister's desire to strengthen strategic alignment with our European neighbours, will he—in the interests of public safety—follow the lead of France, Denmark, Belgium and others, and ban the burqa?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. I am not going to follow her down that line, but now she is in Parliament and safely in her place, perhaps she could tell her new party leader that his latest plan to bet £80 billion of unfunded tax cuts with no idea how he is going to pay for them is Liz Truss all over again—although, considering that I think the hon. Lady was a Conservative member when Liz Truss was leader, she probably will not.

Q12. [904413] Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): During recess, I visited Scottish Action for Mental Health's Redhall walled garden, which I am proud to say is in Edinburgh South West. It has operated for decades as a therapeutic horticultural centre, supporting adults with mental health problems. Like similar community mental health services across Scotland, it is now under threat: it faces potential closure due to chronic underfunding of integrated joint boards by the SNP Government. Does the Prime Minister agree that facilities such as Redhall walled garden should have been a priority for the SNP when deciding how to spend the record funding settlement that Scottish Labour MPs won for Scotland?

The Prime Minister: What my hon. Friend describes is how health services in Scotland are utterly broken under the SNP, whether it is people waiting too long for mental health support in his constituency, or the Wishaw neonatal unit in Hamilton, which the SNP is threatening to downgrade. In 2021, the SNP Government said they would recruit 1,000 more community mental health workers. They utterly failed to do so. If they had a plan to fix Scotland's NHS, they would have done it by now. Scotland needs a change of direction.

Q6. [904407] Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Sir Jon Cunliffe's interim report, published yesterday, laid out the fundamental changes needed for our water sector. That is felt no more acutely than in my constituency of Chichester. We have a harbour that is in an unfavourable, declining condition and sewage is blighting our tourism industry. With water bills from Southern Water rising by 47% for my constituents, can the Prime Minister tell them when they can expect to see the real change that this Government promised and our waterways cleaned up for good?

The Prime Minister: I share the hon. Member's anger and frustration at the broken water system that we inherited, with frankly appalling sewage, higher bills and executives paying themselves huge bonuses. The era of being rewarded for failure is over. We have launched a record 81 criminal investigations into lawbreaking water companies in England, and we have introduced the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, with prison sentences for polluting bosses and the banning of unfair bonuses. We will respond to the independent water commission in full following the publication of the final report.

Q14. [904415] David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): The proposed Hemel health campus, a partnership between the NHS and the council, presents a perfect opportunity to deliver on Labour's commitment to neighbourhood-based care, bringing services closer to where people live, in facilities designed around their needs. It can also help to regenerate our town centre. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is essential that all stakeholders involved in the project are as ambitious as possible and work to deliver a community hospital that builds on the services currently available and reflects the evolving needs of our town?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to how my hon. Friend is bringing people together to deliver better care in the community that meets the needs of his constituents. The proposals for the health campus will be open to public consultation. I urge the whole community to input into that, to ensure the strongest investment case is put forward. I am pleased that waiting lists in his local trust have fallen by a fifth since March 2024, because of the investment that we have put into the NHS. That, of course, was opposed by the parties on the Opposition Benches.

Q7. [904408] Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Over the past few months, I have been meeting care providers in my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon who deliver essential and expert care to some of my most vulnerable constituents. However, like so many small businesses, they are under huge financial pressures, and the hike in national insurance is yet another burden many cannot afford. I welcome the Government's partial U-turn on winter fuel payment cuts following pressure from those on the Liberal Democrat Benches. When will the Prime Minister offer relief to care providers and other small businesses and U-turn on the punitive hike to national insurance?

The Prime Minister: We announced £502 million to support local authorities to manage the changes in NICs. We have put in £3.7 billion in additional funding for social care, doubled the disabled facilities grant and introducing the first ever fair pay agreement for professional carers, including minimum standards for pay. I gently say to the hon. Member that her party opposed the Budget that provides the money for the funding. They cannot keep asking for more spending and oppose a Budget that raises the money.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): The first constituent to reach out to me was a brave Bolsover mummy who had waited four years and five months, from rape to prosecution, with three postponements and multiple suicide attempts. I will do everything I can to use this Chamber to speak out for women who are being so badly let down. How will the Prime Minister support me to ensure that when these survivors—these formidable women—across the country come forward, they will get justice and there will be space in our prisons for the perpetrators?

The Prime Minister: May I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue so powerfully and for everything that she is doing on it? The case she has outlined is utterly shameful, and far too many victims are waiting too long for justice. We are delivering a record number of sitting

days and reviewing criminal courts to speed up the hearing of these cases, and we have a mission to halve violence against women and girls.

My hon. Friend talks about the prison system. The Conservatives left the prison system on the brink of collapse and routinely operating at 99% of capacity, because in 14 long years they added just 500 extra places. We will deliver 14,000 new prison places so that the public are protected from these vile offenders.

Q8. [904409] Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Prime Minister told us during the general election that he is a socialist. What has been more surprising is to find out in the last couple of weeks that the leader of the Reform party might be one too. As the Chancellor locks down the spending review, will the Prime Minister please remind her of Mrs Thatcher's all-too-pertinent observation that the trouble with socialism is that eventually you run out of other people's money?

The Prime Minister: Was it Kwasi Kwarteng that the hon. Gentleman replaced? Now he stands there to give lectures on economic prudence—you couldn't script it! The difference between the Labour Government and the parties opposite is that we believe in properly costing our plans. Reform has £80 billion-worth of unfunded commitments—Liz Truss 2.0.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Blackpool's own boxing champion, Brian Rose, uses his gym to tackle knife crime and antisocial behaviour and to give young people a safe space, demonstrating the significant impact of amateur gyms. Thousands of amateur gyms up and down the country operate on a shoestring and cannot afford to keep their lights on, and they are reliant on brilliant charities such as Maverick Stars, Empire Fighting Chance and Matchroom in the Community. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking those charities and praising the volunteers, and will he throw a haymaker behind these gyms, giving them the knock-out support they need to continue their vital work?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a great champion of how amateur boxing gyms can transform both physical and mental health, as well as confidence, in young people. The time given by selfless volunteers is inspiring, and we should thank them for it. England Boxing is investing £9 million in the sport and GB Boxing will also receive more than £12 million during the next Olympic games cycle, and I know that my hon. Friend will be looking forward to Liverpool hosting the inaugural world boxing championships in September.

Q11. [904412] Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Since July, health services in my constituency have got worse. The Chase hospital may close, the promised health hub in Bordon has not arrived, and this week we have learned that in-patient wards in Haslemere are being closed because of a lack of GP cover. The Prime Minister promised hundreds more GPs. Could he possibly send one or two of them to Farnham and Bordon?

The Prime Minister: I remind myself that the Conservatives left the NHS on its knees: the last Labour Government brought waiting lists down to record lows,

and they drove them up to record highs; the last Labour Government had the highest possible confidence in the NHS, and they dragged it down to the lowest ever level. Because of the money that we are putting in, we have done 3 million extra appointments in the first year of a Labour Government—that is the difference that Labour makes in power.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): The Environment Agency predicts that 8 million homes—one in four in England—could be at risk of flooding by 2050. Despite this, the Conservative party presided over a tripling of the proportion of our flood defences that are deemed “not adequate”. By contrast, this Labour Government are investing over £2.6 billion in new flood defences, including on the Greenway in my Hendon constituency. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is a shame that not all parties share this Government’s determination to keep homes safe from flooding?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this issue, because the Conservatives left our flood defences in the worst state on record. It is prisons, it is the NHS, it is the economy, it is flooding—every single thing they touched, they broke. We are investing £2.65 billion to build and maintain flood defences, and that means 52,000 more properties will be protected by March of next year.

Q13. [904414] **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Glastonbury is experiencing a notable increase in antisocial behaviour. St John’s church was recently forced to close its doors after gravestones were reportedly used as counters for drug transactions. Constituents Peter and Melanie told me that people have been targeted with demands for money when collecting their pensions, leaving them feeling scared and overwhelmed. The lawlessness is deterring tourists, and business owners have told me trade is suffering. As visitors start to arrive ahead of the Glastonbury festival, could the Prime Minister reassure my constituents that he will give the police the additional resource that they need to tackle this threatening and menacing behaviour, and to reduce the devastating crime wave sweeping through the town?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise this matter. Antisocial behaviour massively impacts on individuals and their communities, and that is why we are introducing 13,000 new neighbourhood police and giving them better powers—respect orders—so they can actually deal with what they see on the streets effectively. It is very important that we take this seriously.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): This time last year, Southend United football club almost went bankrupt, thanks to mismanagement by the former owner, but on Sunday they made it to Wembley for the national league play-off final. Despite being beaten by Oldham Athletic at the eleventh hour, it was like the phoenix rising from the flames to see them on the pitch. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Southend United on their

outstanding recovery, and give me an assurance that the Government are doing all they can to make sure that no club ever again has to go through what our club went through?

The Prime Minister: Let me congratulate Southend on what was an incredible achievement; commiserations for the final result. One of the police officers on my team is an ardent Southend supporter, so I know all about the team—and the plans and the stadium—and what it means, but I should also congratulate Oldham, of course, on that victory.

Q15. [904416] **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): In 1999, the Prime Minister produced a book on “Miscarriages of Justice”, recommending ways of preventing them and of quickly putting them right. In 2014, people who had been wrongly imprisoned and then exonerated were allowed compensation only if they could prove their innocence beyond reasonable doubt. This ignored the decision of the court exonerating them, and meant that 93% of people who had been wrongfully imprisoned, and often had their lives destroyed, got no compensation whatsoever. This is an institutional miscarriage of justice. Will he instruct the Ministry of Justice to review this matter, and pay personal attention to getting this travesty of justice resolved?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Member raises a really important issue that I am obviously aware of. It is right that victims of miscarriage can apply for compensation and appropriately do so, and I will take away what he says and have it looked at.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) please find a seat? He cannot just stand there and have a conversation.

Jesse Norman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This House and, indeed, the viewing public have just been treated to the very unfortunate spectacle of a Prime Minister who was completely unwilling to answer questions from the Leader of the Opposition—so much so that he entirely changed the subject. Instead of referring to the two-child benefit cap, he started referring to the Kremlin and Russia. I know that you, Mr Speaker, pay careful attention to the content of supplementary questions to make sure that they are within scope. Could you give us some guidance on whether you may be able to control answers when they are wildly inappropriate?

Mr Speaker: As somebody who knows how this House runs, the right hon. Member knows that I have no responsibility for the answers given by Ministers. He has put his point on the record, but I have been in this House since 1997 and I can honestly say—we both can honestly say—that the scope has always been that we have questioned the answers, whoever has been at the Government Dispatch Box; so nothing has quite changed, but the point is on the record.

Regional Growth

12.40 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): With permission, I shall update the House on the Government's work to boost growth across the United Kingdom.

As the Prime Minister set out in the plan for change, economic growth is the No. 1 mission of this Government. It is key to achieving the Government's goals: higher wages for working people; delivering economic and national security; and investing in our public services. We are already making progress. The most recent figures show that the United Kingdom was the fastest growing economy of any G7 country in the first quarter of the year and that real wages have risen more since July 2024 than over the first 10 years of the previous Conservative Government. But we are keenly aware that this progress must be widely felt in every part of the country. As such, our plan for regional growth will be hardwired into the spending review and infrastructure strategy, which will be set out in more detail in the coming weeks. This investment will be targeted squarely at the renewal of Britain and fixed on the priorities of working people, delivering on the promise of change and improving lives and communities across the country.

This morning, the Chancellor set out her next steps for nationwide growth in a series of speeches across the north and the midlands, and I am pleased to update the House on those announcements now. A key part of the Government's growth mission is the view that growth relies on dynamic, interconnected city regions, creating clusters of activity where people can get around, communicate, share ideas, commute, find good work, and earn wages that flow back into strong local economies. As most Members know, the majority of our city regions have poor public transport systems, holding back growth and improvements to air quality and making it harder to get around. Stronger transport links are therefore crucial. They create opportunities for individuals to access a wider pool of jobs, for employers to access a wider labour market, and for businesses to expand the market for their goods and services.

If we were to increase the productivity of our largest city regions outside London just to match the national average, it would grow the economy by £86 billion. So I am pleased to say that this Government are making the biggest investment in intra-city transport connectivity that this country has ever seen. The spending review will allocate funding for ambitious local transport programmes across England, including the new transport for city regions fund launched by the Government today. This will give nine city region mayors a share of £15.6 billion in long-term transport for city region settlements running until 2032. The benefits and opportunities will be felt in the cities and towns across these combined authorities and by those who commute to work from outside those city regions.

The previous Government said that they would do some of this but, as was always the case, they never put the money aside to pay for it. As a result of our reforms to the fiscal rules and decisions to increase investment in the 2024 autumn Budget, this Labour Government are delivering.

The funding announced today will mean that the Mayor of West Yorkshire can now fully commit to delivering the West Yorkshire mass transit system, which

will be fully integrated with cycling, walking, bus and rail, making journeys quicker, more accessible and more reliable across the region. The Mayor of the West Midlands can extend the metro from Birmingham city centre to the new sports quarter, unlocking more than £3 billion of private investment, and bringing benefits and opportunities to those living in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) and all who travel there.

It will mean that the Mayor of Greater Manchester can grow and transform the Metrolink tram network, building new tram stocks in Bury, Manchester and Oldham, which will help drive up living standards for the constituents of my hon. Friends the Members for Bury North (Mr Frith), for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and for others in the north-west region. The Mayor of the Liverpool city region can deliver three new rapid bus routes linking up the city centre, John Lennon airport, the new Everton stadium on Bramley-Moore dock, and new homes built on the Central Docks redevelopment and Anfield.

The Mayor of the North East will now be able to extend the Tyne and Wear Metro, linking Washington with Newcastle and Sunderland, connecting those living in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) to new jobs and opportunities. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned for this project for years and years, and it is now being delivered by a Labour Government.

This investment will also mean that the Mayor of South Yorkshire can renew the existing and now publicly owned Supertram network with track replacements, overhead line maintenance, and rolling stock renewal, yielding a fleet of new vehicles by 2032, linking jobs and homes in Sheffield and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion).

We are backing the Mayor of the West of England's plans for mass transit development across the region, with improved rail infrastructure to help unlock more services between Brabazon and Bristol city centre, meaning shorter journey times to Bristol Temple Meads across the wider area and providing greater opportunities for those in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove) and—declaring my own interest—in my own.

After years of the Mayor of Tees Valley trying to persuade his Conservative colleagues to fund these important projects, I am delighted to confirm today that this Labour Government are now backing the region to invest in, for example, the Middlesbrough station in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald), unblocking local networks and increasing capacity on local lines. I pay particular thanks to my hon. Friends the Members in the Teesside region who have lobbied hard to see this investment in their region—now being delivered by a Labour Government.

The Mayor of the East Midlands can now forge the Trent Arc, linking Derby and Nottingham to create tens of thousands of new jobs and homes, connecting Infinity Park investment zone and the east midlands freeport with sites including Ratcliffe-on-Soar clean energy and advanced manufacturing and east midlands intermodal park—home of Toyota in the region—along the Trent Arc corridor.

This funding is substantial, marking a 2.4 times real-terms increase in spending on city region connectivity, funding the priorities that matter to hard-working people across the country. These announcements were only made possible today because at the autumn Budget 2024 the Chancellor took the necessary action to reform the fiscal rules to improve stability after years of chaos from the Conservative party, and to unlock investment. This means the Government can now provide greater investment in Britain's economic revival as, for the first time, the Treasury takes account of the value of financial assets and not just the costs of investment. That has enabled us to increase investment by over £113 billion more than the previous Conservative Government, while keeping debt on a sustainable path—only made possible by the credibility of our fiscal rules, which require day-to-day spending to be funded with revenue.

It is more important than ever to have a robust fiscal framework. I am pleased to note that the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed at the spring statement that the Government will meet their stability and investment rules two years ahead of schedule. In addition to her announcements today regarding transport for city region settlements, the Chancellor will set out further detail on this allocation of additional funding at next week's spending review.

In January, the Chancellor announced a review of the Green Book, the Government guidance on appraising options for investment. Since then, we have consulted extensively with stakeholders from across the country, considering potential problems with the Green Book guidance itself and how the guidance is being applied in practice. I thank and pay tribute to many hon. Members across the House for engaging on this important issue.

We will publish the full conclusions of the review next week. It will mark a new approach to Government decision making that puts an end to siloed Whitehall thinking and takes account of the reinforcing economic effects of infrastructure, housing, skills and jobs to ensure that investment takes place in every part of the country.

These announcements reflect just a fraction of our plans to supercharge growth across the United Kingdom. We are focused on investing across all parts of the country to boost prosperity and deliver the change the British people voted for at last year's election, and there is more to come. The spending review, which we will publish next week, will set out in further detail how an active Government will continue to deliver growth, empowering all regions and nations of the UK to reach their full potential and making working people across the country better off, no matter where they choose to live and work.

Unlike the Conservatives, who will tell us that they would have delivered on their false promises after 14 years of failing to do so, this Labour Government, in our first year in office, are delivering: a country that people will see is being set up for success that they can take part in. That is the change we promised, and that is the change this Labour Government are delivering. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I think you missed a couple of railway stations out of your statement, Minister, but not to worry. I call the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

12.51 pm

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for his statement and for early sight of it. I will start with an area of agreement: it is a shared ambition to enable all parts of this country to participate in our growth and our future. Potential in the United Kingdom is everywhere, and it is right that the Government seek to unlock it with every means they have. Indeed, that was one of the guiding principles of the 2019-24 Conservative Administration's levelling-up policy.

They always say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Now, we know that this Chancellor has a reputation for copying, so I thought I would have a look at the statement made in 2023 on Network North allocations, which I am sure the Chief Secretary has seen. I thought I would compare those allocations with the Government's announcement today. I have the Conservative announcements in one hand and the Labour announcements in the other. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members can shout all they want.

Here we go. In 2023, the Conservatives promised the west midlands £2.64 billion—*[Interruption.]* I say to Labour Members that the Chief Secretary is also only making a promise. In 2023, we promised £2.64 billion for the west midlands, and the Government have announced £2.4 billion for the west midlands today. We promised £2.1 billion for West Yorkshire; today, the Government have announced £2.1 billion. We promised £2.5 billion for Greater Manchester; they have announced £2.5 billion today. We promised £1.45 billion for South Yorkshire; they have announced £1.5 billion today. We promised £1.581 billion for Liverpool; they have announced £1.6 billion today. We promised £1.84 billion for the north-east; they have announced £1.8 billion today. We promised £0.752 billion for the west of England; they have announced £0.8 billion today. We promised £978 million for Tees Valley in 2023, and Labour has announced £1 billion today.

I know the Chief Secretary is occasionally good with numbers, but does he not agree that what he is announcing today is essentially nothing more than a rounding error on the Conservatives' plans from 2023? The only difference between the 2023 and 2025 announcements is that we would have spelt Rotherham correctly in our announcement.

The truth is, the Chancellor will go around the country rewriting history as frequently as she writes her CV, but nobody believes in her £22 billion black hole. What people do believe is that this Chancellor is open to change. She is going to roll back the issues on the winter fuel allowance, her botched welfare reform and changes to the two-child policy. Look at those on the Treasury Bench—they have not got a spine. If Labour Back Benchers have an issue in their constituency and want to stand up for their constituents, they should make a bid to this Chief Secretary, because he will back down and give them the money. That is what we know from Labour.

We also know that in the Government's analysis of the Green Book, they are looking to change the assessments of the cost-benefit analysis. My question to the Chief Secretary therefore is—*[Interruption.]* I do have a number of questions. First, will he publish the cost-benefit ratios for each of the projects he has announced today? Will he state whether they have been evaluated

[Richard Fuller]

on the existing Green Book rules or on new rules? Will he give an indication today of what those rules might be?

Secondly, as the Labour Government try to decide whether their commitment on defence is for 2%, 2.5%, 3% or 3.5% of GDP, with both those numbers and today's investments stretching into the next period of government—whoever is in government—can the Chief Secretary confirm that it is this Government's intention that the investments made today will be secure, whatever the changes made on defence expenditure?

The Chief Secretary said that he is able to make this announcement because the Government changed the rules, which has enabled £113 billion more of investment. But that is not quite right, is it? The Government can afford the additional investment only if people are prepared to fund it, and there are two sources for funding: taxpayers or the bond market. Can the Chief Secretary therefore advise whether he is going to look for additional funding from taxes or additional borrowing, if there is a shortfall?

The truth is, despite what the Back Benchers say, this Labour Treasury team are out of their depth. They are addicted to tax increases and to more borrowing. The Chief Secretary can republish as many press releases as he likes, but we know that because of their reckless mismanagement of the economy, come the autumn, this Labour Government will be back for more.

Darren Jones: I am pleased to see the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury back in his place today; I always enjoy our exchanges. I welcome the fact that he supports our plans and sees the good value in them. I will respond to one particular question, and then answer the rest in the round: all the Green Book details will be published next week at the spending review, so we will be able to share them with him and the House at that time.

The shadow Chief Secretary said that we were imitating the Conservative party's promise to level up the country, but I think the British people voted and gave their verdict on the Conservatives' success in delivering that at the last election. Whereas their version of levelling up was a set of false promises, this Labour Government are delivering real change.

The shadow Chief Secretary—rightly, given his role—asked how we will fund the announcements we have made today. As I explained in my statement to the House, it is because of the Chancellor's decisions to amend the fiscal rules and invest in Britain, instead of continuing with decline, that we have been able to do so.

The shadow Chief Secretary and the Conservative party have not said what they would do differently. They were against the change in the fiscal rules, against our increasing of taxes on the wealthiest people at the Budget and against every single measure we have taken to be able to pay for today's announcements. Whether it is the Conservatives, Reform or any other party, they need to recognise that the Conservatives' false promises led to their decline and their unfunded promises are disrespectful to the British people, and that this Labour Government promised change at the election and we are delivering it. These are fully funded promises, unlike

the unfunded promises of the Conservatives, which posed a risk to the economy and a risk to family finances. The sooner the Conservatives learn from their lessons, apologise to the British people, and come forward with some serious proposals, the better for the debate in this House.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome this investment in Britain, and I hope that the Treasury will be fully evaluating the impact of this vital transport infrastructure on growth in regions, which we know has always lagged, except for in London and the south-east. Although these figures are fully funded now, with all the global shocks we are seeing, it is important that we are aware that there could be additional costs on some of the raw materials being used, and any delay obviously adds costs too. Will the Chief Secretary tell the House the Government's plans if costs do go higher—will the figures be fully funded regardless, or will they have to go back to the drawing board if there are challenges?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Treasury Committee rightly alludes to the fact that the Chancellor's speech today makes the case for this Government investing in every part of the country and ensuring that growth is felt widely. My hon. Friend asks me about the supply chain and costs for building infrastructure. The House will know that Britain has unfortunately become a country where most of our infrastructure projects go over time and over budget as a failure of poor industrial and infrastructure policy and erratic decision making over many, many years. Alongside the spending review, we will be publishing the infrastructure strategy, at a slightly later stage, and that will answer many of my hon. Friend's questions on Government policy, recognising the problem she has raised and the solutions that will be set out to support the supply chain to be able to deliver for Britain.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): We Liberal Democrats believe that when the economy is growing, every nation, every region and every person should feel and see the benefits, so we are pleased to see investment in public transport and public infrastructure, but I must ask the Minister: where is the plan and the money for rural areas? He will remember that, at the Budget, we Liberal Democrats supported and welcomed the Government's changes to the fiscal rules that allowed for borrowing and more productive investment, and we are delighted to see that one of the beneficiaries of today's announcement is the Metrolink to Stockport, which is a testimony to the hard work of the Liberal Democrats, who have been campaigning on this for far longer than the mayor and the combined authority have even existed. From Shropshire to the south-west, from Cumbria to Cornwall, and from Norfolk to Newton Abbot, rural areas once again feel as if they have been forgotten. Will the Government therefore bring forward a rural growth strategy?

May I also ask the Minister about Wales? We know that HS2 and the Oxford-Cambridge line have been designated England-Wales lines, as opposed to England-only lines. Can he explain to the people of Wales why that has happened and why they are set to lose out on Barnett consequentials?

There is one big piece missing from the puzzle. Many of us rightminded people want to see investment in infrastructure, but if we want to build stuff, we need skilled people to build it. Will the Government now fix the apprenticeship levy so that it can be spent on skills and training? When will the Government produce their skills strategy? Why has Skills England been set up as an executive agency of the Department for Education rather than having employers at its heart, as was promised? And why are the Government scrapping the level 7 apprenticeship when we know that it supports social mobility, including into engineering? We welcome this investment into transport infrastructure, but that transport infrastructure will not build itself; we need the people skilled to do it.

Darren Jones: I am pleased that the Liberal Democrats welcome today's announcement, which is specifically about investment in city regions. The House will know that, at the 2024 autumn Budget, the Chancellor said that this Labour Government are choosing investment over decline, which is why we are increasing investment in every part of the country. Announcements outside of city regions will come next week at the spending review. To some of the hon. Lady's broader questions on policy, I can tell her that we will debate the infrastructure strategy the week after that. She will have to bear with me, but she should know that there is good news coming, because Labour is delivering.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I very much welcome the commitment to city regions. Nationally, our city regions have underperformed on growth compared with continental cities. On South Yorkshire, I welcome the £1.5 billion to restore and renew our tram network and to improve our bus services, but I understand from the mayor that discussions are still under way about a tram-train project to link Stocksbridge in the north to Beighton and Woodhouse in my constituency in the south. That project will unlock sites for housing and employment growth. Will my right hon. Friend agree to give further consideration to discussions with the mayor to unlock that extra funding for those growth projects?

Darren Jones: As my hon. Friend has mentioned, the Mayor of South Yorkshire has been given £1.5 billion, which is in line with our commitment to devolution and to city region mayors. It is for the mayor to decide how that money is spent. As my hon. Friend suggests, the mayor has announced that some of this money will be allocated to the tram network, but it will be for the mayor and the combined authority to decide how to use the balance of this funding for other projects in the region. As always, I am very happy to meet him and the mayor to consider what options are available.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I recognise the importance of assisting the city regions to boost the economy, but my Brigg and Immingham constituency covers the south bank of the Humber, which is home to a cluster of energy businesses that are of particular importance to the renewables sector. Can the Chief Secretary to the Treasury outline what resources will be made available for that area to support improvements both in rail connections and also to the A180, which provides access to the major port of Immingham?

Darren Jones: The Government recognise the strategic importance of the hon. Member's region to the UK economy. This will be reflected in the industrial strategy when it is published in the coming weeks, alongside our other plans. On his specific question, announcements for funding outside of the Transport for City Regions funding will be made at the spending review next Wednesday.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): Twenty years ago, when first standing for election, I was told to limit my ambitions with regard to campaigning to bring the Metro to Washington, but I persisted and now, thanks to this Labour Government and the new Mayor of the North East, my ambition is going to be realised. Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that that is the difference that Labour in government can make and that what we are seeing is promise made and promise delivered?

Darren Jones: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her decades of campaigning for that project. I also welcome her suggestion that this is a Labour Government delivering the change that they promised to the country, but may I add to that and say that it is also the difference that brilliant Labour MPs can make in their constituencies campaigning for change for their constituents? I offer many congratulations to my hon. Friend, and I hope that she will be able to cut the ribbon when the lines are up and running.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Minister talks about regional growth, but in north-east Scotland we see only cost and decline under this Labour Government. Let us take the oil and gas sector. Labour policies will cost almost 35,000 jobs by the end of this decade, and £150 billion in economic income by 2050. The UK-EU deal will cost fishermen in Scotland £6 billion. Two thirds of Scottish farmers will be impacted by the family farm tax, with 48% of farms halting their investments, which again hits the rural businesses that would be supplying them? Can the Minister name a single policy that this Labour Government have introduced that benefits regional growth in north-east Scotland?

Darren Jones: I can reconfirm to the House that this Labour Government have delivered the largest real terms increase in funding for Scotland since devolution began. Furthermore, may I politely point her to the fact that the announcement today is about England, not Scotland. Further announcements on our commitment to delivering a new direction in Scotland will be coming next week in the spending review.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I very much welcome the Labour Government's delivery of £1 billion of investment for the Tees Valley, and particularly the £60 million for the third platform at Middlesbrough station. The money to increase the station's capacity, which I hope will mean increasing the number of direct trains to London, will complement the recent modernisation works that have been completed, which I began campaigning on in 2018 with the then Middlesbrough Mayor, Dave Budd. There are many priorities in which this money could be invested, including the repair of the iconic Transporter bridge, taking buses back into control à la Andy Burnham, and electrification of our rail line. Can the Chief Secretary to the Treasury

[*Andy McDonald*]

set out the importance of combined authority mayors consulting with local authorities and local communities and making best use and best value of this award?

Darren Jones: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this investment in his constituency. The key difference of course being that when he started campaigning for it, we were under a Conservative Government, and now, under a Labour Government, we are delivering. On his question about working with combined authority mayors, he is right to point out that the most effective combined authority mayors in England are those who work in partnership with their local Members of Parliament to ensure that every part of their authority area is heard and involved in decision making, and I encourage the Mayor of Teesside to do just that.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): People in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Durham are deeply concerned to see no mention at all in the Chancellor's announcement of the A66 dualling project, which is vital to boosting the economy of the north and, more importantly, to saving lives. There is not a penny for the northern two thirds of the north-west of England, so will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury allay Cumbria's fears and commit now to the A66 upgrade?

Darren Jones: I think the hon. Member is slightly confused. The statement today is about devolved transport funding to mayors for intra-city transport. He is asking me questions on the broader spending in the Department for Transport, which will be announced in the spending review next Wednesday.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on an announcement that will make a huge difference to delivering the industrial strategy for this country—something that the Business and Trade Committee will report on later this week. I particularly commend him for the £2.4 billion for the east Birmingham tram, which I have been campaigning on for 15 years. It is crucial for connecting the impoverished part of east Birmingham to the extraordinary new growth opportunities created by HS2. Will he just confirm today that this is only the first piece of the tram, and that, in future, we will finish the job?

Darren Jones: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing that investment into Birmingham. I recently visited part of that development and saw the enormous potential that will come for his constituents from connecting Birmingham city centre with the new sports quarter. I am delighted to see how much private investment that investment is unlocking for his constituency and for the city. The funding allocations have been devolved to mayors. The announcements today are the announcements that mayors wish to make on some of the early allocations of the funding, and it will be for mayors to decide how they wish to allocate the rest of their funding. I encourage my right hon. Friend to work with the Mayor of the West Midlands, and I will help in any way I can to extend that and get the full benefit for his constituents.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know that the Minister is drawing his parameters rather tightly today, but can he give us at least a hint of what impact the Treasury's consideration anticipates for the defence investments in the regions resulting from the recent strategic defence review, given the closeness with which his Department was involved in the formulation of that review?

Darren Jones: I thank the right hon. Member for his question, which recognises the significant increase in investment in defence and security that this Labour Government are making. He has asked for a hint, but the only hint I can offer is that the answer will come next Wednesday at the spending review.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for listening to Steve Rotherham, the Liverpool city region's metro mayor, and Liverpool city region MPs, who jointly asked for pretty much what he has announced for the region in today's statement. I also congratulate him on recognising the value that transport investment has for communities and for growth. In 2027 a new fleet of electric buses will arrive in my constituency as part of the expansion into the borough of Sefton. Can he confirm that today's announcement covers the improvement in grid connections and infrastructure for charging that will be necessary to take advantage of the very welcome transition to electric buses?

Darren Jones: I congratulate my hon. Friend and colleagues from the Liverpool city region on securing £1.6 billion of transport investment. As he will remember, he and I were on a visit together looking at some of the potential for that money to be spent not long ago, including at a roundtable with local employers and workers at the Everton stadium. It was great to be able to see out the window of the office of the Liverpool city region mayor the potential that that investment will unlock in housing, jobs and great opportunities for people in the area. My hon. Friend asks about how the rest of this money will be spent on what sounds like very sensible infrastructure upgrades. As he will know, that is a decision for the mayor of the Liverpool city region.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Chief Secretary's announcement on regional growth largely omitted the south-west region beyond Bristol. Will he therefore ensure that next Wednesday there is at least a nod to the region in which both he and I have our constituencies? Will he ensure that the signal that this Government sent to the south-west practically on day one by canning improvements to the A303 is corrected? Will he ensure that there is at least a nod to the much-needed Westbury bypass? Can we please have a little investment in the poor country cousin of the rail network in this country, which is the west of England line?

Darren Jones: Of course, the announcement today is on funding for combined authority mayors, which is why the west of England combined authority mayor has received two-thirds of £1 billion of transport investment for areas that are part of that boundary. We are still committed to investing in each and every part of Britain, and the details of that will come out in the spending review next Wednesday. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that the Government have said to other parts of the

country that if they can get together and agree on a combined authority mayoralty, we will continue to support it in the same way that we support the existing mayors in the UK. It will be for local leaders in the region that he and I come from to decide how best to collaborate on these issues going forward.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): It is more than 30 years since I was the leader of Leeds city council and made the first proposal for a rapid transit system in that area of West Yorkshire, so I welcome today's announcement, although it will be a couple of years before the building starts. During the 14 years of Tory Government, the average amount of money per head spent in London was three times larger than the amount of money spent per head on transport in Yorkshire. Of course we want a successful capital city, but that has left the coalfield communities that I represent in real difficulty, with low investment and low productivity. Our wages and salaries are £12,500 per head less than those received on average in the north of London. Will the Minister assure the House that we will look again at funding the regeneration of coalfield communities in the near future?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his campaigning over many years. As the Chancellor set out today in her speech on the funding for city regions, and as was set out in our review of the Green Book, we are purposefully tilting funding towards the north and the midlands after many, many years of those areas losing out, with a tendency for money to come more into London and the south-east. London and the south-east are still important, but we recognise the historical injustice in the distribution of investment across the country, whether it is low ratios in the east midlands, low funding in the south-west or decades of being overlooked in the north. That is why this announcement is really important. I reassure my hon. Friend that I understand from the mayor that work will begin on the projects announced today in 2028, with an ambition for the first services to be available from the mid-2030s.

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): I welcome the news about Metrolink coming to Stockport; it is an absolute tribute to all the residents, businesses and organisations that fought tirelessly to get that result. I thank Councillor Mark Hunter, the former leader of Stockport council and the former MP for Cheadle, who made it his life's work to get this result. The Minister will know that we expect a train station in Cheadle very soon, which will be adapted for the Metrolink. Can he confirm that when Metrolink comes to Stockport, it will come through Cheadle as well?

Darren Jones: One of the many benefits of the funding announced today for city regions is the positive effect that it will have for communities along these transport lines and for people who travel in and out of the city regions. This may be funding for transport in particular places, but I hope that the benefit will be felt widely, as the hon. Gentleman suggests. It will be for the mayor to decide the programming and delivery of those projects, but the hon. Gentleman makes a strong case for Cheadle, and I am sure that he will be able to raise it with the mayor in due course.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. There is a shift from focusing funding on areas where it is easy to deliver in London and the south to focusing it on the midlands and the north, where there are left-behind areas like my constituency. I very much welcome that local mayors will take that decision. Some £2 billion has been given to my mayor to invest in the east midlands, which is absolutely welcome. I also welcome the Trent Arc proposal and the freedom that the mayor has to spend money in our area, such as in Bassetlaw. I am already in discussions with her about how that money can best be spent. My ask of the Minister is that that money is used to help to deliver the STEP—spherical tokamak for energy production—programme in Bassetlaw, which will change lives, create jobs and put us on the energy-efficiency agenda that we need for the future.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and her vociferous campaigning to ensure that we deliver on our promises to invest in left-behind areas across the country after years of failed promises on levelling up from the Conservative party. It is right that we find that money and invest it in her community. One important point to make is that this is not the total amount of funding that the Government are putting into her community; this is just transport funding devolved to the mayoral combined authority. There will be further announcements in the coming weeks in relation to energy infrastructure, industrial policy, skills, housing and public services in which we will be able to show very clearly the difference that a Labour Government are making, working in partnership with brilliant Labour MPs such as my hon. Friend to deliver the change that people voted for.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister is right in stating that modern growth relies on dynamic, interconnected regions and that stronger transport links are vital for businesses to expand their markets for goods and services. While he has announced £15.6 billion to improve transport links in other parts of the United Kingdom, his Government are spending £140 million on creating a border post in my constituency that disrupts the transport links between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, costing businesses, slowing transport and dissuading some businesses from supplying to Northern Ireland. What will he do to improve the transport links between Northern Ireland and Great Britain for logistics? The current disruption is slowing growth and causing businesses to fail.

Darren Jones: The right hon. Member raises important points that my colleagues in the Department for Transport will no doubt have heard. I am sure that he is talking to them about the delivery of that project. The Government have put record investment into Northern Ireland, and we have reset the relationship. Under the last Government there was not even any conversation about Northern Ireland, whereas now I am in frequent communication with the Northern Ireland Executive, who, might I say, of all the colleagues I have had to negotiate with for the spending review, are the toughest? This Labour Government will be delivering a good deal for Northern Ireland, as we will for every nation and region of the country.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I really thank the Chief Secretary and the Chancellor for delivering historic investment that will make a reality of the plans of the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, for an integrated transport network. I understand that it will be called the Weaver Network, to compete with the Bee Network on the other side of the Pennines. I have been actively campaigning for that along with other West Yorkshire MPs. Will the Chief Secretary confirm that funding is included for a new bus station in Bradford? Does he agree that the investment the Government are making in transport infrastructure in the north will improve connectivity for communities in the Shipley area and beyond, bringing social, environmental and economic benefit?

Darren Jones: I congratulate my hon. Friend on working so positively with the Mayor of West Yorkshire to secure this historic amount of investment in her community. She asked specifically if there will be new bus stations as part of the announcement. I understand from Tracy Brabin that there will be new bus stations at Bradford and Wakefield, as well as building out the West Yorkshire mass transit system. I understand from the numbers that there is still some more to spend, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will be in touch with the mayor about that in due course.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am disappointed that there are no SNP Members in the Chamber—[*Interruption.*] Nobody is here from the Scottish National party. I have to take issue with the Chief Secretary, because economic growth in any part of the United Kingdom affects not just England but all of the United Kingdom. I am sure that if SNP Members were here, their constituents, like mine in Edinburgh West, would want to know what consequential implications he anticipates for Scotland. Specifically, will there be Barnett consequentials from this investment?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member is encouraging me to get ahead of the statement and answer questions about next week's spending review. All I can say for now is that the Labour Government are investing in every nation and region of the country. We are delivering on the promise of change in Scotland, where we know we need a new direction. She rightly alludes to the absence of SNP Members in the House—and, might I say, the absence of SNP leadership in Holyrood? At the election next year, we will have an example to show how two Labour Governments can deliver real change for people in Scotland, which will be underpinned by the significant investment we will announce next week in the spending review.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement, his comments on the Green Book and, of course, the nearly £1.8 billion of investment for the north-east. We know that growth and opportunity should never be just for some areas; they need to be felt in every single part of the country. This is a clear demonstration from the Government that we understand that. Will this approach also shape future infrastructure decisions such as the road investment strategy, where projects such as the Moor Farm roundabout upgrade have the potential to unleash growth in my constituency?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for championing jobs and livelihoods in her constituency and the region, and for welcoming the historic £1.8 billion of investment announced today for transport infrastructure. As she rightly alludes to, the announcement is about transport infrastructure, but the Government are doing much more to improve lives, wages and communities in every part of the country. We will be setting out further information in the coming weeks in relation to other types of infrastructure as well as how, through the industrial strategy, we are supporting skills, jobs and training opportunities for people so they can get better jobs and better pay. I note that, of course, the transport funding announced today will serve one of the largest advanced manufacturing zones in the United Kingdom, which will be great news for her constituents and great news for the country.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Following on from High Speed 2, there is a new chapter in the great Welsh train robbery—I am sure hon. Members know where this is going. The East West Rail project between Oxford and Cambridge has been classified as an England and Wales project. I have lived in Wales all my life, and I have got to say that it is nowhere near the Welsh border. The last time I looked, neither of them were anywhere near Wales. Honestly, will the Chief Secretary explain why the Treasury has made the farcical decision again to deny Wales millions of pounds in funding, which we desperately need to transform our dilapidated, crumbling rail network?

Darren Jones: I think that the hon. Member and I can agree on one important thing, which is the failed promises of the last Conservative Government, who made decisions that undercut investment in Wales and deprioritised Wales. She will know that we have a brilliant group of Labour MPs now representing Wales who have been making their case strongly for the Government to invest in Wales. We will be setting out further details of that investment at the spending review next week.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): As Chair of the Transport Committee, I hugely welcome this announcement. These rail and mass transit schemes will link communities, generate growth and cut pollution and carbon emissions. In the context of finishing the job, which was mentioned earlier, can we hope that before too long there will be a similar announcement about linking northern cities with the south-east through the currently stalled HS2 project?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work as Chair of the Transport Committee, which has shown on a cross-party basis why the announcements we have made today are good for the economy, good for jobs and good for constituencies across the United Kingdom. She encourages me to answer questions about statements that will be made next week. All I can say at this stage, I am afraid, is that there is not long to go.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The Chief Secretary says that west of England funding will increase services between Bristol city centre and Brabazon. I have been pressing Ministers to extend the funding for half-hourly trains at Yate, which is due to end next year. That is vital to provide a service to the new Charfield station, which

is due to open in 2027. Both places are, of course, in the city region. Will this funding support or even improve those services, or is this more about the city than the region?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for, I think, welcoming the nearly £1 billion of investment in transport for the west of England, which we know is a thriving part of the country. With the right investment in affordable housing, clean, renewable transport that works on time and is affordable to use will be great for people living in her constituency and mine, and great for the country.

One point to note is that the funding announced today is capital investment, not day-to-day spending. There will be further announcements in the coming weeks from the Department for Transport about issues such as bus subsidy and rail subsidy, but we are absolutely committed to supporting funding within regional combined authorities. This is not about particular places; that is why we have given this money to mayors, who will work with Members of Parliament like me and the hon. Member to ensure that we are delivering for the west of England and for the country.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I note that York did not feature in the Chief Secretary's statement. However, I recognise the outstanding connectivity in York. Today is about creating jobs, and adjacent to York station, the York Central development—the gateway of the economy of the north—will create 12,000 jobs. Will he ensure that there is proper investment in York Central to unlock those jobs and give people in my city and the region the opportunities they deserve?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the historic level of funding in transport infrastructure. As she will know, this is a devolved pot of money and regional mayors will decide how to spend it, so I cannot answer her question. I encourage her to talk to the mayor about the opportunities in her constituency.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I thank the Chief Secretary for the statement. Giving money out to mayors to fix transport—there is nothing to disagree with in that. Kent, which as he knows is the UK's strategic corridor to Europe, recently asked for a mayor and was rebuffed. Without a mayor, when will Kent get its money?

Darren Jones: The Government will be investing in every nation and region across the country. Further details will be published at the spending review next week. The announcements today are about particular investment in city regions with mayors, because we think that is an important driver for growth in those areas as well as for the wider regions in which they sit. I recognise the importance of the hon. Member's region to the country, and there will be further announcements in due course.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's announcement. It is quite wonderful to hear MPs buzzing about the investment in their constituencies, especially after 14 years of neglect by the Tories and their short-term, insufficient funding. Will the Minister reassure the House that, when the spending review comes next week, London will be recognised for its economic empowerment of the

country and that there will be a different attitude to London spending that will help with infrastructure projects such as the docklands light railway and its Thamesmead extension?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for rightly recognising the importance to our country of its capital city, which has been at the centre of our engine of growth for many years. She also alludes to the fact that we have a brilliant Labour Mayor of London in Sadiq Khan, who strongly makes the case for investment in the capital. We will make further announcements next week that will bolster and strengthen London, and Sadiq's leadership in London, to deliver for the whole country.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The Chief Secretary will know that the benefits of the Cullompton and Wellington stations project would bring tens of thousands of people to the city, the metro region and the Cardiff-Bristol-Exeter corridor. Thanks to a cost-benefit ratio of almost 4:1, will he acknowledge the strength of the case for that project, as set out in the letter he received from his hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) and for Exeter (Steve Race) and from me and my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord)?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his campaigning and for welcoming today's news of historic levels of investment into the west of England for transport. The best use of the money is to make sure that not only do we deliver infrastructure within our combined authorities, but that opportunities are unlocked for broader spending decisions on intercity transport, heavy rail, road investments, new house building and industrial policy spending. The review of the Green Book has been looking at this and further details will be published next week. However, I am confident that we will be able to unlock opportunities for areas outside the combined authorities, and the investment announced today makes a stronger case for doing so.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): May I welcome this Government's £2.5 billion investment into the west midlands? It will allow our Mayor Richard Parker to make strategic decisions such as the extension of the tram, enabling my constituents in West Brom to get to east Birmingham, which is fantastic. Does he agree that that will drive growth not just in Birmingham, but in the Black Country and the entire west midlands?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming this historic level of funding from a Labour Government to our brilliant Labour Mayor of the West Midlands. I note that not only does the investment go to particular railway tracks or bus facilities in certain places, but it creates great opportunities for people who live and work in and around the region and delivers on the mayor's priority that everyone should benefit from the economic growth that will come as a consequence of the investment. That is the difference between a Conservative mayor previously lobbying a Conservative Government that failed to deliver and now a Labour mayor working with a Labour Government to deliver these projects.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I warmly welcome the news that the tram is finally coming to Stockport. I have also warmly welcomed that announcement every time it has been made previously, so I am delighted that the Chief Secretary will deliver it. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) rightly acknowledges the sterling campaigning that has been done by businesses, residents and elected politicians over many years. This is how we get things done in Greater Manchester: on a cross-party basis. Will the Chief Secretary assure my local authority colleagues on Stockport council that the money is ready to go? They are as keen as mustard to crack on and deliver the project so we can get on with the next phase, which is a tram-train to Marple, from which my Hazel Grove residents will really benefit.

Darren Jones: The funding announced today is in the spending review timeframe—it will be available from 2026-27 onwards—while the money that we allocated at the Budget last year for this fiscal year will continue to be spent.

We are all exasperated by announcements being made by politicians and spades never getting into the ground. I am sure the hon. Lady is now experiencing a difference. Compared with the false promises of the Conservative party, which were made in the past and never delivered, not only have we found the money and allocated it, because of the Chancellor's decisions, but the hon. Lady will see spades going into the ground and transport in her community being improved for real.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement, making sure we see investment right across the country. Building on the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) about the support for London, I am sure that the Chief Secretary will recognise that London's transport infrastructure is vital to our young people when they start a career and to our vulnerable communities when moving around. London has three big transport infrastructure projects: the Bakerloo line extension, the DLR to Thamesmead, and the west London orbital. Backed by London boroughs, the mayor, businesses and Transport for London, those projects need additional funding. Will the Chief Secretary highlight how what he said about a regional plan will be hardwired into the spending review going forward and that that will include London?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her excellent work on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee looking at those and related issues. She is right to point to the London's success and the potential for future success through investment in London. As the Chancellor said today, we are tilting investment to parts of the country that have missed out for many years. However, we know that by working with mayors such as Sadiq Khan in London and with private capital and other investors, we can also deliver for places as important as London, as our country's capital city. We know that there is plenty of opportunity, and we can set out further details on that in due course.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): In the city of Brighton and Hove, my constituents tell me they need more and cleaner buses, and more reliable trains and stations without barriers to people with children, older

people and disabled people. Will the Chief Secretary assure me that the wider review of Treasury rules will mean great value projects such as the ones I mention are prioritised in the south-east, and that our transport investment does not just consist of major, unnecessary road building and expanded international airports that will not help people's daily lives?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member makes an important point about people's lived experience of these types of policy announcements. We are trying to make it easier for people to use affordable, reliable public transport that is better for the environment and easier for them to use to get about in their day-to-day lives. We have seen that a lot in places such as London in the past, other places around the country have looked on in envy. The announcement today will mean that that is available to many people across the country. Announcements on funding for areas that do not have combined authority mayors will also come, but that will be next week at the spending review.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras bras, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thoroughly welcome the Treasury's Green Book Review because the current funding formulae do not reflect the true cost of delivering services in remote coastal areas such as Cornwall. They do not account for the scattered nature of deprivation, the costs associated with seasonal surge in demand, the costs associated with the influx of retirees, or the higher per capita costs of transport, waste collection, coastal protection and emergency response during the holiday season. They simply do not reflect the lived experience of people in Camborne, Redruth and Hayle and across Cornwall, despite our massive economic potential. Will the Chief Secretary assure constituents in remote coastal communities such as Cornwall that there will be specific changes to reflect our specific challenges?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend and the wider group of Labour Members from Cornwall, who have campaigned vociferously on the Green Book. That may seem technical, but for the people at home it is important because it alludes to all the issues that my hon. Friend points out—not least because in the past, Government have made decisions about particular projects as opposed to particular places. That means that we cannot unlock the potential for growth and better livelihoods because of a failure of applying the Green Book and its rules.

The Chancellor announced today that the Green Book update will be published next week at the spending review. I can give my hon. Friend the guarantee that the detail of that, when it is published, will show that this Government will look much more widely at how spending across Government lifts the potential of places to deliver better jobs and better wages for people, and more secure communities.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): The Chief Secretary rightly says that stronger transport links are crucial for creating opportunities for jobs and economic growth, and it is great to see so many happy Labour MPs in the Chamber. I heard what the Minister said to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) about being patient, but it feels like the Government, by trailing the spending review with this announcement, are prioritising spending on urban areas and in particular those with many fine Labour MPs.

Will he therefore assure me and my constituents in South Devon, that the Treasury will remember next week that the west country does not end at Bristol? Indeed, many would say it starts there.

Darren Jones: As I have alluded to many times today, this Government are committed to investing in every region and nation of the country. Today's announcement is about city regions and city region transport, but the spending review next week will show how this Government are delivering for people, irrespective of where they live.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Transport in the midlands has been historically underfunded, and today's announcement is a welcome turn of the tide. Many Birmingham City fans in my constituency will also strongly welcome the metro extension, and this feels like a good opportunity to congratulate the Blues on their record-setting, promotion-winning season. This is yet more good news. We are also campaigning for upgrades to the Cross-City line, and in particular to the Kings Norton station works, to make the most of this new investment. Will the Minister confirm that he and his Department for Transport colleagues remain open to constructive representations, so that we can finally make this important project happen?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for campaigning for his constituency and for welcoming this historic funding of £2.4 billion today for the west midlands. He asked me about future projects. The good news is that the Mayor of the West Midlands has not spent all of this money yet, so there is definitely potential for lobbying him on how he might wish to spend the rest of that money in due course, and if there is anything I can do to help, I will be glad to do so.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The statement says that stronger transport links are crucial, and the Department for Transport has already paid, through the Union connectivity fund, for a feasibility study on the reopening of the Lisburn-Antrim rail line, which would connect to Belfast International airport in my constituency. Unfortunately, they have already told me that they cannot allocate funding until the next spending review is announced, so they have beaten the Chief Secretary to that answer. Given that the £15.6 billion that has been allocated today roughly equates to £450 million as a Barnett consequential, would he agree that investment in that Lisburn-Antrim-Belfast International line would be a good investment in Northern Ireland railways?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member rightly alludes to the fact that because the Labour Government are increasing investment here in Westminster for the whole country, the nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland benefit, both through Barnett and direct spending from this Government, to make sure we are investing in every nation and region of the country. We have already seen significant amounts of funding—I think the highest level of funding since devolution began—into Northern Ireland, as well as Scotland and Wales, and further details will be published next week at the spending review.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): In the east midlands we have been raging for over a decade against the inequality that has left our region at the very bottom when it comes to spending on transport per person, and it has taken a Labour Government to start to put that right and begin to unlock the economic potential and raise living standards. Would my right hon. Friend agree that this represents a considerable achievement of our Mayor Claire Ward and shows that, after years in the pit stop, the regions are finally being given the green light to grow?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the £2 billion of investment announced today for the east midlands. I have been on a number of visits to her region, including with Labour's brilliant Mayor Claire Ward, who has made a very strong case for the investment being announced today. It shows the difference a Labour mayor can make. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend and her colleagues from her regional group, who have campaigned as vociferously here as Claire Ward does from her mayoral office in the east midlands?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. Regional growth is an imperative for the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and I am pleased that he is expanding the horizons for areas considered for further funding. I am also pleased to announce in the Chamber today news of a previous scheme initiated by the Conservatives and delivered within the time of this Government for the Ards and North Down local council: the Queen's Parade development. It was one of the regional schemes that were delivered, and £9.8 million was set aside by Westminster for that project. It was signed and sealed, and the project is going ahead. It is estimated that some £70 million of regeneration will come off the back of it, so whenever the Government spend money here, they can be assured that the benefits are significant. The Minister has also hinted at the possibility of other moneys coming through. What commitment can he give to ensuring that coastal communities across all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can apply to similar schemes to improve the beauty and tourist attractions of all our coastal towns and centres?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for continuing his work campaigning for Strangford and for Northern Ireland in general. As he knows, details of funding for the Northern Ireland Executive will be announced at the spending review next week, building on the back of significant increased investment. He is right to say that investment in transport projects opens up opportunities for new housing, new jobs and new livelihoods. I recognise that the Northern Irish economy is one of the best performing parts of the United Kingdom, and we want to continue to support that in the future.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It was a pleasure to hear my right hon. Friend refer to Bury North in his statement, and I welcome the investment for trams and buses in Bury North; it comes hot on the heels of the announcement only this week of vital school and hospital funding. New buses and new tram stops are about connecting people and places to opportunity, and that opportunity can help rid us of poverty. Today's

[Mr James Frith]

announcement is about improving journeys to work and getting on in life, but does he agree that it is only by growing the economy that we will tackle child poverty, which is now at a shameful 42% in Bury North, and improve our children's journey through life?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his campaigning for Bury, and for welcoming the investment today. He points to two issues that are really important. First, why is this happening now? It is because of the decisions taken by a Labour Government, after the failed promises of the Conservative party. He asked about child poverty. As he knows, this Government are committed to tackling child poverty, and the child poverty taskforce will report in due course. He will also know that for families who are experiencing child poverty, the best lever to alleviate the situation is helping into work those parents who are able to and want to work. We are investing in affordable, reliable public transport, alongside childcare support at school in the early years. We are not giving people false promises, which they were given in the past; we are giving them a path to being part of the success that we are setting up the country to deliver.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): It has been good to hear so much talk about left-behind communities today, but I have always hated that phrase, because my community was not left behind by the last Government; it was wilfully abandoned by them. The £1.8 billion for the North East combined authority region is hugely welcome. I welcome the campaigning by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for the extension of the Metro to Washington, and the world-class Angel network that will be built by Mayor Kim McGuinness, but does the Minister agree that it makes no sense to have a fantastic new train line with fantastic new trains on it if they have to run under a crumbling flyover in the middle of Gateshead, and through an interchange that requires work? Will he work with me and the Mayor of the North East to deliver these additional critical infrastructure projects for the north-east?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is showing what brilliant Labour MPs can achieve through continuous campaigning and lobbying. He has made the case very strongly for his constituency, which of course will benefit from the record investment being announced today, but I know he wishes for more, and further details will come next week in the spending review.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I welcome this Government's funded commitment to making every community across this country better off after the failed promises of the previous Government. I represent an outer London constituency with the oldest trams in the country and pockets of deprivation. What reassurance can my right hon. Friend give me and my constituents in Croydon East that next week's spending review will recognise the contribution that London makes to our national economy, and will provide investment in communities like mine, which were failed by the previous Government?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for making an important case for the transport infrastructure that her constituents rely on. The case that she makes for her constituency in Greater London is very similar to those being made for other parts of the country. People need to be able to get to the opportunities that we are creating; those opportunities need to be made available to them. The Government are ensuring that by investing in every nation and region across the United Kingdom, including London. I look forward to further announcements in the spending review that will fulfil the promise of change that she and the Government made to her constituents.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I genuinely welcome the significant investment in city regions around our country that the Chief Secretary has been able to announce. Stoke-on-Trent does not have a combined authority, and realistically will not have one for many years to come, but my constituents' aspirations for significant growth and investment are no different from the aspirations of those in other parts of the west midlands. My constituents would like the reinstatement of the number 40 bus from Mount Pleasant to Hanley, for example, and would like lifts installed at Longton train station, to make it accessible. I have absolute faith that the Chief Secretary is aware of the nuances of the difference between mayoral and non-mayoral areas, but will he give a commitment today that when announcements are made next week in the comprehensive spending review, investment in non-mayoral areas will match investment in mayoral areas? What mechanisms will be used to deliver the money to communities? When there is a fragmented local government base, it is quite easy for this money to stick around in pots and not be spent, because people cannot agree on how to spend it.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for making the case for his constituency. As he says, the announcements today are for areas with combined authority mayors. The Government have said that if other parts of the country can get together and agree to have a combined authority mayor, they will be able to benefit from this type of announcement in the future. As for areas that do not have a mayor, this Labour Government are as committed to the people in those communities as to those in any other community across the country. We have already significantly increased funding through the autumn Budget 2024, including for road maintenance and pot holes, for maintaining a bus fare cap, and to support the extension of bus services, which he alluded to. We will continue to support those communities, and further details will be announced next week in the spending review.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I hugely welcome these investments, which will free up the great potential of the north, or at least a part of it. The Green Book review will of course create the conditions that allow us to release the rest of the potential in left-behind areas and small towns, including those in Rossendale and Darwen. As a colleague said, we want similar investment in non-mayoral authorities. What assurance can the Minister give the people of Lancashire that we will see similar benefits to those that city regions enjoy?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his continuous campaigning for his constituency. I think I am right in saying that every time I have seen him in the House he has mentioned the Green Book review to me. He has been one of our most forthright campaigners for ensuring that we build the rules and frameworks to deliver for every part of the country. As the Chancellor announced today, we will update the Green Book, and will publish the outcomes of the consultation next Wednesday. He will have to wait a few days for the detail, but I think he will be pleased with where we have got to.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I welcome the huge investment in the north-east under this Government. For a long time, rural Northumberland was ignored and held in contempt by the Conservatives. May I encourage the Chief Secretary to reflect on the growth opportunities in the rural north-east, to communicate them to devolved leaders, and to recognise the development and growth opportunities that rural communities offer our economy?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for the campaigning he undertakes for his constituents, and for rural communities. He touches on the important point that the funding we have made available to combined authority mayors today is not only for the combined authority, but the wider region. It is for mayors to decide how to spend the money we have given them, but we encourage them to ensure that people can benefit from the investment whether they live in a city, town or rural community. I know he will work with his mayor to ensure that.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for listening carefully to the representations of our Tees Valley Labour MPs, and for delivering fully the biggest transport settlement for our region. There is enough money here to deliver a safe crossing over the A689 in Wynyard, buses in Port Clarence, more trains in Billingham, and the restoration of our much-loved transporter bridge. Will he assure me that there will be sufficient governance to ensure that every penny is spent on the priorities of local people, and that the money will not be funnelled into the purses of property developers, which was a concern in Teesside under the previous Conservative Government?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend rightly raises the point that the best combined authority mayors are those who work with local Members of Parliament and their communities to ensure that money is spent in the best way to meet the needs of local communities. As he knows, measures are in place in Whitehall to supervise spending by combined authority mayors, and to audit where appropriate. Further measures are coming in due course. He is right to welcome this historic level of funding for his constituency and region, and we look forward to the money being spent well on his constituents' priorities.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the east midlands, I put on the record my thanks to the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for their recent engagement on the potential of our region, which has resulted in the significant £2 billion investment announcement today. The east midlands region has been massively underfunded

and under-invested in, as the data consistently shows, so I welcome the Treasury's commitment to changing how the Government approach and evaluate the case for investing in regions. Will there be further positive announcements for the wider east midlands region at the comprehensive spending review, and in industrial strategy announcements later this month?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his leadership of the all-party group and for, alongside his colleagues and the mayor, making such a powerful case for investment in his region. There will be further announcements at the spending review next week, and in the infrastructure strategy and the industrial strategy, which will show how this Labour Government are investing in regions like his to improve people's life chances, irrespective of where they choose to live or work.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I welcome the announcements today. Finally, we have a Government who are willing to match rhetoric with action when it comes to investment in the north and the midlands. The Network North so-called plan, announced under the Tories, was pitched as an attempt to compensate northern communities for the loss of High Speed 2. My constituents were somewhat surprised that there was not a single mention of Cheshire in that so-called plan. What assurance can my right hon. Friend give that towns outside mayoral areas, as well as city regions, will see the benefits of crucial infrastructure investment?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend rightly points to the frustration of his constituents with the failed promises of the previous Conservative Government. This Labour Government—working with him, the brilliant Labour MP for his constituency—are making a difference. At the Budget last year, the Chancellor changed the fiscal rules to tax the wealthiest, and we are investing money in transport across the country, which will benefit not only those in combined authorities, but those in the broader travel-to-work region. Further announcements for towns and villages will be made next week at the spending review.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The Mellor bus factory in Rochdale was the perfect place for the Chancellor to unveil this £15 billion investment in transport infrastructure today, and also to give a first taste of the changes to the Green Book and the Treasury rules, which for too long have held back places in the north and the midlands from getting their fair share of transport money. Does the Minister agree that investment in public transport is investment in local manufacturers like Mellor? Does this not show what a difference a Labour MP working with a Labour mayor and a Labour Government can make, to deliver the change that people voted for last year?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a brilliant campaigner for his Rochdale constituency, for welcoming this historic level of funding for his community. As he says, the Chancellor made her announcement in Rochdale today, and showed that the investments are not just in track, bus stops and trains, but in jobs, livelihoods and businesses across the United Kingdom. That will help us deliver renewal for Britain.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): After 14 years of talk about delivering for the north, it is refreshing that this Labour Government are delivering for the north. I am a passionate believer in devolution, but devolution must come with accountability. What steps can we take to ensure that the £1 billion we have just agreed for Tees Valley gets to every part of that region—and, most importantly, to Hartlepool?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for his constituents in Hartlepool, and I thank him for recognising the historic investment that this Labour Government are delivering, off the back of brilliant campaigning from him and other colleagues in the region. The best combined authority mayors are those who work with their Members of Parliament and the communities that they represent. I know that he will make his case to the mayor in his region. Checks and balances are in place in Government to ensure that things are done in the best way, and we will continue to work with him to ensure that this investment under a Labour Government delivers on the priorities of people in his constituency.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): For so long, Tipton, Wednesbury, Coseley, the Black Country and the whole of the west midlands have been an afterthought. Now our Mayor Richard Parker and the West Midlands combined authority will have £2.5 billion for transport, to unlock desperately needed good jobs and growth across our cities and towns. I hope that the mayor will look favourably on our need for a new roundabout at Great Bridge, to get the traffic flowing to our factories and jobs, as we seek the economic growth that we are prioritising. Does the Minister share my view that the statement starts to put right decades of under-investment in the west midlands?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming today's historic level of funding into transport, which, as she rightly alludes to, will fix historic failures that other parties promised to fix over many years. She is also right to point to the fact that these transport investments unlock jobs and opportunities for people in the broader region, including in her area, as well as sports, leisure and creative arts opportunities. I know that she will work closely with our brilliant Labour Mayor of the West Midlands to ensure the money is spent on the people's priorities.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): To build on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), can the Minister confirm that, alongside the investments announced today, London too will receive support to develop its infrastructure? Broadmead bridge is still closed and the Central line is creaking at the seams, and the spending review next week will enable our capital to unlock the housing it so desperately needs and allow London to remain a world-leading city.

Darren Jones: London continues to be a crucial engine for growth for the whole country and important to us all as our capital city. I know that my hon. Friend will continue to work with our brilliant Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan to make sure that investment is tackling the problems that he has raised.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I welcome the recognition from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that investment in public transport infrastructure and improved services opens opportunities to work. In contrast, my constituency, part of the Glasgow city region, is experiencing cuts to bus and rail services, which are proving a big barrier to people getting involved in working opportunities and social activity. Will my right hon. Friend join me in making representations to the Scottish Government to ensure that at least some of the record settlement that this Government have passed to Holyrood is spent on transport infrastructure?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for making the case for her constituency. She is right that we have a shared view that investment in public transport is important for people's livelihoods and their enjoyment of the communities they live in. Unfortunately, the SNP Government continue to fail to deliver on their promises, whereas in England we can show the difference a Labour Government make. I hope that in the future a Labour Government in Westminster and a Labour Government in Scotland will show what a new direction can mean for people in her constituency and across Scotland.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): As the shadow Chief Secretary was comparing the records of our Governments earlier, I was reminded of the moment when they made all these transport announcements, and it turned out that half had been delivered already and the other half were cancelled within 24 hours. They included the Leamside line in the north-east, so I am absolutely delighted for my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) that, after 20 years of campaigning, she has secured it, which is also great for growth generally in the north-east. As a champion for my community, I will keep banging the drum for the Weardale railway line and the West Auckland bypass. They will not be funded through this funding settlement, so my question is: will this be the only transport infrastructure spending this side of the next general election, or will there be future rounds that we can bid for?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for campaigning so well for his constituents and for welcoming today's historic level of funding. He asked whether there would be other funding, outside of today's announcement for city region mayors for infrastructure and other capital projects. The answer is yes, and the details will come in the spending review next week.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I hugely welcome the £2 billion investment in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire that has been announced today, because the east midlands has consistently been at the bottom of the table on funding for public transport. Yesterday, along with other Derbyshire MPs, I was pleased to welcome representatives from Arriva, Stagecoach, Trentbarton and TM Travel to Parliament. I know that Mayor Claire Ward will put the money that is coming into the region to good use with those companies. Can the Chief Secretary to the Treasury say how this investment will help to unlock opportunities in the region and meet our net zero ambitions? May I also encourage him not to lose sight of the benefit of midland main line electrification? I know that is not a question for today, but it is very important to people in Derbyshire.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his brilliant lobbying on behalf of his constituents and the east midlands, and for welcoming the historic level of funding for transport announced today. He is right to point out that this is about not just transport infrastructure but the communities in which people live, livelihoods and the opportunities for them and their families. I know that he will continue to work hard with our brilliant Mayor Claire Ward in the east midlands to turn these numbers into stories that matter for people in his constituency and across the east midlands.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jayne Kirkham to ask the last question on the statement.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the transport investment, which is needed in those city regions and spreads the wealth out. Cornwall also has ambitious transport plans, but does not have a large city region for 175 miles. It is very difficult to get public transport to our airport or a direct bus to our one acute hospital. I am also campaigning for a freight rail link for Falmouth, so I am heartened to hear that there will be more transport announcements in the spending review. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury confirm that that investment will go further down into the south-west? On investment more widely, he has talked about the National Wealth Fund, which we know is dealing in early-stage project development support in areas of the country. Will he confirm that those talks will also go wider than the city regions, so that places such as Cornwall that have political and business partnerships and a strong growth plan will be considered by the National Wealth Fund?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for championing Cornwall and the opportunities it presents to the country. She makes a strong case, alongside her colleagues in Cornwall, for renewable energy, mining and other important parts of our industrial strategy. She knows, and makes the case frequently, that those opportunities will be made available to people only if they can afford to live in places like Cornwall and get around them. That is why this Labour Government are investing in every nation and region of the country. I know that she will be looking forward to further announcements in the spending review next week.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

2.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): We are appalled by repeated reports of mass casualty incidents in which Palestinians have been killed when trying to access aid sites in Gaza. Desperate civilians who have endured 20 months of war should never face the risk of death or injury to simply feed themselves and their families. We call for an immediate and independent investigation into these events, and for the perpetrators to be held to account.

It is deeply disturbing that these incidents happened near the new Gaza Humanitarian Foundation distribution sites. They highlight the utterly desperate need to get aid in. The Israeli Government say they have opened up aid access with their new system, but the warnings raised by the UK, the United Nations, aid partners and the international community about these operations have materialised, and the results are agonising.

Israel's newly introduced measures for aid delivery are inhumane, foster desperation and endanger civilians. Israel's unjustified block on aid into Gaza needs to end. It is inhumane. Israel must immediately allow the UN and aid partners to safely deliver all types of aid at scale, to save lives, reduce suffering and maintain dignity. It must ensure that food and other critical supplies can reach people safely, where they are, across all the Gaza strip. Civilians and medical and humanitarian workers and facilities must be protected.

We will continue to be steadfast in our support for the UN and other trusted international non-governmental organisations as the most effective and principled partners for aid delivery. Our support has meant that over 465,000 people have received essential healthcare, 640,000 have received food, and 275,000 have improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene services. Just two weeks ago, the Minister for Development, my noble Friend Baroness Chapman, announced £4 million of additional funding to support the British Red Cross and enable the delivery of humanitarian relief in Gaza through its partner the Palestine Red Crescent Society. That was part of our wider £101 million of support this financial year. Aid must be allowed in so that support can continue.

Today, the UN Security Council is expected to consider a resolution for an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages and the lifting of all Israeli restrictions on humanitarian aid, supporting delivery by the United Nations. We will once again use our vote in support of those goals.

Following our leadership in co-ordinating dozens of countries to address the humanitarian situation and the joint statement by the UK, France and Canada, as well as the actions announced by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 20 May, we will continue to convene international partners to increase the pressure and take further steps to address the catastrophic situation on the ground.

We will continue to strongly support the efforts led by the United States, Qatar and Egypt to secure an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. As the Prime Minister has said, a ceasefire is the best way to secure the release of all

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remaining hostages and achieve a long-term political solution. The Israeli Government's decision to expand their military operations in Gaza and severely restrict aid undermines all of those goals.

We repeat our utter condemnation of Hamas and our demand that they release all hostages immediately and unconditionally. Hamas can have no role in the future governance of Gaza. A two-state solution is the only way to bring the long-lasting peace, stability and security that both Israelis and Palestinians deserve. We welcome France and Saudi Arabia's leadership in chairing an international conference later this month. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.11 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

The scenes emanating from Gaza are harrowing and the suffering is intolerable. The current situation that we are all witnessing simply cannot continue. The level of humanitarian suffering and desperation continues to be unacceptable, as children, women and their families continue to suffer while desperately trying to secure food and humanitarian aid. The deaths and casualties near aid distribution centres should never have happened. Will the Minister inform the House what discussions have taken place with Israel about those appalling events, the status of any investigations and what action will follow?

Britain must use its influences at every level and bring all allies together. We want peace and stability in the region, including in neighbouring countries, as the current conflict is hurting civilians and a sustainable end to the conflict appears to have moved even further away. Are we working with our Abraham accords partners and regional allies who also want peace, such as Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar?

Britain must leverage its considerable influence in the region to help stop the endless suffering that we are seeing, to get more aid in, to see the hostages released and to end the terminal situation with Hamas to achieve a proper, sustainable end to the conflict and, importantly, work towards a better future for the Palestinian and Israeli people. To that end, will the Minister explain how the Government plan to use the upcoming summit in New York to further those ends?

On humanitarian aid, the Government say that they continue to call for broader aid access. Of course, we support that, but are there practical and specific proposals for the opening of individual crossings and entry points? Have those been presented directly to the Government of Israel? The Minister will know that my noble friend Lord Cameron, working with our allies, previously secured commitments from the Government of Israel to open up the Erez crossing and the port of Ashdod to get aid into Gaza. He will also know that at that time Israel agreed to extend the opening hours of the Kerem Shalom crossing point, and we were able to achieve commitments to increase the number of trucks entering Gaza, which naturally led to an increase in vital aid supplies, including food and medical aid, for innocent Palestinians.

On British aid sitting in the region, the Minister has said in a written answer to me on Monday:

"Quantifying how much is awaiting entry into Gaza is difficult, due to the complex operating environment and limited real-time data."

We appreciate that, but what more can he do to secure practical information about where UK aid is located, who we can work with to move aid to key locations and what more Britain can do to ensure that UK aid gets to those who are desperately in need of our support?

We know that multilateral institutions, including the World Bank and others, are working on serious plans to deal with immediate, as well as long-term, issues to support the recovery and reconstruction of the economy in Gaza and the west bank. What are the Government doing to support that work and what engagement has the Minister had with those organisations?

Some 58 remaining hostages have now been in cruel captivity for 607 days at the hands of Hamas. They must be released. We are aware of initiatives put forward by the United States and that the latest proposals have been rejected by Hamas. What pressure are the Government exerting on Hamas to get them to reverse their opposition to those plans?

On the west bank, the Government signed a memorandum of understanding with the Palestinian Authority on 28 April, which we debated in the House. Will the Minister update the House on the PA's progress since that signing on reform and governance, because credible governance is required for long-term stability?

On settlements, the Conservative position is as it was in government and is well understood. Settlements are not helpful for achieving long-term peace and we urge Israel for its part not to take steps that could make a two-state solution more difficult, and to use its legal system to clamp down on settler violence. We support a two-state solution that guarantees security and stability for both the Israeli and Palestinian people.

Finally, we all want to lift people's lives to a better future, for the Israeli and Palestinian people. To do so, Britain must actively bring our long-standing perspective and influence to bear in the region, with all our allies.

Mr Falconer: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her important questions. I confirm that we are working closely with our allies, both in the region and beyond, on this devastating situation. I saw colleagues from Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar at the Madrid conference 10 days ago, and I will be continuing my consultations with them over the coming days, as will the Foreign Secretary.

The right hon. Lady rightly asks about the status of the ceasefire negotiations. I am sure that she is aware that on Sunday I called for Hamas to return to those negotiations. There have been some promising indications that they are doing so, but it remains a very delicate situation and I will update the House with more solid information when I am in a position to do so. We of course want those ceasefire talks to proceed with speed, we want a full release of all hostages and a permanent ceasefire, and we do not want Hamas in control in Gaza. That is the objective of this Government.

The shadow Foreign Secretary also asked an important question about where UK aid is and how much has gone in, and I am grateful for her understanding on

those points. I fear much of that aid remains in many of the humanitarian distribution centres outside Gaza—blocked, as it was when I saw it with my own eyes in Egypt.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, but we have been here countless times before. Last week, Israel approved 22 further settlements in the west bank. Israeli Defence Minister Katz claimed it was

“a strategic move that prevents the establishment of a Palestinian state”.

What more evidence do we need to call this exactly what it is: a deliberate policy of annexation and genocide? Will the Government now take the long overdue steps that we have all been calling for for years—namely, the recognition of Palestine, sanctions on extremist Israeli Government Ministers, suspension of all arms sales and suspension of all trade? If we want to see a Palestinian state, we must do something now to prevent its erasure. The history books will not be kind to this Government unless we use every form of leverage at our disposal, and our grandchildren will ask why we effectively stood by while a people were eradicated by bombs, bullets, starvation and, no doubt, the further ethnic cleansing that is still to come. This should shame us all.

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question; of course, it was her request for an urgent question this morning that led to this statement. I do not agree with the whole premise of her question, but I assure her that we will continue to convene international partners, to increase pressure and to take further steps, as long as this catastrophic situation remains. We have taken steps since we were first elected; we announced further steps on 20 May, when the Foreign Secretary was at the Dispatch Box; and we will take further steps, which we were clear about in the joint statement between the UK, France and Canada, until the situation improves.

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

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I spoke yesterday with a British surgeon who has regularly visited Gaza to deliver emergency medical aid. He first reported cases of malnutrition 18 months ago and is deeply anxious about what he will find when he arrives at Nasser hospital in southern Gaza later this month.

People in Gaza are on the brink of starvation. Others are dying daily from gunshot wounds inflicted as they queue for food. The situation is intolerable, and it is deliberate. The policies of Netanyahu's Government amount to an indiscriminate assault on the Palestinian people. We must get the aid in, we must get the hostages out and we must stop the violent forced displacement of Palestinians in Gaza and in the west bank. That is the only path back to a ceasefire.

The time for timidity is over. Liberal Democrats have consistently called for the Government to take firmer action, and they must do so today. We called for the sanctioning of the extremist Ministers Ben-Gvir and Smotrich 18 months ago. Will the Minister finally commit to implementing those sanctions, showing that we will no longer tolerate calls for Palestinian dispossession?

Will the Government make it clear that unless the Israeli Government change course, the UK will expand sanctions to those Ministers and Members of the Knesset who support a continuation of the blockade and the current military action? Will the Government finally ban the export of all UK arms to Israel?

In his response earlier, the Prime Minister said that the Government were working with allies to get aid into Gaza. Can the Minister expand on what options are under consideration and when they could be implemented? Last week's announcement of 22 new settlements in the west bank—the largest expansion in years—is intolerable. The UK should have no part in this, so will Ministers introduce legislation now to ban all UK trade with the illegal settlements? Will the Government use the conference later this month, together with allies such as France, finally to recognise the state of Palestine, showing beyond doubt the UK's commitment to Palestinians' right to self-determination and a two-state solution?

Mr Falconer: The Liberal Democrat spokesperson alludes to some of the commentary of some Israeli Government Ministers. I want to be clear that the UK Government's issue is with Netanyahu's Government—it is with the statements and actions of many of those Ministers. As Members will know, I will not discuss from this Dispatch Box sanctions that we might take, but what I will say is that we watch very closely the statements that have come out. We have condemned them repeatedly, and they have not stopped; they have continued. We keep this under very close review.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is no such thing; it is a group of trigger-happy private security employees. Under international law, Israel, as the occupier, has a duty to the people in Gaza. The International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion on 19 July 2024 stating that Israel's

“policies and practices are contrary to the prohibition of forcible transfer of the protected population”

under article 49 of the fourth Geneva convention. The Government have still not given their response to this, and if I were to be very uncharitable—and, hopefully, very wrong—I would say that this has created a limbo whereby the Government are not using their full toolbox of sanctions, prohibitions and legal accountability to hold Israel and indeed Hamas to account. When will the Government act and acknowledge that they have duties under this advisory opinion?

Mr Falconer: We continue to consider the ICJ's advisory opinion with the seriousness that it deserves. I want to reassure the House that the powers of the Foreign Office are not set by our views on an advisory opinion, which is just that: advisory. We abide by international law in all that we do and our options are not constrained by the fact that we have not yet pronounced a view on the advisory opinion.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As the hon. Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker) indicated, we are all frankly getting a bit fed up with the theatrics in this Chamber, and if I am honest with the Minister, it feels like the whole House is being played.

[*Kit Malthouse*]

He shows up and mouths the words, full of condemnation and saying he is appalled, and very occasionally the Government leak out just enough sanctions in order, frankly—I am afraid to say this, colleagues—to keep the Labour Benches from open revolt.

And yet, since the Minister last appeared here, as others have mentioned, 22 new settlements have been announced, and the Israeli Government have replaced the United Nations Relief and Works Agency distribution system with a shooting gallery—an abattoir, where starving people are lured out through combat zones to be shot at. If the situation were reversed, we would now, quite rightly, be mobilising the British armed forces as part of an international protection force, so here is my question: what is the difference?

Mr Falconer: I hope the right hon. Member will forgive me; he talks of theatrics, whereby I come to the House and provide an update and he delivers a speech saying that we should do more. I remind him and the House that the Labour Government have a profoundly different position towards these issues than the Conservative Government before us. We have taken a series of steps, most recently on 20 May—

Kit Malthouse: Not a single thing has changed—nothing! They are ignoring you now. I am sorry, but they are killing dozens every day—

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

Mr Falconer: We have taken steps, and we will continue to take steps. We have led the international community in the most recent of those steps. I am, and we are, under no illusion about the severity of the situation that we face.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments that Israel's newly introduced measures for aid delivery are inhumane, foster desperation and endanger civilians. Indeed, in just eight days, 102 Palestinians seeking food have been killed, and 490 have been injured. What discussions is the Minister having with his Israeli counterpart about ensuring the protection of innocent civilians who are accessing lifesaving aid?

Mr Falconer: I regret to inform the House that there is a fundamental disagreement between the British and Israeli Governments about the nature of aid that needs to get into Gaza. We have spoken to them, and we have been clear that the United Nations is ready with a system that works and that is able to deliver aid at the scale required to try to address some of the horrific desperation that we see. The Israeli Government are clearly committed to the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, with all of the problems that we have seen over the last three days.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The policy of successive UK Governments has been that the United Kingdom will recognise the state of Palestine when it is conducive to the peace process and the ultimate realisation of the two-state solution. Up to this point, I have accepted the argument that the Minister

and his predecessors have made that that moment has not yet come. But has not the balance shifted decisively with a succession of moves to greater territorial change in the west bank by increased settlement activity and by increasingly blunt and frequent statements from members of the Israeli Government that they are going to restrict Palestinians to a sub-set of Gaza or restrict them from Gaza all together? That is what has changed my mind such that I now believe that it is necessary for the UK, hopefully in conjunction with others, to recognise the state of Palestine urgently. Why has it not yet changed the Government's mind?

Mr Falconer: The right hon. and learned Member makes a very powerful point. One reason that the traditional positions of UK Government and many other Governments across the world has been that the recognition of a Palestinian state should come at the end or during a two-state solution process was the hope that we would move towards a two-state solution. Many minds have been changed, like the right hon. and learned Gentleman's, because of the rhetoric of the Israeli Government—the clear statements by so many that they are no longer committed to a two-state solution. We see in the press many representatives of the Israeli Government criticising others for considering their position in relation to a Palestinian state. Exactly as the right hon. and learned Member says, it is the action of this Israeli Government that has made so many, including ourselves, review their position on these matters.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): The time has come for us to stop arming Israel in any way whatsoever. This collaborative pool of items that are gathered under the auspices of NATO seems to be a route by which Israel can be supplied. Is it not possible for us to withdraw the right for anything we supply to that collaborative pool to be passed on to Israel, or even to influence our partners in that pool to stop providing any form of weaponry to Israel via that route?

Mr Falconer: Let me first address my hon. Friend's question about arms more broadly, and then turn to the F-35s. We have taken steps to ensure that weapons directly for use in Gaza have been suspended. As my hon. Friend has outlined, there is a provision in the F-35 programme for a global spares pool, the operation of which we do not control. I understand the argument sometimes made in this House that in fact we could control the final destination of those parts, but that is a point that we refute—it is being debated in the courts, and a judgment is forthcoming on the question of whether or not the final destination of F-35 parts could indeed be determined. I am afraid that I have nothing further to add on that point.

However, I want to be clear to the House—as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security was on Monday evening—that the arms suspensions that we have introduced are far-reaching. Some reports have suggested that we have not taken far-reaching action, and that significant arms are still reaching the Israel Defence Forces, but that is simply factually not true. The sale of items that are controlled by the arms licensing criteria continues, as we still judge that many military-grade items—for example, body armour for non-governmental organisations—are appropriate to be traded with Israel, because they will go to NGOs that are going in.

It is also true that we are trading components that will end up in use outside of Israel, in the arsenal of NATO allies. For example, of the £127.5 million of export licences that have been approved subsequent to our decision, £120 million of them were for components for a NATO ally, not for Israel. There is considerable confusion about that point, so I wanted to take the opportunity to clarify it.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Securing a ceasefire is vital, securing the release of the remaining hostages is vital, and getting aid through to the suffering people of Gaza is an absolute moral imperative. The Israeli Government need to ensure the safe delivery of that aid, and if they do not, the members of that Government should suffer immediate and severe consequences—no more prevarication. Will the Minister also make an assessment of what the impact of cuts to the United Kingdom's aid budget has been on the ability to deliver aid in Gaza and elsewhere, and will he work with his UN colleagues to ensure that all the resources that this Government could possibly provide to the United Nations get through, so that aid gets through and stops the dying and the suffering?

Mr Falconer: To be clear, the issue with aid getting into Gaza is not the availability of aid. The cuts we have announced have had no bearing on whether or not aid can get into Gaza—I know that because I have seen our aid with my very own eyes in warehouses in al-Arish. We must remain focused on the central issue, which is neither the availability of aid nor the availability of partners, such as the United Nations, that are prepared to go in and deliver it; it is that the Israeli Government have effectively put in place a blockade. That is the central issue that must be addressed.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Almost eight months ago, the UN commission of inquiry found that Israel has implemented a concerted effort to dismantle the healthcare system in Gaza, and that the killing and disappearance of healthcare workers amounts to the crime of extermination. UK doctors in Gaza describe it as a “slaughterhouse”. With the growing mountain of evidence detailing war crimes taking place, and our diplomatic efforts being totally ignored by the Israeli Government, it is time to sanction Benjamin Netanyahu and the other murderous figures who are responsible. Words are not enough, so today—here, now, in this Chamber—I would like the Minister to give us a concrete date for when we can expect this Government to impose sanctions.

Mr Falconer: I hear the frustration of the House. I am sure that other Members will also raise the deeply distressing reports that there have been in recent days, and indeed going even further back, in both the west bank and in Gaza. Let me be clear, as the Prime Minister was clear with France and Canada: if Israel does not cease the renewed military offensive and lift its restrictions on humanitarian aid, we will take further concrete actions in this place. [HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] I will not say from the Dispatch Box today when that might be.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I concur entirely with the views expressed by the two Privy Counsellors on the Conservative Back Benches

who have already spoken, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright). For weeks we have been listening to fine words from Government Front Benchers, and we have seen a lot of handwringing and a vast amount of inactivity. The question that everybody in this Chamber is asking of the Minister is “When?” Yesterday, as he knows, four of us tried to deliver a letter to Downing Street calling for the immediate recognition of the state of Palestine. We were not even allowed to deliver that letter. The time has come to act now. There is a route from Larnaca in Cyprus straight into Gaza—use it! Let us save these children.

Mr Falconer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the force of his remarks. I hear so many colleagues say that they are fed up with my words, which is gentle, but on 20 May we announced concrete actions. I am telling the House this afternoon that further actions will come if there are not changes. [HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] I will return to the House when I am in a position to do so. I hear everybody's frustration, but let us not pretend that the UK's position has not changed—that it has not continued to change. It will continue to change while the situation remains as it is.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): A genocide case against Israel is before the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants against Prime Minister Netanyahu and others. In its 2007 judgment, the ICJ made it clear that a nation's duty to prevent genocide begins when it becomes aware that there is a serious risk. On Monday, in response to my written question, the Minister confirmed that almost all of Gaza

“faces a critical risk of famine”,

with half a million innocent people facing starvation. We know that is caused by Israel's months-long blockade of aid, so has the Minister been satisfactorily notified that there is a serious risk of genocide occurring in Palestine, and will he ensure that the Government take all steps to meet our obligations to prevent genocide?

Mr Falconer: We abide by all of our international legal obligations and keep these matters under rapid review. My hon. Friend rightly highlights the risks of malnutrition and famine in Gaza, as identified by the integrated food security phase classification. We take very serious note of all of these reports as they come out.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I cannot help but feel that the Minister is treating Members with a significant level of contempt by telling us that something will happen, but not telling us what that will be or when it will happen. On a more acute point, can he perhaps clarify for the House why he believes it is consistent for his Government to condemn the Israeli Government for starving a civilian population while at the same time providing them with the component parts to bomb a civilian population?

Mr Falconer: I am surprised that the right hon. Member thinks that there is any question as to why Foreign Office Ministers might need to leave some degree of ambiguity about when they take actions, including all the ones that have been discussed this

[Mr Falconer]

afternoon, such as sanctions. These principles of why we might want to do things without pre-notifying the House of each and every step are relatively well-established, I think, but I am happy to discuss in further detail why we do that. On the point about F-35 components, where we know that they are going to Israel, we are suspending that. It is only because we are not able to control the onward transmission of the global spares pool that this at least theoretical risk exists.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank the Minister for all the work he is doing and the endless number of statements he has had to make on these horrific issues. I absolutely agree with him and support him in calling for both Israel and Hamas to make sure that all humanitarian aid is available and gets to innocent Palestinians, who desperately need it. The best way that we can solve this problem is through a ceasefire. Will he join me in expressing regret that after Israel accepted the Witkoff framework proposals for a ceasefire, Hamas decided to turn them down? We must put as much pressure as possible on Hamas to move forward with the ceasefire as soon as possible.

Mr Falconer: On Sunday I was clear that Hamas should engage in ceasefire talks, should return to the table and should release all hostages. A ceasefire is desperately needed and is the only route forward.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Studied ambiguity of what and when has had no impact on Israeli policy. We want to know, and Israel needs to know, precisely what the Government mean by “further steps”.

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Member will appreciate that in our private discussions with Israel we have been clear about the depth of feeling across the whole country, and indeed in this House, and we have been clear about the nature of further steps coming.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am sure the Minister can sense the frustration across the House and from all parties. I support their frustration. We were at a meeting yesterday with the former UN secretary-general for human rights, Andrew Gilmour. He said that the lack of action that the international community is taking now on this issue reminded him of the lack of action during the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s. That is a lesson we all should closely heed. I will not ask the Minister everything that everybody else has asked about sanctions and recognition—he knows where I stand on that. I will ask him about the coalition of the willing for Palestine, as we have a coalition of the willing for Ukraine. How are we building up our international allies to ensure that recognition and everything else that needs to happen has an international consensus? Again, we are looking at days, not weeks and months.

Mr Falconer: I just want to acknowledge for my hon. Friend that we recognise that this conflict is being measured in hours and days, not weeks and months, and it is on those timelines that we seek to take action. On the question of a coalition of the willing, we are working with our allies, as I am sure she is aware. We

convened the statement of 26 on humanitarian action and the leaders’ statement of three, to which I referred earlier in my statement. We will continue to work broadly. I can confirm that even today I have been working on those questions.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The UK Government have an obligation under international law to do everything possible to prevent genocide, yet we see genocide occurring in Gaza. The Minister assured the House a month ago that he was conducting a risk assessment on genocide in Gaza. Will he give me a clear, unambiguous, straight answer today? Will he publish his most recent genocide risk assessment without delay?

Mr Falconer: As this House has heard from me before, the question that we assessed in relation to international humanitarian law was whether there a real risk of a breach of IHL. That was the assessment we made when we first entered government. That is a considerably lower bar than the questions to which the hon. Member refers. We continue to make those assessments, which cover the entirety of international humanitarian law. We have updated the House on that initial assessment, which is at a rather lower bar than she is suggesting, and the assessment broadly remains in place. We will not provide further updates, but if the position changes, I will be sure to return to the House.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate the Minister coming back to the Chamber, but as he can see from the strength of numbers here, this is an issue that will not go away.

The Minister just outlined to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, that we are measuring this in hours and days, not weeks and months. There is only one kidney dialysis unit left in Gaza, and the World Health Organisation reports that the number of machines has decreased, with just 27 left in northern Gaza. My late mum had renal failure. She was on dialysis three times a week. It is not hours and days; it is minutes, Minister. People are literally surviving or dying within minutes.

Many people—women and children—are still buried under rubble. A number of us have spoken about the lack of aid going in, and the fact that aid is being used as a weapon of punishment. What more do we need to say for us to see concrete and more visible action from this Government? We are getting emails from our constituents. We need to see an end to some of the weapons going through, a process which the UK is still supporting. We need clearer guidance on sanctions, because Israel is not listening to us.

Mr Falconer: I recognise that when we talk in this Chamber about aid restrictions, it can seem like an abstract concept. My hon. Friend is right about what that looks like, person to person. There are terrible shortages of all kinds of desperately needed items that preserve life and dignity, and nothing about the last few days indicates that the new aid measures are doing anywhere near enough to try to avert that tragedy. We not only make our own assessments, but pay careful heed to the assessments of others. I was a diplomat before. The International Committee of the Red Cross

is a sober organisation that is not prone to strong statements, and the statement that it has made in recent days about the conditions in Gaza is sobering reading. We are under no illusions about the urgency and the gravity of the situation. I was pleased to be with the Foreign Secretary on 20 May when he announced further measures. We have been clear that further measures will come. We are trying, as the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) has asked us, to persuade the Israelis to change course. If they do not, we will return to this House.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I listened carefully to the answer that the Minister gave to the right and proper question from the hon. Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce) just now. Will the Minister not accept that simply calling for Hamas to go back to the negotiating table is nowhere near strong enough? For there to be accuracy in this debate, it must be publicly and clearly acknowledged that the only blocker to a ceasefire deal that will get the hostages out, and the bodies returned of those hostages who have died, is Hamas.

Mr Falconer: We have condemned Hamas. I have condemned Hamas repeatedly, and we will continue to do so. A ceasefire clearly requires two parties. We welcomed Israel's return to the ceasefire negotiations. We called on Hamas to do the same. We are glad to hear that there seems to have been some progress. We will continue to press all sides on this point until we have a ceasefire.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): Yesterday, the United Nations human rights chief, Volker Türk—this must have broken everyone's heart in this place—said:

"Palestinians have been presented the grimmest of choices: die from starvation or risk being killed while trying to access the meagre food that is being made available through Israel's militarised humanitarian assistance mechanism."

I feel like a broken record. What concrete actions will we take in this place, so that the Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and does something to change Israel's psyche so that it listens to the world?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks me to change the Government of Israel's psyche. We have been clear with the Israeli Government about the extent of our disagreement. Anyone who has closely followed the communications between me and my Israeli counterparts will see that there is a profound disagreement in approach. We do everything we can to try to persuade our long-standing ally why the steps that it is taking are such grave mistakes—not just for the region and for the Palestinians, but ultimately for the Israelis themselves. Our disagreement is with the Government, not the Israeli themselves. It will be with regret if I return shortly to this House to announce further steps, but I will do so, given the strength of our feeling on these matters.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): As the Minister has acknowledged, Israel's alternative aid scheme is dangerous, unworkable and profoundly insufficient. There is aid waiting on the border—UK aid that my constituents have paid for. You know the Palestinian people's desperation. You have heard the desperation—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Lady said "you" twice.

Monica Harding: The Minister has heard the Palestinian people's desperation. He has heard the desperation in this Chamber. What new pressure will he bring to bear on Israel to open the aid routes? What is the alternative plan? The Minister has asked for an independent inquiry into what went on in Rafah. Will he insist that the Israeli Government let the BBC and independent journalists into Gaza so that we know what is going on?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the lack of international media in Gaza and the hotly contested nature of events there. It is not just me who has called for an independent investigation; the UN Secretary-General has as well. That reflects the degree of concern within the United Nations system about enabling the media to their job.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): Minister, if we do not recognise Palestine, it will cease to exist, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker). Israel has approved another 22 settlement sites in the occupied west bank—the biggest expansion in decades. It violates international law. Minister, Louis Theroux's incredible documentary "The Settlers", which I will be showing today—he is in Parliament today—highlights the grim reality of the settlers' mindset. Minister, you must agree that it is time that we have a strong debate. You cannot persuade—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is better than that.

Dawn Butler: The passion is overtaking me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Minister, do you not agree that we need—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. People keep addressing the Minister as "Minister". They should be asking their questions through the Chair. The hon. Lady should say, "Does he agree?"

Dawn Butler: Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Does the Minister agree that it has gone far enough, and that we must have this debate and say we will apply sanctions to Israel? No more arms should go to Israel. We must see the Palestinians as people and help them to survive.

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to my hon. Friends, who are just trying to make me, as a new Member of the House, feel that everybody makes mistakes. I am also grateful for that important question. As my hon. Friend knows, we have taken action against the settlers in the documentary and others. I recognise that the situation in Gaza and the west bank remains awful. We have condemned the 22 settlements that were announced over the recess. We have been clear that further steps will be taken, and I will be happy to return to the House when I am in a position to do so.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister says he hears the frustration of the House, but do the Government hear the cries of Gaza's orphaned children

[Mark Pritchard]

and the cries of the children who have had their loved ones literally blown to bits in front of them, who will be maimed for life? I have been at many of these statements before. I am grateful for what the Minister said, and I also put on the record that I am grateful for what the shadow Foreign Secretary said, but the reality is that aid is not getting through. There were 400 UN stations before, but there are now only a handful. They are in combat zones, and people are unable to access the aid. Every single day, men, women and children are being impacted through a lack of food, access to aid, access to medical supplies, and access to fuel so that they can actually cook some of the food—some very practical issues. I do not support the new way of delivering aid—it should be done by the UN—but if that is going to be the case, what more can the Minister do with the Americans to ensure that there are more aid stations in more places so that more people can access aid, in order to save lives?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's words. There are clearly profound issues with the new aid distribution mechanism. That is not just the view of the British Government; it is clearly the view of the GHF itself, given that it has suspended operations after three very bloody days. Exactly as the right hon. Gentleman says, there are insufficient aid distribution centres and very dangerous crowds, and we have seen terrible violence associated with the distributions. I would be very happy if there was a mechanism in place at this moment that could provide aid properly, but waiting on the outskirts of Gaza—in al-Arish and elsewhere—is a United Nations operation with more than 18 months' experience of doing that and making sure that everybody gets the aid they need. We must not delay. We have both the aid and the delivery partners—we should let them in.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): The barbarism of Benjamin Netanyahu's Government against the Palestinian people is beyond belief. We should not be negotiating trade deals with the Israeli Government, we should not have trade envoys on the ground, and we should not delay recognition of the state of Palestine. The Business and Trade Committee, backed by my hon. Friend the Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), is determined to get to the bottom of UK arms exports. I am grateful to the Business Minister for confirming last night that he will appear before the Committee before the summer recess. Can the Minister confirm tonight that a Foreign Office Minister will be alongside him?

Mr Falconer: I make it a habit not to confirm the schedules of my ministerial colleagues. Of course, it is the Minister for Europe—who has responsibility for the overall licensing regime—who has appeared before my right hon. Friend's Committee. Let me be clear to the House: there is no effort to conceal our position on arms licences. We have set it out to this House on a number of occasions. The Minister for Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lothian East (Mr Alexander), set out some of the numbers on Monday. We have taken exceptional measures to try to show more transparency than is usual about the arms licensing regime. We are having that discussion not just in this place, but in the

courts. There is no effort on the part of this Government to be anything other than transparent—not only with this House, but with the Israeli Government themselves—about the nature of our decisions.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): We can all see that a genocide is happening in Gaza, and it is about time that this Government called it out for what it is. We are witnessing the systematic dismantling of Gaza's healthcare system, and the Red Cross has described the situation as "hell on Earth". What are this Government doing to prevent Gaza's healthcare system from being decimated further, and to re-establish hospitals and lifesaving medical services?

Mr Falconer: The truth is that while the aid blockade remains in place, there is very little that any outside partner can do to ensure proper health services in Gaza—I will not mislead the House by suggesting that there is. The aid that has come in from the GHF is far too little and far too geographically concentrated to be able to provide the kind of provision to which Gazans are entitled and that they should have, and it is a clear necessity under international humanitarian law.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): On 20 May, the Foreign Secretary informed this House that a free trade agreement with Israel was being suspended. Less than a week after that announcement, the UK's trade envoy to Israel was in Israel. The Minister, in his opening statement, said:

"We call for an immediate and independent investigation into these events, and for the perpetrators to be held to account."

We know who the perpetrators are. What evidence does he need from an independent inquiry? Why does he not take action by suspending the UK's trade envoy to prevent him from going to Israel? Why does he not back the 800 lawyers, retired senior judges and academics who wrote to the Prime Minister earlier this week to ask for article 6 of the United Nations charter to be invoked, and for Israel to be expelled as a member state of the United Nations?

Mr Falconer: The call for an independent investigation began with the UN Secretary-General, given, as I said earlier, his concerns about aid provision. The UK supports the vital humanitarian role of the UN, and that is why we have echoed his calls.

On the question of the trade envoy's visit, let me be clear that we suspended negotiations on a future free trade agreement with Israel, but we did not suspend all trade with Israel, as I think the House knows. The trade envoy had no scheduled meetings with Israeli officials, but made his visit as part of his regular duties, because trade continues between Israel and the UK. I am not sure it is entirely fair to link the visit of a trade envoy with the horrific events at aid distribution centres in recent days.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Minister will be well aware that Hamas have threatened to execute any Palestinian who dares to take aid from the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation. He will also probably be aware that there are strong reports that desperate Palestinians are breaking into Hamas-controlled warehouses that are stocked to the eaves with the aid we have provided. We all want to see the aid provided to the Palestinian people, so what plan does he have to convince

the Israeli Government that if aid is flooded into Gaza, it will actually reach the people who need it, rather than be taken away and stockpiled by Hamas?

Mr Falconer: We are clear that, in our view, the United Nations and its partners have a clear mechanism to ensure that humanitarian need is met, and to prevent diversion to Hamas. We obviously condemn any credible reports of Hamas diverting aid, but those reports should not be a reason why aid is not provided to the Palestinian people. There are tried, trusted and credible mechanisms for distributing the aid that is waiting to get in, as it should.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): The International Red Cross chief has said that Gaza is

“worse than hell on earth”.

Is it any wonder that he did, when those children who have escaped bombs face death from starvation? The United Nations has said that one in five people in Gaza faces starvation because of the blockade. Does the Minister agree with me that the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is clearly incapable of addressing the starvation in Gaza—that is now very clear—and that Israel should immediately hand over any aid operation to the United Nations?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. I think I have been clear on that point, but yes, the United Nations should deliver the aid, in the principled way that it has previously.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Ward Jalal is a six-year-old Palestinian girl who, last week, crawled out of a burning school, leaving behind her mother and two siblings, who burned to death. I mention Ward because she is Palestinian. Last month, there was Al-Haq’s case against the Government. By September 2024, 40,000 innocent Palestinian men, women and children, like Ward and her family, were killed. The Government reviewed 413 cases and found one possible breach of international law, which was the killing of volunteers at the World Central Kitchen. Do the Government have any regard for children like Ward and the Palestinian people?

Mr Falconer: Of course we have regard to and concerns for Palestinian people. The questions at issue in the assessment of risk are complicated legal ones. They are complicated because the corpus of international humanitarian law ends up relying a great deal on what is in the mind of a commander when they make a decision. International humanitarian law is tightly constrained, and it is difficult to make conclusions about what is in the mind of a commander who will not share their thoughts with us. That is why, when we make determinations, we consider other limbs of international humanitarian law. We are not saying that in all the cases, the action was proportional and necessary to meet the military objectives, but where we cannot determine that, we can look to other limbs. Those limbs include the obligations on an occupying power relating to the provision of aid and the treatment of detainees. Those are easier tests to meet, because they do not require knowing what is the mind of a commander.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am planning to run this statement for a further 30 minutes, but Members should think carefully about how many of their colleagues they wish to help to get in, and ask short questions—and short responses, please.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Let us be short and frank, then. For many of us in this House, this is no longer complicated. Time has run out for claiming ambiguity of action. Since 20 May, we have seen 22 more settlements. It is deliberately made dangerous for people to access aid, and the Israel Defence Forces have declared the roads to the aid distribution centres “combat zones”. The Minister says that the Government have raised concerns and have called for immediate independent investigations, but those have not happened—not just in this incident, but repeatedly. He will not tell us what he will do. This is on the consciences of us all, so we have to ask him to be clearer. Will he tell us what is not on the table? Will he rule out things? He has told us that he is talking about the future, but will he rule out immediate recognition of Palestine, which many of us have been calling for, the sanctions that many of us have been calling for, and a final resolution of the F-35 farce? If he does, at least we will get sense of where this is going.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. During statements, we need briefer questions.

Mr Falconer: I will return to this House when I have further announcements.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Parishioners in the Matlaske benefice have raised over £3,000 to support the people of Gaza. They were visited last year by a priest from Bethlehem, who shared how this conflict is impacting people there. They hope for the return of the hostages, and for peace for the Palestinian people. I will not ask the Minister to repeat his answer to the question, “when?”, but will he confirm to them that the tools that he is considering using as a next step include sanctions against extremist Government Ministers, and formal recognition of a Palestinian state?

Mr Falconer: I pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member’s constituents. So many of our constituents, including mine in Lincoln, are doing so much to keep these issues in people’s minds, and to raise funds. I will not be drawn on what further steps may be taken. We were clear in the leaders’ statement that they could include targeted sanctions, so he can assure his constituents that that remains under review.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): Members have tried to reach for the right words to describe what the Palestinians are facing. It is incredibly difficult to convey that within the constraints of parliamentary and diplomatic language. I will not go over any of the ground that colleagues have covered, but does the Minister agree that it is completely unacceptable on every level to pair aid with military objectives? Will he assure the House that when we as a Government consider where next we go on Israel, the unacceptability of those tactics will be taken on board?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend, who has raised these issues with me many times and is very focused on them. I completely agree with what he says. Aid must be

[Mr Falconer]

delivered in a principled way. That is vital not just in the middle east, but across the entire world. We take these issues very seriously, and we raise them with force with the Israeli Government.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In 10, 20 or 50 years, none of us wants to look back and say that we could have done more. As of December, there were 191 licences for the export of military equipment to Israel. Fewer than half of them were for the IDF and the Israeli Government. What comfort does the Minister have that the military equipment going to Israel is not being used to expand settlements on the west bank, is not being used by the civilian staff working at aid centres, and is not being used to worsen the situation for the Palestinian people?

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. Member for that important question. We take these issues very seriously. Our arms export licensing criteria and systems are among the toughest in the world, and we work very carefully to ensure that the words that the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and I say at this Dispatch Box are followed all the way through, in every decision that we make. In some cases, it is absolutely obvious from the licence that the exports could not be used in the way that the hon. Member describes—for example, components for submarines cannot be used in Gaza—but we do take enormous care over these questions.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): A noble Friend from the other place reminded me of a conversation that she overheard me having with my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) in October 2023. Israel had begun bombing the civilian population in the Gaza strip, and my hon. Friend asked, “When will they say something?” As I often do, I said the first thing that came to my mind: “When they level it to the ground.” I have to ask the Minister if that is the change that we are waiting for, because I have asked what our red lines are, and it seems that we have none. History will not look kindly on those who perpetuate genocide, or those who assist it, whether through the sale of arms or through sheer inaction. Does the Minister accept that this is now us? The right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) pointed to actions that we might take; I have to ask: why are these actions not good enough for the people of Palestine? How many more people will have to die before we do something?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks me if I accept that this is us; I do not accept that this is us. We are in a very serious disagreement with the Israeli Government about the conduct of the conflict. That disagreement is ongoing, and is strongly felt. Their policy on Gaza and the west bank is not the British Government’s policy. Not only have I condemned it, but the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have done so repeatedly. I hear the frustration of the House about further measures, but let us accept that the British and Israeli Governments disagree profoundly on this question, that the disagreement between us is deeply felt, and that British policy is as it is, and is not what the Netanyahu Government are doing.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Hundreds of my constituents have written to me expressing their desperation and horror at the hellish scenes coming out of Gaza, so I speak here on their behalf. It is clear that the Israeli Government aspire to wipe Palestine off the map, as they expand their settlement ambitions with impunity. They do not care that Ministers in Whitehall are watching their statements. Until Palestine is recognised as a state, the dispossession of land and homes by Israel will continue. Why will the Government not stand up now and, alongside our allies Spain, Norway and Ireland, recognise Palestine as a state?

Mr Falconer: I recognise the concern of many constituents across the country, including in the hon. Lady’s constituency. We are obviously in close touch with our counterparts. I was talking to my Spanish counterpart on Sunday, and at the Madrid conference I was with my Irish counterparts, and those from the other nations the hon. Lady mentions—and from a whole set of states—that have recognised a Palestinian state. I recognise the desire right across this House, I think, for further steps in that area. Whatever we do, I am sure that this House will press me on the continued horrors in Gaza. In everything we do, we are focused on trying to make an impact on the scenes that our constituents are seeing. We are considering these matters, but we are focused on trying to reduce the suffering in Gaza today.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s update to the House, but he will know that we see not only the horror and inhumane violence of the Israeli Government in Gaza, but aggression on the west bank. I welcome the Government’s condemnation of the 22 new settlements, and look forward to hearing words about the forced transfer from Palestinian villages that we are seeing this week. The Minister recognises the anger and frustration in this House; what more would he need to see happen before we took further action on sanctions against extremist Ministers, and took action to recognise Palestine at the UN conference in coming weeks?

Mr Falconer: The 22 settlements are not only appalling but illegal. We put in place sanctions against individuals and organisations on 20 May. Clearly, that has not deterred Minister Smotrich and others from continuing to try to expand settlements on the west bank. The viability of a two-state solution, and of the two states living side by side, is being undermined, and we will continue to take action to avert that.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Minister rightly called for an independent inquiry into Israel’s behaviour in denying food, medicine and vital aid to the people of Gaza. In the same spirit, would he welcome an independent inquiry into the British Government’s policies in relation to F-35 jet parts, for example, because this seems to be becoming ever more mysterious? Apparently they are sold into the global supply chain, but we have no control over what happens to them; they might end up in the hands of Israel, or they might not. Is he seriously expecting the House to believe that the manufacturers of these components do not trace them, do not track them, do not label them, do not identify them? I think the Government know exactly where those parts are going and exactly that they are enabling those F-35 jets to bomb Gaza and take part in acts of genocide. Does this not deserve an independent inquiry?

Mr Falconer: We have talked about these issues many times. They are in the high courts being discussed in a judicial review at the moment. I do not see that this could be any further scrutinised and litigated or what an independent inquiry on the position of the F-35 parts would achieve.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I was very proud to join thousands of protesters surrounding Parliament today, demanding to know what this Government's red line is. Can the Minister tell this House what his red line is, and when he will stop arming Israel and stop F-35 bombers dropping bombs on schools and killing innocent children?

Mr Falconer: I think I have addressed most of those substantive points already. We are clear in our position: we have set it out repeatedly, privately and publicly, and no doubt I will be back in the House shortly.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Under the UK strategic export licence criteria, licences are prohibited when there is a clear risk that items would undermine peace and security or, under criteria 7, where the controlled items might be diverted for such uses. Can the Minister confirm that the export of all items, both those with licences and those that sit outside the rules or that have authorised exemptions, is being reviewed so that, for instance, drones for decoys and surveillance used against civilians and aid convoys will fall under the restrictions and not go under the radar?

Mr Falconer: I hesitate in my answer because there are quite a few clauses in the question and I do not want to get it wrong. The effect of what I have said in Parliament binds all our export licences. There is not an asterisk or footnote that allows some way around; this is a full-reaching approach that has been set out repeatedly in Parliament and has been scrutinised by the Business and Trade Committee and the courts. There is no attempt to fudge the position; it is as I have set out.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield Heeley) (Lab): I recognise the Minister's personal dedication to this issue and his efforts in achieving a ceasefire, but it is impossible to conclude that this is anything less than a genocide. On that basis, will he reflect the will of this House to the Foreign Secretary and the Cabinet that sanctions be imposed immediately on Netanyahu and his genocidal regime?

Mr Falconer: I know my right hon. Friend is committed to these issues. Determinations of genocide are for a competent court. I can confirm, as I did to the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), that we are considering further targeted sanctions in line with the three leaders' statement of recent weeks.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Dr al-Najjar along with nine of his 10 children were murdered when an Israeli bomb hit their home. All this happened while his wife, another doctor, served at Nasser hospital. We all know, and we have all seen, the many thousands of men, women and children lined up in a cage for food shot as if it was some sort of hunting game. We know also that former President Biden's spokesman, Mr Miller, said to Sky during an interview that he had no doubt there were war crimes but that he did not say so, even though he was aware of it, when Biden was in power.

Does the Minister fear that he finds himself in the same position, and if he does not, why does he not do what the thousands encircling this Parliament have asked to be done and stop the arms to Israel?

Mr Falconer: With respect, and I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's commitment to these issues, it was not the badge or the protest that stopped the arms to Gaza. It was the Labour Government. That was the effect of voting for a Labour Government and having a Labour Government. *[Interruption.]* I hear the frustration of the House. I have set out what we have done so far. I have been clear that we will go further. The badge is nice, but action is what matters and that is what the Labour Government have done.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The president of the International Committee of the Red Cross has described the situation in Gaza today as worse than hell on earth, but the Minister has come to the House today with a message that is exactly the same as it was two weeks ago. He condemns the settlements, but settlement goods are still being sold in our shops. He supports a two-state solution, but he has not recognised a Palestinian state. He disagrees with the Israeli Government, but he will not sanction their extremist Ministers. It is clear that the Government of Benjamin Netanyahu are not listening to the Minister's words. In the context of the slaughter and starvation we are seeing in Gaza, the Government's position is, frankly, not good enough. When will there be further action?

Mr Falconer: I would not want the House to have the impression that Foreign Office Ministers and the whole of the Government were not focused on these issues during the recess. We made statements on Sunday. We are working closely with our partners. We made a clear statement—on 19 May, I think—to the Israeli Government that there would be further consequences should the situation not improve, and I will return to this House when I am in a position to make further announcements.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Can the Minister tell me how many more children must die before the Government finally ban the sales and export of all UK arms, including component parts, to the murderous Netanyahu Government?

Mr Falconer: I have seen children in Gaza. My Department was able to get two of them out of Gaza last week. *[Interruption.]* I understand the frustration of the House, but do not give the impression that what this Government are doing is not deeply focused on the fate of children in Gaza. I hear those on the Opposition Benches laughing; of course getting two children out of Gaza is not enough. We hear the reports across the House, but we are doing everything we can and we will continue to do so.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): The Minister referred to the joint statement with France and Canada on 20 May. Things have got worse since that point. Food distribution has been blocked entirely, hunger is being used as a weapon and innocent Palestinians are paying the price. If that statement is to hold up, will the Minister say what action he will be taking with France and Canada?

Mr Falconer: I cannot bind the French and Canadian Governments from the Dispatch Box, but we were clear that targeted sanctions would follow, among other actions, if there was not an improvement. I can commit to the House that that remains under review and I will return to this place to provide a further announcement.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The Prime Minister failed today to answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara). Do the Government believe Israel is committing a genocide—yes or no?

Mr Falconer: It is a long-standing position that that is for a competent court to determine.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): The approach of the so-called Gaza Humanitarian Foundation flies in the face of every established principle of humane and effective aid delivery, as has become quickly apparent. The head of the organisation has resigned and at least 42 Palestinians have been killed—killed—for simply trying to feed their starving families. That is an affront to all of us and to the basic principles of human dignity and respect. Does the Minister agree that there has to be full accountability for these atrocities?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend was an aid worker and she understands better than most the vital importance of those principles, not just in the middle east but right across the world. I join her and the Secretary-General in their calls.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Men, women and children in Gaza do not care that our Government have a profound disagreement with the Israeli Government. The Israeli Government do not care either, because they are continuing to act with impunity. It is quite simple: there is a genocide in Gaza being committed by the Israeli Government. We are complicit in that genocide. We have the power to act and we are not acting. What are we waiting for? Why have we not sanctioned Israel for its war crimes? Why have we not implemented a full arms embargo, including on F-35 fighter jet parts? Why have we not recognised the state of Palestine? We can do it, because rightly we did it for Ukraine. Why are we not treating Palestinian lives as equal?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. She mentions Ukraine. Our actions have consequences. I understand that the House may disagree about the position the Government have set out about the global spares pool, but it is the strongly held view of this Government, including the Ministry of Defence, that we cannot stop sales to the global spares pool without harming the defence of NATO allies. At a moment of critical vulnerability for European security, the Government have to act responsibly across all their interests. Where F-35 parts are going directly to Israel they are suspended, but we want the F-35 programme to continue not only for reasons of our own national security, but that of our allies, including Ukraine.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The horrific historic tragedy of the Palestinian people, and particularly the people of Gaza, is that they are at the mercy of two sets of extremists: the extremists of Hamas, but also the extremists of this Israeli Government. National Security Minister Ben-Gvir said giving aid to Gaza is

“a...mistake...delaying our victory.”

Finance Minister Smotrich said, “we are liberating Gaza” and “settling” it. The Minister talks about further steps. Surely, now is the time for us to sanction those individuals in the Israeli Government to prove that we do not endorse such extremism?

Mr Falconer: Let me be clear from this Dispatch Box: we do not endorse such extremism. I will not speculate about sanctions from the Dispatch Box, but it is clear that should the situation not improve, targeted sanctions will be considered.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I appreciate that, as Minister of State, my hon. Friend is limited in what he can say from the Dispatch Box, but will he convey back to the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister the extreme disquiet and unease across the House, particularly on the Labour Benches, about the position the Government are adopting? Will he ask the Prime Minister to come back next week to update the Government's position, tell us that more sanctions will be considered and that the recognition of the Palestinian state is also now on the agenda and will be forwarded?

Mr Falconer: The whole Government, from the Prime Minister down, know the extent of concern. I am not sure that they necessarily watch all these appearances, but do not be under any illusion: the whole Government understand the strength of feeling about these issues in this House, in our constituencies and across the country.

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): As if this situation could not get any worse, we now have damning reports that Israeli fire is killing Palestinians trying to access aid at militarised distribution centres that are not sanctioned by the UN. It shows complete disregard for human life. Does the Minister agree that enough is enough, and that now is the time to take immediate, stronger, further action against the Israeli Government?

Mr Falconer: I share my hon. Friend's concern over events at the Rafah crossing and beyond. The scenes from Gaza are intolerable. I will return to this House when I am in a position to do so.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is clear that this House has no confidence in the Government's handling of the F-35 programme. I ask the Minister the following question: what is to stop the Government withdrawing from the programme and then bilaterally selling the parts to countries excluding Israel? This would ensure that we are compliant with international humanitarian law, and that no component manufactured in the UK is used to bomb innocent civilians in Gaza.

Mr Falconer: A unilateral withdrawal from the F-35 programme would have the effect of fully suspending the programme at a time it is required for global peace and security.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): It is a disgrace that the Foreign Secretary is not here, but it is unsurprising. The majority of the British public support a full arms embargo on Israel, yet this Labour Government have

continued to supply arms exports, including components for lethal F-35 fighter jets, thereby enabling genocide. Those jets are not used in Ukraine, so Ministers need to stop saying that at the Dispatch Box. The Government have also defended this indefensible policy in court, claiming they have seen “no evidence” of genocide. The evidence is overwhelming—we know it, the Minister knows it and the Government know it. Does the Minister understand that through the decisions he makes every single day, he is personally complicit in genocide?

Mr Falconer: I would like to address the point about F-35s not being used in Ukraine. The importance of the F-35 programme to Ukraine is that the deployment of F-35s allows a redeployment of F-15s, which are used in the defence of Ukraine. Convenient though it would be to the House, it is not possible to divide up defence and national security in that way. I am confident in what I say from the Dispatch Box: the F-35 programme helps to protect Ukraine.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s statement and his efforts, but he must sense our frustration at the inability to arrest the situation we are seeing in Gaza and the occupied territories. In the past few days, we have seen 58 people killed and many more injured in and around the GHF aid distribution sites. Those of us who have participated in UN operations in the past know that this should have been foreseen—it confirms all our fears about what happens when humanitarian principles are disregarded. Let us be clear: Israel is continually and deliberately undermining the institutions of international law, and we need to respond more strongly. Israel is not listening. When will the Government announce sanctions on Israel’s extremist Government?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend, who served for a long time in the RAF, as well as in the United Nations. These issues are desperate. As he knows, we have taken actions against Israeli settlers and extremists, and we have been clear that if the Israeli Government do not change course, there will be further measures, including targeted sanctions.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is clear to all that the actions of the Israeli Government are morally abhorrent. I welcome the further sanctions announced by the Secretary of State two weeks ago, but I plead with the Minister now: we must go further on sanctions and consider trade measures. Like the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), I now believe it is time to recognise the Palestinian state. I was willing to accept the Government’s position on it, but I cannot any longer. I beg the Minister: come back to this House extremely soon—tomorrow, or next week—with further concrete measures.

Mr Falconer: I have heard the force of my hon. Friend’s intervention, and I recognise the feeling right across the House on the need to see the situation in Gaza change. It is an urgency that is felt by Government.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): It is increasingly accepted that Israel’s military operation in Gaza, having forcibly displaced and starved millions of Palestinians and killed tens of thousands,

amounts to a genocide. The latest feature of that is its aid distribution process, which today does not deliver aid; instead, it is a dehumanising death trap that sees a child receiving treatment in a tent being shot in the head through the side of the tent. For the UK to end its complicity, it must pull all the levers to stop Israel’s military action immediately. There needs to be a shift away from condemnation and demands for Israel’s compliance with international humanitarian law to a clear, unequivocal commitment that if Israel does not comply, it will be forced to comply by whatever means. Will the Minister make that commitment?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has a long commitment to these issues, and we were discussing them through the recess. Clearly, the situation in relation to aid in Gaza remains absolutely desperate. We condemn those scenes—we did so on Sunday. We have been clear in our views about the new aid mechanism, but let us not escape from the fundamental position of the British Government, which is that we oppose this operation in Gaza. We are calling on all those involved to return to a ceasefire. That is what we are working towards.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): Colleagues from right across the House have expressed their frustration with the contradictory things that the Minister has said in response to our questions. We have heard that there will be a change when there is a change, and that there will be new steps when new steps are available, yet in the same statement he has outlined how Israel’s newly introduced measures for aid delivery are inhumane, foster desperation and endanger civilians. Surely, this week has shown that there has been yet another change, and that now is the time for action and for changing our response.

Mr Falconer: I do not think that what I have said has been incoherent. On 19 May, we announced leader-level statements, setting out our position. On 20 May, the Foreign Secretary came to the Dispatch Box to announce concrete new measures. I hear that Members would have liked me to come to the House this afternoon to announce further measures. We have been clear—at the level of Prime Minister, alongside our allies, as one of three with France and Canada and with 26 partners—about the need for change. I hear that the House would have liked further measures announced this afternoon. I have committed to return when I am in a position to do so.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I must take issue with the Minister, when he said that the people outside this place wearing badges and marching are not making a difference. All that members of the public can do is wear badges and march, whereas Ministers in a Government can bring sanctions, end arms sales and hold the war criminal Netanyahu to account. Quite rightly, this Government have labelled Russia’s actions in Ukraine as war crimes, and accordingly they brought in significant widespread sanctions. When will they do the same in relation to Israel? Otherwise, this reeks of double standards, and Netanyahu will see the Minister and this Government as a weak, weak, weak pushover and a joke.

Mr Falconer: Let me be clear: I was not seeking to disparage the efforts of activists or protesters. My hon. Friend asks when we will suspend arms to Gaza. We

[Mr Falconer]

have suspended arms to Gaza. I hear the frustration of the House, but the Labour Government took steps, and I am proud of the steps that we have taken. I hear the frustration—that Members want us to go further—but let us not pretend that this Government have done nothing. The scenes in Gaza are deeply distressing. The Government have been clear, as I have been clear this afternoon, that we will take further steps if things do not change, but we have taken measures and we will continue to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That is the end of the statement, which has been going on for about 90 minutes.

Kirsty Blackman: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have had an hour and a half of questions. It is very unusual for almost every Member in this House to be speaking with one voice. I wonder whether she could give me some guidance. When something is the preserve of the Executive, meaning that it is only the Government who can take action—for example, on international sanctions, on arms sales and on many of the points we have been discussing today in relation to Netanyahu or other Ministers in the Israeli Government—how can Members in this House, who have spoken with one voice today, ensure that actual change is made? In this case, it is the responsibility not of this House but of the Government, and they do not seem to be listening at the moment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Member has most definitely put her point on the record and those on the Treasury Bench will have been listening. It is not a matter for the Chair, but there are many opportunities that she can take up to put pressure on the Government; the Table Office can advise on that.

Gaza (Independent Public Inquiry)

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

3.39 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for establishing an independent public inquiry into UK involvement in Israeli military operations in Gaza; to require the inquiry to consider any UK military, economic or political cooperation with Israel since October 2023, including the sale, supply or use of weapons, surveillance aircraft and Royal Air Force bases; to provide the inquiry with the power to question Ministers and officials about decisions taken in relation to UK involvement; and for connected purposes.

In the aftermath of the Iraq war, several attempts were made to establish an inquiry surrounding the conduct of British military operations. The Government of the day spent many years resisting those attempts and demands for an inquiry. However, they could not prevent the inevitable, and in 2016 we had the publication of the Chilcot inquiry, which Sir John Chilcot had undertaken over several years. The report found serious failings within the British Government, who ignored the warnings of millions of ordinary people who had been protesting on the streets against the invasion. I was the leader of the Labour party when the report came out, and I apologised on behalf of the Labour party for the catastrophic decision to go to war in Iraq.

History is now repeating itself. Over the past 18 months, human beings have endured a level of horror and inhumanity that should haunt us all forever: entire families wiped out; limbs strewn across the street; mothers screaming for their children buried under the rubble; human beings torn to pieces; doctors performing amputations without anaesthetic; and children picking grass and dirt from the ground, thinking that they might find something edible. The survivors will face lifelong mental health consequences that will go on for generations. Home by home, hospital by hospital and generation by generation, we are not just witnessing a war; we are witnessing a genocide—this time being livestreamed all over the world. Today, the death toll in Gaza exceeds 61,000, and at least 110,000 people—one in 20 of the entire population—have been severely injured. Two Israeli officials are now wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

Britain has played a highly influential role in Israel's military operations. First, Britain has been supplying weapons to Israel that are being used to bomb the people of Palestine. This, of course, started with the previous Conservative Government, but it has continued with the current Labour Government. In fact, between October and December 2024 alone, more arms export licences were granted than were approved by the previous Government for the whole of 2020 and 2023.

In September '23, the Government suspended some licences but continued to allow the supply of F-35 components to the global pool. The Foreign Secretary has accepted the fact that F-35 jets are being used in violation of international humanitarian law, yet at the same time he admits that those parts go into the global supply chain and could therefore go to Israel. The Government know full well the implications. By justifying the continued licensing of those parts, our Government

are admitting their complicity in what are, quite clearly, war crimes. I find it truly astounding that they are telling us loud and clear that their participation in this programme is more important than upholding international law and the convention on genocide. It is very simple: until this Government end the sale of weapons to Israel, they will remain complicit in the mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza at the present time.

Secondly, many of us have repeatedly asked for the truth regarding the role of British military bases in Cyprus. Since October 2023, military cargo has been airlifted from RAF Akrotiri to Israel. That cargo has often travelled to Cyprus from US military bases in other parts of Europe. Meanwhile, RAF Shadow aircraft have been conducting nightly surveillance flights over Gaza. When the Prime Minister visited RAF Akrotiri last December, he told troops:

“The whole world and everyone back at home is relying on you... Quite a bit of what goes on here can’t necessarily be talked about all of the time. We can’t necessarily tell the world what you’re doing.”

A recent report by the British Palestinian Committee said that the UK Government are “engaged in military actions without being subject to parliamentary scrutiny, and that these actions implicate its institutions and officials in the gravest breaches of international law.”

Over the past 18 months, our questions have been met with evasion, obstruction and silence, leaving the public in the dark over the way in which the responsibilities of government have been discharged. Transparency and accountability are the cornerstones of democracy. The public deserve to know the scale of UK complicity in these atrocities. Any meaningful inquiry would require the co-operation of both Governments—Conservative and Labour—involved in decision making processes since October 2023.

The inquiry needs to ask the following questions. What arms have been supplied to Israel? Which of those weapons have been used in Gaza and the west bank? Is the Government’s position that they cannot or will not bring the F-35 programme into line with the UK’s legal obligations? What is RAF Akrotiri being used for? Is it being used as a route for weapons that are being deployed in Gaza? How many US air force flights have flown from RAF Akrotiri to Israel since October 2023? Have Israel’s F-35 jets been stored and repaired at RAF bases, whether Akrotiri or anywhere else? What video footage do the Government have of the war zone from RAF flights? Will they release that footage? What intelligence has been passed on to Israel? What legal advice have the Government received over an assessment of genocide? When will they publish that advice?

I finish by reminding the House that in October 2023 many of us called for an immediate ceasefire, for the bombing to stop and for the release of all hostages. We

condemned those attacks but expressed alarm over the wholly disproportionate nature of the response. We warned that we were witnessing the beginning of the total annihilation of Gaza and we pleaded with political leaders on both sides to call for peace. Today, some politicians have finally begun to backtrack a bit—perhaps they are frightened of the consequences and of their own inhumanity. If there was any integrity in this, all those who support the operation of the military there would weep for the 61,000 Palestinian lives lost, buried under the rubble, and the moral cowardice of politicians in this country and others who have allowed it to go on.

Today, we teach children about history’s worst war crimes against humanity. They are asked to reflect about how those crimes ever came about. Our future history books will report with shame those who had the opportunity to stop the carnage but failed to act to achieve it.

We will continue our campaigns in the House and outside because we are appalled at what is happening. Our demonstrations and the huge demonstrations in this country and all around the world are made up of people of all ages and all faiths, and actually quite a wide range of political opinion. They are united with the simple human request that we stop the bombing and save lives, and we will do that by no longer supplying weapons. We will continue to campaign for truth, for accountability and, most importantly, for peace and justice for the Palestinian people, who have been denied all that for far too long. If the Bill is agreed to—I hope that it will be—this will be a step forward in opening up the murky history of what has gone on, with murky arms sales and complicity in appalling acts of genocide.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Question is, That the right hon. Member have leave to bring in the Bill. As many as are of that opinion, say Aye. [HON. MEMBERS: “Aye!”] And of the contrary, No.

Several hon. Members No!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that vote must follow voice. A Member who opposes a motion by shouting “No” may not then vote in favour of it if there is a Division. I will give it one more go.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Jeremy Corbyn, Ayoub Khan, Mr Adnan Hussain, Shockat Adam, Zarah Sultana, Apsana Begum, Brian Leishman, Richard Burgon, Kim Johnson, Ellie Chowns, Ann Davies and Brendan O’Hara present the Bill.

Jeremy Corbyn accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 4 July, and to be printed (Bill 254).

Product Regulation and Metrology Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN MARKING FOR CERAMIC PRODUCTS: ASSESSMENT

“(1) The Secretary of State must carry out an assessment of the potential benefits of introducing a country of origin marking for ceramic products sold in the United Kingdom.

(2) A report setting out the outcome of the assessment must be published and laid before Parliament within six months of this Act being passed.

(3) In this section—

‘ceramic product’ means a product—

- (a) shaped from clay and hardened by high temperature;
- (b) intended for use as tableware, kitchenware, or ornamentation;
- (c) intended for sale; and
- (d) made after this section comes into force;

‘country of origin’ means the country (including any constituent country of the United Kingdom) where the majority of the clay that comprises the product was first hardened by high temperature;

‘country of origin marking’ means a marking on the product stating the country in which the product was made.”—(*Gareth Snell.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

3.52 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Requirement to inform customers about changes to prepackaged products—

“(1) A supermarket must inform customers if—

- (a) there has been an increase in price per unit of measurement in any prepackaged product sold by the supermarket; and
- (b) this increase has resulted from a decrease in the quantity of the goods included within the package.

(2) The requirement to inform customers must include a statement attached to the product, or placed alongside the product.

(3) The statement must—

- (a) include the amount the quantity has decreased by and the amount the price per unit of measure has increased by;
- (b) be the same font size as the unit price of the product and must be visible and legible; and
- (c) be in place from the date of the change in unit quantity and remain in place for the following 60 days.

(4) In this section—

‘prepackaged product’ is a product that has been wrapped or placed in a container before being made available for retail;

‘quantity of goods’ includes, but is not limited to—

- (a) weight of goods;
- (b) volume of goods;
- (c) number of units;

‘supermarket’ is a store with a sales area greater than 400m² of which 50% or more of the products sold are food products.”

This new clause would place a requirement on supermarkets to inform customers when the quantity of goods within the product had decreased resulting in a price increase per unit of measurement.

New clause 3—Reviews of potential country of origin labelling for meat products—

“(1) The Secretary of State must undertake a review into the feasibility, benefits, and potential impacts of requiring food service businesses employing over 250 people to display the country of origin of beef products sourced from the United States on menus.

(2) The review must consider—

- (a) the potential public health, environmental, and animal welfare concerns related to beef production standards in the United States compared to those in the United Kingdom;
- (b) the practicality of creating regulations for the labelling of beef for food service businesses equivalent to the Beef and Veal Labelling (England) Regulations 2010;
- (c) consumer demand for country of origin information in relation to beef products; and
- (d) the practicality and cost implications for the hospitality sector.

(3) The Secretary of State must, in undertaking the review, consult with representatives of the food and hospitality sectors, the National Farmers Union, food safety bodies, animal welfare groups, and any other stakeholders deemed relevant.

(4) The Secretary of State must lay a report on the findings of the review before Parliament within 6 months of the passing of this Act.

(5) Within 6 months of laying the report under subsection (5) the Government must undertake a further review into the feasibility, benefits, and potential impacts of requiring food service businesses employing over 250 people to display the country of origin labelling for any meat product from any country with reference to the outcomes of the report under subsection (5).

(6) The Secretary of State must lay a report on the findings of the review under subsection (6) before Parliament within 6 months of the launch of that review.”

This new clause requires the Government to undertake reviews into the feasibility of requiring food businesses to disclose the country of origin of meat products on menus.

New clause 4—Labelling for UK-produced or manufactured products—

“(1) The Secretary of State must establish a voluntary labelling system to indicate when a product has been produced or manufactured in the United Kingdom.

(2) The label must be—

- (a) displayed clearly on the front-facing packaging of applicable goods;
- (b) standardised in appearance, including a nationally recognised symbol or wording indicating UK origin; and
- (c) legible, visible and no smaller in font size than the unit price display or equivalent information on the product.

(3) A product qualifies for the label if—

- (a) it is wholly or substantially produced, manufactured, grown or reared in the United Kingdom; and
- (b) it meets any additional criteria as set out by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(4) The Secretary of State must consult food producers, retailers, consumer groups and relevant trade associations before setting the criteria for qualifying products and the design of the label.

(5) The Secretary of State must undertake a promotional campaign to ensure consumers are aware of the new labelling system.

(6) Regulations under this section must be made within 2 months of the passing of this Act.

(7) In this section—

‘product’ includes food, drink and manufactured goods available for retail sale;

‘produced or manufactured in the United Kingdom’ includes goods where the final significant production process occurred in the UK.”

This new clause would require the Government to introduce a voluntary labelling system, clearly marking goods produced or manufactured in the UK, helping consumers make informed choices and supporting domestic producers.

New clause 5—Support and Guidance for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises—

“(1) The Secretary of State must produce and maintain guidance for small and medium-sized enterprises on how to comply with any provisions made by regulations under this Act.

(2) The guidance must include—

- (a) a summary of the key provisions of the Act relevant to SMEs;
- (b) practical advice on compliance requirements;
- (c) information on any available financial, technical, or advisory support; and
- (d) contact details for further enquiries or assistance.

(3) The first version of the guidance must be published on the day this Act is passed.

(4) Each time regulations are made under this Act, a revised version of the guidance must be published on the day the regulations are made.”

This new clause would ensure that guidance and support for SMEs on the impact of the Bill should be available 60 days before implementation.

New clause 6—Review of access to testing and certification for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)—

(1) The relevant Minister must undertake a review into the accessibility and affordability of independent product testing and certification for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in relation to the requirements of this Act.

(2) The review must include consideration of—

- (a) the typical costs incurred by SMEs in meeting relevant testing and certification requirements;
- (b) the availability and capacity of accredited testing providers serving SMEs;
- (c) any barriers to market access arising from testing and certification obligations; and
- (d) potential non-financial measures to support SMEs in meeting compliance requirements.

(3) The Minister must publish a report on the findings of the review, including any recommendations, within 12 months of the commencement of this section.”

This new clause would require the Government to undertake a review into the accessibility and affordability of independent product testing and certification for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in relation to the requirements of this Act.

New clause 7—Liability and redress for unsafe or defective products—

“The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision for—

- (a) the extension of liability for unsafe or defective products to online marketplaces and any other persons within the scope of section 2(3);
- (b) the disclosure of evidence in relation to claims for compensation or other rights of action in law for harm caused by unsafe or defective products and presumptions of liability that may arise accordingly;

- (c) proceedings, including collective proceedings, to ensure redress for consumers or other individuals suffering harm as a result of unsafe or defective products made available in breach of requirements imposed under powers given by this Act.”

This new clause allows the Secretary of State to make regulations providing for liability of online marketplaces for defective and unsafe products, and to ensure that those suffering harm from unsafe or defective products can obtain redress.

New clause 8—Alignment with EU law—

“(1) Where equivalent or similar EU law exists in relation to relevant product regulations, the Secretary of State must, when making provision under section 1, update Parliament on whether the Government proposes to vary the regulations from alignment with EU law.

(2) If the Secretary of State believes divergence from relevant EU law to be in the interests of the United Kingdom, they must arrange for a statement to be made in Parliament on the benefits to United Kingdom business to be achieved by this divergence, at least fourteen days before the relevant regulations are laid before Parliament.

(3) If the Secretary of State believes alignment with the relevant EU law to be in the interests of the United Kingdom, they must arrange for a statement to be made in Parliament on the benefits to United Kingdom business to be achieved by this alignment, at least fourteen days before the relevant regulations are laid before Parliament.

(4) The statement under subsection (2) or (3) must include the date by which any such regulations will be reviewed, which can be no later than 36 months after implementation.”

This new clause provides greater regulatory certainty for UK businesses by requiring scrutiny of all decisions to diverge or align with EU regulations and a process for Parliamentary scrutiny and review, whether Ministers determine that divergence or alignment from such regulations would be in the best interests of the UK.

New clause 9—Inclusion of lithium-ion batteries as a priority product category—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within three months of the passing of this Act, make regulations under this Act to include lithium-ion batteries as a specified product category subject to relevant safety, performance, labelling, environmental, and end-of-life requirements.

(2) Regulations made under subsection (1) must include—

- (a) provisions for minimum safety and performance standards for lithium-ion batteries placed on the UK market;
- (b) requirements for clear labelling, including information on capacity, cycle life, and safe handling;
- (c) obligations for manufacturers and importers relating to fire safety, product recalls, and end-of-life disposal or recycling;
- (d) powers for market surveillance authorities to take enforcement action in relation to non-compliant lithium-ion batteries.

(3) In this section, a ‘lithium-ion battery’ means any rechargeable battery containing lithium compounds as a primary component of the electrochemical cell.[KMI]

(4) Before making regulations under this section, the Secretary of State must consult the following stakeholders—

- (a) representatives of the battery industry,
- (b) environmental groups,
- (c) consumer safety organisations,
- (d) fire services, and
- (e) any other person whom the Secretary of State considers to be relevant.”

This new clause would ensure that Lithium-ion batteries are included in the Bill.

New clause 10—Duties of online marketplaces—

“(1) Without prejudice to the generality of any other powers or duties conferred by this Act, the Secretary of State must by regulations make provision about requirements that must be met by a person mentioned in section 2(3)(e), including regarding duties—

- (a) to operate an online marketplace using effective systems and processes designed to monitor for, and identify, products presenting risks to consumers or other individuals and prevent such products being made available on or through the online marketplace;
- (b) to cooperate with relevant authorities, with other persons mentioned in subsection 2(3) or any other relevant persons, to facilitate any action taken to eliminate or, if that is not possible, to mitigate the risks presented by a product that is or was made available on or through their online marketplace;
- (c) to ensure that information regarding the identity and activities of persons marketing products on or through online marketplaces to consumers or other individuals is obtained and verified;
- (d) to remove products presenting risks to consumers or other individuals from availability on or through an online marketplace as quickly as possible if alerted to their presence or becomes aware of it in any other way.

(2) Within 3 months from the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament a statement that sets out how the Secretary of State is exercising, or expects to exercise, the powers under subsection (1) regarding the proposed duties that must be met by a person mentioned in section 2(3)(e).”

This new clause provides a list of duties that must be imposed upon online marketplaces by regulations, and for a statement by the Secretary of State to be made to Parliament within 3 months of Royal Assent regarding the exercise of the duties conferred by this section.

New clause 11—Product recall—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, make regulations on product recall processes.

(2) The regulations must include provision to ensure—

- (a) the creation and maintenance of a publicly accessible, government-hosted online database of all active product recalls affecting the UK market;
- (b) clear obligations on manufacturers, importers, and distributors to notify the appropriate enforcement authority and upload recall notices to the database promptly upon identification of a safety risk;
- (c) that recall notices include details of the affected product, risks identified, corrective action to be taken, and information on how consumers can claim a refund, replacement, or repair; and
- (d) minimum standards for direct communication to affected consumers, including by email, SMS, or postal notice where reasonably practicable.

(3) The regulations must establish consumer rights entitling individuals to—

- (a) a full refund, suitable replacement, or repair of a recalled product within a reasonable timeframe;
- (b) access to support and guidance through the recall process, including where a product is no longer in production.

(4) The Secretary of State must consult with consumer protection organisations, trading standards bodies, manufacturers, and other relevant stakeholders before making regulations under this section.”

This new clause would ensure that a centralised Product Recall Mechanism is established to protect consumers.

New clause 12—Local weights and measures authorities: review—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within one year of the day on which this Act is passed, lay before Parliament a review of the funding and capabilities of local weights and measures authorities to carry out in an effective way their enforcement responsibilities under the regulatory framework provided by this Act and other trading standards and consumer protection laws.

(2) In conducting the review under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult regulators and other persons likely to be affected by the review, including such representatives of consumer and business organisations as they consider appropriate.”

This new clause provides for the Secretary of State to carry out a review of how the funding and capabilities of Trading Standards authorities affects their enforcement activities, to consult appropriate bodies and stakeholders and to lay the review before Parliament.

New clause 13—International agreements—

“(1) The Secretary of State may not make regulations under section (1)(2) or section (2)(7) that will disadvantage the United Kingdom or its trade under—

- (a) the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership,
- (b) the Japan Economic Comprehensive Partnership Agreement,
- (c) the UK-Canada Continuity Trade Agreement,
- (d) The UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement,
- (e) the UK-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement, or
- (f) any other trade treaties to which the United Kingdom is, or becomes, a signatory, including any free trade agreement with the United States of America and India.”

This new clause would prevent the Secretary of State making regulations to align with EU standards which would damage the UK's current or future trade agreements.

New clause 14—Review Panel—

“(1) The Secretary of State must establish an independent review panel (“the Panel”) no later than 2 years after the day on which this Act comes into force.

(2) The Panel must—

- (a) carry out a review of all regulations under this Act corresponding to, similar to, or making references to, the requirements of relevant foreign laws under section 2(7), with a view to establishing—
 - (i) their effect on economic growth;
 - (ii) their effect on trade in the product concerned on a global basis;
 - (iii) their effect on the relevant industry or industries within the United Kingdom;
- (b) prepare a report of the review, and
- (c) lay a copy of the report before Parliament, no later than 12 months from the date of the Panel's creation.

(3) The Panel must consist of—

- (a) at least one person with expertise in economics;
- (b) at least one person with expertise in trade policy;
- (c) at least one person with expertise in domestic regulation of business.”

This new clause would ensure a review and report to Parliament of any regulations aligning UK regulations with those of other countries or territories.

New clause 15—Consultation on committee to examine changes to product regulations—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within three months of the passing of this Act, commission a consultation on the creation of a committee on changes to product regulations.

(2) A consultation under subsection (1) must consider the suitability of current scrutiny mechanisms for assessing regulations created through the powers created or amended by the Product Regulation and Metrology Act 2025.

(3) A consultation under subsection (1) must consult—

- (a) the Chair of the House of Commons Business and Trade Committee,
- (b) the Chair of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee,
- (c) the Chair of the House of Commons Liaison Committee,
- (d) the Chair of the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and
- (e) the House of Commons Commission.

(4) The Secretary of State must, as soon as practicable after receiving a report of a consultation under subsection (1), lay before both Houses of Parliament—

- (a) a copy of the report of the consultation, and
- (b) a statement setting out the Secretary of State's response to that consultation."

The new clause would require the Secretary of State to consult on the establishment of a House of Commons committee that would examine all changes to product regulations which are made by the powers granted by this legislation.

New clause 16—Regulations: requirement for certification—

"When laying regulations to be made using the regulation making powers in this Act, the Secretary of State must certify that their effect is not to undermine the resolve of our constitutional arrangements to honour the choice of the people of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union by means of subjecting the United Kingdom to the same law as the European Union so it could subsequently be argued that the United Kingdom should rejoin so it has a voice in making the legislation rather than adopting legislation that has already been made by the European Parliament and Council of Ministers."

New clause 17—Brexit good faith statement—

"When laying regulations to be made using the regulation making powers in this Act, the Secretary of State must provide a statement (a "Brexit good faith statement") setting out how in the development of the regulations it has sought to honour the decision of the people of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union by developing, through the regulations, a legislative framework that intentionally seeks to exploit the opportunities afforded by Brexit to develop competitive and other advantages for the United Kingdom compared with the European Union in the global marketplace."

Amendment 9, in clause 1, page 1, line 3, leave out subsection (1).

This amendment seeks to remove the broad powers granted to the Secretary of State under product regulations, when defining and regulating risks and determining what constitutes efficient or effective product operation.

Amendment 10, page 1, line 9, leave out subsection (2).

This amendment removes the Secretary of State's ability to make regulations about the marketing or use of products in the United Kingdom which corresponds, or is similar to, a provision of relevant EU law for the purpose of reducing or mitigating the environmental impact of products.

Amendment 11, page 1, line 9, leave out "also".

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 9.

Amendment 32, page 1, line 10, leave out "the United Kingdom" and insert "Great Britain".

Amendment 25, page 1, line 11, leave out "EU" and insert "foreign".

Amendment 12, page 1, line 13, leave out "(1) or".

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 9.

Amendment 7, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

"(3A) Further, the Secretary of State may only make regulations under subsections (1) or (2) if satisfied that making the regulations will not result in reducing the necessary levels of consumer protection and regulatory standards in relation to products, with reference where applicable to equivalent product regulations or standards in force at the time."

This amendment prevents the Secretary of State from making regulations unless satisfied that the regulations will not reduce consumer protection and regulatory standards in relation to products.

Amendment 8, page 1, line 21, at end insert—

"(4A) The Secretary of State must also by regulations make provision aimed at promoting investment, fostering innovation, and encouraging economic growth in relation to the marketing or use of products in the United Kingdom.

(4B) Regulations under subsection (4A) must support—

- (a) the creation of economic incentives for businesses that contribute to economic growth, and
- (b) the alignment of product regulations with the strategic aim of positioning the United Kingdom as a global leader in innovation."

This amendment ensures that the regulations in the Bill prioritise economic growth and the United Kingdom's role in innovation and economic expansion.

Amendment 26, page 2, leave out lines 12 to 18 and insert—

"'relevant foreign law' means law of one or more of the United States of America, Canada, Japan, the European Union, Switzerland, Australia, or New Zealand relating to standards, the marketing, or use of products in those markets, which are in force on a specific date and only that date, as specified in regulations;"

Amendment 5, in clause 2, page 3, line 6, at end insert—

"(2A) Product regulations must include requirements in relation to an environmental impact assessment, and provisions related to the right to repair and the circular economy."

This amendment guarantees that future regulations under the Act will include provisions which relate to the circular economy and granting consumers the right to repair products.

Amendment 3, page 3, line 21, at end insert—

"(fa) a person involved on behalf of a person mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (f), in product marketing or the use of products, including storage, transportation, packaging, labelling or disposal;"

This amendment closes a potential loophole in the Secretary of State's powers to ensure that, whatever their legal status or location, all relevant organisations in the supply chain, including fulfilment houses, can be held accountable by regulations to protect consumers from non-compliant goods.

Amendment 16, page 3, line 39, leave out subsections (7) and (8).

This amendment removes the ability for product regulations to provide that product requirements are met if the requirements of relevant EU law are met.

Amendment 27, page 3, line 41, leave out "EU" and insert "foreign".

Amendment 14, page 4, line 2, at end insert—

"(7A) Any regulations under subsection (7) which specify a relevant foreign law must specify that the foreign law referred to is that which is in application on a particular date, which must be specified."

This amendment prevents the Bill enabling ambulatory references or dynamic alignment to relevant foreign laws, and only enables alignment with laws as they stand on a particular defined date.

Amendment 15, page 4, line 2, at end insert—

“(7A) Notwithstanding the provisions of subsection (7)(a), a product requirement of relevant EU law must not be treated as met unless regulations are made by the Secretary of State to incorporate them into United Kingdom law.”

Amendment 28, page 4, line 5, at end insert—

“(8A) Before making provision described in subsection (7), the Secretary of State must make a statement in Parliament if the provision relates to relevant foreign law of only one of the markets listed in the definition of ‘relevant foreign law’ in section 1(7).”

This amendment, and Amendments 25, 26 and 27, open up the possibility of defining product regulations by relation to the laws of countries other than the European Union, and require the justification of decisions to limit any such reference to the laws of one territory only.

Amendment 29, page 4, line 5, at end insert—

“(8B) The final meaning or interpretation of any provision of relevant foreign law under this Act shall be made exclusively by the Secretary of State or by a court or tribunal of the United Kingdom, as appropriate, and must not be delegated or conceded to any other authority within or outside the United Kingdom.

(8C) The enforcement of any provision of relevant foreign law under this Act must be undertaken exclusively by the authorities of the United Kingdom Government and must not be delegated or conceded to any other authority within or outside the United Kingdom.”

This amendment would prevent the interpretation or enforcement of any regulations referring to foreign law, notably that of the EU, from being undertaken by any authorities other than those based in the UK (for example the European Commission or the CJEU).

Amendment 13, page 4, line 6, at end insert—

“(10) The provision described in subsection (7) may only be made if—

(a) a Minister of the Crown has laid before each House of Parliament a statement explaining the necessity of aligning with relevant EU law, and

(b) the updated provision had been approved by a resolution of the House of Commons on a motion moved by a Minister of the Crown.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to make a statement to Parliament when aligning with EU law, and for Parliament to approve that provision before aligning with EU law.

Amendment 17, page 4, line 6, at end insert—

“(10) The final meaning or interpretation of any provision of relevant EU law under this Act must be made exclusively by the Secretary of State or by a court or tribunal of the United Kingdom, as appropriate, and may not be delegated or conceded to any other authority within or outside the United Kingdom.

(11) The enforcement of any provision of relevant EU law under this Act must be undertaken exclusively by the authorities of the United Kingdom Government and may not be delegated or conceded to any other authority within or outside the United Kingdom.”

This amendment would prevent the interpretation or enforcement of any regulations referring to EU law from being undertaken by any authorities other than those based in the UK (for example the European Commission or CJEU).

Amendment 21, in clause 3, page 4, line 8, leave out subsections (1) and (2).

Amendment 22, page 4, line 11, leave out subsection (3).

Amendment 23, page 4, line 17, leave out subsection (4).

Amendment 24, page 5, line 16, leave out subsections (9) to (11).

Amendment 6, in clause 12, page 11, line 37, at end insert—

“‘circular economy’ means that products are manufactured to minimise waste and maximise the use, reuse, and recyclability of products;”.

This amendment clarifies the meaning of “circular economy” and is consequential on Amendment 5.

Amendment 4, page 12, line 21, at end insert—

“(e) provision described in section [Product recall].”

Amendment 1, in clause 13, page 13, line 4, leave out from “Act” to “may” in line 5.

This amendment would make all regulations under this act subject to affirmative resolution of both Houses of Parliament.

Amendment 2, page 13, line 8, leave out subsections (4) and (5)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 30, page 13, line 8, at end insert—

“(za) provision described in section 2(7);”

This amendment would ensure that the affirmative parliamentary procedure will apply to regulations under Clause 2(7), that is, any regulations which include referenced to relevant foreign law.

Amendment 31, page 13, line 19, at end insert—

“(4A) Any regulations made under section 1(1) or (2) which correspond to, are similar to, or make a reference to the requirement of relevant foreign laws under section 2(7), expire at the end of four years from the date on which they come into force.”

Amendment 18, page 13, line 24, at end insert—

“(6A) Regulations that amend or replace primary legislation must be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.

(6B) Before making any regulations under this section, the Secretary of State must—

(a) conduct a consultation for a period of no less than six weeks;

(b) publish a statement outlining the purpose and necessity of the proposed regulations, the expected impact on businesses, consumers, and enforcement bodies, and the outcome of the consultation.

(6C) Within six months of any regulations made under this section which amend or repeal primary legislation, the Secretary of State must publish a review of the effect of that regulation and lay it before Parliament.”

This amendment requires that any regulations made under the Act that amend or replace primary legislation be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.

Amendment 33, page 13, line 24, at end insert—

“(6A) Where the regulations are for the purpose of applying to Great Britain regulations already applied to Northern Ireland by the European Union, Northern Ireland must also be involved in the said consultation on an equal basis with the rest of the United Kingdom.”

Gareth Snell: I wish to speak briefly to new clause 1, which is a probing amendment that seeks to establish a couple of facts. I will start, however, by thanking the Minister for his time yesterday and for engaging with me on the matter. I know that he takes the matter of how we protect ceramics in the UK, and indeed how we can enhance that protection, as seriously as I do.

New clause 1 is a short amendment that simply asks the Government to explore and consider how we can better protect ceramics from counterfeit production, ensuring that when we buy something that purports to

have been made in the UK, that is in fact the case. Most ceramics have something called a backstamp. If we turn over any piece of tableware or giftware in the UK, we normally see a stamp showing the company that made it and the country of origin. Most notably, for most pieces it states either “Made in England” or, even better, “Made in Stoke-on-Trent”.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): In Staffordshire.

Gareth Snell: Yes, that is in Staffordshire, as my hon. Friend says. There are factories in Newcastle-under-Lyme as well.

We are, however, seeing a proliferation of companies that seek to pass off material not made in the UK. Its firing will have taken place overseas and it will then be imported into the UK, with the decorating and final glaze firing or hand-decorating stage happening in the UK, and with simply the word “England” put on to it. That way, the consumer thinks that the thing they are buying is a UK-made product, when in fact it is not.

There are many great companies in Stoke-on-Trent, which I know hon. Friends will reference in their speeches. I will speak briefly of Duchess, Churchill, Steelite, Emma Bridgewater and the companies that proudly put “Made in England” on the back of their products, because everything they do is made in England. The clay is first moulded, first fired, glazed, decorated, second fired and sold in the UK. It is a genuinely British product, and there is value in that product. We know from the export markets to South Korea and America, in particular, that those customers want to buy products that are made in the UK.

There are some companies that quite honestly import from overseas and they are very clear about that. Plates made by some companies in my constituency, such as Portmeirion, quite clearly state that they have been made in China, but they sit alongside products made in the UK. The company is very up front about that; it does not seem to hide it or to try to confuse the consumer. It is clear about the fact that it imports some of its ware from overseas.

Some companies, however, simply seek to put the word “England” on the back of their products. That will be because the company is probably English registered, or it is one of the UK’s historical brands that have a long affinity with Stoke-on-Trent, even if the manufacturing processes no longer takes place there. A consumer will turn that product over and see the name of one of our historical companies and a date, normally from the 1700s or 1800s, and they will see the word “England” underneath it. It is completely and utterly understandable for them to look at that and think, “This is a product made in England”, but often it is not.

New clause 1 asks the Government to come forward with an investigation to consider whether there is merit in protecting things that are made in the UK by having that country of origin stamp, specifically for ceramics. I know that the Liberal Democrats have tabled a similar amendment today that would do this for a whole host of products. I am glad that we are using similar language on this, because whether it is food or any other products unrelated to ceramics, if they have been made in the UK they should clearly say so. My new clause specifically

looks at ceramics, and I will not deviate into the speech that I am sure will come from the Liberal Democrat Benches.

Another aspect that the Minister graciously made time to discuss yesterday is the companies, particularly Chinese companies, that now seek to copy the backstamp. We have some great examples from a company called Dunoon in Staffordshire that makes excellent ware. If a consumer buys an item from the company’s shops, it will have “Made in the UK” written on the bottom, and little stickers on it that say “Made in the UK”. I have in my office some Chinese copies that have copied the “Made in the UK” sticker and the “Made in the UK” backstamp. These are sold through drop-shipping companies online, so tracing where they actually come from is very difficult.

Any consumer who collects that sort of material would be forgiven for thinking that they were buying something online that had been made in the UK. It will have a “Made in the UK” backstamp and sticker, and all the design elements match almost perfectly the ones that are made in the UK, but the consumer will have no idea where it was made. They will also have no idea whether there are elements of mercury and cadmium in the glaze that has been used, whether the pigments used to decorate it meet the standards we have in the UK, or whether it meets the food contact regulations that are required in the UK for items used for drinking or eating off. The consumer will have no idea about the quality of the clay, or what has been added to the clay before firing. Sometimes, in products that are imported into the UK from less good manufacturers, the clay will have been mixed with material that can have a harmful effect on the consumer.

New clause 1 simply asks the Government to consider the merits of a country of origin marking scheme for ceramics. It does not commit the Government to bringing forward such a scheme. I have a ten-minute rule Bill, which is currently waiting for a free Friday, when it can get an airing and we can discuss that in more detail. This is about trying to establish the principle that there are things that are made in the UK that we value, and that if we know they have value because they are made in the UK, we should do all we can to try and protect that.

Adam Jogee: I am pleased to have put my name to the new clause tabled by my neighbour in Stoke-on-Trent Central. Does he agree, notwithstanding his comments, that much of this is also about pride? It is about pride in our people, pride in the skill of our people and pride in the vital ceramics industry, not just in Stoke-on-Trent Central and Newcastle-under-Lyme but in many other parts of Staffordshire, as he has noted.

Gareth Snell: As always, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We in Stoke-on-Trent can talk at length about that pride, but I will not do so today, I promise, although we can talk about our pride that is associated with our industrial heritage.

Rob Ffello, who once served in this place and is now the chief executive of Ceramics UK, told me when I first met him that in Stoke-on-Trent people think we have slip in our veins—slip being the wet clay used for mould casting. That is because the ceramics industry in the city is intrinsic to who we are. It is an incredibly

[Gareth Snell]

important part of our heritage, but it is also a really important part of our future. We can make industrial ceramics, including those strategic ceramics that go into nuclear submarines and into joints for hips and elbows, as well as some of the technical ceramics that are needed in steel and glass making in the UK. Steel and glass cannot be made in the UK without ceramics; a refractory-grade ceramic is needed, because it can withstand heat that would ordinarily melt glass or metal. I know the Minister is well versed on this, because I have bent his ear on the subject on more occasions that he may have cared for.

The ceramics sector is having a tough time, but there is hope on the horizon; I am sure that the industrial strategy will give some relief on energy costs. We are keen to encourage people to buy British-manufactured goods with pride, in order to support jobs in the localities where the industry is dominant. New clause 1 simply asks the Government to consider the merits of country of origin marking.

In my constituency, there is pride in every piece made. In fact, in some factories, people who make and decorate a piece put their initials on the bottom along with the company stamp. Quite often, they can identify their own work in shops because their way of painting and applying transfers is unique to them; it becomes a fingerprint. New clause 1 encourages people to buy British, as my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) have been doing—[*Interruption.*]—and the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), of course. When people go out and buy that piece of tableware or giftware, and are trying to do their bit to support our industry, if they turn it over and see “Made in England” or “Made in Stoke-on-Trent”, they should have absolutely confidence that what they are buying is made in those places.

4 pm

New clause 1 is purely for probing purposes. It was tabled to get the Minister’s attention, and his time yesterday allowed me to do that. I know it will not go much further than this, but I am grateful to the Government for their discussions with me. I know the Minister has great consideration for the importance of place in the industrial strategy, and I know from our conversations that he understands why we are pushing the ceramics line hard in Stoke-on-Trent. All I will say is that as future Bills progress, we will aim to bring in provisions back in other formats and ways, because while this Bill may not be the most appropriate place for it, there will be other opportunities for it. I hope that when that time comes, the Government may feel able to support us.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I agree and endorse what the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said. He makes logical and coherent points, and the Bill could be used as a vehicle for his suggestion. I therefore support his new clause 1 and new clause 4, which is of a similar ilk.

However, aspects of the Bill are democratically dangerous, because it gifts to Government unbridled capacity to make regulations, with virtually no oversight from this

elected House, on matters which touch on not just the sanctity of our product production, but the sovereignty of this nation. This Bill, with little attempt at subtlety, enables a Government, if so minded—this one, I fear, might be—to sabotage Brexit in many ways. I stand to be corrected, but I do not think a single member of this Government voted for Brexit, which was the settled and declared will of the people greatest number of people who ever participated in a democratic vote in this nation. Yet in the Bill, we have the capacity, particularly through clause 2(7), to dynamically align all our regulations with those of the EU, without having recourse to this House, at the whim of the Executive. Whatever the subject matter, that surely is a most unhealthy situation.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The hon. and learned Member is making an important point, which is why I will support the Opposition amendments in this vein today. Does he agree that the reports from the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee in the House of Lords are important in bringing to light just how skeletal the Bill is, and is that not a reason why we should pay attention? We should not always leave it to the House of Lords to do our work for us. We should have those debates about the future on the Floor of this House, rather than having things done by ministerial diktat.

Jim Allister: I agree, absolutely. The House of Lords has done some very informative and useful work on the Bill. I only hope that it is not wasted on this Government, but that is my fear.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Has the hon. and learned Member had time to look at amendment 13, under which, if there was any backsliding by the Government, the matter would be brought back to this House for determination? I suspect that he, like me, would not accuse Ministers of being capable of abusing Henry VIII powers at the moment, but those in some future Government might. That is why we need amendment 13, particularly to ensure that retained EU legislation, a third of which the previous Government binned, canned, and got rid of, does not start creeping back over months and years, taking us back to where we began prior to 2016, and effectively taking the public for fools.

Jim Allister: I agree, absolutely. No Member of this House should glibly pass over clause 2(7), because it expressly and emphatically sets out that regulations, which can be made without recourse to this House, can provide that

“a product requirement is to be treated as met”

if it meets the relevant EU regulation. That is indisputably a bold platform for dynamically realigning this United Kingdom, in all its regulations, with the EU, so that we become rule takers. That is what I fundamentally object to in the Bill.

This House’s lack of scrutiny powers on these matters is made worse by the fact that we no longer have the European Scrutiny Committee. If we had that Committee, we would at least have that opportunity for scrutiny. That is why I welcome new clause 15, which would require the authorities of this House to explore and hopefully ultimately establish a Committee to scrutinise

the regulations being made. Surely the minimum expectation of anyone democratically elected to this House is that we should have the capacity for oversight, challenge and scrutiny of laws being made in the name of those we represent, although made exclusively by the Executive, without the consent or processes of this House. That seems so fundamental to me that it would be a very sad commentary indeed on the intent behind the Bill if new clause 15 was not acceptable to the Government. If it is not, they are saying that they want unbridled, unchallenged, unchallengeable power to make whatever regulations they like, despite and in the face of this House.

Mr Holden: The Government have said throughout the passage of this legislation that it is not about the European Union, yet as the hon. and learned Member makes clear, it is only the European Union that we can align with through regulations made under it. Does that not fundamentally undermine the Government's entire argument, and show why these amendments are so vital to protect this House?

Jim Allister: Absolutely. The Government tell us, "When we make trade deals, we may be able to ensure the requisite alignment," but this Bill provides for alignment only with the EU, which rather lets the cat out of the bag. The Bill is not about facilitating international trade, so that we could, in the relevant circumstances, align with the United States, Japan or whoever we are making deals with, because it is exclusively and singularly focused on alignment with the EU. I suspect that is because the purpose of the Bill is to advance, at the speed of the Government's choosing, and without the restraint of this House, down the road of dynamic alignment. To me, new clause 15 is very important.

Amendment 16 is key, because it will pull the teeth of clause 2(7) and protect us from the intended course of action. I strongly support amendment 16, because it would rein in powers that need to be reined in, and would remove the threat—indeed, the allegation—that the Bill is about realignment with the EU. A couple of weeks ago, we had the so-called reset with the EU, but the reset is as nothing compared with this Bill. This Bill is the legislative vehicle whereby Brexit can be sabotaged. That is why it is important to address the core issue in clause 2(7).

If the Bill were not about securing dynamic alignment with the EU, there would be Government support for amendment 25, which would make a reference to "foreign" law and not "EU" law. That amendment would put to bed the concerns of those of us who believe that the Bill is a subterfuge to secure realignment with the EU. However, I fear that the Government will not support that amendment.

The legislation is a Trojan Bill. It has a very clear direction of travel, which is to be secured by ignoring the question of what powers of scrutiny this House should have, and by affording to the Executive alone the right to realign dynamically with the EU at a pace and time, and on the content, that they alone approve of. The Bill needs these radical amendments, including the surgery that amendment 16 would do. At the very least, it requires the semblance of oversight that new clause 15 would provide.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It gives me huge pleasure to call our resident metrology expert, Adam Thompson.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): Once again, it is a great honour to speak about the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill. Today, we are focused on the amendments proposed following the Public Bill Committee, on which, in common with the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), I was honoured to serve; I was the resident metrologist.

In Committee, we heard extensively from Members of the Opposition. They described in great depth their concerns about the Bill's implications for international alignment of regulations; we have just heard some of those concerns from the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister). Today, those concerns have once again been presented to the House through various amendments to the Bill. I will explain, with reference to state-of-the-art metrology, why those issues should not be a significant cause for concern for right hon. and hon. Members.

Mr Holden: The hon. Member and I served on the Bill Committee together. I think he misses a slightly important point that this is not about international alignment, as is put forward in the amendments tabled by the Opposition, but alignment with the EU, and that is why there is such concern from the Opposition parties.

4.15 pm

Adam Thompson: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. As I discussed extensively during the Bill Committee, there is a misunderstanding here of exactly what the Bill is doing, so I fundamentally disagree with the point he makes, but I will go into more detail on it in my speech.

One of the first things one learns about as a budding metrologist is the concept of perfection. In his book "Exactly", Simon Winchester writes of what he refers to as "the perfectionists", detailing the evolution of the science of metrology through time and how precision engineering has been used to create the modern world that we inhabit. It is a great read, covering the history of my science in the popular mindset. However, I do not necessarily agree with Winchester in his core thesis; he talks about metrology as the science of perfection, whereas it is more accurate to think of it as the science of the good enough. I will elaborate on that shortly.

In the early days of a metrologist's training, we learn that with more money and more time, a precision engineer can almost always achieve a more precise and accurate result, whether a straighter line, a smoother surface or a better piece of legislation, but that striving for true perfection—the absence of any fault—is always folly. Our resources are never infinite, and in the real world it is always more appropriate to strive for the good enough as opposed to the perfect. Good enough is the core of modern engineering and the fulcrum on which our world balances.

I am, as many colleagues will know, by trade a metrologist, but within the broader field, I am a surface metrologist. Surface metrology revolves around the measurement and characterisation of surfaces—surface texture and surface topography. I am the one who decides whether the leather steering wheel feels right. I am the one who ensures that car engines distribute and hold oil in all the right places to keep them running smoothly. I am the one who ensures that tyres keep us firmly planted on the road as we round corners.

[Adam Thompson]

Becoming a surface metrologist involves gaining an intimate acquaintance with the very concept of perfection. Always in engineering I hear people asking for a product to be made perfectly—for the angle of the corner of the table to be exactly 90° or for the surface of the microscope to be infinitely smooth. Let me put it on record that there is no such thing as perfection in reality.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Despite what everyone was thinking, I am not going to suggest that I am perfection, but as a mathematician, may I ask my hon. Friend to accept that the reason perfection is not achievable in that instance is to do with the infinite—the infinite amount of numbers between 1 and 1.1, for instance, or the infinite amount of numbers between 1.1 and 1.11?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I accept that we have some experts in the Chamber, but I remind Members that speeches and interventions must relate to the business at hand and the amendments.

Adam Thompson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention—it was perfect. He is absolutely right, and I will leave the perfection to the mathematicians. To illustrate my point, I hear people in engineering asking for products to be made perfectly—for the angle of the corner of the table to be exactly 90° or the surface of the microscope to be infinitely smooth. To study metrology is to understand the concepts of imperfection and uncertainty and apply those to everything. If one zooms in close enough, the angle is never exactly right, and the surface is never perfectly smooth.

On Second Reading, I made reference to the optical mirrors used in the James Webb space telescope. They are incredibly smooth, yes, but to examine them at the atomic scale, one would find deviations from the nominal plane that mirror those in the Grand Canyon. Being an engineer involves accepting these deviations within the context of the work we undertake towards our goal of constant improvement—be that in the creation of, say, aerospace engines or, indeed, national legislation.

My expertise within surface metrology was in the development of X-ray computed tomography for measuring surfaces. Alongside my good friend Dr Andy Townsend at the University of Huddersfield, who made similar discoveries at the same point in history—a phenomenon that is common across science—I was among the first to be able to use X-rays to measure the interior surface of parts that were otherwise hidden to both the eye and the machine. X-ray computed tomography had never previously been good enough to measure surfaces, with the imaging resolutions achievable lagging significantly behind those required to separate measurements from noise. Previously, such measurements were not really needed, as to manufacture a surface, one generally had to access that surface with a machine tool, so one could similarly access it with a measurement tool.

However, with the birth of industrial additive manufacturing—often called 3D printing—we could suddenly make things with hidden internal geometries that did not need tool access and could not be measured. Without measurement, though, we cannot verify that the parts we make will function as we require them to.

As such, new technology was required to allow us to create additively manufactured parts, be they novel, much lighter aeroplane parts or new joint replacements finely customised to suit the individual. Alongside our colleagues, Andy and I solved this problem by demonstrating that X-ray computed tomography had become good enough to measure those surfaces.

This Bill mirrors that “good enough” paradigm. Current legislation places us at risk of falling out of alignment with the rest of the world, which in turn risks our ability as the British to maintain our position at the forefront of international science. In its current, unamended form, the Bill grants the Secretary of State the necessary authority to keep pace with the guidance of relevant experts. The amendments proposed by the Opposition would only hinder our ability to stay aligned with the continuous advancement of progress.

Jim Allister: In lauding the Henry VIII powers in this Bill, as an elected Member of this House, is the hon. Gentleman at ease with the fact that the Bill could see criminal offences created without any scrutiny or input from this House? Is he at ease with the fact that the liberty of our constituents—which I think we would be interested in protecting—could be jeopardised by criminal offences created by the Executive alone?

Adam Thompson: I thank the hon. and learned Member for his intervention, but I disagree with his assessment. This Bill is about providing the Secretary of State with the powers necessary to ensure that we remain at the forefront of science. Opposition Members have incorrectly claimed that the Bill hands over authority to foreign powers, or overly centralises it in the hands of the Secretary of State. This is not a matter of ceding control to external entities; rather, it is about maintaining the United Kingdom’s position at the forefront of scientific and regulatory innovation. It is about ensuring that the British scientists who follow in the footsteps of Newton, Franklin and Hawking can continue to lead the world in their fields.

These Opposition amendments appear to stem from a fundamental misunderstanding—or perhaps a complete lack of understanding—of what metrology and standards frameworks entail and why they are vital. I urge all Members to vote against them and support this Bill through its Third Reading.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I remind Members that they are speaking to the amendments. There are 33 to choose from, so please keep your contributions appropriate.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I rise today in support of new clause 1, which deals with a country of origin marking for ceramic products and which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) so eloquently introduced. My constituency is home to “The Great Pottery Throw Down”, based in the wonderful Gladstone Pottery Museum in Longton, and I am so proud to have many great pottery firms in my constituency. Those include Wedgwood, which is famed for its iconic blue jasperware, and Duchess China, which has factories in Longton and Newstead that I was honoured to visit recently. There, I met Jason Simms, who is a 100-mph visionary for the future of ceramics in Stoke-on-Trent and the world. It was a really interesting visit.

Duchess, founded in 1888, produces the tableware used in the House of Commons. It is proud of the fact that its products are made in the UK, from clay to table. People buying products produced by Duchess, for example, will see that they say on the bottom, “Fine bone china made in Staffordshire”. The phrasing is deliberate; it clearly informs the purchaser not only of the product’s country of origin, but the precise part of the country that it comes from. Most of our ceramic products contain these backstamps to mark authenticity, and many include a reference to Stoke and Staffordshire. As I have before, I invite all colleagues to join the “turnover club” and check the backstamp on the chinaware here. They will probably find it was made in Stoke.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Just for the record, some of the tableware in the Members’ Dining Room is in fact German. I hope everyone will get behind a campaign to replace it.

Dr Gardner: I thank my hon. Friend for that timely and right intervention. I join him in his campaign.

We do not always have the level of detail needed in this country, and we need to address that nuance so that consumers know exactly what they are buying. That is important, because the pottery industry is at great risk from cheap imports, which are undermining our British-made products and creating unfair competition for our better-quality products made in our own country. This china-dumping of products often falsely pretending to be made by our Staffordshire firms—Dunoon being one example—must be stopped. We must back our British industry and our British workers and do what we can to resist such unfair competition.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Having Stoke tableware in my home, I completely understand the argument that the hon. Member is making, so will she join me in the Lobby in voting for new clause 4, to support UK labelling for manufactured products? That is for not just Stoke tableware, but further afield, too.

Dr Gardner: The hon. Member is right to point out that Stoke and Staffordshire are not the only places that produce wonderful ceramic and other products. I understand that new clause 4 is broad in scope. I am speaking today to new clause 1, which relates to ceramics. I hope he will indulge me.

A few months ago, I was proud to meet GMB representatives for the British pottery industries here in Parliament, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). That included the formidable Sharon Yates, who is one of my constituents. They have real pride, real passion and real skill in what they do.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. She is eloquently outlining the real skills and talents of our people who make world-class ceramics. I echo her support for new clause 1, brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). Recently I met the GMB union and workers who had sadly been made redundant at the iconic Moorcroft pottery in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kids Grove. Collectively, the 30 people in that room had more than 800 years of honing skills and expertise.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we must do all we can to protect our pots, including backstamping our ceramic products, as outlined in new clause 1?

Dr Gardner: I commend my hon. Friend for his outstanding advocacy, in particular for the workers of Moorcroft. I know how hard he has been working for them, and I agree that they are a testament to the great skilled craftsmen and women in British manufacturing.

Stoke-on-Trent, the Potteries and Staffordshire are globally renowned for our chinaware and tableware. We stand tall among the likes of Limoges in France and Delft in the Netherlands, and we must ensure that we protect that status. We are celebrating Stoke-on-Trent’s 100th anniversary this year and working towards UNESCO creative city status. I hence urge Ministers and the Government to demonstrate their pride and support for this globally renowned industry by supporting new clause 1.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my colleagues from Stoke, who have so powerfully advocated for their local communities. It is also an absolute pleasure to be part of a debate with my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), who I genuinely believe should be knighted for his services to explaining what metrology is to all of us. At the very least, he should have some kind of BBC Four series, possibly with my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) as his sidekick.

I am here because I have tabled new clause 15, which has cross-party support. It is designed to be a probing amendment—I hope the Minister is reassured about that—because these are important parliamentary matters. I agree with Opposition Members that this Bill is an important piece of legislation, although I come at it from a different perspective, because I see it as being at the sharp end of Brexit.

To me, Brexit is paperwork, because there are multiple regulatory regimes. Our constituents, and particularly small businesses, must deal with the reams and reams of paperwork that have come from leaving the European Union in the way we did, and we know that has had an impact on them. We know that over 16,000 small businesses have given up exporting to the European Union because of all the extra paperwork, that one in eight small exporters had temporarily or permanently stopped selling to the EU, and that another 10% were considering doing so, because it had become more complicated.

4.30 pm

This piece of legislation will affect over 300,000 businesses in our constituencies, because it will hopefully help to start dealing with the paperwork mountain that is the product of Brexit. It makes no sense at all to ask people to follow two sets of rules when one of those sets is perfectly functional. Opposition Members should be honest and admit that, because their own attempts to run two separate regulatory regimes fell so flat. We saw that with the UK conformity assessment, which the previous Government originally tried to introduce in December 2021; because it was such a disaster and was creating so much extra cost and paperwork for small businesses, it kept getting delayed until May 2024, when the then Government finally admitted defeat and claimed that any business in the UK that had met the European

charter mark had also met the UK charter mark. They did that because it would have cost businesses up to £1.6 billion over the next decade to try to run two separate lots of conformity assessments for the very product regulations whose operation we are talking about today.

This Bill matters very much for our constituents, for small businesses and for the jobs that it creates, but getting this right also matters to the Government, because businesses need certainty and stability in their regulatory regimes and the Government need to be functional in their review of them.

Mr Holden: As the hon. Lady appreciates, we come at this Bill from different angles. We have tabled some amendments, including amendment 13, which would require the Secretary of State to come to this House and make a statement. As the hon. Lady says, small businesses are seeing regulatory change happen so swiftly that they cannot keep up. One issue with the Bill is the fact that it will be possible for regulations to be changed even more quickly, at the stroke of a Minister's pen. That could lead to small and medium-sized enterprises being disadvantaged compared with very large businesses, which can align much more quickly.

Ms Creasy: The right hon. Member had the luxury and benefit of being on the Public Bill Committee. I did not have the ability to ask the questions that he is asking, but I look at the evidence under the previous Administration. When there was the ability to diverge, what actually happened? The reality is that very little divergence happened, because it is not in our national interest. We can, and do, fight many things in this place—indeed, in British politics—but geography really is not one of the things that it is worth our time arguing about.

Given that we do five times more trade with our European Union neighbours than with America, China and India put together, it obviously makes sense to have a regulatory regime that makes that trade as friction-free as possible, which is where this piece of legislation comes in. Indeed, under the previous Government, there were only five cases of active divergence—the sort of changes that the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) is worried about—that might affect small businesses. That is with good reason, because if we have a sensible regulatory regime, it makes sense to be aligned. The Prime Minister has talked about that, and it is also what businesses want. The Engineering and Machinery Alliance, which represents over 1,600 firms from 11 different trade associations, puts it very simply. It says that our businesses

“are trading in European markets and are part of European value chains. They have European customers and suppliers. For companies operating in highly specialised, high value markets, the UK is unlikely to provide the mass needed to develop and successfully market their products. They need to be international and that means working to international standards—the EU's being, almost always, the most appropriate.”

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that the Tory/Reform Brexit has been a complete disaster for our economy?

Ms Creasy: I cannot even look you in the eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I know I should not be tempted into quite that level of analysis. Very practically, we are

trying to deal with the fallout of Brexit. The hon. Member will have heard me say that we need a salvage operation, because of the consequences seen and the damage done as a result of the way that our leaving the European Union was conducted. I see this Bill as part of that salvage operation. We used to be part of writing such regulations with our colleagues in Europe, which we do not do any more, but we need a process to maintain them because of the reality of the supply chains, of how we do business and of where divergence has hit small businesses—and it is small businesses, in every single constituency, that have paid the price for this version of Brexit.

Mike Martin: I'll take that as a yes.

Ms Creasy: The hon. Member can take it as yes, but he will know that I am sticking very closely to the amendments, because I want to come on to how we make such decisions.

First, though, we need to be clear that this legislation will affect the lives of our constituents. Let me give one example. I am a child of the 1980s; I remember the Glo Worm. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for looking surprised—I hope it is a look of surprise, but perhaps you are remembering the Glo Worm yourself. The point is that the Glo Worm turned out to be quite a dangerous toy because of the chemicals it contained. Regulations help to keep us safe, so when we are talking about sharing regulatory regimes and being able to promote markets, there is a good reason why we are seeking high standards. I hope that everyone will hold the Glo Worm as an example—it has now been reissued without those chemicals in it, thank goodness, so that children of the 2020s can enjoy those squidgy toys.

What matters is how we make decisions about such regulations, and the debate on this Bill heralds a bigger conversation that we need to have in Parliament about how we can be involved in those decisions now that we are not part of the European Union. Obviously, agrifood and sanitary and phytosanitary goods are not included in the Bill, but the Government have now committed to dynamic alignment with EU rules for a very common-sense reason. As the Prime Minister has said,

“we are currently aligned in our standards, but we do not get the benefit of that. We want to continue to have high standards; that is what the British public want”.—[*Official Report*, 20 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 894.]

I hope that is the ethos we take in how we use the powers in this Bill. It is certainly what businesses would like us to do.

Mr Holden: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Creasy: I will happily give way, although I promised Madam Deputy Speaker that I was about to turn to new clause 15.

Mr Holden: The hon. Lady makes an important point, but on the broader issue of dynamic alignment, are there not some issues—for example, animal welfare, which is not covered by the Bill—on which, if we want to maintain higher standards, we will want to go further than our EU allies, not dynamically align with them?

Ms Creasy: The right hon. Member seems to believe the regulatory regimes we had were a ceiling rather than a floor. There was nothing to prevent us from having

higher standards; they were about maintaining standards. He and I are on different sides of the debate about nutrient neutrality, but the concern was about the high standard when it came to protecting our rivers and seas from algae that was at risk under the previous Government.

The right hon. Member is right, though, to raise the question of how we maintain standards, which is where new clause 15 comes in. It is about the concept of how we take back control—which, frankly, was at the heart of all the Brexit debates. I am sure the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) is surprised that I have become the stopped clock for him: this is one point in his political career that I may be right.

There is a challenge here that we need to address, and those of us who came to the Brexit debate from different directions can all agree that it is good and healthy to have such a discussion. I also want to say, as a parliamentarian, that the Government should be directed to do something that has consequences for Parliament as well. That is where new clause 15 is coming from. It is a probing amendment to raise a more general concern about how we make good legislation.

At the beginning of this Parliament, the Government decided not to re-establish the European Scrutiny Committee, which had existed since 1973, to scrutinise European documents that affected UK policy or law. In the debate, the Leader of the House said that

“the principal job of the Committee—to examine the documents produced by the EU institutions that the Government would automatically take on board—is no longer required.”—[*Official Report*, 30 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1272.]

The challenge for many of us is that this Bill, and indeed the deal we now have with the European Union, means that that test is being set again. There is now a need for some form of dedicated scrutiny mechanism, with specialist expert staff to consider relevant EU laws and rules. That is not confined to the issues arising from this Bill; it is a broader point about what is happening now.

The ESC worked primarily by examining proposals from the European Commission and giving an opinion on their implications and when they would affect

“matters of principle, policy or law in the UK”.

I recognise that since that Committee was abolished, some work on these issues has been done by other Committees, and that is welcome. However, with this Bill and the reset deal, we are moving to a volume of European law and regulation with such technical complexity that we in this place would be best served by having that specialist expertise. Let’s be honest: many of these things are beyond our individual pay grades and we will want some expert assistance.

Put simply, if PRaM is passed in its current form, where the Government choose to recognise EU product regulations there will again be documents produced by EU institutions that the Government would automatically take on board. The Government’s dashboard of assimilated EU law shows that there are 155 items in the area of product safety and standards that derive from European law and could, under PRaM, be influenced by proposals of the European Commission to update EU law. Clearly, 155 documents alone would likely mean we exceed the ability of any one individual departmental Select Committee to devote sufficient time to the required level of scrutiny given their other priorities.

Many of us had run-ins with the previous Member for Stone. For some reason he never quite welcomed my interest in his work, but my interest and concern in scrutiny in this place is genuine and heartfelt, because I do think that at our best we can help Ministers, although I know that some on the Front Bench—maybe on both sides of the Chamber—will be raising an eyebrow at that suggestion. Aside from the democratic merits of parliamentary scrutiny in its own right and the cry to take back control, there are a number of benefits to the Government of ensuring that regulations derived from EU laws are scrutinised closely, not least because if those regulations deriving from EU law were later the subject of judicial review, the quality of parliamentary scrutiny of the relevant secondary legislation would be factored into a court’s thinking on the adequacy of the Government’s decision making. We might also pick up things in the process that have been missed.

It is indeed the question of perfection, as my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) said, to argue that any Government or any individual scrutiny process through a statutory instrument could ever be perfect. I do not believe we should set that standard. As a psychologist, I believe in competing opinions and views; there is always merit in having a second pair of eyes. That is what this process is getting at—that is how we get closer to perfection, if I have understood my lessons in metrology correctly.

The point also fits within the broader debate about how, as we reset our relationship with Europe, we make sure that we show the British public our homework. That is ultimately what good scrutiny does: it defeats the naysayers who claim that there is a backroom fix; it allows the disinfectant of sunlight to be poured on every single document to its dullest degree.

As the Prime Minister told the House in presenting the European deal, we will be taking co-operation with Europe “further, step by step”, and alignment will be an important part of that. I welcome that because it is in the interests of the British public. We are already committed to dynamic alignment on the SPS deal, to free us from those dire border checks and all the extra paperwork that means that there are trucks stuck at Sevington, food inflation has increased and our constituents have paid the price.

We are also looking at dynamic alignment on emissions trading to allow us to remove energy tariffs in key industries including steel. That means that when those deals are completed, there will be much larger volumes of EU rules that directly affect UK law and policy. That will probably be a good thing but it is right for this place to be able to debate, discuss and scrutinise how that works.

I hope the Minister will recognise that every single political party in this House has supported new clause 15 because they want not to batter the Government but to engage with the Government on these issues, and that he will talk about how we can see the appropriate level of parliamentary scrutiny in this piece of legislation. I recognise that not many pieces of legislation will be affected by the PRaM proposals directly, but there is that broader point about how we take back control—how we have that conversation about the way in which we, at our best, can assist the Government to get the best out

[Ms Creasy]

of regulations so that our businesses can keep trading, our consumers can keep buying and our Glo Worms can keep glowing.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in this debate; I was not sure that I would, depending on timings of the business of the House. I had the pleasure today of welcoming Doreen and Eric Moyse to Parliament. This year they both celebrate their 90th birthdays and I am sure colleagues will join me in sending our best wishes to them.

There are five MPs from north Staffordshire and we are all here, proud members of the Turnover Club and champions of our ceramics industry. We have all contributed to the debate both through making speeches and in interventions, and I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your guidance on the 33 amendments and for reminding us to speak to them.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I just want to make sure that all five Members from north Staffordshire make their voice known on the record. I support him wholeheartedly in his speech.

Adam Jogee: That is my kind of friend. I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for her intervention, which speaks to the cross-party support for our ceramics industry. I grateful to her for placing that on the record.

4.45 pm

There are two Adams in the parliamentary Labour party: my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) and me—he is older than me—but there is only one metrologist, so although I enjoyed his speech, I will not attempt to repeat it. But I did enjoy him sharing his experience of testing leather standards, Madam Deputy Speaker. [Laughter.] I will leave that there.

I will speak briefly in support of new clause 1, which stands in the name of my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), and in the names of our hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams), for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) and for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth). We heard a very good speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central. I am grateful to him for taking my intervention in which I focused on pride. That is what I will talk about very briefly now.

The home of the ceramic industry in Staffordshire is something that local people in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across the county are very proud of: men and women who have shown their skill, prowess, knowledge and talents since the 17th century. On occasion, Madam Deputy Speaker, we hear the odd speech in this Chamber that reminds us of the 17th century. Recently, I was very lucky to have the opportunity to visit Silverdale Bathrooms, which specialises in the highest quality handmade ceramics and is based in my constituency. The skill to produce the work has been passed down through many generations. The quality of British ceramics is the best in the world and we should not be afraid to claim it, show it off and celebrate it all year round. That is why new clause 1 is so

important, notwithstanding my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central confirming that it was more of a probing amendment, intended to get some time with the Minister. That is excellent advice for a new Back Bencher like me, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I shall leave the Chamber to start drafting some of my own probing amendments to the various Bills before Parliament.

New clause 1 is an amendment that I hope few colleagues will disagree with. I proudly wear the flag of our United Kingdom on my lapel. From what I have gathered, I think I was made in the United Kingdom—that detailed conversation has obviously never taken place—and I want the same for the ceramics industry: designed, produced and rooted in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Staffordshire. [Interruption.] Too right, I stopped right there. I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North for the work he has done to support the workers at Moorcroft.

New clause 1 speaks to our ceramics industry. We need this Labour Government to step up and deliver real support for our ceramics industry. From crippling energy and gas costs to ensuring the ceramics industry is at the heart of our approach to trade, we have much to do. Stepping up with actions not words will be good for the jobs and livelihoods of the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme and across the county of Staffordshire, good for UK plc and good for our ceramics industry. New clause 1 is a step in the right direction and it has my support.

Chris Vince: It is an honour to speak in this debate on the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, and in particular the amendments tabled by the Public Bill Committee. I was not on the Committee—some might say I did not measure up. [Interruption.] My parliamentary assistant has asked me to point out that I wrote that joke, not her.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson). Following his contribution on Second Reading, I did take away his slides on metrology and found them particularly interesting. As a former maths teacher, I am sure he will recognise that without maths there would be no metrology.

I wish to speak to a number of amendments, as is our role in this House. I will briefly touch on new clause 1, because I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell)—every time the ceramics industry is mentioned by anyone in the House, I know there is an intervention coming. In all sincerity, his passion in standing up for the ceramics industry in Stoke should be respected by Members across the House. Businesses claiming that they make their products in England or in Stoke when they do not are not only dishonest; they also damage the industries that do make their products there.

We all want to support our local industry wherever possible. Sadly, I do not go around buying a lot of fibre optic cables—although if I did, I would do so proudly, as the fibre optic cable was invented by George Hockham and Charles Kao in my constituency of Harlow.

The Bill is an important piece of legislation that will update the UK's product safety regulation and metrology framework. Some were sceptical on Second Reading, but clause 5(5) points out that it will not stop me having

a pint—or, for my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), 0.56826125 cubic decimetres of beer—at The Willow, The White Admiral, or any of the other moth-related pubs in Harlow.

Regulation is only effective with enforcement, so I welcome the inclusion of the clause on enforcement. I would also welcome a little more detail from the Minister in his summing up, if possible, on the regulation and how we will ensure it is effective. I would also be grateful if the Minister could touch on cost recovery, which is obviously important for the relevant authorities to impose these regulations.

I will briefly touch on new clause 15, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) advocated so well. She was correct to say that stability is hugely important for UK businesses, and she was also right to say that we do five times as much trade with the EU as with any of our other trading partners. As I said in a recent Opposition day debate, businesses in Harlow would absolutely welcome a breaking down of those barriers to trade with the EU. I also welcome my hon. Friend's comments on the importance of scrutiny by this House. I joked with Mr Speaker yesterday that I do come to this Chamber quite often to talk about things in my constituency—believe it or not—but one of the most important roles of elected officials, whether on the Government or Opposition Benches, is scrutiny. The hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) knows how much I scrutinise legislation.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for giving way. What we have in common is that he will stand up for his businesses in Harlow, and I will try to stand up for my businesses in Epping Forest. Much of the debate today and some of the amendments touch on scrutiny; the hon. Gentleman is moving on to the power of this House to scrutinise regulation. Small and medium-sized businesses in our country are facing huge pressures, and not just with regulation but with the economic climate set by this Labour Government through the jobs tax. Measures such as new clause 13 are seeking to rein in some of the powers that the Executive are trying to take on board, which will enable them to change regulations on a whim and then create more uncertainty for businesses. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that these sensible amendments would enable more scrutiny from this House and actually make the climate better for the businesses that we really want to champion?

Chris Vince: I thank my neighbour for his intervention. We both recognise the importance of championing businesses in our constituencies, although I am sure he would recognise that businesses in Harlow are better than those in Epping Forest. That was a joke—apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Dr Hudson: Would the hon. Gentleman just correct the record on that?

Chris Vince: I will pre-empt the point of order: businesses in Epping Forest and in Harlow are equally very good and very successful. I will now move on.

I disagree slightly with the hon. Gentleman on the reasons for the economic challenges. When I have spoken to businesses in Harlow, it is clear that we need to break

down the barriers to trade with the EU that have been created. However, as I also said in a recent debate, I do not intend to rehash the same old arguments we have had over Brexit. It is about how we work with where we are at the moment, and I think the trade deal that the Prime Minister and the Business Secretary have secured on that is really positive. This is part of that alignment, and I think it is very positive.

Just to finish, I will welcome the response from the Minister on some of the points that have been raised today. I have absolute confidence in the Secretary of State to ensure that he gets the best for British businesses—businesses in Epping Forest and in Harlow.

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

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a real pleasure to take part in this debate on product regulation and metrology, not least because it gives me the opportunity to highlight the work done by my former colleagues at the National Physical Laboratory in Teddington, which is the UK's home of metrology. I would like to set the mind of the hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) at rest. He is still, as far as I know, the only metrologist with whom I have worked in a finance department, but, nevertheless, as a non-scientist, it gave me a real admiration for the work of scientists in this particular area. In Teddington they are setting the standards. They are developing and maintaining the primary measurement standards for the UK and across the world.

What I would like to say to the Chamber this afternoon and to my constituents in the neighbouring constituency of Richmond Park is that if they have been inspired by the hon. Member for Erewash and have had a fire ignited in them for the science of metrology, the National Physical Laboratory is having its open day this Friday, 6 June, and everyone should go along.

Adam Thompson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. It is lovely to hear of her experiences. I was aware that she was previously at the National Physical Laboratory. Indeed, I recall how excited my field was when she was first elected. I would just like to place strongly on the record how much I agree with her colleagues' excellent contributions to science.

Sarah Olney: Following that hymn of praise to metrology, I will now turn to the amendments.

The Liberal Democrats welcome many of the measures proposed in the Bill. The legislation seeks to balance consumer safety, economic growth, and regulatory flexibility, ensuring that UK laws can keep pace with technological advancements. We support enhanced consumer protection for those products that pose a safety risk to consumers, as well as the importance of corporate responsibility for businesses operating in online marketplaces.

The Liberal Democrats support the need to update the regulatory framework and we are glad that the Bill takes steps to address this. However, steps must be taken to level the playing field between online and high street businesses, and to protect consumers. As such we have tabled new clauses 7, 10 and 11 and amendment 3, which work toward that aim.

Equally, the Liberal Democrats remain concerned by the Bill's reliance on secondary legislation and the overuse

[Sarah Olney]

of Henry VIII powers, giving Ministers excessive discretion to repeal or amend primary legislation through regulations. All product and metrology regulations should be subject to the affirmative procedure and we seek to ensure that the Bill is ambitious in providing proper parliamentary scrutiny. There should also be greater engagement and consultation requirements, meaning that key stakeholders may not be adequately considered in regulatory changes. This lack of consultation feeds more broadly into our apprehensions about the burdens that some measures will place on small businesses, and as such we have tabled new clauses 5 and 6, which acknowledge this and would provide support to small and local businesses.

I wish to speak in favour of new clause 2, which would place a requirement on large supermarkets to inform customers when the quantity of goods within the product have decreased, resulting in a price increase per unit of measurement. Research by Compare the Market found that products such as digestive biscuits have become 28% smaller, yet the price has risen by 65% compared with a decade ago.

Adam Jogee: Outrageous.

Sarah Olney: It is outrageous, yes.

Similar situations have been seen with popular household items such as Coco Pops, butter and crisps. We were glad to see that, while the Bill was in the other Chamber, the Government accepted a Liberal Democrat amendment, preventing changes to the pint as a recognised measurement for beer, cider and milk through regulations under the Bill. However, I hope the Government will go further and expand this safeguard to protect consumers by accepting this amendment.

I also wish to speak in favour of new clause 3, which would require the Government to undertake reviews into the feasibility of asking large hospitality businesses to disclose the country of origin of meat products on menus. The farming industry has been pushing for clearer labelling of the origins of food for some time. Previous research by the National Farmers Union has shown that 65% of consumers are more likely to visit a venue that claims that its ingredients are sourced from British farmers, and almost 70% of consumers agreed it was important that the sourcing of food in venues is transparent. Farmers across the country are grappling with the punitive family farm tax introduced by this Government, and continue to cope with the challenges imposed by trade deals under the last Conservative Government. Better labelling of British produce on the menus of larger restaurants would give crucial support to farmers and their businesses, and I hope that the Government will support this new clause as a step towards achieving that.

5 pm

More broadly, I urge the Government to support new clause 4, which I intend to push to a vote. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and his neighbouring Staffordshire MPs. I really enjoyed listening to him speak about the manufacture of ceramics; he spoke eloquently about the importance of UK manufacturing and, most importantly, the sense of place that it evokes, and the pride that local people can feel in

products produced in their town, city, region or neighbourhood. So many consumers want labelling of UK products, because they know that would be a quality mark, and as the hon. Gentleman said, it would allow the expression of pride in their towns and cities.

If the Government accepted our new clause 4, it would require them to establish a voluntary labelling scheme, under which goods were clearly marked as being produced or manufactured in the UK. That would help the consumer to make an informed choice and make it easier for the Government to support domestic producers. The new clause would also set up a promotional campaign to ensure that consumers were aware of the scheme.

Having spent the last five years grappling with the bureaucracy of Brexit, increased trading costs and the ongoing cost of living crisis, business owners will be deeply concerned by the additional challenges coming from Washington. We need to bring the country together and collectively show that we will not take Trump's tariffs lying down, but will rally behind our businesses at home, and work with our Commonwealth and European allies abroad.

As specified in new clause 4, in setting up the campaign, we urge the Government to consult with British businesses and trade groups, such as industry leader Made in Britain, which recently said that it had seen a surge in membership following the introduction of tariffs, as

"more businesses are focused on British manufacturing representation and promotion."

Countless people across the UK wish to buy British, champion our local businesses and support our high streets, and this new clause would be a key step in supporting them to do so. I would very much welcome all Staffordshire MPs joining us in the voting Lobby this afternoon.

Gareth Snell: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words about the amendment and the work that my colleagues are doing. My only point is that the final paragraph under subsection (7) of new clause 4 would allow such labelling

"where the final significant production process occurred in the UK", but that is one of the things that we are trying to clamp down on. In ceramic production, products that are bisque fired outside the UK then brought into the UK for gloss firing are passed off as being made in the UK. We argue that this should not be the case; the full process, from clay to table, should take place in the UK. While I have absolute sympathy with her on her new clause, that subsection unfortunately would not address the issue—in fact, it could do further damage to our industry. If she is happy to, we could discuss that outside this place. I am sure that there are areas of commonality, on which we could work together.

Sarah Olney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that further information about the ceramics industry, which I now feel so much better informed about. He makes a valuable point. When we talk about things being "made in the UK", what exactly does that mean? How can we use that valuable designation to best support our domestic industries? I thank him for that further clarification.

Liberal Democrats support the need to update the regulatory framework for the UK marketplace to reduce trade friction and give businesses and consumers confidence

in their products. We are glad that many of the measures in the Bill will have that effect, but we remain concerned about the excessive ministerial discretion in this legislation, and the reliance on secondary legislation. We will continue to push the Government to strengthen scrutiny mechanisms, and for fairer regulation for online marketplaces. Crucially, I hope the Government will take this opportunity to support British businesses by supporting new clause 4, giving consumers greater transparency and British businesses the boost that they need.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): May I say what an interesting debate this has been? I have a huge amount of sympathy for the case that has been put for new clause 1, which was made in a very coherent way. I also have great sympathy for the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) and her proposed new clause 15. I will explain how our amendments would address some of the issues she has spoken about. The Liberal Democrat amendments, and new clause 4 in particular, make a great deal of sense. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) tabled a range of amendments that cover points made in His Majesty's loyal Opposition's amendments, which I will come to.

We should ask ourselves why this relatively small and technical Bill has attracted nearly 50 amendments on Report. It is because, as was said, it is a Trojan horse Bill. We tabled our amendments because the Bill does a lot more behind the scenes than appears on the surface. When, in 2016, the voters of Britain—on an 80% turnout—voted to leave the European Union, it created an opportunity for the country to tailor our regulatory regime to best fit British industry, and to set a global standard, so that it is easier to do business. The UK's product regulation and metrology, as we heard from our resident metrologist, the hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), once set the standard for the world, and indeed has the chance to do so again. When in government, the Conservatives started the work of capitalising on that opportunity. We see the Bill as a terrible step back and a Trojan horse, because it will tie us to EU red tape on which we have no say.

The hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) spoke about his hopes for businesses in Harlow. Through this Trojan horse Bill, Labour will restrict Britain's innovators with over-burdensome regulations, meaning that British industry will fall behind international competitors. As we heard the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), say when speaking to her amendments, it is a prime example of a skeleton Bill. There are two major areas of concern for His Majesty's loyal Opposition: the use of sweeping Henry VIII powers; and the ability to dynamically align by the back door with the European Union. I will speak to the amendments we have tabled to address those concerns.

When the Bill started its passage, the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee in the other place found that the powers in the Bill, particularly in clause 1, were excessive, and it recommended that they be removed. Many of our amendments address those elements of clause 1. In the other place, the Government watered

down the Bill following those criticisms, but afterwards the Bill was still described as a skeleton Bill that shifted powers “to an unacceptable extent”. As recently as 21 February, the Committee in the other place said that the amendments made in the other place were

“limited changes that do not address the fundamental concern we have about the skeletal nature of this Bill...The Government has not taken the opportunity to add flesh to the bones of this skeleton Bill. It remains the case that the Bill provides for almost all of the substance of the regulatory regimes for product safety and metrology to be provided for by Ministers in regulations.”

While we acknowledge that the current Secretary of State may act responsibly, we do not want to put things on the statute book that future Ministers might treat differently.

We all agree that strong, consistent product safety rules are needed, and we acknowledge the risks from online marketplaces and unsafe imports, but we do not think that the Bill is the right way to deal with that. We also think that Parliament must retain proper oversight, so amendments 9, 11 and 12 seek to remove the broad powers granted to the Secretary of State in clause 1.

Clause 3 is of equal concern, because it grants the Secretary of State sweeping powers to create new criminal offences, creating new complexities in our criminal justice system. It also allows Ministers to create civil sanctions for non-compliance with product and metrology regulations through secondary legislation, reducing parliamentary scrutiny of an issue that is incredibly important for our constituents' freedoms. The clause also allows the Government to introduce new penalties, and even prison sentences; new powers of entry; and new fines on businesses, which will drive up the cost of doing business. Our amendments seek to change those elements. We believe that such serious offences should be subject to considerably more parliamentary scrutiny. That is why amendment 24 seeks to ensure that new criminal offences that could have consequences for the Ministry of Justice and the criminal justice system are not created through new product regulations under the Bill.

Jim Allister: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is quite astounding that among the criminal offences that are anticipated being made by the Minister without parliamentary scrutiny are indictable offences, which could result in people losing their liberty for whatever period is specified in the offence? Is that not a retrograde departure from the standards of oversight that any citizen would expect Members elected to this House to exercise?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I agree. We all know the types of people being let of prison by this Government. It is a total scandal that suddenly a person can be imprisoned for perhaps inadvertently having products in stock that have not followed a dynamic alignment process that has not been very visible to Parliament. That is why I hope that the whole House will support amendment 24 in the Lobby.

Amendments 21, 22 and 23 seek clarification of the functions that may be conferred on a relevant authority, and the powers that may be granted to inspectors. The phrase “relevant authority” is used throughout the Bill, and it is not entirely clear what all such authorities might be.

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

In clause 13, we once again see Henry VIII powers being used, despite the concerns raised in the other place. Amendment 18 would therefore add to clause 13(6), and require that any regulations made under the legislation that amend or replace primary legislation be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. I am sure all parliamentarians will want to support that amendment.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I am sure the Minister will come back on that point and say, “You can trust us, and you can trust this Government.” Does the shadow Minister agree, however, that this Government may not always be in power, and that the powers they are creating for themselves may be handed down to someone less responsible in future?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I wholeheartedly endorse that. It is the principle; we do not know what Executive we will hand this power to in future. The current Executive is asking for the power, but we are a democracy, and the Executive can change at every single election. It would be wrong for Parliament to give away its powers in the way that is proposed in this legislation. That is why I hope that everyone will support our amendments.

Dr Hudson: I remember sitting through many debates on Bills in the last Parliament, in which Members of the Labour party, then in opposition, talked about the importance of parliamentary scrutiny. Does my hon. Friend agree that the amendments tabled by His Majesty’s Opposition are all about improving and bolstering parliamentary scrutiny, and that Government Members have nothing to fear by giving more powers to this House?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is so wise and so insightful. In fact, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade himself said in opposition,

“We must bear in mind that the use of delegated powers carries a risk of abuse by the Executive, which is not something the Opposition could ever support. Rather, it is our duty at this stage to check the powers of the Executive and ensure that we are not giving them carte blanche to change the balance of power permanently in their favour.”—[*Official Report, Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Public Bill Committee Public Bill Committee*, 1 February 2018; c. 305.]

That is exactly what they are asking for in this Bill, and why we urge Members to support our amendment.

It is not just the Secretary of State who says this. Let us listen to what our friend the Attorney General of this great United Kingdom, Lord Hermer, another member of His Majesty’s Government, has said on Henry VIII clauses, skeleton legislation and delegated powers. He says that they strike not only at the rule of law

“but also at the cardinal principles of accessibility and legal certainty.”

And yet we are being asked this evening to allow criminal sanctions and the possibility of imprisonment to go through using those powers.

5.15 pm

Amendment 16 would remove the ability for product regulations to provide that product requirements are met if the requirements of relevant EU law are met. We believe that the UK, as an independent nation, should set its own product regulations to foster innovation and

support domestic industry, and not automatically align with EU rules, over which we no longer have any influence and do not help to shape.

The second area in which we have tabled further amendments is that of dynamic alignment. We have heard the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) admit that that is the very purpose of this Bill. We believe that dynamic alignment with EU regulation should be a decision for the House to make, and that interpretation must only be undertaken by UK courts, not by international courts such as the European Commission or the Court of Justice of the European Union. We took back those very powers, but in this Bill the Secretary of State is taking the power to give them away.

Our amendment 10 would remove the Secretary of State’s ability to make regulations about the marketing or use of products in the United Kingdom which corresponds, or is similar to, a provision of relevant EU law for the purpose of reducing or mitigating the environmental impact of products. Our amendments 13 to 15 would specifically require parliamentary approval for aligning product regulations with EU law. Our amendment 17 states that interpretation and enforcement of any regulations must only be undertaken by UK courts.

We, as His Majesty’s loyal Opposition, also want to ensure that regulations under this Bill do not damage any other international agreements that the Government may wish to strike, so our new clause 13 on international agreements would ensure that any regulations made under the Bill’s powers do not undermine the UK’s existing or future trade deals, including with key partners such as the US, India, Japan, Australia and Canada. That is a pragmatic and necessary step towards maintaining the strength of the UK’s trade relationships and protecting the long-term prosperity of our businesses. The Government have talked many times about growth being their top priority, so this new clause would ensure that regulations made under the Bill prioritised economic growth. Amendment 8 would require the Secretary of State to actively promote investment, innovation and economic growth through product regulation. It embeds a forward-looking vision, positioning the UK as a global leader in innovation and ensuring that our regulatory framework supports prosperity and not just compliance.

When this Bill left the other place, the lead Minister in the other place, Lord Leong, said:

“We have taken the Bill from its early state to where it is today, and obviously it will now go to the other place. I am sure that the noble Lord is right: there will be further deliberation on the Bill, and hopefully we will get it to a better place.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 March 2025; Vol. 844, c. 714.]

And yet there have not been significant changes in Committee. I therefore recommend that the House supports our amendments in the Lobby this evening.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I thank all hon. Members for contributing to the debate—my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), for Harlow (Chris Vince), for Erewash (Adam Thompson), the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and

the shadow Minister the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin). I will address many of the points they raised during the debate.

I welcome the Liberal Democrat spokesperson to her new role. I do not know whether it is a promotion or demotion, but I welcome her all the same. As always, it was a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash and his great technical insight. Indeed, we have our own Professor Yaffle in his House—those of a certain age will know who I am referring to. His expertise was greatly appreciated in Bill Committee and again today.

Amendments 9, 11 and 12 would remove clause 1(1) from the Bill. Of course, that is the central power to keep consumers safe and our product regulations updated. As I said in Committee, our product regulation framework is extensive. We have hundreds of often technical regulations. Removing clause 1(1) would freeze our regulations in time. We would be unable to respond to new risks, products or business models. I cannot accept an amendment that would stop us from protecting consumers and businesses from product-related harm.

Mr Joshua Reynolds: The Minister talks about protecting consumers. That is exactly what new clause 2 would do by making them aware when a product gets smaller but the price remains the same—shrinkflation—so will he work with us and get that clause into law?

Justin Madders: I will address new clause 2 in due course. That is a more a consumer-related issue than a product safety one, but I understand the intent behind it.

We have heard a lot of concerns—many of them misplaced—about the breadth of powers contained within the Bill. In the other place, we did increase the measures that will be subject to the affirmative procedure. We removed several Henry VIII clauses and added a statutory consultation requirement. We also published a code of conduct, available in the Library of the House, which sets out exactly how the powers under the Bill will be used. I now believe the Bill strikes the right balance of appropriate parliamentary scrutiny without clogging up parliamentary time with highly technical product regulations. Gutting the Bill by removing the central power would leave consumers unprotected.

Amendments 10, 14 to 17, 25 to 29 and 32 all relate to EU law. I want to be absolutely clear yet again that the powers in the Bill give the UK the flexibility to manage its own product regulatory framework. Part of that is, of course, ensuring that the UK can respond to relevant developments in EU law. It does not mean that the UK is beholden to EU changes, and all regulations will be subject to Parliament's oversight. I also wish to reassure the House that the Government remain committed to our obligations under the Windsor framework. The reason the Bill explicitly references the EU rather than other jurisdictions is that most of our product regulation is, of course, inherited from EU law. The UK continues to recognise certain EU product requirements—a policy that was, of course, enacted under the previous Government only 12 months ago.

The Bill's powers allow us to continue or end such recognition based on the UK's interests on a case-by-case basis. Decisions on whether to diverge or align will be made as they come along and will only be implemented by laying a statutory instrument in Parliament. Recognition

of EU product requirements would be stated in UK law and could only be enforced by UK authorities. The Bill does not grant jurisdiction to foreign courts. I find amendment 15, which would prevent CE recognition, an odd amendment to be pushed by the Conservatives given that they introduced regulations only a year ago that did the absolute opposite.

New clauses 8, 14, 16 and 17 and amendments 13, 31 and 33 deal with themes of EU law, parliamentary scrutiny and oversight. These amendments duplicate the robust safeguards already in the Bill and the statutory and non-statutory controls that we have published in our code of conduct. Those include the statutory requirement for consultation and assessments under the better regulation framework. The Government value Parliament's role in scrutinising legislation, so we will continue to consult all the devolved Governments as appropriate to ensure that regulations work for the whole of the UK.

Let me turn to amendments 1, 12, 18 and 30, on parliamentary scrutiny. The Bill as introduced already applied the affirmative procedure in key areas, including the creation of criminal offences—contrary to what has been said this afternoon—and amending primary legislation. However, in response to matters raised by the DPRRC, we have added additional areas, which are set out in clause 13(4). For the avoidance of doubt, I can confirm that the affirmative procedure applies to the following: the creation of criminal offences; the first use of regulations covering online marketplaces; the first time duties are imposed on a new supply chain actor; regulations conferring powers of entry, search or inspection; regulations to disapply requirements in response to an emergency; regulations covering the sharing of information between persons; regulations on cost recovery; regulations amending or repealing the Gun Barrel Proof Acts; consequential amendments to primary legislation; and regulations amending the definition of online marketplaces.

Dr Gardner: Does the Minister agree that online marketplaces should have a greater responsibility to ensure the safety and authenticity of the products they sell, just like a retailer on our high streets?

Justin Madders: I absolutely agree, and that is one reason why the Bill has been introduced. We absolutely need to keep up to date with developments in the online marketplace world, which is why we have introduced this legislation. It is not, as has been suggested, an unbridled use of powers; it sets out a clear set of principles and provides for the use of the affirmative procedure in most cases. There are already a number of regulations that will be transposed as they stand—there are about 2,500 pages of product regulations, including to do with noise levels emitted from certain types of machinery and the ergonomic design of personal protective equipment. Increasing the list of regulations subject to the affirmative procedure to cover such matters risks mirroring Parliament in a level of technicality that I think only my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash could follow. I do not think that is a good use of parliamentary time, and I believe the Opposition used to think that too, which is why the powers in the Consumer Protection Act 1987, which is similar to what we are dealing with today, remained in place under successive Governments.

[Justin Madders]

I will deal now with new clause 15, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow. She raised some important points, and I thank her for setting out the rationale behind her new clause so clearly. First, I reassure the House that we are not looking at the same level of regulatory change that was necessitated when we left the EU. We anticipate no more than half a dozen uses of the powers a year. That is because the fundamentals of the regulatory framework are already in UK law—thousands of pages, as I have referred to, and many of those provisions have been through previous scrutiny processes. The majority of future changes using the power in the Bill will be smaller and technical.

I recognise the concerns raised, though. When we were a member of the EU, directives enacting major regulatory changes were regularly transposed into UK law using the negative procedure. Our Bill contains many more safeguards than were in place before, meaning that the affirmative procedure will be used far more often, as I have set out. Careful consideration was given in the development of the powers to ensure that we struck the right balance between good use of parliamentary time and the processing of highly technical changes. We listened to the concerns raised by members of the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee and went further, broadening the areas requiring scrutiny, as I have set out.

As Lord Pannick said, the practical reality is that technical regulations of the breadth and complexity that will be produced cannot sensibly be enacted by primary legislation. If we used primary legislation every time we wanted to do something on product safety, we would have little time for anything else. However, to provide maximum transparency in this space, we also published a code of conduct setting out the statutory and non-statutory guardrails in place before regulations can be made. That included a statement on how we will engage and consult with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that their views are considered. We will continue to review and update the code of conduct, and of course we will be happy to take suggestions on how we can be clearer about Parliament's role in the scrutiny of regulations.

Given those assurances, I believe we have struck the right balance between scrutiny, the appropriate use of parliamentary time and the flexibility needed to keep our product and metrology regulations up to date. I hope that gives my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow some reassurances.

Ms Creasy: I thank the Minister for setting that out. It is incredibly helpful and reassuring to many of us to hear that in this instance just a handful of regulations would be affected. I hope that Business Ministers have heard the wider call for us to look at the issue across the piece; in fact, I am sure that the Minister will want to feed that in. What he said is very welcome and I am sure that all hon. Members who supported my new clause will be reassured accordingly.

Justin Madders: I am sure that Ministers across Government will have heard the important points that my hon. Friend has made today.

Amendment 7 on consumer protection could have unintended consequences as product safety is not one-dimensional; it requires consideration of multiple risks and consumer and business needs. For example, we are undertaking a significant programme of work considering furniture safety and the balance between fire risks and the possible effects of exposure to chemical flame retardants. Were the amendment adopted, we would be open to challenge by any interest groups unhappy with how regulations balance those factors. Indeed, when I gave that example in Committee, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson), said that it was a compelling reason for not accepting the amendment, so I hope the hon. Member for Richmond Park will not move that amendment.

5.30 pm

Amendments 5 and 6 on the circular economy are unnecessary, as the Environment Act 2021 already requires the Government to consider the environmental impact of any new policies, and the Consumer Rights Act 2015 includes provisions on right to repair.

On new clause 19, the Government are committed to meeting our obligations on the UK's trade agreements and nothing in the Bill will contradict that.

New clauses 5 and 6 relate to small and medium-sized businesses. The purpose of new clause 5 is already met through existing practice, and that of new clause 6 is also met, as all regulations will be assessed in line with the better regulation framework principles. Similarly, amendment 8 on economic growth is unnecessary. All regulations will be subject to a statutory consultation and require an impact assessment as per the better regulation framework, ensuring that business needs are fully considered. The Bill will allow greater simplification and clarity on product requirements, which should ease burdens on industry.

Let me turn to amendment 3 and new clause 10 on online marketplaces and supply chains. I agree that all relevant actors must be captured by our regulatory framework. That is why we have explicitly recognised and defined online marketplaces in the Bill, as well as including clause 2(3)(i) to ensure that “any other person” engaged in activities relating to a product can be brought within scope, including those working in fulfilment houses. At the earliest opportunity, we intend to consult on requirements applying to online marketplaces that protect consumers and are proportionate to the range of marketplace business models. The Bill gives us the opportunity to develop appropriate requirements, following consultation. That is better than requiring the introduction of specific obligations, irrespective of the outcome of consultation and consideration of proportionality.

New clause 7 relates to online marketplaces being held liable for products purchased via their platforms. We agree that there is scope for improvements to be made in this area, which is why I have asked the Law Commission to conduct a full and comprehensive review of product liability legislation and make suggestions for reform. Following its report, which we anticipate will be released next year, we will legislate, if necessary, to ensure that our product liability laws are up to date and fit for the future.

Turning briefly to new clause 9, the Bill's powers cover various product categories, including lithium-ion batteries. Although concerns about battery safety are

valid, the Bill must remain broad to address evolving products effectively. To improve lithium-ion battery safety, we have published research from the Warwick Manufacturing Group that highlights risks such as compatibility and design issues. Those findings will guide interventions, including regulatory standards and improved guidance. We are committed to collaborating with stakeholders to determine what actions should be taken forward.

Amendments 21 to 24 would render unenforceable many requirements introduced in regulations under the Bill. Removing powers to create enforcement functions would make requirements introduced in new regulations ineffective, particularly for new supply chain actors. Without powers to effectively enforce new requirements, good businesses will be undermined by those who ignore their duties and responsibilities. I assure the House that the use of those powers already has precedent in comparable matters. The Building Safety Act 2022 is a recent example of primary legislation that created similar powers.

New clause 11 and amendment 4 relate to product recall procedures. Supply chain actors are already under duties to report incidents to enforcement authorities, and the public can already access an online database of recalls: the product safety alerts, reports and recalls database. Furthermore, there are legislative routes for consumers to pursue their rights, including rights to repair, replace or refund, through various legislation, such as the Consumer Protection Act 1987 and the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. The Government are reviewing product recalls as well as the full range of existing enforcement powers for product safety and metrology so that the powers can be targeted and effective. The consultation following Royal Assent will seek views on the structure of such powers.

I turn to new clause 12. Local authorities do vital work across several areas of consumer protection. This Bill is not the appropriate vehicle for a broader review of enforcement capability for consumer protection legislation, as it is limited to product and metrology regulation. However, it will help local authorities by simplifying product safety legislation and allowing the Government to consolidate enforcement powers. It will also provide for cost recovery powers to be obtained by local authorities—something raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow.

New clauses 1 to 4 relate to product labelling. We will not be accepting them, but I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central for tabling new clause 1 and for shining a light, as he always does, on an important UK sector that is very important to his part of the world. Manufacturers can already indicate the country of origin on the labelling of their goods, as long as the information is accurate. Falsely claiming that products are made in the UK is an offence under existing UK consumer law, which prohibits traders from misleading consumers. I understand that my hon. Friend has a private Member's Bill on the country of origin for ceramics, which was introduced on 2 April and is listed for Second Reading next week. I will be interested to hear that debate, and I am always willing to engage with him on this important issue for his constituents.

New clauses 2 to 4 relate to matters where separate legislation already applies. New clause 2 on the prices of goods falls under the Price Marking Order 2004, which includes requirements for unit pricing to be clearly labelled.

There are developments in this area. The Competition and Markets Authority published a report in July 2023 on the use of unit pricing in store and online in the groceries sector. Following this, it made recommendations to reform unit pricing legislation and proposed reforms to the Price Marking Order 2004.

Amendments to the 2004 Order will come into force next April and will introduce additional requirements for retailers, such as consistency in unit pricing. That means that all unit prices for products sold by weight or volume must in future be displayed in either kilograms or litres. There will be stricter criteria on pricing legibility, and the changes will also provide clarity on how items in multibuy or loyalty card offers should be displayed. We believe that these changes will allow retailers to provide the information that customers need to make informed purchasing choices.

Finally, new clauses 3 and 4 relate to country of origin information. This is already required for certain pre-packed foods, including beef. Origin labelling for food products, however, is well beyond the intended focus of the Bill. It is the case that current rules do not prevent British products from being labelled as British, and this is often done voluntarily. Indeed, the hon. Member for Richmond Park made reference to the “Made in Britain” campaign that is already in place. We do not believe it is necessary to legislate to set up a voluntary system when a voluntary system is already in place. In the light of that, I ask that the new clause 1 is withdrawn and all other amendments are not moved.

Gareth Snell: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

LABELLING FOR UK-PRODUCED OR MANUFACTURED PRODUCTS

- “(1) The Secretary of State must establish a voluntary labelling system to indicate when a product has been produced or manufactured in the United Kingdom.
- (2) The label must be—
 - (a) displayed clearly on the front-facing packaging of applicable goods;
 - (b) standardised in appearance, including a nationally recognised symbol or wording indicating UK origin; and
 - (c) legible, visible and no smaller in font size than the unit price display or equivalent information on the product.
- (3) A product qualifies for the label if—
 - (a) it is wholly or substantially produced, manufactured, grown or reared in the United Kingdom; and
 - (b) it meets any additional criteria as set out by regulations made by the Secretary of State.
- (4) The Secretary of State must consult food producers, retailers, consumer groups and relevant trade associations before setting the criteria for qualifying products and the design of the label.
- (5) The Secretary of State must undertake a promotional campaign to ensure consumers are aware of the new labelling system.
- (6) Regulations under this section must be made within 2 months of the passing of this Act.

(7) In this section—

“product” includes food, drink and manufactured goods available for retail sale;

“produced or manufactured in the United Kingdom” includes goods where the final significant production process occurred in the UK.”—(*Sarah Olney*.)

This new clause would require the Government to introduce a voluntary labelling system, clearly marking goods produced or manufactured in the UK, helping consumers make informed choices and supporting domestic producers.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 171, Noes 274.

Division No. 211]

[5.38 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Fox, Sir Ashley
Allister, Jim	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Amos, Gideon	Franklin, Zöe
Anderson, Lee	Freeman, George
Anderson, Stuart	French, Mr Louie
Andrew, rh Stuart	Fuller, Richard
Aquarone, Steff	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Argar, rh Edward	Garnier, Mark
Atkins, rh Victoria	George, Andrew
Babarinde, Josh	Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)
Bacon, Gareth	Glen, rh John
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Glover, Olly
Barclay, rh Steve	Goldman, Marie
Bedford, Mr Peter	Grant, Helen
Bennett, Alison	Green, Sarah
Berry, Siân	Griffith, Andrew
Blackman, Bob	Griffiths, Alison
Bool, Sarah	Harding, Monica
Bowie, Andrew	Harris, Rebecca
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Heylings, Pippa
Braverman, rh Suella	Hinds, rh Damian
Brewer, Alex	Hoare, Simon
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Hobhouse, Wera
Cane, Charlotte	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Holmes, Paul
Chadwick, David	Hudson, Dr Neil
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Chambers, Dr Danny	Jarvis, Liz
Chope, Sir Christopher	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Chowns, Ellie	Jenrick, rh Robert
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Jopp, Lincoln
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Cocking, Lewis	Kohler, Mr Paul
Coghlan, Chris	Kruger, Danny
Collins, Victoria	Lam, Katie
Cooper, John	Lamont, John
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Cross, Harriet	Lowe, Rupert
Dance, Adam	MacCleary, James
Darling, Steve	Maguire, Ben
Davies, Ann	Mak, Alan
Davies, Mims	Malthouse, rh Kit
Dean, Bobby	Martin, Mike
Denyer, Carla	Mathew, Brian
Dillon, Mr Lee	Mayhew, Jerome
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Maynard, Charlie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	McVey, rh Esther
Dyke, Sarah	Medi, Llinos
Evans, Dr Luke	van Mierlo, Freddie
Farage, Nigel	Miller, Calum
Forster, Mr Will	Milne, John
Fortune, Peter	

Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Moran, Layla (<i>Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin</i>)	Smith, Rebecca
Morgan, Helen	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Morrison, Mr Tom	Sollom, Ian
Morrissey, Joy	Spencer, Dr Ben
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Mundell, rh David	Stafford, Gregory
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Stephenson, Blake
Norman, rh Jesse	Stone, Jamie
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Stride, rh Sir Mel
O'Brien, Neil	Stuart, rh Graham
Olney, Sarah	Swann, Robin
Patel, rh Priti	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Paul, Rebecca	Taylor, Luke
Perteghella, Manuela	Thomas, Bradley
Philp, rh Chris	Thomas, Cameron
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Tice, Richard
Pochin, Sarah	Timothy, Nick
Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	Trott, rh Laura
Ramsay, Adrian	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Reed, David	Vickers, Martin
Reynolds, Mr Joshua	Voaden, Caroline
Robertson, Joe	Whately, Helen
Roome, Ian	Wild, James
Rosindell, Andrew	Wilkinson, Max
Sabine, Anna	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Savage, Dr Roz	Wilson, rh Sammy
Shannon, Jim	Wood, Mike
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec	Wrigley, Martin
Simmonds, David	Young, Claire
Slade, Vikki	
Smart, Lisa	
Smith, Greg	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Susan Murray and
Tessa Munt

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Blake, Olivia
Abbott, Jack	Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Abrahams, Debbie	Bonavia, Kevin
Akehurst, Luke	Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Aldridge, Dan	Brash, Mr Jonathan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Burgon, Richard
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Burton-Sampson, David
Ali, Rushanara	Butler, Dawn
Ali, Tahir	Byrne, rh Liam
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Cadbury, Ruth
Anderson, Callum	Caliskan, Nesil
Anderson, Fleur	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Asato, Jess	Carling, Sam
Asser, James	Carns, Al
Athwal, Jas	Champion, Sarah
Atkinson, Catherine	Coleman, Ben
Atkinson, Lewis	Collier, Jacob
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Collinge, Lizzi
Bailey, Olivia	Collins, Tom
Baines, David	Conlon, Liam
Baker, Richard	Coombes, Sarah
Bance, Antonia	Cooper, Andrew
Barker, Paula	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Costigan, Deirdre
Baxter, Johanna	Cox, Pam
Beales, Danny	Coyle, Neil
Beavers, Lorraine	Craft, Jen
Betts, Mr Clive	Creagh, Mary
Billington, Ms Polly	Creasy, Ms Stella
Bishop, Matt	Crichton, Torcuil
	Curtis, Chris
	Dakin, Sir Nicholas

Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul (*Proxy vote cast by Lorraine Beavers*)
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald

Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie

Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren

Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tuftnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Anna Turley

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 2

PRODUCT REQUIREMENTS

Amendment proposed: 16, page 3, line 39, leave out subsections (7) and (8).—(*Dame Harriett Baldwin.*)

This amendment removes the ability for product regulations to provide that product requirements are met if the requirements of relevant EU law are met.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 100, Noes 339.

Division No. 212]

[5.52 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen

Braverman, rh Suella
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Mims
 Dinanage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke

Farage, Nigel
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Holmes, Paul
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti

Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Gregory Stafford

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Aquarone, Steff
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex

Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carling, Sam
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Carns, Al
 Chadwick, David

Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Champion, Sarah
 Chowns, Ellie
 Coghlan, Chris
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Collins, Victoria
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Bobby
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foster, Mr Paul (*Proxy vote cast by Lorraine Beavers*)
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Franklin, Zöe
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan

George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harding, Monica
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James

Macdonald, Alice
MacDonald, Mr Angus
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Maguire, Ben
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Martin, Mike
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mathew, Brian
Mayer, Alex
Maynard, Charlie
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKenna, Kevin
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNeill, Kirsty
Medi, Llinos
Midgley, Anneliese
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Minns, Ms Julie
Moon, Perran
Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Joe
Morrison, Mr Tom
Mullane, Margaret
Munt, Tessa
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Susan
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Olney, Sarah
Onn, Melanie
Opher, Dr Simon
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, rh Lucy

Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Roome, Ian
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Scroggham, Michelle
Shanker, Baggy
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slade, Vikki
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smart, Lisa
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Snell, Gareth
Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Thomas, Fred
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turnaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Vaughan, Tony
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Wilkinson, Max
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean

Wrighting, Rosie
Wrigley, Martin
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Young, Claire

Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Anna Turley

Question accordingly negated.

6.7 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Order, 1 April).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Clause 3

ENFORCEMENT OF PRODUCT REGULATIONS

Amendment proposed, 24, page 5, line 16, leave out subsections (9) to (11).—(Dame Harriett Baldwin.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 164, Noes 273.

Division No. 213]

[6.7 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aqarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Braverman, rh Suella
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, John
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline

Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
Glen, rh John
Glover, Ollie
Goldman, Marie
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward

Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew

Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Gregory Stafford

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom

Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul (*Proxy vote cast by Lorraine Beavers*)
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire

Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte

Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John

Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Vicky Foxcroft and
 Anna Turley

Question accordingly negated.
Third Reading

6.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This Bill will help to preserve the United Kingdom's position as a global leader in product regulation, supporting businesses, protecting consumers and ensuring a fair and level playing field across our economy, whether on the high street or on online marketplaces. It is designed to future-proof our approach to product regulation and metrology, ensuring that we can respond effectively to emerging technologies, tackle modern-day safety challenges and create the conditions for safe innovation and sustainable economic growth. By strengthening the system that underpins confidence in our goods market, we are reinforcing one of the core pillars of a productive and competitive economy.

As hon. Members will know, the majority of the UK's product safety and metrology laws have their roots in EU legislation developed over the past 40 years. That framework served us well in many respects, but, of course,

we have left the European Union, so we have a responsibility and an opportunity to tailor our rules to the UK's own needs, circumstances and ambitions.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): We have heard arguments today, as we did in Committee, that this measured Bill is some mysterious route back into the EU. Does the Minister agree that, far from discovering a Trojan horse, the Opposition are trying to flog a dead one and that their arguments have been made up on the hoof?

Justin Madders: I give my hon. Friend 10 out of 10 for ingenuity. I have heard so many references to horses during the passage of the Bill that at times I felt I was at the Aintree racecourse. We can be clear that the Bill will not lead to dynamic alignment by default.

Chris Vince: We have heard a lot of myths about the Bill. The other myth that has been parroted is that the Bill will see the end of the great British pint. Does the Minister agree that actually it secures the great British pint? I look forward to enjoying one with him in the next few months.

Justin Madders: Indeed, the Bill does secure the great British pint; thanks to an amendment in the other place, it will hopefully be enshrined in law. I look forward to joining my hon. Friend in enjoying one at some point in the not-too-distant future.

The pace of change in both consumer behaviour and product innovation is only accelerating. From connected devices and artificial intelligence to new materials and manufacturing methods, the nature of risk and regulation is constantly shifting. We must ensure that our regulators are equipped with the right tools to act quickly and proportionately so that we can both manage and harness the hazards and the economic potential of new technologies. The Bill provides the powers to do just that. It gives Parliament the ability to update and strengthen product regulation and legal metrology in a coherent, consistent way.

Adam Thompson: Does the Minister agree that the Bill is instrumental in keeping the UK at the forefront of science internationally?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention—he has certainly got the measure of this Bill. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] I will not give up the day job—and we will not have a Division on that, either.

This is a framework that supports businesses by reducing unnecessary burdens, supports consumers by keeping dangerous goods off the market and supports the UK economy by making our regulatory system more agile, more responsive and more transparent. In short, the Bill will help to ensure that every product on the UK market, whether made in the United Kingdom or imported from abroad, meets the expectations of safety, fairness and quality that the public rightly demand.

Gareth Snell: The Minister rightly points out that the Bill will allow for new regulations to come on board to keep us safe, but the safety element of that comes about through the enforcement of those new rules. Can he say a little about the conversations happening across Government to ensure that our enforcement agencies are properly resourced to enforce the new regulations that are so vital?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will be primarily responsible for enforcement at the local level, but the Bill also increases the powers of local trading standards to enforce measures.

The Bill affects the whole of the UK. We have worked closely and constructively with devolved Governments on policy development through regular engagement and throughout the Bill's passage at both ministerial and official level. I therefore thank the devolved Governments, Ministers and their teams for working so constructively with us.

In Committee, we tabled an amendment that placed a statutory requirement on the Secretary of State to obtain the consent of the devolved Governments where regulations contain provisions within their devolved competence. We believe that provides for the most effective and appropriate role for the devolved Governments in a way that respects the individual devolution settlements. I am pleased to report that the Senedd passed a legislative consent motion for the Bill yesterday. I have also had constructive discussions with the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, and both have recommended legislative consent to their respective legislatures. We will continue to work collaboratively with those bodies to develop product regulation that best supports businesses and consumers across the whole of the UK.

I will provide a quick recap of some of the changes made to the Bill by the Government since it was introduced last year, in addition to the devolution amendment, because there has been some misconception about what the Bill does and does not do. We have added a statutory consultation mechanism to ensure that stakeholders can shape product and metrology regulations. We have extended the affirmative procedure to parts of the Bill to further boost parliamentary scrutiny; for the avoidance of doubt, they are detailed in clause 13(4). The affirmative procedure therefore now applies to: the creation of criminal offences; the first use of regulations covering online marketplaces; the first time duties are imposed on a new supply chain actor; regulations conferring powers of entry, search or inspection; regulations to disapply requirements in response to an emergency; regulations covering the sharing of information between persons; regulations on cost recovery, which I have already referred to in my response to the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central; regulations amending or repealing the Gun Barrel Proof Acts; regulations on consequential amendments to primary legislation; and regulations amending the definition of online marketplaces. As Members will be aware from the responses on Report, there were a number of reasons that we want flexibility with regard to online marketplaces, which we believe will develop in ways that we cannot predict.

I can confirm that aviation safety products are exempted from the Bill as they are covered in existing legislation.

The Government have published a code of conduct that sets out the statutory and non-statutory guardrails to ensure that regulation made under this legislation is proportionate and well designed. It is also worth addressing the criticism that this is a skeletal Bill and pointing out that the proportion of skeletal Bills tripled in 2016-2023

compared with 1991-2015. Indeed, in the former period, some 19 separate Bills were described as skeletal by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee.

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, far from being a skeletal Bill, this legislation provides an adaptable framework for product regulation and consumer safety?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is right; indeed, this goes well beyond the measures in place when we were in the EU when it comes to parliamentary involvement. I will briefly refer to contributions made by hon. Members during the passage of the Bill.

I thank my counterpart in the other place, Lord Leong, for shepherding the Bill through the Lords, with support from Lord Hunt of Kings Heath. I also thank the hon. Member for West Worcestershire, who has been alongside us throughout the passage of this Bill in the Public Bill Committee. The hon. Members for Wokingham (Clive Jones), for Chippenham and for Richmond Park, who represented the Liberal Democrats in Committee and in the Chamber, are a trio that we will never forget. I hope that the short passage of this Bill is not a reflection of the high turnover in Liberal Democrat spokespeople—they have engaged with the Bill in a constructive manner.

I thank hon. Members who engaged in the Bill Committee and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall and Bloxwich (Valerie Vaz), who chaired that Committee with great expertise. It is probably worth mentioning my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central again. He has championed the ceramics industry both today and on Second Reading, and we recognise his great contributions.

Finally, I pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), who, as the first elected metrologist to this House, has brought a deeply technical and knowledgeable perspective to our debates, which we all appreciate—although I do not think we could ever be asked to take a quiz on the finer details of his work.

Adam Thompson: On that point, could the Minister elaborate on how the Bill supports the advancement of British science?

Justin Madders: I suspect that my hon. Friend would be far better at doing that himself. His speech on Second Reading was a fantastic example of how we explain legislation matters and practice. It is important that we have certainty and consistency in how we measure things and that we have a clear legislative framework for the measurements that underpins all science. He gave us a historical sweep of those issues when he spoke on Second Reading.

It is important for me to pass on my gratitude to all those officials who have supported us in the passage of the Bill, as well as the parliamentary staff who have enabled it to come through swiftly and smoothly. It will return to the other place for consideration of the amendments we have made in this place, and I am confident that—in the spirit of constructive scrutiny and co-operation that has characterised its progress so

far—it will continue on its way. This legislation is an important step in strengthening our domestic regulatory regime and ensuring that it is robust, future-facing and fit for purpose in a post-Brexit economy. I look forward to working with colleagues in the other place to ensure that the Bill finally reaches the statute book as swiftly as possible.

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

6.36 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Let me place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) and for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) for their work in holding the Government to account on this Bill.

On Second Reading, I said that the Bill was the archetype of everything that is sometimes wrong with Westminster, but now, after months of debate in both Houses, I fear that it is even worse. In 2017, the now Prime Minister said that his party would respect the outcome of the referendum in which 17 million people voted to leave the European Union. Britain has now fallen victim to Labour's EU surrender summit, giving up our fishing rights and our ability to make our own laws. I am happy to concede that this is no longer a Trojan horse of a surrender Bill, because it is now in plain sight. It is absurd that any Government would give up the power to shape our own regulations and meet the needs of our own consumers, electors and businesses. Those economies that will succeed in the future are those that are agile, that can adjust dynamically to events and that can tailor their own rulebook to their own particular needs.

While this Government's track record is frankly disastrous, I still give them the benefit of the doubt when they say they wish for growth, but for the benefit of Labour Members—who I rather suspect have not read the detail of this Bill; they have been whipped into supporting it—let me spell out what it does. The dynamic alignment clauses in the Bill would mean that every time the EU tweaked its standards—shaped by the interests of 27 other states with their own different mix of businesses, often in competition with ours—Britain would have to follow suit. There would be no more bespoke trade deals around the world, as the Prime Minister and his team would be lame-duck negotiators, with the EU President holding the real strings. The Government boast of three trade deals in three weeks, but that is a hollow boast when not a single one is backed up by any detail. The Trade Secretary, who is noticeably absent today, is no doubt trying to make true what his Prime Minister has already announced. The Paymaster General confirmed to me in a written answer this afternoon that British businesses, exporters, travellers and tourists will not benefit from e-gates, as we were promised. Yet the Government, in all their naivety, are legislating to hand control of our product regulations back to Brussels.

At every stage of scrutiny, this Bill has been found wanting. The mild-mannered Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee in the other place delivered

an uncharacteristically scathing rebuke, branding it a skeleton Bill that grotesquely shifts legislative power from Parliament to Ministers. It shackles British businesses, already bleeding out, to EU standards, stifling innovation. It is a solution in search of a problem, and under the Bill—under the measures being brought forward by the Government today—there is no room for the sort of robust scrutiny that we were sent here by our constituents to do, and no accountability. It is all in the hands of Ministers who keep breaking their promises.

Let us be clear: Labour's pattern of broken promises does not just set Britain back; it erodes the trust that people have in politics. This House has a duty to restore faith in our democracy, to protect our hard-fought sovereignty and to say no to the overreach of blank-cheque ministerial powers, such as those in the Bill. This House must tonight reject the Bill, as we will seek to do, to stop the Government from forsaking Britain's ability to carve and determine its own future.

Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Will the Serjeant at Arms investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby?

The House having divided: Ayes 264, Noes 99.

Division No. 214]

[6.40 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Butler, Dawn
Abbott, Jack	Byrne, rh Liam
Abrahams, Debbie	Cadbury, Ruth
Adam, Shockat	Caliskan, Nesil
Akehurst, Luke	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Aldridge, Dan	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Carling, Sam
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Carns, Al
Ali, Rushanara	Champion, Sarah
Ali, Tahir	Chowns, Ellie
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Coleman, Ben
Anderson, Callum	Collier, Jacob
Anderson, Fleur	Collinge, Lizzi
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Collins, Tom
Asato, Jess	Conlon, Liam
Asser, James	Coombes, Sarah
Athwal, Jas	Cooper, Andrew
Atkinson, Catherine	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Atkinson, Lewis	Costigan, Deirdre
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Cox, Pam
Bailey, Olivia	Coyle, Neil
Baines, David	Craft, Jen
Baker, Richard	Creagh, Mary
Bance, Antonia	Creasy, Ms Stella
Barker, Paula	Crichton, Torcuil
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Curtis, Chris
Beales, Danny	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Beavers, Lorraine	Dalton, Ashley
Berry, Siân	Darlington, Emily
Betts, Mr Clive	Davies, Ann
Billington, Ms Polly	Davies, Jonathan
Bishop, Matt	Davies-Jones, Alex
Blake, Olivia	Dean, Josh
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Dearden, Kate
Bonavia, Kevin	Denyer, Carla
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Burgon, Richard	Dickson, Jim
Burton-Sampson, David	Dixon, Anna
	Dodds, rh Anneliese
	Dowd, Peter

Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul (*Proxy vote cast by Lorraine Beavers*)
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Irons, Natasha
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian

Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David

Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Vicky Foxcroft and
 Anna Turley

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Burghart, Alex
 Cartlidge, James
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dinage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pochin, Sarah
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec

Simmonds, David	Timothy, Nick
Smith, Greg	Trott, rh Laura
Smith, rh Sir Julian	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Smith, Rebecca	Vickers, Martin
Snowden, Mr Andrew	Whately, Helen
Spencer, Dr Ben	Wild, James
Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Stephenson, Blake	Wilson, rh Sammy
Stuart, rh Graham	Wood, Mike
Swann, Robin	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond	
Thomas, Bradley	Tellers for the Noes:
Tice, Richard	Rebecca Paul and Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Business without Debate

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Orders Nos. 15 and 41A(3)),

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of James Murray relating to Absent Voting (Elections in Scotland and Wales) Bill: Money.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

ABSENT VOTING (ELECTIONS IN SCOTLAND AND WALES) BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Absent Voting (Elections in Scotland and Wales) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Rushanara Ali.*)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

INVESTIGATORY POWERS

That the draft Investigatory Powers (Codes of Practice, Review of Notices and Technical Advisory Board) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 31 March, be approved.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

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

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Contracts for Difference (Miscellaneous Amendments) (No. 2) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 2 April, be approved.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 11 June (Standing Order No. 41A).

PETITION

Early Detection of Pancreatic Cancer

7.2 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Today, my constituent Isla presented her petition, which has over 200,000 signatures, to No. 10 Downing Street. It calls for more investment in, and political will for, the early detection of pancreatic cancer. She and her brother Tam started the petition the night before he died, just weeks after his diagnosis. I am presenting this petition on behalf of Isla and the hundreds of thousands of others who lose loved ones because of the lack of early detection.

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the resource needs in relation to the research and development of tests for the early detection of pancreatic cancer, and ensure the appropriate tools are available to General Practitioners across the NHS”, and across the UK.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that there are life-threateningly few tests for early detection of pancreatic cancer therefore reducing the availability of life-saving early treatment to patients.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the resource needs in relation to the research and development of tests for the early detection of pancreatic cancer, and ensure the appropriate tools are available to General Practitioners across the NHS.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003080]

Street Parking on Estates: Bracknell Forest

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

7.3 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I am delighted to have secured this Adjournment debate on an issue that might not be right at the top of the political agenda, but affects the lives of hundreds of people in my constituency every day: street parking on residential estates in Bracknell. It is a topic that comes up on the doorstep perhaps more than any other, particularly in parts of Bracknell where we have older estates. It is a real challenge for people; it affects not only their ability to get around our fantastic community, but in some cases their safety.

One of the core challenges we face is the mismatch between older estate design and modern car ownership. Bracknell is an older new town. It celebrated its 75th birthday last year, and while it was designed with an excellent active travel network, which is built into its DNA, it was also designed around the car. It is an easy place to get around by car. We are lucky that we do not see massive issues with traffic jams and the like, but people still rely on their cars, as is the case in many towns across the country. The challenge is that many estates across Bracknell, particularly in Wildridings, Great Hollands and Easthampstead, were built when households typically had one small vehicle, if that. Now, many households have more than one car, and the cars are larger to boot. Also, because of the nature of the housing market, we increasingly see more generations living in the same family home, which only further compounds the issue.

The garages built alongside the estates that I am talking about in Bracknell Forest were built for a different kind of car. They are narrow, and many no longer fit cars of the size that people drive today. The obvious conclusion to all this is exactly what we see: vehicles spilling out on to roads, verges and pavements. Where households do not have a driveway, it causes a huge challenge around space.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I think he is about to describe the incredible pressure that many residents feel because of parking problems, whether that is difficulty parking near their home, difficulty walking along a pavement because of pavement parking, or one of many other problems. It drives people absolutely crazy. There is real pressure on communities up and down the country, in my experience. Does he agree that, to help ease some of this, the Government should have a new look at existing regulations, at further refining residents' parking schemes, and at the more tricky issues, such as cases where one person or a group of people parking again and again on an unrestricted road? In my constituency, I have had issues when people commuting to work have parked on the same road time and again, which can be frustrating for residents. As my hon. Friend says, the basic problem is that there are many more vehicles nowadays, and it is difficult to accommodate parking needs, but we must try.

Peter Swallow: I thank my hon. Friend for that insightful intervention. In Bracknell Forest, we have few permit parking zones, because they simply would not work for our community. The point that he makes is absolutely correct, and I will come back time and again in this debate to the need for local areas to come up with local solutions to these local problems. Ultimately, communities like his in Reading and mine in Bracknell Forest know best what the solutions are to some of these endemic issues.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for the speech he is making. This issue plagues residents in my area, too. Two particular problems are: parking around school pick-up and drop-off—I wonder whether he has found the same—and, in unadopted estates, real difficulties with enforcement when there is dangerous parking. Does this issue need to be addressed by local authorities, as well as the Government?

Peter Swallow: Absolutely. My hon. Friend's point about the challenge around schools is well made. We all want to see more young people and families walking and cycling to school, but in some communities, that just is not possible. Also, we have to be realistic: in some communities, it just does not happen. The end result is what we often see in streets such as Staplehurst in Great Hollands, where there is a lot of conflict between those going to pick up their kids from school and the families who live there, who just need to get out without having their movements dictated by the timings of the school day. It is a real challenge. In those situations, local solutions need to be the vehicle that takes us forward, if the House will pardon the pun.

Enforcement is a really important part of the puzzle. On some streets in Bracknell Forest, at any hour of any day, a traffic warden could litter all the cars with tickets. Frankly, if there is not the parking infrastructure to allow cars to park, enforcement can only go so far, so although it is absolutely part of the solution, it is not the only part.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way, and congratulate him on securing this Adjournment debate. As he knows, Binfield in my constituency is part of Bracknell Forest. An issue in Binfield is commercial businesses being run from residential properties, which often creates increased demand for parking. I really support the hon. Gentleman's call for localised support and action to target this issue. Would he like to work together with Bracknell Forest and me to come up with a solution?

Peter Swallow: That sounds like an excellent campaign. I have to say that I have not necessarily identified that issue in my part of Bracknell Forest, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman and I could have a further discussion in the Tea Room on that very important issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Gentleman before the debate, and I congratulate him on bringing forward this issue. In my constituency of Strangford, which is very similar to his, there are estates where the houses were built in the '60s and '70s. The roads are narrow and were never built for households with two or more cars, and the situation is aggravated when young people learn to drive. The Department back home came up with the idea of enabling those who have driveways to have a white line put across them,

so that cars cannot park in front. That is okay in theory, but it does not work, because cars have to go in and out, and there is a problem when cars park beyond the line. As the hon. Gentleman knows, that leads to frustration, anger and fisticuffs, and to neighbours falling out. If there is to be an initiative from this House—we look to the Minister for that—it has to start with legislation or direction from this place. Then councils can have responsibility for taking it to the next stage. Again, well done to the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this issue. There is not one of us in this House who does not agree with him.

Peter Swallow: May I say what an honour it is to be intervened on by the hon. Member? I will take his suggestion and flip it on its head. I feel that local solutions are the best way to tackle what are often local issues, and part of the reason for that is exactly what we have heard today from Members across the House: in every community and on almost every street, different issues cause the parking woes to which the hon. Member so powerfully refers. Parking is perhaps the greatest example of an issue that must be tackled from the bottom up, and this place can empower local leaders to come forward with common-sense answers and strategies to address these very real issues in our communities.

In Bracknell Forest, there are estates where a large number of homes without driveways were once council houses. They are now in private ownership, but the estates themselves have been transferred to the social housing association Abri. That makes the issue even trickier to address. Bracknell Forest council is working hard to tackle this issue in exactly the proactive and practical way to which I have referred, and it has been undertaking a scheme to convert grass verges into additional parking spaces, almost road by road. The council is identifying underused grass verges and converting them into usable and safe parking bays, and that is being done in partnership with Abri. It is an excellent example of what can be achieved when councils and housing associations work collaboratively to address shared challenges. That has not always been easy, and it has involved complex legal issues around transferring ownership from social housing providers to the council, but I thank both the council and Abri for working proactively together to address the concerns. I also make it clear that this is not a silver bullet. Such schemes are making a real difference in parts of Bracknell Forest, but I am fully aware that this is not enough and challenges remain.

It would be fantastic to see Government take more action to support local authorities to work with social housing providers in delivering such small-scale, locally targeted infrastructure improvements. It is not about massive investment or a complex solution but an obvious, common-sense one: unlocking existing local potential by simplifying the process. Of course, I recognise that converting grass verges may be anathema to some. Let me be clear: I support access to green space, and I do not want to see every corner of Bracknell Forest tarmacked over.

Matt Rodda: Again, my hon. Friend is making an excellent point. May I remind him that there is a great deal of underused brownfield land that can sometimes be made available for parking? In my constituency, I worked previously as a councillor on a scheme to tarmac an unadopted road, which my hon. Friend the

Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) mentioned, and unadopted roads and other areas of hardstanding that are not formally used for parking can be converted without any loss of green space.

Peter Swallow: That is a fantastic point, and it again reinforces the local need for finding solutions. As in Bracknell Forest where cars are already parked on grass verges because of the lack of parking spaces—tearing up the grass and in some cases causing safety concerns such as blocking blind corners—it is also common sense to convert some of the verges in a safer way into proper parking spaces. Rather than taking away valuable green space, it ensures that we better protect the grass verges that we do need.

Another growing pressure on our estates, which is very much on the Government's radar, is the need to transition to electric vehicles. As things stand, EV charging on housing estates with roadside-only parking is almost impossible for many residents. Without driveways or off-street bays, there is nowhere to install a home charger. Charging cables trailing across pavements are a serious safety concern for pedestrians, wheelchair users and families alike. Bracknell Forest council has been leading the way in installing charging infrastructure in council car parks, and there is good coverage for those who need to charge.

However, there is a challenge. It cannot be right that households with a driveway, who are more likely to be affluent already, can access cheaper and easier EV charging at home without paying VAT, while households without a driveway struggle to access charging at home and have to pay above the odds at rapid charging stations. It is not just a Bracknell issue; it is a national challenge. It is a critical barrier to equitable access to EVs, particularly for those living in older estates.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising these very important issues, and his constituents will be delighted that he is doing so on their behalf. In Ealing, electric vehicle charging points have been a major concern for the council to ensure they meet the need. There are currently 900 electric vehicle charging points throughout the borough, but we need 1,800 by 2030. The council has been consulting on an electric vehicle roll-out strategy to take a strategic approach to the issue. Does he agree that other areas would benefit from taking a similar strategic approach to the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points?

Peter Swallow: Absolutely. That again goes to the point about local solutions being important. I thank the Government for their work on reforms set out by the National Energy System Operator to improve the speed at which EV charging infrastructure can be added to the grid. I will press on because I am conscious that we are fast approaching the witching hour.

Another technical but very real issue that makes it harder for local authorities up and down the country to introduce parking restrictions is that even simple localised restrictions can cost up to £1,000 in advertising fees because of the requirement, under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, to publicise them in a local newspaper. That is money not going towards tarmac or signage, but simply to advertising costs. As a result, residents can wait for months for a minor change that could immediately improve safety and accessibility.

[*Peter Swallow*]

Finally, I shall touch on pavement parking, which I know is a divisive subject. Many Members have argued that it should be illegal to park on pavements, and I understand why they hold such a view. I recognise how difficult it is for people with pushchairs as well as disabled people, especially blind people, to navigate pavements when cars are parked. I have also met and heard from a fantastic charity, Sustrans, on this issue. But the reality is that if we enforce a total ban on pavement parking in Bracknell Forest, there will simply be nowhere left to park. On many narrow estates, pavement parking is the only way the road can remain passable. That is why I support giving local authorities the powers to decide where to ban pavement parking based on local needs and knowledge. Again, this is about local flexibility. Councils know their communities best and communities know what is best for them. Let us trust them to make the right calls and empower them to tackle this really significant issue facing so many families in Bracknell Forest and across the country.

7.20 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) for raising this important matter with the Government, and congratulate him on securing this debate. I have heard his concerns regarding the inadequate provision of parking across his constituency, and I recognise the issues he raises on the accessibility of parking. These are important issues which have a direct link to the welfare of local communities and the economic prosperity of our towns. Let me cover some of the main points raised in his remarks and other interventions.

As my hon. Friend will be all too aware, competition for parking spaces, especially for accessible street parking, across this country is already substantial. The Government recognise the provision of accessible and reliable parking is particularly important outside of the major metropolitan areas, where public transportation is often limited and where people need to be able to drive to access basic services and economic centres. Although the Government understand the benefits of private car use for individuals up and down the country, with many across our communities relying on private vehicles as a key part of their lives, I also recognise that many estates are simply not equipped to deal with the number of cars on our roads. That is most keenly felt by residents in older estates.

This problem has been exacerbated by the fact that modern cars have grown not only in number but in size, as my hon. Friend rightly referenced in his remarks. As a result, the growing demand for the provision of parking risks becoming unmanageable. That will not only be frustrating to residents who own vehicles, but can also lead to irresponsible or even dangerous parking in prohibited areas.

My Department is aware of the complaints many residents of Bracknell Forest have raised about parked vehicles preventing the flow of traffic, and I welcome the measures the council has now put in place to prevent this. While the Government recognise the importance of adequate provision of street parking for local communities, in line with the Government's position on localism, parking is ultimately the responsibility of local authorities

and it is for them to determine what is appropriate in their area, and local authorities already have powers to implement and enforce parking restrictions.

The Government understand that Bracknell Forest council has acknowledged the pressures with street parking in the community and is in the process of implementing a parking strategy with the objective of supporting the provision of parking in the borough. I note the concerns my hon. Friend raises regarding the council's progress to date; however, it is right that local authorities have autonomy over the nature and scope of parking policies within their local area. As he rightly recognised when he spoke about local solutions, local authorities are best placed to balance the needs of residents, emergency services, local businesses and those who work in and visit their area.

Of course, the Government are committed to investing in local communities and improving local transport infrastructure. The Department for Transport recently allocated £203,000 to Bracknell Forest council from the local transport resource funding scheme. Under the scheme, local transport authorities can use this funding to build their capability and capacity to develop ambitious transport schemes, develop and update local transport plans, deliver local delivery plans, fund individual projects and retain the transport expertise to do this.

On pavement parking, I well understand that this can be a real problem for pedestrians, wheelchair users, those with prams and buggies, and especially people with mobility or visual impairments. We are mindful of the concerns many people have raised about inconsiderate pavement parking.

As my hon. Friend is likely already aware, the Department for Transport held a consultation back in 2020 on the complex problem of pavement parking. This Government intend to publish a formal response to that consultation later this year, which will summarise the views received and announce the Government's next steps for pavement parking policy. In the meantime, highways authorities may introduce specific local pavement parking restrictions using their existing TRO-making powers—traffic regulation orders—and these can be enforced by councils using their civil parking enforcement powers.

My hon. Friend also raised the topic of electric vehicle charging on housing estates with roadside parking. The Government are committed to making EV charging infrastructure more affordable and accessible, particularly for those without off-street parking. Most electric vehicle drivers charge overnight at home, which is often the most convenient and cost-effective option. To support those without on-street parking, the Government offer a grant for homes to purchase a charge point when paired with a cross-pavement charging solution. The Department is aware of at least 26 trials and hundreds of individual installations of cross-pavement solutions across the UK. The Government are also working with local authorities to encourage this technology. In December 2024, the Government published cross-pavement guidance to help local authorities understand what they need to consider for the roll-out of cross-pavement solutions. That includes relevant planning permissions, minimum existing standards, responsibilities and case studies of trials.

For private land, such as the residential estates my hon. Friend mentioned, the landowners or private car park operators are responsible for parking provision

and enforcement. I am pleased to hear that Bracknell Forest council is working with local landowners, including housing associations, to deliver more parking capacity across the community. Housing associations are private bodies and must make their own decisions on how they run their business, but the neighbourhood and community standard is clear that providers must co-operate with partners to promote social, environmental and economic wellbeing. The standard includes a specific expectation that housing associations co-operate with local authorities to support them in achieving their objectives. However, the regulator of social housing does not dictate how individual housing associations demonstrate how they comply with this duty. I welcome the co-operation my hon. Friend mentioned. I am glad to hear his local authority is working collaboratively with Abri, the housing association in question, and I am pleased by Bracknell Forest council's commitment, through its parking strategy, to work with housing associations generally to help alleviate the pressures on parking.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend once again for raising this matter with the Government. We recognise the significant concerns many communities, particularly those residing in older estates, face regarding the accessibility and availability of parking. This essential resource is under increasing pressure, and we fully support local councils in their endeavours to mitigate the challenges. As I said, local councils are best positioned to lead the initiatives, as they possess the intimate knowledge of their areas and can effectively consider factors such as traffic flow capacity, road safety and the diverse needs of residents, visitors and businesses, but I hope I have given my hon. Friend a sense of what the Government are doing to support them.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 4 June 2025

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Disadvantaged Communities

9.30 am

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Colleagues can look around the room and see how many people are seeking to participate in this debate. I am giving you warning that after the opening speech, there will be a time limit of two minutes. I am sorry that it is so short, but we have the alternative of not accommodating everybody, and Mr Speaker likes everybody to be accommodated.

9.31 am

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for disadvantaged communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the Minister for taking the time to come and listen to us, and we can see by the attendance today that this issue truly resonates in all our communities across the country. It is a tremendous honour to lead this important debate on a subject that resonates deeply with many of us here who represent places that have faced long-term social and economic challenges, including my constituency of Wolverhampton North East.

Whether we live in Low Hill or Bushbury, Heath Town or Park Village, New Invention or Short Heath, these stories will be familiar, but let me be clear from the start: I am fiercely proud of where I come from. I have said it time and again: I am not just a Wolverhampton girl; I am an Ashmore girl. I grew up in a community on the Ashmore Park estate, and I started my own family in Park Village—the very kind of neighbourhoods that we are here to discuss. Too many of our neighbourhoods—not just those in Wolverhampton, New Invention and Short Heath, but around the whole country—have been left behind and left to decline, as communities that are no longer a Government priority, where children and young people have nowhere to go, and there is rising antisocial behaviour, theft and burglaries, while the number of good, secure jobs has declined.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): In Stoke-on-Trent, £11 is spent per young person per year on youth services. In inner London, the figure is £111. Meanwhile, Staffordshire police is one of a handful of forces that has fewer police on the beat than it did in 2010. Does my hon. Friend agree that when this Government look to invest, they must understand the starting point of our communities in order for any investment to have a meaningful impact?

Mrs Brackenridge: I certainly agree. Communities like ours have borne the brunt of these cuts, and we see this playing out on our streets, in our schools and, unfortunately, in the criminal justice system. This should

never have happened. It cannot continue, and it must never happen again. That is why I am calling for a project of national renewal for our neighbourhoods, designed to work with communities.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Brackenridge: I will.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady is quite entitled to give way, but where Members choose to intervene, it will affect my judgment on where in the batting order they are called.

Luke Akehurst: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she agree that we should pay tribute to the work of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, led by Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top? Based on its detailed statistical research, the commission has identified 613 of the most left-behind neighbourhoods around the country—one of which is South Stanley in my constituency—where funding is essential if we are to achieve the Government's five missions. If investment is not made in those neighbourhoods, we can never achieve our national targets.

Mrs Brackenridge: I agree. Hon. Members will hear more about ICON's work in my speech, because it paints a picture of our communities.

This is a project of national renewal that is designed to work with communities, to rebuild from the ground up and to restore hope and dignity to our places. It is a strategy about the huge importance of cultural capital and social infrastructure for social connections. What makes those communities special? They are resilient, largely because they have had to be. They have felt the brunt of 14 years of austerity. They have been disproportionately affected because they disproportionately rely on good public services, which were stretched to breaking point under the last Government.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that it is important to recognise the interconnected barriers in such discussions? The dearth of post-16 education and poor transport connectivity blunt young people's ambitions and further entrench the disadvantages of which she speaks in areas such as my constituency.

Mrs Brackenridge: I absolutely agree. I signpost hon. Members to yesterday's meeting of the Education Committee, where we heard from a representative from the National Union of Students about the clear link with the barriers that certain young people face to get to college or school. I beg hon. Members to look at that.

What makes those communities special? As I said, they have borne the brunt of 14 years of austerity. They saw Sure Start snatched away, cuts to neighbourhood policing, record NHS waiting lists, the decimation of youth services, a crisis in special educational needs and too much more. But our communities are full of potential; they are close knit and packed with people who graft and work hard.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Child poverty rates in Florence in my constituency have reached over 60% in recent years—the highest rate across Stoke-on-Trent, which routinely scores highest for infant mortality rates. Does my hon. Friend agree that as we publish the child poverty strategy in the autumn, Stoke-on-Trent South needs sustained investment to tackle high rates of child poverty?

Mrs Brackenridge: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who is clearly a champion for families and children in her constituency.

Our communities are burdened with deep-rooted barriers—obstacles caused by poverty, economic inactivity, inequality, educational disadvantages, poor access to healthcare and years of systematic under-investment. The scale of the challenge is clear: Wolverhampton North East ranked 73rd out of 543 constituencies in England in the index of multiple deprivation. One in three people in my constituency lives in one of the highest need neighbourhoods in the country, and they are not alone. Across England, 345 of 543 constituencies contain at least one neighbourhood in the most deprived 10% nationally. Those left-behind places are not isolated pockets; they are widespread.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a tremendous speech. Does she recognise that some of our most deprived communities are right next to areas where we are seeing rapid growth? It is vital that a test of our £113 billion investment—a once-in-a-generation opportunity for infrastructure—must be its impact on our most deprived communities.

Mrs Brackenridge: Investment has to go where it is most needed. Hon. Members feel strongly about that, which is why we see such representation in this debate.

Child poverty in Wolverhampton North East tells a clear story. In 2014-15, 22% of children were living in absolute poverty. That figure now stands at 31%, which should shame us. More than that, however, it must galvanise us. Nationally, the situation is no better. In 2023-24, 18% of people in the UK were in absolute poverty after housing costs. According to the Resolution Foundation, another 1.5 million people, including 400,000 children, will fall into poverty by 2030 unless bold action is taken. Those are not just statistics on a spreadsheet; they are real lives. They are children going to school tired and hungry. They are young people who are poorer now than their parents' generation, with less hope of buying their own house. They are families stuck in insecure housing or waiting years for mental health support. They are opportunities lost and represent an injustice at the heart of our society.

That is why the work of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods—ICON—has been so vital. Under the leadership of Baroness Armstrong, ICON has helped to shine a light on what is really happening in the most disadvantaged areas of our country: mission-critical neighbourhoods. It reveals what people are facing, how they feel about Government and what can be done differently. Its recent polling in partnership with Public First is a wake-up call. Just 5% of adults in England believe that the Government care about “neighbourhoods like mine”: a damning verdict on decades of decisions made too far from the people they affect.

It is not just a question of neglect; it is a fact of inequality. Nearly seven in 10 people believe that the Government care about some neighbourhoods more than others: the wealthier ones, the connected ones, the places where voices carry weight. They have lower crime, higher economic activity, higher intergenerational wealth and higher life expectancy.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): On life expectancy, in my constituency, the lives of men and women in the most deprived neighbourhoods are nine years shorter than in the more affluent ones. Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the strategy has to be around narrowing those health inequalities?

Mrs Brackenridge: I absolutely agree. If I drive 10 minutes in my constituency, the life expectancy increases by more than seven years, which is shocking. This is not the politics of envy; it is the reality after the politics of inequality. This is about restoring people's chances to participate in Government, making it something that is done with them rather than to them.

There is cause for hope. In January, I had the pleasure of welcoming Baroness Armstrong to the Scotlands Estate in the Fallings Park ward of my constituency. We visited the Big Venture Centre, an anchoring institution in the neighbourhood. It is an inspiring community-focused project that is changing people's lives every single day. From the pink ladies—and men—who volunteer there to the WV10 community chefs who support healthy eating education, to the community shop helping with the cost of living, that is what every neighbourhood deserves. It was a chance to see how the findings and principles behind ICON's work can be implemented in practice and, with the right support, that those places can thrive.

We have the insight and the evidence; action is what we now need. What we have had has clearly not worked. Let us look at education. In 2024, only 46% of disadvantaged pupils met the expected standard at key stage 2, compared with 67% of their peers. A growing divide that has set in by year 6 continues to widen in year 11 at GCSE.

After school, it gets worse. Disadvantaged young people are 65% more likely to be NEET—not in education, employment or training. If they leave school with fewer than five GCSEs they are 131% more likely to be NEET. Meanwhile, nearly three quarters of people in destitution are in receipt of social security. That tells us everything we need to know about how broken the safety net has become.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's call for a project of national renewal; I think that is absolutely excellent. I also welcome her comment that these communities are special—they are, and we need to focus our attention on them. Does she agree that the closure of Sure Start centres, including in my constituency, had a significant impact? They changed people's lives. We have heard from so many people who have done well as a consequence of having access to those services, so it is essential that we revitalise them.

Mrs Brackenridge: I thank my hon. Friend. I speak from personal experience, and I will always champion the excellent work that Sure Start centres did. They were there for me, my neighbours and my community. We must learn lessons from the past.

We need strategic, neighbourhood-based investment, not competitive bidding pots that lead to the most disadvantaged areas often losing out due to a lack of capacity. So how do we respond? The Government's recently announced £1.5 billion plan for neighbourhoods is a welcome step. In the words of Baroness Armstrong,

"This is a good first step in the right direction",

but it must not be the last step. That is why I am calling today for a £1 billion neighbourhood renewal fund in this Parliament. It should be strategic, long term and locally led. We must have no more fragmented, competitive pots that pit community against community, and no more centralised decision making that misses the mark.

People in my constituency know their neighbourhoods and what they need. We need to trust them, back them and invest in them. This is a defining moment. The public are asking not for favours but for fairness. They want clean, safe streets, decent, safe homes, good schools, secure jobs and pride in the places they call home. We must turn neighbourhood renewal from a slogan into a mission. I call on the Minister to take the evidence from ICON as a road map for delivery. I call on the Government to give every community, no matter its postcode, the respect, resources and responsibility that it deserves.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. If hon. Members intervene, injury time is added, which means that not all Members will get called. If you look at the clock and the number of Members who want to intervene, you can do the sums for yourselves. It is up to you whether everybody gets called or not. If we stick to two minutes, we should be able to get everybody in. I hope that is clear.

9.47 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) for setting the scene and for her enthusiasm and energy about the subject, which was evident in her speech. I will take an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), Sir Roger, but I will keep within two minutes and not take any extra time.

There are areas across the UK that are undoubtedly disadvantaged and that must be urgently addressed. Northern Ireland still faces complex challenges across many areas of life, including health, education and poverty, not to mention underlying historical factors, so it is great to be speaking in this debate. Poverty rates in Northern Ireland are a massive problem: the Department for Communities states that 14% of working-age adults are in relative poverty and 12% are in absolute poverty.

Among pensioners, poverty increased from 13% in 2020 to 16% in 2022. I say this with kindness to the Minister: the withdrawal of the winter fuel payment grieved us greatly. There are also health and education inequalities, where outcomes are lower in disadvantaged or deprived areas.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On lower educational attainment areas, does my hon. Friend agree that young men in particular find it difficult to go back to education after leaving school, and that apprenticeships can be used to address poverty in the areas that he is describing?

Jim Shannon: I am happy to endorse what my hon. Friend says, and I hope the Minister will do the same.

There is no doubt that the environment in which a child is raised has an impact on the opportunities available to them and where they choose to go in life. Housing infrastructure is a huge problem.

To conclude, in a world where millions of people live in poverty, we have the means in Westminster, and therefore across all the regions, to support our people. It is important that we do that and that we also support the agencies that already do it.

9.49 am

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with your Chair, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) on securing the debate. Poverty has affected the work that I have done over the last decade, and I probably would not be in the House today had it not been for some of the things I have witnessed over the past 10 to 15 years.

While I was researching for the debate, I found a report on child poverty dating back over a decade. The foreword reads:

"In the UK today, millions of children"

and

"adults are daily experiencing the crushing disadvantage that poverty brings. They are living at the margins of society, unable to achieve their aspirations and trapped".

The report goes on to say that that is unacceptable in "today's" society—obviously, it was written over a decade ago. It is not usual for me to quote the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), but those comments are particularly pertinent. In 2013, when the report was written, poverty in Nuneaton stood at around 18%, but it is now 33%—almost double—and in some communities it is over 50%.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): On the question of barriers to opportunity, the potential for growth in some areas is high, but access to funding and education—particularly further education—can be difficult, as it is in Cornwall. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as a result, the people who live in an area cannot always take advantage of that growth potential?

Jodie Gosling: I thank my hon. Friend for her valuable intervention, and I absolutely agree. One challenge is under-skilled children who have left school without the right qualifications. As a result, they experience a lag in getting qualified and being able to access opportunities.

In one of my wards, Chilvers Coton, over 65% of households—two out of three—live with one marker of deprivation. The majority of them are defined as living in deep poverty and destitution, and they are not able to meet basic needs. That is not my understanding of the word "eradicate", and it appears that the strategy that was laid out over a decade ago actually perpetuated significant poverty, rather than eradicating it.

Poverty eats into every corner of people's lives. It drains people and grinds them down, and it makes every aspect of life harder. The physiological and psychological impacts are profound. As poverty has soared, we have seen healthy life expectancy fall by over four years, with cardiopulmonary conditions, diabetes

[Jodie Gosling]

and preventable death statistics among those affected by poverty well above the national average. Poverty strips people of their dignity and their power to shape their lives and livelihoods and those of the people they love.

Living in poverty is a full-time job, as people juggle making sure that they can pay their debts, get their kids out, do the daily shopping—which involves having to look for the yellow stickers in the aisles—and deal with the chaos of managing arrears, evictions and sleepless nights, as they worry about how to just get through tomorrow. Despite that, the vast majority of Nuneaton households in poverty still work, with over 60% of affected households having at least one working adult.

Poverty is also wasteful. It is expensive; it costs more to live in poverty because people cannot access cheaper supermarkets and might not have the data to order online—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I call David Chadwick.

9.53 am

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I sincerely thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) on securing this debate on behalf of communities that have been left behind across Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Too often, rural disadvantage is overlooked, but in Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe it is a daily reality. The constituency is grappling with the legacy of deindustrialisation and the drain of rural depopulation. The Government's proposed changes to personal independence payments risk deepening that disadvantage, making it even harder for many to live independently, let alone escape poverty.

A parliamentary question tabled by the Liberal Democrats revealed that 90% of people in Wales receiving the standard rate of PIP for daily living are at risk of losing that support. One of my constituents, Karen Harris from Ystalyfera, put it plainly in one of my constituency surgeries, when she said that most disabled people would love to work, but that there is just no suitable work locally. She is certainly right. Across the coalfields in south Wales, we have only 44 jobs per 100 people of working age. That is why the Government must reverse their course on changes to PIP and introduce an industrial strategy that focuses on bringing good jobs to every corner of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

9.54 am

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) for securing this debate. I started my career working for Oxfam, whose mission was to make poverty history.

Across the country, including in my constituency, we have seen what over a decade of neglect looks like: community centres gone, local shops shut down, public

services underfunded and overstretched. In Tamworth, youth centres were left to crumble—they were not repaired; they were closed—so young people lost a safe space. That is what happens when investment dries up.

Since 2012, more than 760 youth clubs have shut nationwide. That is not just a number; it is a message that says, "You don't matter." That is how it feels in places such as Glascote Heath, Belgrave and Stonydelph. The Government promised levelling up but the most deprived areas have seen little support, and some none at all. How can we talk about levelling up while cutting back support for the people who need it most?

We are the sixth-richest country in the world but, I ask, rich for whom? In my constituency, as a union organiser for over 11 years, I saw people working long hours and relying on in-work benefits. Disabled people are now worried that their support may be stripped away while they face rising bills and shrinking safety nets. I ask the Government to rethink their approach in this area.

This issue is about more than just poverty; it is about inequity and exclusion, and how they breed division. Last summer, we saw unrest in Tamworth, communities divided, and tensions that had been building for years. Work must now get under way to rebuild, with the local authorities and the support that goes with them. Let us be honest: inequality cannot be patched over with slogans; it is fixed by investing properly in schools, housing, the NHS and jobs that people can build a life around.

9.56 am

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. When I was a child, my hometown was thriving, the high street was teeming and there were places to go and things to do. The British Insulated Callender's Cables factory was at the top of my street, and employed perhaps 1,000 people. In contrast to my thriving hometown, the inner cities were in an awful state, with botched town planning, derelict street corners and subways that people did their best to avoid.

If we fast forward 30 years, things have changed utterly. In my hometown, the factory closed and the workers were all made redundant. The factory site became a retail park and took trade away from the high street, leaving the town centre having seen better days. The youth clubs are gone. The library that helped me to learn to read has been demolished.

Such places look depressed because they are depressed, but the cities are transformed. They are places of economic activity, cultural events and a huge amount of residential living. They are teeming with life. The domestic challenge is to bring up to that standard the hundreds of smaller conurbations that have seen better days—to work to reopen the youth clubs, to invest in our neighbourhoods and to bring back a sense of pride in place for the vast majority of our people.

In too many places, there are obvious, visible manifestations of austerity, but the rot goes deeper than that. State investment has fled our towns, and street drinkers and rough sleepers have arrived. In my constituency, there is one youth club in a town of 85,000 people and there are too few places for people to go to socialise, whether they are 18 or 80. It falls on this governing party to do for our towns what previous

Governments did for our cities. The British public are fair and they will give us a chance to put it right, but they will not give us too many chances. If we do not put it right, they will be unforgiving in their assessment of us.

9.59 am

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

The very premise of my values and beliefs is that where we are born should not determine our future, yet unfortunately that is still the case in many communities across the country, including my constituency of Sherwood Forest, where even the difference between being born in the south part of the constituency compared with the north is the difference in how long someone lives. Places such as Ollerton, Rainworth and Clipston in the north of my constituency face poorer health outcomes, particularly for mental health, and lower opportunities for skills and decent and secure jobs. They are battling with long-term social and economic decline.

Other equally important areas in my constituency include Hucknall, Bilsthorpe and Blidworth. These former coalfield communities, previously decimated, are still some of the most deprived areas in the country. Almost one in 10 people in coalfield communities are in poor health, and nearly one in five are economically inactive.

For too long, disadvantaged communities have been forgotten by previous Governments, often leaving it to the communities to step in for themselves. For example, the Social Action Hub in Rainworth has made it its mission to improve the life chances of, and increase sustainable opportunities for, the most deprived and marginalised in our society.

If we are to tackle child poverty, it must start in the most disadvantaged communities, and it starts at the very beginning of a child's life. It has a huge impact on where they go in life and how they make it out of poverty. We must go back to an early intervention strategy that runs through every single children and young people's service.

10.1 am

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I was not expecting to be called to speak, Sir Roger, as I made an intervention, but I will make some additional points.

I have already paid tribute to ICON, and I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) having reinforced the point about mission-critical neighbourhoods. Given the level of deprivation in neighbourhoods such as South Stanley in my constituency, which is ranked 41st most in need out of 34,000 super output areas in the Government's growth mission, it is unsurprising that my constituents tell me that they feel left behind and that our area is not getting the targeted investment it needs.

I welcome today's announcement about major investment in transport infrastructure, but we need to recognise the limitations of that when it comes to deprived communities that are more isolated and away from major conurbations. Too often, big infrastructure projects benefit the core cities, not isolated towns and villages like those that make up North Durham.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I am proud to represent wards such as Newgate, Carr Bank and Ransom Wood—mission-critical neighbourhoods as identified by the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods—and I welcome the signs that the Government are increasingly focused on those places. Does my hon. Friend agree that the spending review must make mission-critical neighbourhoods an absolute priority?

Luke Akehurst: I absolutely agree. We need investment in social infrastructure, such as parks, leisure centres and community centres, that will deliver rapid economic improvements and change how communities look and feel. Communities need to be at the heart of the decisions, cutting through the bureaucracy and red tape, and they must decide themselves what will make a real difference in their areas.

After the recent local council election results in County Durham, I spoke about people feeling impatient for change, including economic regeneration, good-quality jobs and the new local infrastructure that they have needed for not just years but decades. The Government are starting to deliver many great things through the plan for change, but we will deliver on their missions faster if we target deprived and mission-critical neighbourhoods—areas with the most concentrated problems in economic activity, health, educational achievement and crime. It is economically, fiscally and morally right to target those neighbourhoods, and it would be a clear demonstration of this Labour Government's social democratic values.

10.3 am

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Disadvantage comes in many forms, and today I want to talk about child poverty. I grew up in poverty caring for two disabled parents. It took me a very long time to say that, and every time I do my mum will text me afterwards to say that she loves me, she is sorry and she did her best. No mum should ever have to text their son that. Enough is enough, and I want this Labour Government to stamp out child poverty.

There are five quick solutions that we could take forward. The first is nothing less than the resurrection of Sure Start. We know the benefits and impacts: a recent Institute for Fiscal Studies report found that access to a Sure Start centre significantly improved children's educational outcomes and reduced hospitalisations; children with Sure Start access in their early years were less likely to have depressive and anxiety disorders in their later years; and the impacts were remarkably long lasting.

Let us do as the 1998 comprehensive spending review did and commit to 250 Sure Starts in the most disadvantaged communities, within a pram push of a person's home. Let us resurrect our town and district centres by, wherever possible, filling empty shops with spaces where we can co-locate and integrate services once and for all.

Let us think again about our libraries. Some 800 have closed in recent years and the number of librarians has been slashed. Let us reinvigorate our libraries as a place for the imagination to develop and roam, and let us centre Sure Start right there.

[Tom Hayes]

Let us involve the integrated care boards. They have a duty to tackle health inequalities and can do that work. [Interruption.] Time is short; I am going to be fast.

We need to invest in playgrounds, which are more likely to have been cut in deprived areas. We need to tackle the two-child benefit cap. I am glad to see that the Labour Government are looking at that again; it would have a significant impact overnight. We need to consider bus travel for children and younger people. Let them have free bus travel so that they can access opportunities. Let us, once and for all, stamp out child poverty.

10.5 am

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger.

State failure can come in many different forms. When he was Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister said,

“we must restore the sense that this is a country that can rectify injustice, particularly when carried out by institutes of the state.”—[*Official Report*, 20 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 668.]

He was referring to the infected blood scandal, but lack of investment is a different form of state failure, and the sentiment therefore still stands. The state has failed so many of our communities. We must restore the sense that this is a country that can rectify injustice.

This is not a new idea. In 2009, the Labour Government launched the Total Place initiative to improve the delivery of local public services and to increase the focus on communities. Frontier Economics analysis shows that a £2 billion investment in mission-critical neighbourhoods would deliver £2.4 billion in fiscal benefits to the Treasury. We reduce the cost of failure by investing in these communities.

I am the chair of the coastal parliamentary Labour party, and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coastal communities, alongside my good friend and ally, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume). The ICON report highlighted yet again the need to invest in our coastal communities. Of the 613 mission-critical neighbourhoods in the report, almost half are on the coast. The 25 neighbourhoods identified with the highest need in all of England are all coastal—every single one.

Part of the reason why we have missed out on funding in Thanet and in other coastal areas is that the deprivation in coastal communities is often hidden by the upper-tier local authority statistics—forgive me for being a bit of a data nerd on this. East Thanet is one of the most deprived areas in the south-east, but because it is in Kent it is lumped in with Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks. The existing Treasury orthodoxy has meant that coastal communities have often missed out on vital funding.

I was encouraged by reports that the Green Book is being reformed in ways that will allow communities that have been overlooked for investment for decades to finally share in funding. If done right, that could be transformational for unlocking potential and economic growth in coastal communities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I notice that the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) is standing. Under the rules, I am afraid we are not allowed to call Members who were not here at the start of the debate. That is not a criticism; I fully understand that Members quite frequently have good reason for coming in late. Now the hon. Member has been here for long enough, I am more than prepared to allow him to intervene on another Member, should he choose to do so.

10.8 am

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

I have sat through many similar debates about communities that have challenges. They are often cathartic but also a Top Trumps of misery in which we each seek to parade around the acute nature of the challenges we face in our communities, not because we want to say how challenging things are in our communities, but because the funding situation the last Government implemented basically meant that unless we could demonstrate that we were the poorest of the poor, the most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged, or in some way an outlier from statistical norms, we got nothing. The barrel was left empty or, as described by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge), we had to go through the ignominy of begging bowl politics.

We were put into competition with our nearest neighbours, and ended up trying to deprive them of what they needed so that we could get a little more of what we needed. That often led to a lack of joined-up working among communities whereby we could have had structural and societal change in the places we all call home and love and represent. Instead, we ended up trying to demonstrate why Stoke-on-Trent should get something and Derby should not, because we are slightly poorer than Derby is. That has to fundamentally change, because the systemic problems that we face in our communities—which derive from poverty, if we are being entirely honest—are going to be solved only if we are able to come together collectively, with a national programme of investment that targets the root causes of those problems and allows communities to have the skills, resources and opportunities to build themselves up.

There is a catalogue of concerns in Stoke-on-Trent: we are first for fuel poverty, routinely in the top 10 for child poverty and food bank usage, and in the last year our Lord Mayor had to raise £50,000 to pay for kids to have beds in our city. That is a symptom of a struggling society—one that was let down by the last Government and one that I hope, under the leadership of the Minister and the new Labour Government, we can start to turn around. We owe it to a generation to tackle poverty head on, so that we do not have more debates about how disadvantaged we all are.

10.10 am

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) for her impassioned speech, which I very much associate myself with.

Salford is the 18th most deprived authority in England, and that deprivation is juxtaposed against immense growth: gleaming tower blocks, the highest productivity in Greater Manchester and 11,000 businesses—an 85% increase since 2010. So why is the growth that we have created not benefiting everyone? The Government should ask themselves that question.

Although many of the strategies the Government have outlined so far—from housing through to our employment rights programme and the neighbourhood plan—are all very welcome, the Government can take immediate measures now, while they are waiting to develop their anti-poverty strategy, to help to alleviate the suffering that many families in my constituency face. First, it is welcome that the Government have suggested they will look again at the cut to the winter fuel allowance, but the detail must be fleshed out urgently to avoid the anxiety that many pensioners face in my constituency.

On child poverty, only this week a report by Loughborough University showed that at least a quarter of children are in poverty in two thirds of areas across the UK. Experts found an extremely high correlation between child poverty and the two-child benefit limit. It is clear that the Government's priority must be to scrap the two-child benefit cap and, ultimately, lift 470,000 children out of poverty overnight.

Thirdly, on disability poverty, although it is welcome to have programmes to assist people into work where it is possible, cutting people's support is not the way to incentivise that. It will push 250,000 people into poverty, and I urge the Government to rethink their proposals.

10.12 am

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) on securing this debate. I appreciate the points that she raised, but I have to say that I have concerns about the outcomes of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods.

I speak today as the Member of Parliament for Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, but also as a voice, alongside other MPs, for the people of Cornwall's remote coastal neighbourhoods—communities that are proud, resilient and hard-working but all too often overlooked. If we are truly to succeed in our mission to fix the foundations of left-behind neighbourhoods, we must start by recognising the unique challenges faced by places such as Cornwall.

The commission identified 613 neighbourhoods across England that are at risk of falling behind on the Government's five missions for national renewal, yet only one of those is in Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, despite my constituency's profound socioeconomic deprivation. I worry that the commission's conclusions do not reflect the levels of poverty in remote coastal areas such as Cornwall. Without targeted support, these communities risk being left behind in terms of health, education, housing and economic opportunity.

Our neighbourhoods face deep-rooted, overlapping challenges, and we see that every day. Wealthier pensioners who retire to Cornwall from up country are masking underlying deprivation, while at the same time increasing

the pressure on health and social care. The housing market is severely lacking in affordable homes and is distorted by second homes, Airbnbs and migration from people moving from up country, pricing out local families and workers.

There is a chronic workforce shortage in essential services, from teachers to care workers, as a result of our remoteness and high cost of living. We also have a seasonal economy that stretches public services beyond breaking point for four months of the year, with no recognition in funding to meet our needs. This is not just about numbers on a spreadsheet; it is about the future of our towns and communities, and our shared manifesto commitment that no neighbourhood should be left behind.

10.15 am

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): My constituency has enormous potential, but it has been held back by the last 14 years of austerity. That represents a shameful neglect of not just my community, but the country. It is the duty of this Government to fix that. The industries that sustain reliable work for so many have long disappeared, with nothing to replace them. Without investment in communities like mine, the Government cannot meet their missions. Crucially, that investment needs to make a difference now.

It is not good enough to pump more money into just the cities in the north of England; our towns need support too. It is certainly not good enough for the headlines about Government plans for growth and investment to be dominated by plans to expand airports in the south-east of England. Blackpool North and Fleetwood deserves better. The Government's mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower is the right one, but it must mean investment in places like Blackpool North and Fleetwood.

Fleetwood, once a thriving port, has been the victim of a managed decline over many years. We can take advantage of the offshore wind in the Irish sea, providing operations and maintenance for decades. Like so many of the country's ports, ours needs investment to rebuild its capacity. We have one of the highest tidal ranges in the world, giving us the opportunity to harness the power of the sea to generate clean electricity. A tidal barrage would also work as flood defences, stopping flooding on farmland, and supply us with a much-needed access road, which would benefit the whole Fylde coast.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Nowhere is this issue more stark than in my constituency, where we have 34 critical neighbourhoods—more than any other constituency. They cover every part of the town, with 98% of its population living in them, including my own family. Does my hon. Friend agree that the impact of this issue is felt daily across Blackpool, in my constituency and hers? Does she also believe that this Labour Government finally have a chance—and have a responsibility—to turn the tide for coastal communities like ours?

Lorraine Beavers: I do.

We have a disused railway line. Were it to be reopened, it would finally give Fleetwood the connectivity that it has so badly lacked for decades. I am heartened by reports that the Chancellor will be rewriting the rules

[Lorraine Beavers]

that have diverted investment away from constituencies like mine, but the effect needs to be felt by my constituents here and now.

I hope the Government will do what 14 years of the Conservatives failed to do, and give towns like mine hope once again. That is what I stood to do. That is why we are in this place. We came here to serve our people and rebuild our communities. Let us get on with delivering the future we promised.

10.18 am

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): People in Rumworth, Farnworth, Little Hulton, Great Lever, Walkden, New Bury and Kearsley are proud and hard-working, but they have been left behind. Rumworth is the 10th most deprived ward in the United Kingdom.

These problems resulted from 14 years of Tory austerity. We have seen youth centres shut, local services disappear and councils stretched to breaking point. Despite that, local groups are helping young people to build their futures, and faith groups and charities are running food banks, warm spaces and support services. Groups such as Urban Outreach, Wharton and Clegg's Lane church, and Farnworth and Kearsley food bank go beyond handing out food; they help with debt, benefits and homelessness and even help ex-offenders.

The challenges that the people face are all connected: a lack of childcare and transport, homelessness and many other issues. That is why I support ICON's call for, first, a national neighbourhood renewal strategy with local voices at the centre and, secondly, a commitment in the spending review to fund areas such as Rumworth, Farnworth and Little Hulton. Farnworth is receiving investment through the Government's plan for neighbourhoods, which is very welcome, but we also need to rebuild local services that were lost through austerity. People in Bolton South and Walkden are not asking for a handout; they are asking for fairness.

10.20 am

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

I welcome the Government's renewed focus on place-based policy through their plan for neighbourhoods, and the commitment of £1.5 billion to tackle deprivation through long-term investment, rather than bungs and short-term sticking-plasters. The plan rightly recognises that some communities have borne the brunt of economic decline for far too long, and that we cannot deliver growth unless we uplift those places too.

I welcome the transparency and accountability of a data-led, mission-based approach, and I have long believed that trust is built when policy is not simply delivered to people, but brings them along with it and explains why we are doing what we are doing. However, although I am greatly encouraged to see 11 mission-priority neighbourhoods identified in my mid-Cornwall constituency, I am concerned that none is classified as mission critical.

Anyone who spends time in Cornwall knows that, beyond its picture postcard beauty, parts of our region still suffer from some of the lowest living standards in western Europe. For example, St Austell, although not a crime hotspot by national standards, faces severe deprivation

and challenges, from antisocial behaviour, weak public transport, poor per pupil funding, poor investment in healthcare, poor integrated care board funding and 10-year lower life expectancy than in other parts of the UK.

Cornwall has a crucial role to play in our clean energy ambitions and in helping Britain to become a clean energy superpower, but that potential will fall flat without real investment. I therefore urge the independent commission to do two things: be more transparent about how scoring decisions were made, particularly when certain neighbourhoods were not deemed mission critical, and reflect better in the methodology the rural disadvantage that colleagues have described. Rural deprivation can be just as entrenched in areas like Cornwall as in urban areas.

Finally, I urge the Government to unlock more investment to ensure that that mission-priority status transforms into targeted funding, turning Cornwall's once-in-a-generation promise into progress.

10.22 am

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) for securing this important debate; she is a huge champion for disadvantaged communities in her constituency.

I am proud to represent the beautiful constituency of Scarborough and Whitby. However, away from the tourist lens, we have deprivation. My constituents suffer high rates of chronic illnesses like heart disease, and have lower life expectancies. In Scarborough, life expectancy for people living in Ramshill, where child poverty is prevalent, is 10 years less than it is for those living in Ayton, a mere 10-minute drive away.

Despite that, my constituents struggle to access healthcare, and even emergency care, in a timely manner. Since the closure of Scarborough hospital's stroke service in 2020, patients suffering strokes are sent directly to York, which is well over an hour away—if they have access to a car. Hon. Members will know that the first 60 minutes after a stroke occurs is known as the golden hour: the faster someone can be treated, the more likely they are to survive and recover. Despite that, one constituent told me that their partner's emergency journey to York, in a blue-lit ambulance, took 90 minutes. That is the everyday reality for people in disadvantaged coastal communities.

The chief medical officer warned in 2021 of a crisis in coastal healthcare, but we still have no national strategy to combat it. So this is my plea to the Government: we need a cross-departmental strategy to deliver better access to healthcare in our disadvantaged coastal communities, and we need it now.

10.24 am

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) for securing this debate. I will focus specifically on the urgent need for more social housing and on the duty of both national and local government to ensure that there

are safe, decent homes for vulnerable people in deprived communities, such as those in Cann Hall and Cathall in my constituency.

Far too many of my constituents live in unsafe, overcrowded and unsuitable conditions. One family—a father, his wife, their four children and a baby on the way—are stuck in a one-bedroom flat riddled with mould. The children sleep on the floor. The family have been bidding for a home for years, but in Waltham Forest the wait for suitable housing can stretch for over 14 years.

A single mother in my constituency, who is caring for neurodivergent children, lives in a flat with no safety locks on the windows or the front door. Her youngest once tried to climb out of the window and was hospitalised. The mother is now suffering with exhaustion; the stress is relentless. Another family, raising a disabled child, are dealing with persistent mould, noise and antisocial behaviour in temporary accommodation. There is no outdoor space, no stability and no long-term solution.

These are not isolated cases; they are the result of a chronic failure to build and maintain decent housing, especially for those who need it most. I welcome the Government's commitment to raising standards through the Renters' Rights Bill and the decent homes standard, but without proper funding our councils cannot meet their statutory duties. Outdated funding formulas fail to reflect multiple occupancy or the real population pressures in outer London.

We all want to see the biggest expansion of social and affordable housing in a generation, so let us start with communities such as Avenue Road and Montague Road in Waltham Forest, where 465 new social homes have been promised and not yet delivered. The upcoming spending review must prioritise housing as critical national infrastructure. Behind the statistics are real people and real families who have been failed by a decade of inaction.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Congratulations. As a result of everyone's self-discipline, we have accommodated 19 Members and an additional eight interventions. That must be something of a record. It also means that the Front Benchers now have adequate time to respond properly to the debate. Well done.

10.26 am

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

I think we would all agree that it is a basic human right to have a decent place to call home, a neighbourhood where one feels safe, an opportunity to earn a decent living, access to healthcare and a clean environment. If people have those things, they can thrive and, together, form communities that then flourish. If we empower people to take decisions locally, those communities will make choices that lift up the people in them and protect their local environment.

However, under the last Government, it was made harder for communities to take those decisions. Their resources were slashed and they were forced to compete with each other, with towns set against each another in bidding wars through short-term, race-to-the-bottom policies. The Liberal Democrats are disappointed that the Labour Government plan to take decisions away

from communities, using the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to remove local authorities' power to have a say in planning. We are worried about how proposals for local government reorganisation may move decisions on local services further away from people and their neighbourhoods.

The proposal to provide three-year settlements for councils is reassuring, but only if the funding covers the true cost of providing the services people need—not knowing three years out that the council will be forced to reduce its services is not helpful. Although the 2025-26 settlement offered some additional funding, in many councils—particularly those with high levels of social care spending—the Labour Government's jobs tax, which increased employers' national insurance contributions, was not fully reimbursed. The same was true of the packages for fire authorities, and the issue was particularly problematic where high levels of on-call firefighters were on the payroll, meaning that those authorities were seriously disadvantaged.

Turning to the mission-critical neighbourhoods, it is absolutely right that there is a Labour focus—sorry, a laser focus, although I appreciate that there is a Labour focus—on lifting them up and drawing them into every part of society, not just to improve people's lives, but because if those places are economically active, healthy and safe, the rest of us benefit too.

I want to focus on two main issues for communities: housing and transport. We all know that, for years, people around the country—and not just in those neighbourhoods—have given up. They have given up on the chance of owning a home or of even renting a decent place to call home. They have given up on the opportunity to bring up children and have a meaningful career.

In many rural areas, which may not make up the most deprived areas, there are pockets of extreme poverty that are completely forgotten. There are farmers whose children underperform in schools and are loaned their school uniforms; they live in homes that have not been updated for 60 years.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): My hon. Friend talked about communities being overlooked because they are contained within wealthier communities. My constituency is in the outer London borough of Sutton, which, by London standards, is on the wealthier end. We have two distinct communities in St Helier and Roundshaw, and those estates absolutely need more support, but they consistently get overlooked because of the way that local government funding works. First, it is on a borough-wide basis, so when the deprivation scores are added up, they are not entitled to much. Secondly, the indices used are extremely outdated and fail to take account of the true cost of housing.

Housing prices in London and the south-east have skyrocketed over the last 10 years, and the indices do not take that into account, which means the average Londoner is now worse off than the average person in many other regions of the country, once we take housing costs into account. Does my hon. Friend agree that whatever reforms we make to better target resources at disadvantaged communities, we must ensure that local government funding formulas take housing costs properly into account?

Vikki Slade: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—there are micro-communities within communities that look wealthy from the outside, and I will come on to some local examples.

In rural and coastal areas, employment opportunities are incredibly limited, as the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) said, with seasonal jobs in limited sectors of agriculture and hospitality. The homes have been snapped up by those fortunate enough to own two or more properties, as we heard from Members representing various areas of Cornwall. That is why the Liberal Democrats want to see the loophole closed on holiday lets, to ensure that they pay council tax, and it is why we want to see the introduction of a separate planning use for both holiday lets and second homes in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, so that we can secure the homes we need for our teachers, carers and police officers, and our farmers are better able to use their assets on their properties to support agricultural workers, so that we can provide food security.

The Government's move away from the rural services grant has been devastating for so many communities and needs to be urgently rethought. As stated by the Dorset Community Foundation last year in its "Hidden Dorset" report:

"On the face of it Dorset is a beautiful, vibrant county but scratch the surface and underneath there are areas that are among the most deprived in the UK."

There are 17,100 children in Dorset living in absolute poverty—not relative, but absolute poverty—and I am sure the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) will know where some of those communities are. This is in a place that is not considered a mission-critical area.

The plan for 1.5 million homes is laudable, but the Government must refocus on having the right homes in the right places. The lack of focus on social homes is deeply disappointing, especially for a Labour Government, and I encourage the Department to commit to at least 150,000 homes for social rent, as the Liberal Democrats have. We already have a large number of homes lying empty—1.2 million—and the Liberal Democrats have heard little about what is being done to bring them back into use.

Today's announcement on transport is great news for some communities, but many are still being forgotten. People living in most of the south-west—and it would appear from the latest announcement that the south-west stops at Bristol—have no access to trains, and where they do have a bus, it only comes a couple of times a day. How exactly are those who cannot afford a private car supposed to get to work? Those aged 16-plus cannot get to school or college. One constituent in Bere Regis in my constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole had to give up an apprenticeship because there was simply no way to get there. Families living on the minimum wage cannot spare the budget to pay for driving lessons—of course, it is not possible to get a driving test either—or insurance, which can run into thousands of pounds.

Will the Government correct the injustice created when the age of participation was increased by ensuring that home-to-school transport is funded to 18 and accepting Lib Dem proposals to create a young person's bus card, giving under-25s significant discounts on bus fares? Rural areas are most in need of the bus fare cap, so we hope it will be extended, as journeys are often

long and require two or more routes to be used, not just in England but across the United Kingdom—including rural Wales, where, oddly, a project between Oxford and Cambridge was badged as an England and Wales project, potentially costing Wales millions of pounds.

Finally, I want to align myself with the comments made by my neighbour, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East. We must eradicate child poverty. I share the frustrations of others that the strategy has been delayed, and I hope this means that we will have a much more meaningful document which includes the removal of the two-child benefit cap. These children have done nothing to find themselves in the position of having multiple siblings, and I hope the Government will grasp the nettle and deliver real change for our forgotten neighbourhoods and our next generation.

10.34 am

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure, once again, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) on securing this debate and bringing in many Members, who have articulated clearly their concerns about a variety of issues across their constituencies.

We all recognise that relieving poverty is one of the oldest and most central functions of our country's local authorities; it has been enshrined in their duties since their inception. Many Members have referred to programmes of the past—under the last Labour Government, the coalition Government and the Conservative Government—and this debate, fundamentally, is about how we tackle this most effectively. There is no view that these issues are not important; it is simply a question about the most effective way of bringing about that relief, which we all wish to see. Indeed, levelling up, which was fundamentally about all these issues, was a key policy priority for the last Conservative Government, although it was one which, I have to acknowledge in all humility, we did not succeed in delivering in all the ways we wished to. None the less, there were some successes.

When we debate these issues in a political context, we always need to remember that it is not simply a matter of funding, as important as that is. In Wales, for example, the Government have had the benefit of an £1,800 premium over the rest of the UK in public spending. Wales has had a Labour Government for 25 years, and these issues are consistently worse in Wales—where I grew up—than they are in England. So how we spend the money to address these issues is almost as fundamental as the quantum of that spending.

Gareth Snell: I have always found the hon. Gentleman to be a diligent shadow Minister, and I appreciate him taking this intervention. He mentioned levelling up, and Stoke-on-Trent was one of the cities that genuinely got one of the larger allocations. The challenge was that it was mainly capital, so it allowed us to build things, but it did not allow us to have the revenue stream to staff those things to provide services. Would he welcome any move by this Government—I suspect that this is coming—to put more into revenue funding to support communities, rather than giving them the capital for big shiny things that look nice but do not actually improve the lives of people in our communities?

David Simmonds: That is a really good example of where the “how” matters. The theory, which was certainly built into the funding formula under the last Conservative Government, and indeed, the coalition Government, was that growth in housing numbers, which many Members have spoken of as important, came with the new homes bonus. So that was additional revenue funding coming into the local authority as a result of that growth. The theory was that the infrastructure spending would be followed by growth in revenue as a result of those locally made decisions. Clearly, I understand that the Minister’s Department has taken the decision to cancel that as part of the funding formula, and she will no doubt set out what the Government’s new strategy will be. But what the hon. Gentleman describes is a really good example; it is no good having one without the other.

When we look at the ICON report and other consistent reports about this issue over the years, they highlight the significance of businesses as the backbone of any local community. The availability of work, in particular, is critical not just to the economic wellbeing of a community, but to the physical and mental health of those who live there. There is ample evidence, from the UK and all around the world, of the benefits that that brings. As we all know, it is a statistical fact that no Labour Government have ever left office having reduced unemployment—it is always higher when they leave office than when they take it—and the early-warning signs so far are not good. None the less, I hope that the Government will succeed in that agenda.

Tom Hayes: This Labour Government have seen 500,000 people added to employment since the election in July, which is a point that we should reflect on. But does the Conservative party commit to ending child poverty? Is that an explicit goal of the Conservative party under the current leadership?

David Simmonds: Ending child poverty has been a long-term commitment of the Conservative party. Reference has been made, positively, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and the work that he did with the Centre for Social Justice, which enshrined that as a policy agenda during the years of the coalition Government. Again, this comes back to the question of how we most effectively achieve that. Evidence from across the country shows that growing up in workless households is one of the things that creates intergenerational poverty. The opportunity to grow up in a household where somebody works, even if it is only part time to begin with, is a fantastic boost to a child’s life chances. There are many other points within that.

Ms Billington: Is the hon. Gentleman prepared to accept responsibility for the significant increase in child poverty caused by the two-child benefit cap that was introduced by the last Tory Government?

David Simmonds: As Government Members are discovering, having voted to retain the two-child benefit cap as part of the Budget process last year, government is about making very difficult choices. The question becomes: is it fair for those who do not have children and who work in lower-paid jobs to pay additional taxes to cover the costs of other families? All of us who

are parents need to face that choice, and I wish the Government luck with resolving that issue as they begin to think about it.

When we look at how Government resources are deployed across the country, it is very clear in our public spending figures—I commend the House of Commons Library for the excellent research papers that it produced on this—that spending is overwhelmingly focused on the relief of poverty. I commend the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) for his contribution. We see in health and social care, for example, that Blackpool has around £2,000 more per capita in public spending than Yorkshire. Governments and local authorities of all parties have prioritised those issues, and that is reflected in spending on all manner of public services. However, we also need to acknowledge that government is about choices and how we go about allocating resources. What we prioritise and the way we spend that will make a significant difference.

On creating opportunity and supporting the long-term delivery of healthcare, I ask the Minister to reflect on whether the cancellation of the level 7 apprenticeships programme, which is what trained specialist nurses for the NHS, has been a good step in creating opportunity for adults who can train to do more higher-paid work, or whether that will—as the NHS and other bodies have highlighted—result in a significant negative impact on the pipeline of specialist nursing and medical staff. Will the Minister reflect on whether the national insurance contributions increase, which leaves councils a net £1.5 billion worse off—a £1.5 billion cut in local government spending by the Labour Government—will contribute to addressing the agenda that many Members have set out?

The winter fuel payment has been touched on. The Prime Minister has hinted that a U-turn is coming; it is clear that many Government Members will welcome that. The same applies to the two-child benefit cap and the Government’s plans around disability. Under the previous Government, there was a programme, which I think the current Government are continuing in a different form, to enable those with a disability who want to work more hours to have that opportunity. But we will all have seen in our inboxes the level of concern that has been triggered among members of the public. Ultimately, it is for Members opposite to decide how they deal with pensioner poverty, the impact of cuts to disability benefits and the impact of the two-child benefit cap, as they are now in government.

There is the fact that rough sleeping has seen a remarkable increase, particularly in England and in London specifically, under this Government—there has been a 27% increase, according to St Mungo’s, since they took office—and there have been widespread reports about the impact of a significant reduction in house building under this Government. Building 1.5 million new homes was always going to be a challenge—I think we acknowledge that across parties—but a recent *Guardian* investigation highlighted that there has been a collapse in house building since this Government took office.

We are seeing the implementation of all these other policies, which are a choice made by Labour Members and their Government. Will all of those choices help to address and ameliorate the issues that Members have so passionately and eloquently set out? I would argue that that is not the case, and that the negative downward

[David Simmonds]

trends in the economy will see more households and families facing significant challenges. I would also argue that the fact, as widely reported, that all of the growth in the UK economy is due to rising household bills—in particular, higher energy costs under this Government—will be a significant headwind for the reduction and addressing of poverty, and that the toxic combination of rising unemployment, debt and taxes will create significant headwinds when it comes to addressing the issues that Members are rightly and passionately concerned about.

Alison Hume: The shadow Minister is speaking quite eloquently about the failings, as he sees them, of the Labour Government, who have been in power for 10 months. Does he not accept that the communities that many hon. Members have talked about are disadvantaged because of the profound failure of the past 14 years?

David Simmonds: In a word, no. I do not accept that. I do not believe for a moment that we address challenges of long-term poverty and disadvantage in a short-term way, but the purpose of this debate is to ask whether the decisions being made are taking us in a positive direction of travel that will benefit those we are here to talk about or whether they will have a significant negative impact.

I have set out the evidence: the loss of the winter fuel payment, the cuts to disability support, the two-child benefit cap, and the measures in October's Budget, which all Government Members voted for, that saw every single Department except the NHS receive no extra funding for the duration of this Parliament. Our councils are net £1.5 billion worse off as a result of the unfunded rise in national insurance. All of that will bear down on the capacity of our public sector and public services to respond.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) talked passionately about housing. I will share an example. My local authority has seen a significant impact, in that 20% of applications for housing are now from approved asylum seekers and Chagossians displaced to the UK by the Government's deal. All these decisions—I have set out quite a small subset of them—have an impact in the real world in our communities, and it is my contention that that impact is now pushing poverty to a greater degree and making life more challenging for many people in our country.

I will finish with this point—

Michelle Welsh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. No.

David Simmonds: I note your look, Sir Roger.

Much was made in last year's Budget of a supposed £22 billion funding gap, which was swiftly debunked by those more expert in that field than I am. That is about 1.6% of total spending by the British Government; it is a very small amount in the national figures. I am sure Government Members will have noted that the Government borrowed £20 billion last month alone, to fund the amount by which their spending is exceeding their capacity to raise money. That is £20 billion added to debt by this Government in a single month. I am sure Members will accept, having seen the impact that debt has in local communities, that that is not taking our country in a positive direction.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) for securing this important debate on a topic close to my heart. The impassioned speeches from hon. Members show their commitment to tackling disadvantage across our country.

In my role as Minister for homelessness and rough sleeping, I am constantly reminded of the challenges faced by those who face multiple disadvantage. Poverty remains a persistent barrier, affecting not just incomes but, as we have heard, life expectancy, educational outcomes and overall wellbeing. There is a gap of more than 18 years for both men's and women's healthy life expectancy between the most deprived and least deprived areas in England. Many residents in the most disadvantaged communities also experience insecure housing and homelessness, poor physical and mental health, and limited access to high-quality public services.

It is a scandal that we inherited more than 127,000 households, including over 160,000—now 165,000—children, living in temporary accommodation. It is also a scandal that 4.5 million children were in poverty in the year to April 2024. Just to remind the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), that was the culmination of 14 years of Conservative government and leadership—or lack of leadership—on this agenda. Those outcomes are the consequence of austerity and economic mismanagement under the previous Government.

We have heard impassioned speeches from hon. Members, but we had to sit through a shocking and disappointing speech by the shadow Minister, who is in denial about the failures of his Government. I remind everyone that during his party's time in government we saw five Prime Ministers, seven Chancellors and economic mismanagement. We saw the Liz Truss mini-Budget fiasco crash the economy, interest rates go up, people's living standards go down, and double-digit inflation. The shadow Minister has amnesia about the 14 years of Conservative government. I had hoped that in this debate we could build alliances to tackle the multiple disadvantage that people face in our country; instead, he fails to face up to what his party did in government.

Our Government's mission, and our commitment to the British people, is to put this country back on a path to success and to support the most disadvantaged in our country. When we talk about breaking down barriers to opportunity, we mean ending the scandal of children being held back by poverty before they have even begun. When we say we will build an NHS that is fit for the future, we mean making health equity a reality, not just an aspiration, so that someone's postcode or income does not determine their life expectancy. And when we commit to delivering economic growth, we are committed to creating jobs and driving up productivity in every part of the country.

Our mission to break down barriers to opportunity is rooted in the belief that every child, no matter where they are born and no matter their parents' income, should have the chance to thrive in life. Millions of children are growing up in poverty, and in classrooms around the country children are turning up hungry.

That is not by accident; it is because of the failure of the previous Government over 14 years. It is shameful that the shadow Minister talked down this country and spoke about Labour, which has been in government less than a year, rather than taking responsibility for failure under his Government.

Yasmin Qureshi: The Minister is making an excellent speech. She said earlier that we had had five Prime Ministers and seven Chancellors—I think there were about 10 Lord Chancellors. Does she agree that the reason for all the problems is that the past 14 years were always about the Tories' own psychodrama, as opposed to running the country?

Rushanara Ali: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Furthermore, billions of pounds were wasted in personal protective equipment scandals, contracts for donors and much else.

We are determined to address the issues affecting people across the country. We are building family security. It is essential to ensure that every child has a safe and loving home, and that is why we are committed to delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable homes and to delivering 1.5 million homes. Earlier this year, we committed to injecting £2 billion from 2026-27 to build up to 18,000 new affordable and social homes by the end of this Parliament.

Ms Billington: Will the Minister give way?

Rushanara Ali: I would like to make some progress, because I want to make a number of points about what this Government are doing.

We believe that everyone deserves to live in a safe and decent home. We have already invested in homelessness funding, which the Budget increased by £233 million to a total of £1 billion. That was a recognition of the mess that was left behind after 14 years of Tory government, when homelessness and rough sleeping skyrocketed. The previous Labour Government cut homelessness and rough sleeping by two thirds; the Tory Government increased it. We are having to clean up their mess.

We are investing in post-16 education, because children and young people from deprived backgrounds have been left behind and we are determined to tackle that. We are also introducing a youth guarantee for all young people aged 18 to 21 in England to ensure that they can access quality training and education opportunities to help them find work. We will publish an ambitious child poverty strategy, working across Government through an inter-ministerial group of which the Deputy Prime Minister and I, along with other colleagues, are members. We are taking action to make work pay and ensure that people are earning more; we have already increased the minimum wage.

Truly addressing the unique challenges faced by the most disadvantaged communities requires targeted and sustained support. My Department's recently launched plan for neighbourhoods will turn the tide on decades of decline in our most deprived communities. It provides £1.5 billion of funding to 75 communities across the UK to tackle deprivation and turbocharge growth, ensuring that every area joins the decade of national renewal that we committed to in our plan for change. That funding will help revitalise local areas, support growth and fight deprivation at its root by zeroing in on three goals: thriving places, strong communities and taking back control. We will also unlock investment opportunities in every region through local growth plans. The interventions and investments developed through them will build on local sector strengths to boost productivity.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East, I thank Baroness Hilary Armstrong for continuing to make the case for our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities. I remember her work in the last Labour Government, and I agree wholeheartedly with her that our plan for change must be rooted in neighbourhoods.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East for securing this debate. This Government are taking action to support the most disadvantaged communities as part of our long-term plan to deliver a decade of renewal by investing in our healthcare system, helping people get into employment and fixing the mess that the previous Government left behind. I look forward to working with colleagues across parties to take further action to tackle the disadvantage faced by people across our country, particularly in the most deprived communities. I know how much devastation is caused by those who face multiple disadvantage, because my constituency in the east end of London has the highest child poverty in the country. I am committed to working with colleagues to address these challenges and I am grateful for their commitment to tackling this issue, which is demonstrated by the excellent turnout at this debate.

10.58 am

Mrs Brackenridge: I thank every Member who attended the debate. I am sure the Minister will heed our voices, because we speak for and serve our communities.

It is really disappointing that not one Conservative Back Bencher attended the debate. I will not get drawn into the denial that I heard from the shadow Minister. We have heard powerful voices from post-industrial towns, proud coastal communities and struggling rural communities. They are full of pride but desperately in need of targeted intervention. That is why I am calling for a project of neighbourhood renewal.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Environment Agency: East of England

11 am

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of the Environment Agency in the East of England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I have secured this debate to highlight concerns about the operational performance of the Environment Agency in the east of England. This reflects both my time as the Secretary of State overseeing the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the run-up to the general election and numerous interactions with it in my capacity as a constituency MP.

As we are meeting the week before a comprehensive spending review, it is perhaps prudent to start with the usual excuse given by organisations for poor operational performance: a lack of people or funding. According to the Environment Agency's own annual outcomes, its full-time equivalent staff increased in the last Parliament by 21% from 10,791 in 2019-2020, at the start of the Parliament, to more than 13,000 in 2023-24. Over the same period, its expenditure has gone up from £1.4 billion to £2.2 billion, so it has significantly more people and funding, while at the same time showing a remarkable lack of transparency or accountability to Ministers or Members of Parliament, and a remarkable lack of willingness to take enforcement action against those causing the worst levels of environmental damage.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman. It is an absolute scandal: the Environment Agency seems happy to pursue farmers and landowners with a zest and enthusiasm, yet big businesses and other people seem to be left to the side. Is it not time that the Environment Agency supported farmers and helped them when they need it, rather than chasing them and not others?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point, and he is correct. It seems that the Environment Agency is very happy to go after what it may perceive to be easier and more law-abiding targets, but as the most serious environmental harm is caused by serious criminal gangs, there is often a reluctance to take on those organisations in the way that it does an individual farmer. That is why this also points to a need for a much more fundamental reform of the Department's relationship with its arm's length bodies, as well as its accountability to Ministers, regardless of which Government is in office.

This debate is focused specifically on the east of England, and I want to give three examples of where that operational performance really illustrates concerns across the boards with environmental damage being caused. Before doing so, given that I have been the Secretary of State, I thought it relevant to touch on a national example to show that this is not simply a constituency or local issue. With that in mind, let me inform the House about Hoad's wood, which is a site of special scientific interest and an area of outstanding natural beauty that has been covered—as you probably know, Sir Roger—in more than 35,000 tonnes of illegal waste.

We might have thought that a SSSI would be a priority case for the Environment Agency, and one where it would be most certain to take action. However, so concerned was I as a Minister that I had to take the very unusual step of issuing a ministerial direction. No ministerial direction had been issued in the Department in the preceding seven years before I arrived as Secretary of State, so this was an unusual but necessary step to compel the EA to take action on a SSSI. Again, I think that speaks to some of the issues. Even so, the situation has dragged on, with contractors not appointed until November last year, work not beginning until March and completion not expected until at least 2026. That points to some of the issues with the most valuable sites, never mind more routine sites.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I will give another example from Kent. In Tunbridge Wells in my constituency, the River Grom often has very high levels of ammonia due to sewage being dumped in the river. When that is reported to the Environment Agency, it claims a lack of funds, does not send its own investigators and often passes the matter to Southern Water, which is perhaps to blame for the problem in the first place. Does that not contribute to a lack of democratic oversight of our environment?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Member absolutely catches the point raised earlier about the lack of accountability and transparency, and the highlights fact that, although the EA has had more money and resource, it is not targeting priority cases or long-standing issues, while often telling Members of Parliament that they are priorities. I will come on to that, because there is a wider issue of which the Minister needs to be aware: the slowness to act and lack of accountability.

Turning to the east of England, and my own constituency in particular, let me give three examples that cover a range of scenarios. The first is the dumping of more than 122,000 tonnes of waste at Saxon Pit in Whittlesey between October 2017 and February 2018. The EA's initial response was to say that it was totally unaware of 122,000 tonnes of waste being dumped—but, regardless of whether the EA had been asleep at the wheel, we would expect it to then act. In its initial response, the EA said that the operator must dispose of all the non-conforming waste by 10 October 2018; yet seven years on the waste remains in situ. The EA also promised prosecutions, because this was such a serious case. I will quote just one of many letters that I exchanged with the EA over this period. In 2021, the then-chief executive Sir James Bevan promised that

"Saxon Pit is being treated as a priority".

The EA's investigation took a further 14 months to complete, but in June 2022 it said that a

"final set of interviews...will take place shortly".

In October 2022, the chief executive asked me to,

"be assured that my teams are prioritising this work over other competing criminal inquiries".

Three years ago, the EA said it was prioritising this serious case, with more 122,000 tonnes of waste, over other cases. It was a priority case. Yet three years on, and seven years on from the incident, we still have no prosecutions. To go back to what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said a moment ago, what cases is the EA prosecuting with its additional resource, if it is not prosecuting at Saxon Pit?

I thought that the Minister might reflect, “Perhaps that was simply an issue of the past Government. Perhaps things have changed—the Environment Agency has perhaps changed its approach.” I therefore thought it would be helpful to give a second example, from the last year: a very serious pollution incident at King’s dyke, in Whittlesey, the same town as Saxon Pit. I have seen internal papers from the Environment Agency that show that it described the problem, and reported it to the Department, as a category 1 pollution incident. For those not familiar with the term, a category 1 pollution incident is the most severe level, involving a

“serious, persistent...or extensive impact...on the environment, people...or property”.

The BBC reported that an estimated 900 fish were killed in close vicinity to an Anglian Water overflow pipe, and that the pipe had discharged for 23 hours due to a suspected pump failure. When I spoke to Anglian Water and the Environment Agency, no other credible reason was given for the serious incident. I was then told that water samples had been taken and would be quick to establish whether the overflow pipe was the cause of the category 1 incident. I was told on 10 October 2024 that the lab tests were under way, that it would take a week for them to determine the cause, and that an internal decision would be taken on enforcement in November.

November then became December. December became January. We kept chasing, and we were told, “No, it’s no longer January; it’s May.” We chased again in May, and were told September. This is an issue that Ministers say—and I do not doubt for a minute their sincerity—is an absolute priority for the Government. We have the most serious level of pollution incident, a category 1, which happened in September, yet the Environment Agency says it will not tell the public of Whittlesey the cause of it for at least a year—even though I suspect that, internally and within the Department, it is already known whether Anglian Water was the cause and whether, therefore, a criminal investigation should follow. I do not believe that is a sufficient level of transparency or accountability.

Let me give a third example. As a former Minister, I thought I would try to pitch these examples in a way that is constructive across the House. One debate that the Minister may recall was led by one of her parliamentary colleagues, the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker). In it, he raised cross-party concerns—indeed, there were a number of the Minister’s colleagues present, though it was one of her colleagues on the Front Bench—around the environmental damage of incinerators. That is something that many charities usually more closely aligned with the left of politics, such as Friends of the Earth, have raised concerns about, but it is also an issue that many on the Government Benches have highlighted, and one that I have consistently raised myself.

We now know that DEFRA’s own analysis suggests that there is enough national capacity for incineration. As more waste is recycled, the requirements for incineration come down. A BBC report highlighted the serious damage caused by these incinerators and by waste being burned because of anaerobic digesters. Most of that is now plastic, and it is the dirtiest way to generate power. No one would have thought a Government committed to the environment would want to see more incinerators

being built. Incineration is on a par with coal as the dirtiest form of energy generation, yet we still do not have clarity from the Government on whether environmental permits will remain in force for incinerators that have not yet been built.

One of those is in Wisbech. To put this incinerator in context, it is so big that one half its size in the neighbouring constituency was turned down—so they doubled it in size to make it a national scheme and take it outside local planning. It is sited 700 metres from the largest school in the district, accessed solely by single carriageway roads, with a chimney bigger than Ely cathedral in the flat landscape of the fens. The Environment Agency, in issuing a permit, says it does not consider any of the environmental harm of transporting waste from six different counties to this small market town, because the permit only applies to the curtilage of the site itself. I simply ask, given the cross-party support on this issue, whether that decision by the Environment Agency is fit for purpose.

I will add one further point. Is it not very odd that the decision to grant an environmental permit was made during the general election purdah period, a time when organisations are not supposed to take controversial decisions? I hope the Minister will follow up on that, because I know that many of her own Government colleagues are concerned. Where incinerators have not yet been built, we should not be embedding the environmental damage that so many charities and environmental groups, and so many of our own colleagues have expressed concern about.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): The right hon. Member represents North East Cambridgeshire; as the Member for South West Norfolk, I share a border and very similar geography with him, and I recognise many of the concerns he raises about pollution. Does he share my concerns about the EA’s performance on the time taken to issue permits, licences and other permissions? In our part of the world, that is a real barrier to growth and prosperity for businesses, because the performance is so poor—it takes months, if not years, for businesses to get approvals from the EA.

Steve Barclay: I do share them. Just for the Minister’s benefit, the hon. Gentleman’s constituency will be materially affected by the Wisbech incinerator in terms of transport; when the developers doubled its size in order to take it out of the local planning process, they created a different problem of how to get sufficient waste to run it. Therefore, it has to take in waste from further and further afield. As Wisbech is a market town, accessed by single carriageway roads—the A47 is single carriageway into Wisbech—bringing waste through my neighbour’s constituency will cause huge traffic there, as it will in many other constituencies across the eastern region.

A BBC report highlights the severe environmental damage that would be caused by the proposed incinerator, but the hon. Gentleman also highlights a wider point about lack of transparency. As in the King’s dyke fishing example, as a constituency MP one chases on behalf of constituents to get them some answers, yet organisations feel they are unaccountable.

That brings me to my final point. It will not surprise the Minister that, as a member of the last Government, I quite frequently raised my constituency concerns—before

[*Steve Barclay*]

I was in the Department—with relevant Secretaries of State, and I know that they raised those with the EA; yet, as we see with Saxon Pit, it still failed to take prosecution action over seven years while saying to people locally, “It is a priority case.” As Secretary of State myself, I found the organisation so unresponsive that I had to take the unusual step of issuing a ministerial direction. In fact, I issued two in my six months in the Department, where none had been issued in the seven years before. I fear that Ministers now need to look at the accountability to democratic control of not just the Environment Agency, but Natural England—not least given the three interventions we have heard from colleagues across the House.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I have an issue in my constituency down White Stubbs Lane, where we have raw sewage going over the road. The Environment Agency is unaccountable, hardly wanting to meet with MPs or engage. It told me during the purdah period, “We can’t meet with you, because there is a local election going on,” which is absolute nonsense. It should engage with MPs. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is completely unaccountable and needs fundamental reform and change?

Steve Barclay: It does need fundamental reform. I became Secretary of State very close to the general election, but one of my first acts was to issue an instruction to take more rigorous enforcement action more generally on water pollution. I know that current Ministers want to see a more robust set of actions.

I come to my final point. Not least given the Government’s majority and where we are in the parliamentary cycle, there is an opportunity to look at the Department’s relationship with its arm’s length bodies. The Department of Health and Social Care is going through that exact process with NHS England. I encourage the ministerial team to reflect on that, not least for when in some years’ time they are explaining how, if there is lack of action, that sits with some of their priorities. Irrespective of that, as we heard in interventions from across the House, the EA’s lack of transparency and accountability on its operational performance needs to be addressed. I encourage the Minister to focus some time in her busy schedule on doing that.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) for securing today’s debate and everyone else who has contributed to it. Listening to all the points that the right hon. Gentleman made about serious issues in his constituency, I wonder from the outset if it might be helpful to have a meeting with the EA area director to go through each of them in turn. I was told by the EA ahead of this debate that it is very happy to meet him, and me.

I welcome the mention of the increased funding that we have given the Environment Agency. We have increased the budget for environmental protection by £17 million, and the charge income has increased to £513 million for

this year. Each week, I get an operational briefing on some of the major significant issues around the country, and Hoad’s wood has been mentioned. I have been told that waste removal should start this month. If that does not happen, I am more than happy to pick up that point.

More generally, on regulation, regulators and how things work, the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that when we came into government, we commissioned the Corry review to look at all the different regulators within the environmental space and see where there is potential, where there has been overlap of responsibilities, how effectively they are working and what might need to change. Just yesterday, Sir Jon Cunliffe published his interim report on the water sector and how it works. It is really interesting; there is a whole section on how regulation works or does not work effectively in some areas, and there is a genuine call for all Members of Parliament from all parties to feed back on that interim report before the final recommendations. The right hon. Member may be interested in that chapter on regulation.

I find the people I work with at the Environment Agency to be really keen to do well and passionately committed to their jobs. The people who deal with this mess on the frontline are really committed. When the Secretary of State did the water investment tour, he visited Cambridgeshire to attend a water scarcity roundtable on 13 March. Hopefully, we will both be visiting the area again soon.

In my role as Minister, I meet Environment Agency representatives every month, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows from his time in the Department. I talk to them about things that are happening nationally, and our priorities and how they fulfil them. I also ensure that the agency is equipped to carry out its functions effectively.

Ahead of this debate, I asked for an update on what is happening on Saxon Pit. I hear the right hon. Gentleman’s frustration about the amount of time that criminal investigations take. I know that from my time in opposition as well as my time in government that these things can feel protracted, but as it is a criminal investigation, it might be helpful to have a more confidential meeting about it. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will accept my being vague.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out that dealing with water pollution, such as the category 1 incident at King’s dyke, is a serious and important issue for the Government. At DEFRA, looking at how we deal with such incidents is a priority, which is why we have increased enforcement funding. I have been told that the situation at King’s dyke is progressing well, but we can have a more detailed conversation about both incidents with the area director, given that they involve criminal investigations. If the right hon. Gentleman would like to take me up on that, I would be happy to have that conversation.

The Environment Agency generally publishes its progress on different aims. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) and I have spoken before about his concerns about sewage in his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) and I have had similar conversations. There is a lot to sort out and a lot to clean up, but I am always happy to pick it up if the hon. Member for Broxbourne

does not feel that he is getting the engagement that he needs from the Environment Agency. Whenever I talk to EA representatives, they tell me that they are really keen to meet MPs, especially new MPs, and to build a relationship with them, so I urge the hon. Gentleman to take that up. If he does not feel it is forthcoming enough, I am more than happy to pick that issue up.

The right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire will have to forgive me, because waste incinerators are not in my brief and I have only a vague knowledge of them. To be fair to the right hon. Gentleman, I understand that he had to recuse himself from any involvement in the decision making, which I completely respect. Once I talk to a ministerial colleague, I can give the right hon. Gentleman a more detailed briefing on waste incinerators.

We are setting clear conditions for new energy-from-waste plants; they must be efficient and support net zero and our economic growth mission before they get backing. We are keen to make DEFRA a driver of growth and to ensure that it is not seen to be holding up planning permission and consents. I hear what the right hon. Gentleman is saying in relation to this particular incinerator, and I will get back to him in more detail. As Minister, my general feeling from speaking to Environment Agency colleagues has been positive. I know that there is frustration with processes and bureaucracy—we all know that, especially the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire from his time in government. The wheels can sometimes feel like they move quite slowly.

Terry Jermy: The Minister and I have talked on many occasions. I do not envy the scale of the challenge that she has, particularly in relation to pollution. She and I have talked about internal drainage boards, which is another issue that is shared across constituencies. In relation to permits and licensing, we are proud to have a growth agenda as a Government. Does the Minister recognise that focusing on encouraging the EA to improve its performance in that regard could help to unlock growth in many areas in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk and improve growth opportunities for businesses?

I appreciate that there is an awful lot to do in the Department, but can that issue be given some focus as well?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, one of the things that comes up in our monthly meetings is how we can improve the issuing of permits and make it quicker. He is completely right, and I hear not just from his constituency but right across the country that there are problems with how quickly permits are issued. I completely hear and accept his point.

We are committed to working in collaboration with the Environment Agency, and with all hon. and right hon. Members, to continue to advance its performance in the east of England and across the rest of the country. We want to continue to support communities in protecting them against pollution and against the horrific example of Hoad's wood and the other two examples that the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire gave. As I say, I am happy to have a more detailed conversation about those two particular issues from his constituency.

Lewis Cocking: The Minister speaks warmly about having meetings with the Environment Agency. It is all well and good having a meeting, but I do not want to go into a talking shop. I feel like the Environment Agency uses the meetings to say, "We've ticked that box and we've met that MP; that issue is done," but it does not action anything. We want to see real action for our constituents because they are really fed up with these issues, which take a terribly long time to solve.

Emma Hardy: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, and he is completely right: constituents want to action when they see pollution incidents. Of course, if he is not satisfied with the outcome and he feels that action has not been taken to the standard that he wants following the meeting, I am more than happy to pick that up. I will finish on that point.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Business Rates Relief: High-street Businesses

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of changes to business rates relief on high street businesses.

What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I am deeply privileged to have secured this debate.

When we think about the communities that we represent, we so often think about the centre of those communities—the town, village or city centres that truly define the communities that are our constituencies. That is certainly no different in my constituency. Even in some of the very small villages such as Salt or Great Chatwell, the main centre is sometimes the pub, which is the hive of community interest—I would recommend any of the pubs in my constituency to the Minister, if ever he wanted to visit them. They bring the community together. The larger towns and villages, such as Stone, Great Wyrley, Cheslyn Hay or Penkridge, have thriving high streets and centres that are vital for the people who live there. Centres give towns density and, critically, create employment for so many people in my constituency and all our constituencies.

The Government's changes to business rates relief have already had a significant impact on so many businesses, not just in my constituency but right across Staffordshire, the west midlands and England itself. The change in relief, which was 75% but has been reduced to 40%, has had a material impact on the way that people run their businesses.

We are all aware that the initial rates relief was introduced at the height of the pandemic to help businesses. However, businesses, especially on our high streets, have taken time to recover from the pandemic, which saw a shift in the way that many people buy their goods, in people's shopping habits and in the way that we use our town, city and village centres. The rates relief was vital to so many businesses, shops, pubs, hotels and people in adjusting to the new reality that they found themselves living in.

In my constituency, the hospitality industry contributes £70 million in gross value added and employs just short of 3,000 people. If it was a single employer, we would be talking about it all the time, but of course it is not one employer—it is many small family businesses. They may be individuals employing two or three people. They may be limited companies, although often they will be sole traders or partnerships. They are the backbone of England and of our economy, and they are feeling the pain of the changes that the Government introduced.

Many people in my constituency and across the country listened when Labour said, in opposition, that relief would be coming and that there would be changes, but they were not expecting those changes to cost them more money. Let us look at the analysis of the impact on a typical shop in terms of business rates. A typical shop has seen its bill climb from £3,589 to £8,613. For a typical restaurant, the bill has climbed from an average of £5,051 to £12,122. I appreciate that, in the Treasury's view, those are not even rounding errors—they are not

something that it should be concerned about or even think about—but for a business or an individual trying to work out how they will pay their employees' wages, order in more stock or pay themselves a wage that month, that really matters. It impacts those who are in business and dampens the aspirations of those who wish to start one.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): April's retail, hospitality and leisure relief reduction left Samantha, a shopkeeper from Langport in my constituency, with a £2,000 business rates bill, on top of a £5,000 bill, despite the fact that she was potentially eligible for exemption. She consequently faces losing her shop. When I spoke to her recently, she told me that the system has ended her livelihood. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we need to reform rates and exemptions to boost local high streets' viability?

Sir Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need reform. Such closures affect her constituent and many others, but these are not just businesses; they are someone's hopes, dreams and aspirations to create something better and build a better life for themselves and other people. According to the Campaign for Real Ale, 125 pubs have already closed since 1 April. That is 125 communities that have lost something that they may never get back. It is 125 families—and many more, if we take into account the families of the many people working in those pubs—who have seen their livelihoods disappear.

We cannot just dismiss this problem. I thank the Chamber engagement team, which, in preparation for this debate, did a number of surveys asking for the views of people from across the country about the impact of business rates on their businesses. It is interesting to hear those stories. Lorraine, who has a hospitality business, said:

"It is time our industry had some real help. We had nothing left to give. I predict even more closures in the next two years."

Karen, who runs a salon and health club, said:

"The rates are more than my rent and with the wage increases and massive hike in rates, I can't survive. I'm on borrowed time."

This is about not just those people, but the many people they employ. Rachel, who has a beauty salon, said:

"I used to employ 18 people and now only employ four, so it's effectively made me shrink the business."

James, who runs a hospitality business, said:

"The reduction in relief has led me to reduce my workforce by 33%."

There are business out there that last year were perhaps thinking about expanding—maybe taking on another pub or opening another shop—but that is no longer viable. Most business owners—who, like the people employed, are working people—are the last ones to get paid. They take the risk, and the Government do not seem to want to encourage them, let them grow or give them the opportunity to succeed. They just make it harder.

This issue is not just about businesses; it is also about communities. Although there can be no finer high streets than the ones in my constituency—[*Interruption.*] Now we are getting into a real debate, but I will stand firm. However, there is nothing sadder than seeing an empty

shop that was previously occupied. That is not just about the demise of a particular business; it brings down the whole high street.

We see so many businesses being impacted in multiple ways. We see the impact of the changes in business rate relief; we see the impact of the changes in national insurance, and not just in terms of the rate but in terms of when it starts to get paid; and we see the cumulative impact of changes to employment law. We want businesses to take on people and to make it as easy as possible for them to take on new starters. Sadly, it is becoming harder and harder for them to do so.

The reality is that young people are some of the most impacted. Almost half of those working in hospitality in my constituency are aged between 16 and 24. I appreciate that the Government may take the view that their jobs are not important ones and that they will go on to something else, but I think that it is vital that we provide opportunities for young people at the start of their careers. Hospitality and retail are vital for that, whether the jobs are full time or part time. The impact of the changes to rate relief means that fewer young people are in a position where they can get the jobs they need to get on in life.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): The right hon. Member is making a very important point. This issue is important across the whole socioeconomic spectrum. I had a relatively privileged upbringing, but my first job was washing dishes in a hotel. That job taught me what hard work is. The lessons that we learn in those types of jobs last throughout our lives.

Sir Gavin Williamson: The hon. Member makes a very valid point. This issue is about ensuring that there is as much opportunity as possible for all people, whatever their background. We should not be dismissive of such jobs—I am sure that the Minister is not—but they are the jobs that have been squeezed out by the changes to rate relief.

The Minister knows that I am one of his biggest fans; indeed, I am a great admirer of him. I see him as a rising star. While the Chancellor hides, he is wheeled out. He is truly an impressive figure at the Treasury. I am not sure whether it is due to the diminished status of the Chancellor that he is looking taller, but he is certainly one of the rising stars of the Labour Front Bench. I actually enjoy reading some of his many comments. He is a very thoughtful and accomplished Minister. I imagine that he is a joy to work with and that his civil servants value him greatly.

However, I will just read out some of the things that the Minister has said in the past:

“As the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), has set out, if Labour were in government, we would scrap and replace business rates, and shift the burden away from hospitality and retail businesses on the high street, which continue to shoulder a heavy burden compared with those that operate primarily in the digital economy.” —[*Official Report*, 31 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 318WH.]

I do not think that there is a Member in this Chamber who would disagree with the Minister on that. I think everyone in the debate today would say, “All power to the Minister’s elbow, and we look forward to him announcing how that will be done.”

Most businesses I have spoken to have found that they are paying more today than they were just a year ago. When in opposition, the Minister was busy making many comments, including:

“A Labour Government will help to breathe new life into our high streets by calling time on the outdated model of business rates, so that British businesses in all parts of the country can play their part in creating economic growth and the jobs of the future.” —[*Official Report*, 13 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 262WH.]

Sadly, at the moment, the Government are doing quite the reverse. Every small business in my constituency has been impacted by higher rates, not lower ones.

There is concern about what this will look like in the future. There is nervousness that even the reduced reliefs that have been put in place will have gone altogether. I very much hope that when the Minister responds, he will be able to give us every assurance that efforts are being made to deal with the impact of the change in business rates relief on businesses not just in Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge, but across England. I hope he will give them some comfort that the Government do not just say things in opposition, but do them in government.

We have a sorely outdated model of billing businesses. I know the Treasury loves nothing more than the rates system, because it is one of the easiest ways to collect tax, but there are concerns that, whether or not under pressure from President Trump, when it comes to changing how digital services taxes will be done, the Treasury might come for more money from small businesses, the high street and family companies. I hope the Minister can clearly set out that that will not be the case. I appreciate that he will not wish to steal the Chancellor’s sandwiches for any future statements, but I hope he can say clearly that there will be help coming for so many businesses right across the country, and that we will support those job creators.

Several hon. Members rose—

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate, and ask them to keep their speeches to within four minutes so that everyone can get in.

2.48 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine; I believe this is our first time together in this situation, and I hope it is the first of many. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) on securing this important debate. All of us in the Chamber today agree that high street businesses are at the heart of our communities. They not only offer goods and services, but provide valuable jobs, as the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. They support local families and create vibrant and connected town centres, yet they are under unprecedented threat. Across the country, businesses are being quietly but relentlessly squeezed out of our once-thriving town centres.

My constituency of Surrey Heath is often perceived as affluent, but that perception has arguably bred a dangerous complacency. Recently, I hosted a meeting of local businesses—a cross-section of local business owners from the health sector to hospitality, retail and financial services. The message I received was absolutely clear: the current business rates system, and particularly the

[*Dr Al Pinkerton*]

changes to business rates relief, is creating considerably anxiety and uncertainty. The scaling back of business rates relief is compounding the pressures that businesses already face: rising national insurance, increased wage costs and inflationary pressures. Removing or reducing relief schemes at this time risks an existential tipping point for many high street retailers, especially smaller, family-owned and not-for-profit businesses.

In market towns such as Camberley in my constituency—and I am sure this is shared across all the constituencies represented today—the strains on the high street are already visible, with boarded-up shopfronts, dwindling footfall and declining confidence among business owners. As these local businesses close their doors, the risk is that residents will lose further faith in town centres and high streets and turn increasingly to online alternatives, accelerating the decline that I think all of us here wish to stem. While some exceptional businesses continue to thrive despite those challenges and headwinds, and they deserve recognition for that, many more are struggling under the cumulative weight of financial burdens, with reduced business rates relief tipping the balance from viable to vulnerable.

Business rates are paid in good faith, with the expectation that they will support the local environment, funding clean streets, better infrastructure and stronger town centres, but the reality is very different. To use the example of my constituency, in 2025-26 businesses in Surrey Heath will contribute over £30 million in business rates, yet less than £1 million of that—only 2.5% of all the business rates levied—will be retained in the local area, as a result of the tariffs charged by central Government, leaving local high streets without the investment they desperately need.

We need a reformed system that reflects the economic realities of all the regions of our country—not just the most deprived, but also those that may appear prosperous on paper but face deep-rooted structural challenges. I urge the Government to rethink not only their approach to business rates relief but the system of business rates altogether. It cannot be right that struggling local councils such as mine in Surrey Heath, which are teetering on the edge of section 114 notices, are expected to levy rates from local businesses, with local residents and business owners reasonably expecting that those funds will be used to enhance the local community and business environment, only for 97.5% of those funds to be spirited away by national Government. Even if we accept the need for some redistribution, surely that cannot be right, fair or just.

2.52 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) on securing this really important debate.

I have previously spoken in the House about my background as a small business owner—specifically, a furniture retailer—and I know that business rates represent a massive percentage of the cost of running a small business. For many years, I have thought that we should

get rid of business rates. It is a very outdated model, preferred by the Treasury because it is an easy model for collection, but it is destroying our high streets. When I was a retailer, we had an online presence. Post pandemic, more and more people are used to buying online, which means the heart and soul of our communities is being hollowed out. What was once a vibrant high street where people came to do their weekly shop and interact with one another is now somewhere to make a quick trip for necessities.

I have spoken before about my views on parking charges, which differ from those of the Lib Dem-run councils in my constituency. Parking charges are part of the formula for a successful high street. I will continue to feed in my view that we need to incentivise the best behaviour possible, with free parking for an hour for the high street, so that people can have their coffee or tea, pick up their dry cleaning, speak to their friends and pop into the library to return books. Those are the intangible things that we risk losing from our communities.

Taxes have been discussed. I will be a little bit political, because I know the Minister is well versed in politics in support of high streets. When we are discouraging entrepreneurs from creating businesses, we are fundamentally damaging the structure of the tax base. It is all well and good supporting employees, but we are still waiting for the definition of an employee. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge said, business owners are employees as much as employers. We should support them by saying, “We want you to take the risk of setting up a business with your life savings,” to employ people and give someone that first job, and I fear this Government are failing in that. We all look forward to the spending review and future Budgets that will hopefully not U-turn but nudge policy positions in a way that supports wealth creation.

I am lucky enough to represent the great constituency of South West Hertfordshire. I have some really amazing high streets, such as Rickmansworth, Kings Langley, Chorleywood, Croxley Green, Leavesden, South Oxhey, Moor Park, Abbots Langley and many more. But what I have seen over the past five years, especially post pandemic, is an increase in vacancies, and it is taking longer for those vacancies to be occupied. That deters shoppers in my community from going to their local high street, and instead they click and buy from online retailers for convenience, which I am as guilty of doing as anyone else.

My plea to the Minister is to create the policies that incentivise great and best behaviour. He will have support from across the House for being brave. With the majority that this Government command, they can start the tax system again with a blank sheet of paper and ask, “What is it that we are trying to achieve?” One of the frustrations that I had when I first got elected in 2019 with our 80-seat majority was that we could have carried out a once-in-a-generation reform of our tax system, especially business rates. If the Minister works closely with the Chancellor to do that, he will have my support.

2.56 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge

(Sir Gavin Williamson) for securing what is probably the most important debate we could have to rejuvenate our town centres. As some hon. and right hon. Members have touched on, town centres are not just a series of business transactions but the centres of our community, where people go to meet friends or to be part of a place where they can do familiar things. It is the social glue that is created by town centres that is so important; once that is lost it does not come back.

In every town centre there is a mix of retail, leisure and hospitality. We have to get the balance right between those three things, because often someone will come in for one of the legs of the stool, as it were, but stay to do something else—thus they stay longer and have more touchpoints with their community. Business rates are the foundational tax rate that affects those three things. If business rates are not right, we are not incentivising the right mix in the community—because business rates affect those three things slightly differently—and we are undermining the support that those three things give to the idea of the town centre being a social glue. I am not going to talk about all three things, but I will talk about hospitality.

I start with Fuggles bar, which is around the corner from my house in Tunbridge Wells. Fuggles is great; it is run by Alex and has an extraordinary selection of craft beers, including local ones brewed in the constituency, and a number of gins, so I occasionally visit. Alex employs about 18 people. A number of Members have spoken about business rates relief being cut from 75% to 40%. That single change, announced at the Budget, has pushed up the cost of Alex's business rates by 50%. To that we must add a number of other costs that have risen at the same time, such as national insurance, and before that, energy costs.

An independent bar that employs 18 people, many of them part time—as we know, the NI increase hit many businesses that were employing part-time people in particular—finds it really hard to stay afloat. Alex is a member of the Tunbridge Wells hospitality leaders forum, which I meet regularly. His story is the same as the rest of the members of the forum's. We were so concerned that together we submitted a submission to the Treasury's consultation on business rates, and I implore the Minister to look that up and read it.

I will not go through everything in the consultation, but there are two things I will focus on. The first is investment. The current business rates formula penalises investment. If someone invests in their premises, the rateable value goes up and their taxes go up—it is a tax on investment. The other is online. Amazon pays about 0.37% of its retail sales in business rates. Fuggles pays 3%. That is the exact opposite of what a tax system should do. I implore the Minister to look up the Tunbridge Wells hospitality leaders' submission to the Treasury's consultation. There are a lot of good ideas in there, and I hope that he takes them on board.

3 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) on securing the debate.

There are 1,400 small businesses with a rateable value of less than £50,000 across my constituency. Today, we are discussing only the changes in business rates, but a lot of other Government decisions—particularly on employers' national insurance and on energy costs not coming down—will affect our high streets as well. The cumulative impact of all that is devastating for our high streets.

Lots of businesses I speak to in my constituency are horrified that rates relief dropped from 75% to 40%. When I go out and about across Broxbourne and speak to business owners, a lot of them now say, "What's the point? What's the point in me coming to work, trying to run a small business in the town centre, creating growth and employing people?" A Minister told me from the Dispatch Box that it is the Government that create growth. Well, let me tell the Government that it is not the Government that create growth; the Government's job is to create the right environment for entrepreneurs and businesses to create growth.

Business owners go to work day in, day out, and work incredibly long hours. The Government should try to derisk that process. If we want people to open shops on our high streets, the Government should cushion them from some of the risks. When someone starts their own business at home—from a desk, garage or whatever—upscaling that business is incredibly difficult, and lots of risks are involved. Given that the Government are changing business rates relief and slapping more taxes on businesses, particularly in our town centres, why would someone do that?

A couple of weeks ago, I went to a secondary school in my constituency to speak to A-level students who are doing a business T-level. They all want to become entrepreneurs and create businesses, but we are not creating the right environment for people to become entrepreneurs. In the general election campaign, we heard a lot about how Labour would be the most pro-business Government ever to take power in the United Kingdom, but every decision the Government have made since being in office has slammed down growth and made it harder for businesses.

My constituency has the business improvement districts Love Hoddesdon, Love Cheshunt and Love Waltham Cross, and business owners constantly tell me that, whichever way they turn, things are incredibly difficult and the Government are not making them easy. Even when they go through the business rates appeals process, they have to pay the higher bills while the process takes place, and that process takes months. They do not get any response from the Treasury, and it is difficult for them to appeal and submit information. That is simply not good enough.

As I said, lots of people are starting to wonder, "What is the point in me doing this?" We should be pro-growth in this country. The best form of welfare is a well-paid job, but we are not allowing entrepreneurs to go out there, invest in their businesses, create job opportunities and keep our high streets afloat. We all want to see successful high streets up and down the United Kingdom, but this Government's policies are killing the high street. They are absolutely killing it.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I suggest that England is in an extraordinarily lucky position, because in Scotland we

[Mr Angus MacDonald]

are not getting business rates relief. There is none for retail or leisure; there is some for hospitality, but only up to a point. The hon. Member should thank the Lord he lives in England.

Lewis Cocking: The SNP needs to come up with some relief, because things are hard enough in England, even without what the hon. Gentleman has just outlined in Scotland.

The OECD has today downgraded its growth predictions for the United Kingdom. The Government need to start acting on their rhetoric from before the general election. They said they would be pro-growth, but no policies have come forward to support our high streets or promote growth. The Government really should stop trying to kill our high streets.

3.5 pm

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) for calling this important debate and giving us a chance to raise issues on which we largely agree. Businesses are the lifeblood of our economy, the foundation of our communities and the building blocks of our country. I am proud to stand as a pro-business, pro-enterprise, pro-innovation Member of Parliament.

The changes introduced by the Government, notably in the autumn Budget, to reduce the retail, hospitality and leisure relief introduced by the previous Conservative Administration from 75% to 40% will decimate the support available to independent small businesses, and will undoubtedly lead to closures, higher prices for consumers and less footfall across our vibrant high streets and shopping centres, particularly in my constituency.

The examples that stand out for me in Fareham and Waterlooville include national retailers. Following the announcement in the Budget, Sainsbury's in Waterlooville announced the closure of the café, as part of 3,000 job losses across the country. There is also the Canvas Printing Company, which stood proudly in Fareham high street for 16 years. It recently announced its closure, citing online shopping, reduced footfall and, particularly, business rates and staff costs as having contributed to that decision. Whether we are talking about a large business giving jobs and opportunities to local people to earn a living, or a small business where people have scrimped, saved and sacrificed for decades out of a passion to provide a service and generate revenue, those are devastating examples.

However, I want to talk about a larger project in my constituency: the regeneration of Waterlooville shopping centre. I am sure everybody here knows about Waterlooville, but for those who do not, its history is so rich. British soldiers returning from Waterloo are said to have stopped at an inn called The Heroes to celebrate their victory at that famous battle. Legend has it that many of those soldiers later settled in the area; it was originally called Waterloo, but to avoid confusion, it changed its name to Waterlooville. That is why we have a fantastic local pub called The Heroes, which stands proudly in Waterlooville. However, I should say that whether it is The Red Lion in Fareham, The Chairmakers in Denmead

or our cherished Heroes in Waterlooville, our pubs are struggling under this Government as a result of the national insurance rise and the punitive changes to business rates.

We are working on the regeneration of Waterlooville shopping centre. The town has a proud history, and it is the largest town in the Havant borough council area, but it needs investment. There is a masterplan, and we are pleased to have welcomed new developers recently. On Wellington Way, for example, a company has refurbished the first floor for residential accommodation, and new commercial enterprises are going in on the ground floor. We have seen new companies, such as The Exchange, Babyccinos Play Café, Mini Town, Jolly Jellies and the dance school.

I recently visited the Waterlooville Business Association, which is thriving and working hard to bring a more visible brand to the area. We are urging Lib Dem-controlled Havant borough council to proceed swiftly with adoption of the masterplan. Businesses are waiting for it to be adopted, so that they can have the requisite level of confidence to bring investment to Waterlooville. I am sorry about the Government's changes, but I will continue to champion the regeneration of Waterlooville shopping centre.

3.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson). He outlined the attractions of his constituency, and I will do something similar. There will then be a choice for everyone here: which is better? I jest—the right hon. Gentleman's constituency is lovely.

In a world of online convenience, the role of the high street is ever evolving, but the need to ensure that it is worth while for a business to retain a high street presence has remained. The fact is that the costs of energy, heating and lighting a premises, water and insurance—all those hidden costs—are rising and profit margins are steadily decreasing. The rise in national insurance contributions has put additional pressure on businesses that hire staff, which many can simply no longer stand.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. He is a very convivial man, and he never puts across his point of view in a way that offends anyone. I congratulate him on that, and I know that he will try to answer our questions on this issue. High street businesses and business relief are incredibly important.

I am very fortunate to have represented Strangford as an MP since 2010, as an MLA before that and, going back to 1985, as a councillor. I have seen many changes in the high street—lots of things happening and new businesses coming—but one of the cores we have is family businesses, which the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge referred to. I will mention some of them for the record. Wardens has been there for 125 years. We also have Knotts, another family business. We have local family butchers like Carnduff's and Mawhinney's, which have been there for the best part of my life, and local bakeries. The clothes shops are all family-owned. There are very few businesses like KFC and so on—those are all out of the town. The town centre is perhaps unique.

We are fortunate to have a number of restaurants and pubs. The Parlour pub and restaurant dates back to 1860—not many restaurants or pubs date back that far, but we have one. We also have Roma Hamill's and Rice's—again, family pubs and restaurants in the centre of town—and we have developed a coffee culture. There is only one thing we are missing in Conway Square in Newtownards, where everything looks idyllic: if the sun is there, Ms Jardine, you could be forgiven for thinking you were in the Mediterranean, but if it is not there, you might have a different opinion—as the rain belts down on you and reminds you that we are probably one of the wettest places in Europe.

I am thankful that businesses have evolved. Excel, for instance, has increased its online sales but committed to retaining its high street presence. That is the point I want to make. Older shop owners have moved on, and their families have decided it is no longer viable to have a shop on the high street and have gone online. Online is good, and I want to see it, but I want to have family businesses on the high street. Excel is a family business. Some 65% of their trade is online, but 35% is in the shop.

It has never been harder to have a shop. Bills are rising, and many in Northern Ireland cannot order things from the mainland. Retail NI has highlighted these concerns. It has said that increases in the cost of business in April are the perfect storm. Some 74% of Retail NI members indicate that they will reduce their number of employees, 86% say that they will cut back on their expansion plans and 96% say that more must be done to support local business and to deliver.

We need our local heart back, and the Minister is the perfect man to make sure we get it. We look forward, with expectation, to his answers and to hearing how he will ensure that our high streets are saved right across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3.14 pm

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) for securing this debate. It would be remiss of me not to mention my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman); as a rifleman, it is great to hear Waterlooville spoken about. The 95th Rifles fought there, and it was one of our battle honours. Every day is a training day.

This hugely important debate is relevant to every constituency up and down the country. I firmly believe that small businesses are the backbone of the UK economy. We must do as much as we can to release them from red tape and to reduce taxes, in order to see the great growth that will support our high streets.

After the autumn Budget, I set out across South Shropshire to speak to as many businesses as possible. I launched my small business campaign, which I was delighted to see Ludlow Nutrition win, and which showed me how much love there is for small businesses across the constituency. I recently held a roundtable with the chamber of commerce, which I thank for its work in bringing businesses together across the constituency to hear about the highs and lows and to hear what is working and what is not.

I wanted to go further, so I partnered with Love Bridgnorth and launched a local high street campaign. When it is finished, I will be delighted to share the results with the Minister so that he can see what local residents have said about high streets. What encourages them to come to the high street? What are the problems? What would they like to see from the Government? I have put those questions to thousands of people, and I look forward to seeing the results.

I want to talk about two core areas. One is retail shops on the high street, and the other is hospitality and local pubs, of which South Shropshire has some of the best. Local businesses are facing uncertainty because of the impact of the national insurance rise and the change to business tax. They are tending to do one of a few things: stopping recruiting, not investing in expansion to go for growth, or putting up prices, which can be inflationary. Those are all things that they do not want to be doing.

Earlier in the year, I got many of the local publicans together in Ludlow. The Minister has heard me talk about this before, but I really want to push Ludlow as the fine food capital of the country. The publicans told me what was working, what was not and what was hard. If Ludlow, with all its great pubs and its fine food festival, is struggling to make a profit, that is a concern. Some of those pubs have been trading for 20 years. They have the same footfall and the same turnover, or sometimes even more, but they cannot make a profit. It is not like covid or a financial crash; it is an ongoing situation that they are finding it exceptionally hard to deal with. They are not asking, "How do I survive?" They are saying, "I don't know what the future looks like."

I have spoken openly about how I have been teetotal for 13 years, because I used to drink way too much and had a problem with alcohol. So why am I talking about pubs? In South Shropshire, a constituency of 700 square miles, they are a lifeline. They are community assets. People would otherwise be sitting at home on their own come to them, because that is where their friendship groups are. They are a hub for much of our constituency. The other day, I enjoyed going to the George and Dragon at Much Wenlock. There is also the Mill at Leighton and great food at the Mytton & Mermaid in Atcham, where I have taken my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge before now.

I will not push my time limit, but I ask the Minister to look at reducing VAT to 12.5%, as we did through covid, to help out pubs and small businesses. I also ask the Government to reduce business rates back to 75% until we know what the new rates will look like.

3.18 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) for securing the debate. I agree with nearly everything he said, with one notable exception: the constituency with the finest high streets is, of course, Bromley and Biggin Hill.

High streets matter. They are the economic heart of our cities, towns and villages, supporting local jobs and serving as a social hub for communities, as my right

[Peter Fortune]

hon. Friend said. When they are in decline or struggling, communities feel it: not only are there fewer jobs and less cohesion locally, but there is a deep sense of loss. Shuttered shops and empty streets shatter civic pride. While too many communities have seen their local high streets decline, we avoided mass closure during the pandemic, thanks to generous public support.

Retail, hospitality and leisure relief, under which firms were initially offered 100% relief on business rates with a cap of up to £110,000, was one such pivotal measure. It was a lifeline for many businesses, and it remained a lifeline through the energy crisis and the subsequent inflation. Although it was intended as a temporary measure, that tax break remains crucial to the recovery of high streets and to local growth. It is not yet time to rapidly reduce it. That is why the Government's decision to reduce the relief from 75% to 40% is a huge blow. The change effectively doubles the business rates bill for retail, hospitality and leisure firms, and it comes on top of the high energy costs and above-target inflation that are squeezing businesses.

In my constituency we are fortunate to have successful high streets, from Bromley town centre, which is home to more than 700 businesses and supports 20,000 jobs, to the smaller parades in Hayes, Biggin Hill, Coney Hall, Bickley and Keston. However, they remain under pressure from rising costs, inflation and high energy prices, and the same challenges are squeezing consumer spending. It is precisely the wrong time to rapidly reduce the business rates relief. For an independent pub in my constituency with a rateable value of £98,000, the changes to the relief and the increase in the standard multiplier will mean an increase of nearly £20,000 in its tax bill.

It is especially reckless because this is not the only Government policy with an impact on our high streets. In one swoop, Ministers have also hiked the minimum wage, created swathes of new employment red tape and introduced a substantial increase in national insurance contributions. The Government have mixed an expensive, anti-business cocktail for our high streets that few businesses can afford. It will mean fewer jobs, less investment and closures, at a time when we want to grow our local economies.

The Government's boast at last year's tax-hiking Budget was

"a penny off the pint".—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 820.]

But behind that lacklustre announcement, they have not been honest about the collective impact of their policies, which are costing high street businesses an absolute fortune. If the Government are serious about securing investment and growing the economy, they need to rethink their decision to rapidly reduce this critical relief, before they hollow out Britain's high streets and pull down the shutters for good.

3.22 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) for securing this important debate.

Our high street shops and pubs are at the heart of our communities, yet many are threatened by big increases in business rates. Our high street businesses are already contending with Labour's new tax on jobs. The hike in national insurance makes it more expensive to employ someone who works in a shop or a pub on our high street. The Employment Rights Bill will further increase costs, hitting small businesses with new regulations that make it harder and more expensive to operate. In that context, the decision to cut the retail, hospitality and leisure business rates relief from 75% to 40% is wrong.

I met recently with Mr Paul Davis of Styles Menswear in Bridgwater. His business rates have gone up from £3,000 a year to £9,000 a year. That new cost, before we can even consider Labour's new jobs tax, puts his livelihood at risk. He will not be alone. Paul's business has the double misfortune of being based in Eastover, where he has had to contend with extensive and lengthy roadworks. In Liberal Democrat-controlled Somerset, we have had a particular problem with various roadworks being scheduled at the same time and harming local businesses. It seems that the Liberal Democrats know little and care less about the damage that they are causing.

The roadworks in Eastover started in October with a partial road closure. As if that were not bad enough, the council then decided to impose a full road closure in January, which is now set to continue until at least September. Ironically, it is on the council's "celebration mile" project, although to date there has been very little for local businesses to celebrate. The project has proved a hammer blow to many local businesses, which have seen footfall collapse: footfall in Bridgwater is down 400,000 in the past 12 months, mostly caused by the incompetent way in which Somerset council has handled the project.

I believe that those businesses deserve our support. Businesses disproportionately affected by council actions should have the right to claim rates relief. Will the Minister consider that proposal? The situation in Eastover is now desperate, and I fear that in the coming months we will see more shops and businesses closing their doors for good.

It seems that this Labour Government, with the able assistance of Liberal Democrat councillors in Somerset, are set on destroying those businesses. The truth is that, despite the Government's claim to be going for growth, everything that they are doing appears designed to achieve the opposite. I say to the Minister, "Businesses in Bridgwater are suffering. They need your help now."

Mike Martin: On a point of order, Ms Jardine. It seems that the hon. Gentleman is confused and in the wrong debate. This is a debate about business rates, but he spent his entire time talking about local government sequencing of traffic works.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): That is not a matter for me at the moment.

3.25 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson)—that's the hardest bit of the speech out of the way now—on securing this important debate.

When we reflect on our communities, it is often our town centres that we think about. Whether it is our own communities, which many hon. Members have spoken about with great love, or others that we enjoy visiting, it is often the town centre at the heart of it that we truly love. However, the challenge that we have faced over recent years is the strange death of our town centres, whether that is a result of out-of-town shopping, online shopping or, more recently, the failure under the Conservatives to reform the business rates system. We now need the new Labour Government to step up to the mark and ensure that reform happens.

As many hon. Members have noted, it is clearly not just about business rates. The problem has been exacerbated by the national insurance hike, which has had a massive impact. Many businesses tell me that they are comfortable with the increase in the minimum wage, but the double whammy of national insurance hikes and the lowering of the levy has had a major impact on them. The worry for many Opposition Members, I am sure, is that the current Government see business as a cash cow. If they bleed the cow too much, it will die. That is a real challenge. I ask the Government to reflect on that.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about Hatchers department store in Taunton? It was founded in 1775, but because of the combined effects of the change in business rates and the revaluation, it has seen its business rates go up by 144% in one year.

Steve Darling: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I congratulate him on coming from the glorious county of Somerset, where our Liberal Democrat colleagues have had to pick up the pieces after the disastrous Conservative-run council effectively ran it into the ground for many years.

Sarah Dyke: As my hon. Friend alluded to, the previous Conservative administration in Somerset was a disaster; indeed, it oversaw an irresponsible record six-year freeze on council tax. Does he agree that the Liberal Democrats in Somerset are now delivering a successfully run administration after a very difficult run of Conservative irresponsibility?

Steve Darling: My hon. Friend makes some very powerful points. In my experience, the Conservatives in county councils are more interested in painting the grass greener than in actually getting on and sorting out people's services.

Back to the main point, we need to be reimagining our town centres. In my constituency of Torbay, a Merlin cinema has appeared where there used to be a department store, and there is an NHS diagnostic offer in our town centre. That reimagining of what the town centre should be about is essential. We have also seen a really popular new pool hall appear in the last few weeks. That is what we need to do to our town centres. Will the Minister do the right thing and undertake a root-and-branch reform of the system to drive the positive change that we want to see?

A couple of businesses have told me about their challenges. A photographer says that he sees no benefit in the doubling of the rates and has had to let a member of staff go due to the national insurance hike. Another business—a gaming café particularly for the LGBTQ

community—told me that it is really challenged and is on a knife edge due to the business rates increase; it remains extremely worried.

The Liberal Democrats would like to see a commercial land value levy, which would ensure that we look at the value of the land rather than what is developed on the site. That would lead to a major rebalancing across the United Kingdom and significantly reduce land values in some of our more deprived communities, such as mine in Torbay, driving the productivity and regeneration in our town centres that we desperately need. The only saviour for the Labour Government would be growth in the economy, because that would get us out of the rut that we are in.

I would welcome any assurances the Minister can give us that we will have a root-and-branch reform of the system, rather than tinkering. An element of the Government's scheme is a cap of £100,000 on what chains pay, and I fear that the books will be balanced on the backs of the poorer independents in our town centres.

3.32 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) for securing this important debate. I would thank Members from across the House for their contributions, but one main party has failed to show up—apart from the Minister and his Parliamentary Private Secretary, of course.

High street businesses are not just shops, restaurants, pubs, banks and other firms; they represent jobs and investment, but above all they represent identity and a sense of place. Business rates have long been a source of concern for retail firms. That is inherent in their nature as a fixed cost that does not flex to profitability, business cycles or sales.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) spoke of his direct experience as a retailer. There is a case for reform but, as with everything—particularly with this topic—the devil is in the detail. The action that the Government have chosen to take means that shops and others will pay higher bills this year. That comes with consequences, and hon. Members have set out what has happened in their constituencies.

When we were in government, we understood the value of our high streets. That is why we doubled the small business rates relief to £15,000 and almost trebled higher-rate relief to £51,000. That took a third of properties out of business rates completely. We also provided long-term support through things such as the towns fund and the long-term plan for towns, which King's Lynn in my constituency is benefiting from; it is making a difference.

Of course, in 2021 retail relief was set at 100% to reflect the realities and extraordinary pressures of the covid restrictions. In 2022, retail, hospitality and leisure properties were eligible for a 50% discount, and that was increased in 2023 to 75%—a tax cut worth £2.4 billion, which was then extended to 2024. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge rightly said, that was to help the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors adjust and continue to recover.

[James Wild]

That approach is a far cry from the 40% discount that the Government are offering now, almost doubling bills. The Exchequer Secretary was talked up by my right hon. Friend, and if he has his backing he is sure to go far. He is a consistent man, so he will likely claim that there are no plans to extend the 75% relief. However, if people look at our track record, they will see that we consistently provided relief and backed our high streets, and we would have continued to do so—I and my hon. Friends would have made sure of that.

The Government's decision to cut relief from 75% to 40% will leave many high street businesses facing increased costs. Some 250,000 businesses will be worse off, to the tune of £925 million. According to the British Independent Retailers Association, a shop with a rateable value of £60,000 will pay nearly £20,000 this year, up from only £8,000 in 2024. The average pub will have to pay £5,500 more annually. As we have heard, pubs are at the heart of our communities. Kate Nicholls, the chief executive of UKHospitality, has said that when Wales reduced relief to 40%, closures in Wales were a third higher than they were in England.

Any Member who talks to businesses every week, as I do, will know how difficult things are out there due to the choice that this Government have made to increase costs for our high streets. Under the Government's plans, from next year there will be higher business rates for properties over £500,000. That will not only hit online retailers. The British Retail Consortium has expressed concerns that it will hit 4,000 larger stores in England, many of which are the anchor stores on high streets that help to drive footfall and support nearby businesses—more unintended consequences from this Government.

As we have heard, high streets and local businesses are indispensable to our economy. Retail alone comprises 5% of GDP, providing 3 million jobs directly and 2.7 million more in the supply chain. Hospitality is the third largest employer in the UK, with 3.5 million people working in the sector, and it contributes £93 billion annually to the economy. Beyond their economic value, high street businesses form the heart of local communities, providing accessible services and so much more.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will join me in congratulating Robin's Nest coffee shop in my constituency, which has just celebrated its first birthday. In the year that the shop has been open, its owners have seen their business rates double, and they have written to me to say that they might not make it to their second birthday. Does he agree that business rate reform cannot come soon enough and that it would be a crying shame to lose such high street businesses?

James Wild: Absolutely. That is the sort of risk taking and job creation that we want to see across all our constituencies around the country, and it is that opportunity that the Government are crushing through their decisions.

The hon. Lady's example illustrates that the impact of these changes is already being felt, but we have been warned that worse is to come. The British Property Federation has found that business rates changes could cause a £2.3 billion hit to the economy, jeopardising

20,000 jobs. When businesses face higher costs, the alternatives open to them are higher prices, job losses or closures—boarded-up shops become inevitable—and young people and, in particular, part-time workers lose out on opportunities as a result.

The Local Government Association has also raised concerns about the financial impact that these reforms could have on local councils. It has urged the Government to introduce a transitional mechanism to ensure that local council services are not put at risk. I would be grateful if the Minister could respond directly to the LGA's concerns.

Sadly, these are not stand-alone reforms; they come on top of the £25 billion jobs tax; the Employment Rights Bill, which will add £5 billion a year to costs; and the family farm tax and business tax. As if it were playing a game of Buckaroo!, Labour is loading cost after cost on to businesses and there will be a reaction. Half the major retailers surveyed by the British Retail Consortium said that the Employment Rights Bill will lead to job cuts. How does the Minister expect companies to absorb these much higher costs on top of business rates and higher national insurance?

Last month, the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride), visited Beales, which was holding a "Rachel Reeves closing down sale" as it wound down its business after more than 140 years. That is just one of 200,000 businesses that have closed under this Government.

The future of our high streets should be a priority for any Government. Policies should be designed to help them to thrive, rather than burdening entrepreneurs and job creators. Extraordinarily, the Prime Minister said earlier this week:

"I don't think you can tax your way to growth."

Yet that is precisely what the Government have done with the £25 billion jobs tax. They are choking growth, costing jobs and hitting businesses that our communities rely on.

Before the election, the Labour party promised that it would scrap business rates completely. In power, it simply ditched that pledge—another broken promise. It is little wonder the British Independent Retailers Association said:

"For all the government's rhetoric about supporting small businesses and revitalising high streets, their actions do precisely the opposite."

It is time for the Government to start listening to businesses and change course.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I call the Minister, James Murray.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

3.40 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I thank hon. Members for their warm welcome.

I want to extend my thanks, as many others have, to the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) for securing this debate—and, indeed, for his kind words about how I am doing

my job. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate and for bringing perspectives from their constituencies to it. Although we have had a fair dose of politics, there have also, in fine Westminster Hall tradition, been moments of cross-party agreement and a desire to find a way forward to support high streets in all our constituencies.

As Members of this place, we all know how important high streets are to our constituents as centres of economic activity and places where people come together. I was glad to hear healthy competition in the claims about who has the best high street and local pubs in their constituency. *[Interruption.]* I am seeing further bids from the other side of the room. We all know as MPs, and indeed as members of the public in our own right, how high streets unite people. They sustain jobs and are central to the identity of the areas that we represent. That is why the Government are protecting the high street by transforming the business rates system so that it supports investment and is fit for the 21st century. I welcome this opportunity to set out our approach to making that transformation a reality.

As many hon. Members have said, retail, hospitality and leisure businesses are the backbone of our high streets—our shops, pubs and cinemas—but they are contending with changing consumer habits and have faced a series of economic headwinds in recent years, including the pandemic. Online services are undeniably convenient and offer great variety, but it is high streets that bring people together. The problem, as many hon. Members have set out, is that business rates fall more heavily on property-intensive sectors, so it is a priority for the Government to ensure that the burden is permanently rebalanced and that high street businesses are protected.

We inherited a situation in which protection for high street businesses through retail, hospitality and leisure relief was set to end altogether in April this year. That continued a pattern that had become normal under the previous Government; ratepayers would rightly complain that the fact that RHL relief ended every year by default created an annual cliff edge for RHL businesses. What was supposed to be a temporary, stopgap measure was extended year by year following the pandemic by Conservative Governments, who made no attempt to fix the system and give businesses the certainty and stability they need.

That is why at last year's autumn Budget we announced our intention to change how this is done, by introducing permanently lower tax rates for RHL properties with rateable values below £500,000 from 2026-27. That will give much needed certainty and support to the high street, improving investment and growth in places across England. We intend to introduce two lower RHL multipliers to mirror the existing national small business and standard multipliers. The new small business RHL multiplier will apply to RHL properties with rateable values below £51,000, and the new standard RHL multiplier will apply to RHL properties with rateable values of £51,000 and above, and below £500,000. Those lower multipliers will apply to all RHL properties with rateable values below £500,000. We will have no cash cap per business as the previous Government's relief had, meaning that all relevant properties will be able to benefit from our approach.

Under our Government, any tax cut must be paid for. We saw what happened when the previous Government ignored that rule. That is why we intend to fund this tax cut by introducing a higher rate for properties with rateable values of £500,000 and above. Those properties represent less than 1% of all properties, but include the majority of large distribution warehouses, including those used by the online giants.

The Government recognise that business rates form a significant part of the costs of some businesses, but we must make difficult choices to ensure that our plans to support the high street are sustainable. That is why we are asking those occupying the most valuable properties to contribute more to support the vitality of the high street.

The rates for new multipliers will be set at the Budget 2025, so that the Government can factor in the upcoming revaluation outcomes and broader economic and fiscal contexts into the decision making. The Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Act 2025 gives Government flexibility in the creation of the new multipliers and their rates within appropriate guardrails, so that the Government do not have unfettered powers. The rate for any higher multiplier cannot be more than 10p higher than the national standard multiplier, while the lower RHL multipliers cannot be less than 20p lower than the national small business multiplier. I emphasise to Members that those are only guardrails, not the intended rates, and the final decisions on the multipliers will be made at Budget in the autumn.

The Government recognise that RHL businesses need support in 2025-26, ahead of the permanently lower tax rates being introduced for 2026-27. Hon. Members today have spoken about the impact of changes to RHL relief on high street businesses in their constituencies, but it is worth emphasising again that without any Government intervention, RHL relief would have ended entirely in April 2025. To avoid that happening, our Government decided to provide a 40% business rates discount to RHL properties up to the cash cap of £110,000 per business in 2025-26.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Will the Minister assure us that, given the cross-party agreement in the Chamber today, he will go back to the Treasury and make representations to see if that could be increased to 75% for the intervening year? It would be a great relief not just on finances but on the mental worry of so many businesses if they knew that someone in the Treasury was battling for the return of that 75% relief.

James Murray: The permanently lower tax rates will come in in April 2026, so the intervening year is the year that we are currently in. That rate has been set by the Chancellor. The Chancellor makes announcements about rates at fiscal events. The autumn Budget is where she sets out those rates, in the same way that she agreed, at the autumn Budget last year, what the rate would be for RHL relief for the current year, 2025-26. At the autumn Budget this year, she will set out what the permanently lower rates will be thereafter. I would say to businesses looking at their finances this year that from April '26—from the next financial year—the permanently lower rates will come in. Indeed, it will benefit a broader variety of shops on the high streets, because we are not continuing the cash cap of £110,000 per business.

Mr Mohindra: One of the likely consequences of the Minister's proposals is that tenants will look to change their rateable value. Can he assure the House that the Valuation Office Agency will have sufficient resources to ensure that any appeals are done as quickly as possible to give the certainty that our high street retailers and hospitality deserve?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of the VOA. Its performance is very important for businesses across the country. I am sure that he will have seen our recent announcement that, this year, we are bringing the VOA into His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, rather than it being an arm's length body. Part of that is to save on administration costs—to protect the public finances—but it is also to ensure that we can work with it to improve its service as much as possible, to give the best and quickest possible service to businesses involved. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that VOA performance is very high on our agenda.

Hon. Members raised the impact of RHL relief on pubs, which is understandable, given the particular importance of pubs in all our local communities. Indeed, we had a competition for who has the best pub in their constituency. I will just about resist the temptation to list the pubs in my constituency, as I am here as a Minister rather than with my constituency hat on, but hon. Members should pop into the Duke of Kent if they are ever in Ealing North. To put this in context, the extension of RHL relief for this year under this Government is saving the average pub with a rateable value of £16,800 more than £3,300. That is a real, meaningful difference to pubs across the country. The Government have, of course, frozen the small business multiplier for this year as well. Taken together with small business rates relief, more than 1 million properties have been protected from inflationary increases in their bills this year.

Some hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge, have argued that the RHL relief in this year should be higher. However, given the Government's fiscal inheritance, it was not fiscally sustainable to continue the 75% relief, which cost £2.4 billion a year. Crucially, to repeat remarks I have made several times now, our approach from April 2026 will mean no more use of an indefinite stopgap measure. Our approach will instead offer permanently lower tax rates and the stability that those bring for businesses.

The Budget announcements and the changes I have just described reflect the Government's first steps to support the high street. We want to go further, and modernise the business rates system. At the autumn Budget last year, the Chancellor therefore announced the publication of a discussion paper that sets out priority areas for reform.

Suella Braverman: The Minister says that he cannot afford the £2 billion price tag of maintaining the relief introduced by the last Conservative Government. How, then, is he paying for the £30 billion surrender deal in which this Government are giving up sovereign territory, the Chagos islands, to Mauritius?

James Murray: I would challenge the right hon. and learned Lady's use of language, but that issue is rather outside the scope of a debate on business rates.

As I was saying, we published a discussion paper at the Budget last year, which invited the industry to help us to design a fairer business rates system that supports investment and is fit for the 21st century. Since publishing the paper last autumn, my officials and I have met more than 250 stakeholders across a range of sectors, including RHL and local government, and have received submissions from a range of businesses, including those from the constituencies of hon. Members present today. We are analysing the responses in detail, and the data and views shared by businesses will inform the business rates policy development process. In the summer, we will publish an interim report that sets out a clear direction of travel for the business rates system, with further policy detail to follow at the autumn Budget 2025.

It is worth my briefly drawing hon. Members' attention to the fact that, beyond the business rates system, the Government are taking other steps to rejuvenate our high streets. We are introducing high street rental auctions to revitalise our high streets and tackle empty properties, which we know can fuel a spiral of decline in town centres. Through the English devolution Bill, the Government will introduce a new community right to buy to help communities to safeguard valued community assets. That will empower local communities to bring assets such as empty shops, pubs and community spaces into community ownership, helping to revitalise our high streets and eliminate vacant properties.

Alongside that, the new £1.5 billion plan for neighbourhoods programme will deliver up to £20 million of funding and support over the next decade to 75 communities across the UK, laying the foundation to kick-start local growth and drive up living standards. As part of the programme, local partnerships will be able to fund interventions focused on revitalising high streets. The Government will announce further plans to support high streets in the small business strategy later this year.

As we have heard, hon. Members are rightly concerned about the high streets in their constituencies. We are all passionate about the places where we live and that we represent, and we want them to thrive. As I have set out, the business rates system that this Government inherited has been failing to give high streets the long-term, certain and stable support they need, instead providing only stopgap help through RHL relief that has kept changing and has been repeatedly extended ahead of an annual cliff edge.

This Government are fixing the foundations of the business rates system, and that starts with permanently rebalancing the burden of RHL properties through introducing permanently lower tax rates from 2026-27.

Stuart Anderson: I really like the idea of permanently lower tax rates. Can the Minister confirm that that is for all businesses, and that no businesses will receive tax rises?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I set out, the new lower multipliers of RHL properties will apply to all RHL properties with rateable values below £500,000. There will be a standard RHL multiplier and a small RHL multiplier for properties with rateable values of £51,000 and below. The definition of an RHL property will broadly follow the definition by which RHL relief is currently allocated. That will be set out in guidance, but hon. Members can expect that to operate in a similar way.

The advantage of our approach of permanently lower tax rates and multipliers is that they do not have a cap in the way that the previous Government's relief did, of £110,000 per business. All properties within the RHL definition with rateable values of less than £500,000 will be able to benefit from this support, helping all the shops that contribute towards high streets across the country.

Beyond the changes to the RHL multipliers, I have also had the chance to set out some of the wider work that we are undertaking to transform business rates over the course of this Parliament and create a fairer, modernised system that is fit for the 21st century. I thank the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge and all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate.

3.55 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson: A lot of businesses will be worried that when they get rates bills in the future, even under a reformed system, that bill will have not gone down, but actually gone up. I thank the Minister for his comments, but there is a real worry that the Treasury will end up trying to balance the books on the backs of small and family businesses. I urge the Minister to do what he can, because these businesses are the engines of our economy. They are where the jobs are created and where so many young people will get their first opportunity. I urge him to do everything he can to protect opportunities for the future and their ability to create jobs and wealth, because the people who are running these businesses are working people as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of changes to business rates relief on high street businesses.

3.57 pm

Sitting suspended.

Prosecutions for Violence against Women and Girls: West Midlands

4 pm

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they may only make a speech with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates. Before I call the hon. Member for Wolverhampton West, I remind hon. Members that they should not refer to any court cases that are currently active and are therefore sub judice. Hon. Members will also want to be careful about raising matters that might prejudice ongoing police investigations or a future court case. I thank the hon. Member for Wolverhampton West for his courtesy in consulting with the Table Office prior to the debate.

4.1 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for prosecutions relating to violence against women and girls in the West Midlands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I begin by declaring an interest as a member of the Justice Committee, and my wife is a senior Crown prosecutor in the west midlands dealing with rape and serious sexual offences cases. Violence against women and girls is a global problem and remains one of the gravest social challenges that we face. In the United Kingdom, offences involving violence against women and girls account for approximately 20% of all police-recorded crime.

Although it is undoubtedly a national crisis, the problem is particularly acute in the west midlands. In the year ending March 2023, West Midlands police recorded more than 81,000 domestic abuse-related crimes, which is the highest rate across all police forces in England and Wales. In my constituency of Wolverhampton West, violence and sexual offences have consistently represented the most reported crimes over the last three years, totalling to more than double that of the next highest category. Across the west midlands, an incident of violence against a woman or girl is reported every 30 seconds.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does he agree that with a call to police every 30 seconds—that is over 100 people reporting domestic abuse every hour—more resources need to be given to the police? Given that under 3% are convicted of rape or sexual assault, more time needs to be given to investigate, these perpetrators need to be held accountable and tougher sentences need to be given.

Warinder Juss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was about to say that I was so shocked to hear the statistic I just cited that I had to ask my parliamentary assistant to check the figure again, because I could not accept that it was so high.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing the issue forward. I spoke to him beforehand to seek his permission to back up the evidence base that he is putting forward so clearly. This is happening not just in Wolverhampton West, but all

[Jim Shannon]

over the United Kingdom. For example, Ulster University did research in Northern Ireland that said that 21.4% of women who experienced violence reported it to the police, and, further, 77.4% of those who did report found the response unhelpful. There is a clear, huge issue of under-reporting and women must feel that they will be taken seriously. Does the hon. Member agree—I am sure he will—that the police have a lot more to do to reassure women who are subjected to violence and sexual abuse?

Warinder Juss: I agree with the hon. Member. It is quite surprising that, despite the scale of the crisis, fewer than 40% of women and girls who have suffered violence actually seek help, and even when they do, the outcomes are consistently inadequate.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and Black Country colleague on securing this important debate. The Office for National Statistics reports that it takes 158 days from the police referring a rape case to the Crown Prosecution Service to the CPS authorising the charge. That compares to 46 days for other crime. Does my hon. Friend agree that urgent reform is essential for victims to get the justice that they truly deserve?

Warinder Juss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and as I go through my speech, her question will be answered in more detail.

In the west midlands, the police recorded 7,744 reports of rape or sexual assault, yet only 217 actually resulted in either a charge or a conviction. That is a charge or conviction rate of just 2.8%, which is clearly unacceptable. The court backlog for adult rape cases in the UK is at a record high, with more than 3,500 individuals awaiting trial. Each case represents a survivor still waiting for justice, unable to move on with their lives and begin any healing process. If justice delayed is justice denied, we are consistently allowing our court system to deny justice.

I am pleased that this Government have begun to take significant steps to transform the policing response to these heinous crimes. That includes announcing Raneem's law, which will see domestic abuse specialists placed in 999 control rooms, together with the roll out of new domestic abuse protection orders, with independent legal advocates for rape victims to be rolled out next year.

However, delays in our court system can expose victims to the risk of further harm. One of my constituents, who had suffered several incidents of domestic violence, had to repeatedly chase for an extension to her domestic abuse protection order because there were delays in the court providing a non-molestation order to protect her from contact from her ex-partner. That resulted in her having to move from her home, and she felt completely let down by the whole system.

It has to be said that the legacy of chronic underfunding left by the previous Government has sent our justice system into crisis. Between 2010 and 2023, the justice budget for England and Wales fell by 22% in real terms, and since 2010, 43% of our courts were closed. That mess was unfortunately left by the previous Government for this Government to clear up.

The average time it takes for an adult rape case to make the full journey from report and investigation to a verdict is over six years. In early 2024, 61% of police investigations into rape and sexual assault were closed because the victim withdrew their complaint. Last year, more than 280 rape prosecutions collapsed because the victims pulled out after a charge was laid. Even when victims choose to go ahead with the trial, 21% of rape trials are postponed at the last minute.

As a former lawyer, I have to say that one of the problems with the justice system is a critical shortage of legal professionals. The Criminal Bar Association recently reported that 64% of prosecuting barristers and 66% of defence barristers are unlikely to reapply to go on to the lists to be instructed for RASSO cases because of poor legal aid fees and the impact that these cases have had on their wellbeing. In 2023, 139 sex offence trials were postponed because there was no prosecution barrister, and a further 113 were postponed because there was no defence counsel.

One in four trials now does not go ahead as scheduled. That is totally unacceptable; survivors are being left in limbo as trials are delayed by months or even years, and cases are increasingly abandoned, destroying victim confidence in our justice system and fundamentally undermining the rule of law.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. In my constituency we have high levels of deprivation and crime, especially domestic violence, rape and sexual assault. Talking about the criminal justice system, I know as a member of the Bar and a criminal defence barrister that a lot of young wannabe barristers are deciding to go to other professions purely because the funding is not there. Does the hon. Member agree that there is no point having extra court sitting days without the support mechanisms of lawyers? What more could the Government do to support that?

Warinder Juss: I agree, and I will go on to mention some of the steps that the Government are taking.

There has been a recent surge in the volume and complexity of cases coming before the Crown court, which has further contributed to the backlog. We see more of those cases coming through at the highest level since 2014. The guilty plea rate for rape cases sits at just 15% on average, compared with 66% across all other crimes. That means that rape cases are harder to prepare for and more time-consuming for victims and lawyers. I am pleased that West Midlands police have taken the initiative of having a violence against women and girls strategy that rightly places justice at the heart of its mission, prioritising investigation and evidence.

To answer the question put by the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), the Government have provided additional funding of £24 million for criminal legal aid and an extra £92 million annually for criminal legal aid solicitors. They have also increased magistrates' sentencing powers, in addition to a new commitment to increase Crown court sitting days, which are all positive steps. Following the sentencing review and as part of the Government's safer streets mission, there will now be increased tagging for perpetrators of violence against women and girls. I also welcome the Government's drive to recruit approximately 1,000 judges.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for holding this important debate. Research from Greater Manchester shows that women and girls who have experienced abuse are likely to face multiple disadvantages, such as living in poverty, homelessness, mental illness or addiction, which adds complication in accessing the correct services. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must better understand the multiple disadvantages and needs of survivors to improve confidence and trust in the policing of this violence?

Warinder Juss: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and note his point. We need to ensure that the justice system is there for everyone, regardless of circumstances.

As I was saying, the Government have started a drive to recruit approximately 1,000 judges and tribunal members across all jurisdictions annually. There are 16 Nightingale courtrooms across seven venues being used to hear cases. The Crown Prosecution Service launched a domestic abuse joint justice plan in November last year to improve the working relationship between the police and the CPS, which will hopefully have an impact. It has resulted in a 7% increase in the volume of prosecutions and a 12% increase in convictions for domestic abuse in the west midlands.

The CPS commitment to improve communication and support for victims through the victim transformation programme is a positive step forward. It means that there will be a dedicated victim liaison officer in every RASSO team, with the offer made to meet the victim before the trial to answer questions.

We need to go further. The Labour election manifesto committed to establishing specialist courts for rape and serious sexual offences at every Crown court location in England and Wales, in order to fast-track rape cases. While we eagerly await the Leveson review of the criminal courts, I hope that that commitment can be delivered as soon as possible. By introducing other measures such as having separate waiting areas in court buildings and improving the submission of evidence remotely, we can offer victims the dignity, support and reassurance they deserve during what is often an incredibly distressing process.

We also need a dedicated, adequately funded cohort of specialist lawyers supported through ringfenced legal aid funding, better remuneration, and appropriate wellbeing and mental health support for those working in the most distressing and complex situations. Above all, we must centre victims in every aspect of the system. That means having access to sexual violence advisers and domestic abuse advocates to ensure that survivors are guided and supported as they travel through the legal process, so that they have proper access to justice.

Justice for women and girls simply cannot wait. If we are serious about tackling violence against women and girls, we must overhaul our broken justice system with urgency and compassion. Everyone in our society deserves the support and opportunity they need to secure the justice they deserve.

4.15 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for

Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) for securing this debate. I am aware of his extensive knowledge of and passion for this subject.

Violence against women and girls is a national emergency, rather than the inevitability that previous Governments treated it as. We are sick and tired of seeing women and girls facing the same threats of violence and abuse, generation after generation. I wholeheartedly support this Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls, but that can happen only if the Government support police forces and the criminal justice system to prosecute perpetrators.

In 2021, Warwickshire police had the lowest rape conviction rate in the country. Fewer than 2% of reported rapes ended with a charge, and just 1.3% led to a conviction. In 2025, Warwickshire police became the best performing police force in the country for charging cases of adult rape. Its charge rate is now 13.4%, compared with a national average of 7.1%. But let us face it: conviction rates are still woeful and would not be tolerated for any other offence.

Let us look at what Warwickshire police changed, in the hope that other forces will adopt the measures and move in the right direction. It created a dedicated team of detectives investigating only rape and high-risk domestic abuse, trained frontline officers to respond to reports of rape, and involved the Crown Prosecution Service early in investigations to ensure a joint approach. The importance of the change in charge rates, from 2% to over 13%, cannot be overestimated. There is rarely an opportunity to talk about hope when discussing violence against women and girls, but the fact that Warwickshire police's transformation was accomplished in less than five years gives me hope for victims.

Of course, a national average charge rate of 7% is still shockingly low. Women are not safe in a society in which more than 90% of rapes reported to the police go without charge. How are women meant to feel confident in the criminal justice system? I thank the Government for the action they have taken so far, with new measures to tackle stalking and introduce Raneem's law. I truly believe that we can halve violence against women and girls if we treat it as the national emergency it is. I hope that the example of Warwickshire police demonstrates that this is a possibility. We have a very long way to go, but I believe that ending violence against women and girls is a priority of this Government.

4.18 pm

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) for securing this important debate, and indeed for contextualising its seriousness in our minds with his informative and very insightful opening remarks. He highlighted the gravity of violence against women and girls. I also extend my thanks to those who have contributed to this debate.

This Government were elected with a landmark mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade, and we have been explicit in our prioritisation of tackling this deeply harmful form of offending. We have heard clearly in this debate about the wider issues in the criminal justice system, including the record court backlog and counsel shortages that we inherited from the previous

[*The Solicitor General*]

Government. To effectively reduce violence against women and girls, it is important to apply a regional lens that takes into account the nuances specific to different areas across our country, as we are doing today. I am particularly aware of the challenges that my hon. Friend raises when it comes to the west midlands, for reasons I will go into.

As my hon. Friend said, and as other hon. Members have made clear, the Crown Prosecution Service plays a vital role in helping to deliver this Government's VAWG mission, through the prosecution of offenders and by securing justice for victims. As Solicitor General, it is my role to guard the CPS's prosecutorial independence, so that it is wholly free to prosecute offences independently of any interference. It is also my duty to help to ensure that the CPS is delivering on our agenda to halve violence against women and girls in a decade.

I will talk briefly about the specific actions that the CPS is taking in the west midlands, before I go on to cover, again relatively briefly, Government action on VAWG more broadly. The CPS has invested extensively in improving its response to VAWG through a number of initiatives, the impact of which is already visible in the west midlands. I recently met with Siobhan Blake, who is the chief Crown prosecutor and head of CPS West Midlands, as well as CPS national lead on rape and serious sexual offences, to discuss exactly that. I will see her again on Friday this week.

Last year, CPS West Midlands rolled out the joint national action plan and complementary national operating models with policing to improve outcomes for victims of rape. The impact of that is visible in the west midlands, where there has been an increase in the volume of adult rape-flagged cases resulting in a charge. In 2022-23, there were 168 charges for adult rape-flagged cases in the west midlands, and in 2023-24, there were 204 charges. In the rolling year to date, we are again seeing increases.

Although we are pleased to see more cases in the system, this clearly has a knock-on effect on caseloads, which have grown significantly in recent years, despite the CPS increasing resourcing in its RASSO units by around 100 prosecutors over the past five years. I am personally aware of the pressure that this can place on staff, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West will be aware of that, too. The CPS national operating model has provided the framework to respond to this workload issue, and includes a wellbeing offer for all RASSO staff to ensure that they get the support they need.

I have talked about rape, but I turn now to domestic abuse. The CPS launched the joint justice plan, which similarly focuses on improving working relationships between police and Crown prosecutors. Just weeks ago, West Midlands police and the local CPS met to continue discussing this shared commitment to better joint working, and again the impact on local performance is already visible. In the west midlands, the plan has led to a 7% increase in the volume of domestic abuse-flagged prosecutions, and from quarter 2 to quarter 3 2024-25, there was a 12% increase in convictions.

Timeliness is a key priority under the joint justice plan, as we recognise the importance of domestic abuse victims and their families being able to get their lives back on track, without a trial and its associated pressures,

as quickly as possible. The CPS continues to look for innovative ways to improve timeliness. A pilot is now under way across three CPS areas to improve the timeliness of investigations and the efficiency of charging decisions in domestic abuse cases. The impact of that is being monitored closely.

I want to explicitly acknowledge honour-based abuse. The CPS held a multi-agency conference in Birmingham—the very first of its kind—that I attended alongside the Minister for safeguarding, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips). We engaged directly with local and national groups to set clear directions for combating these extremely harmful practices. At the conference, I shared my experience of overturning an unduly lenient sentence of a perpetrator in the east midlands—the first person in the country to be convicted of conspiracy to commit female genital mutilation. Having reviewed the facts of the case, I referred it to the Court of Appeal, which then increased the offender's sentence to a total of seven years.

The CPS's ongoing work across different aspects of violence against women and girls will be unified through its forthcoming VAWG strategy, which is to be launched internally. Work has already begun to deliver that activity from 2025 through to 2030. Our cross-Government VAWG strategy will set out the blueprint for halving VAWG, encompassing prevention, early intervention, responding to offences and supporting victims.

Prevention and education are fundamental to this approach, and we will tackle those crimes at their root, including by supporting our education system to teach children about respectful and healthy relationships and consent. I am especially dedicated to that as a member of the Government's Young Futures board, chaired by the Department for Education, where I have raised the growing prevalence of child perpetrators in sexual offences. Our cross-Government strategy will unify work to address offending that disproportionately impacts women and girls, together with the existing changes that the Government are driving to strengthen the law and the criminal justice system to improve the prosecution of these crimes.

In the limited time I have left, I want to focus specifically on victims and the work being led across Government by some of my esteemed colleagues, such as the Minister for safeguarding and the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice—both are Members for the west midlands.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West rightly pointed out, earlier this year, West Midlands police became one of five forces to pilot Raneem's law—a new Government-led initiative established in memory of Raneem Oudeh and her mother, who were murdered by Raneem's ex-husband. It embeds domestic abuse specialists within 999 control rooms, who will be on hand to provide expert advice, specialist support and to identify missed opportunities to properly safeguard victims.

Last year, pilots of new domestic abuse protection orders began in three police forces, enabling them to provide longer-term protection for victims. There have since been multiple convictions for breaches of those orders, with some perpetrators already behind bars. We are also taking action on stalking by extending the reach of stalking protection orders so that they can be imposed by the courts upon conviction as well as acquittal. That will be backed by other measures, including statutory

guidance to empower the police to release the identities of online stalkers, and conducting a wider review of stalking legislation to ensure that it is fit for purpose. Those are just some of the actions being taken by the Government to help protect women and girls from violence and abuse, and to deliver on our commitment to halve violence against women and girls in a decade.

I should say, in closing, that it is very important to be frank, as all contributors to this debate have been, about the challenges facing the criminal justice system. Court backlogs across the country, after a lack of action by the previous Government, mean that victims are waiting far too long to see justice, which is leading to rising levels of attrition when it comes to victims, as has been adequately covered.

We must strain every sinew to improve victim support. It is important that we respect victims' wishes, and we must also ensure that, where they feel able to, victims remain engaged in the criminal justice process. Ultimately, our success will be measured by more victims coming forward and a sustained reduction in VAWG offending. To achieve that, we need more reporting, more cases being seen through to trial, better support for victims and improved public confidence in the criminal justice system as a whole.

Question put and agreed to.

Swimming Facilities

4.30 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for swimming facilities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I am very pleased to have secured this important debate on Government support for swimming facilities. I will start with the importance of swimming and public facilities, and then move on to the responsibility for maintaining those facilities, as well as some of the challenges faced by providers and operators. I will then finish with the support that has been received historically, and with my asks and considerations for the Government.

Swimming remains one of the most popular activities in England, with around 12.5 million adults going swimming each year—that is around 27% of the population. Participation levels are higher than for hockey, football, rugby and tennis combined. Seventy-two per cent of schools use public pools to deliver their statutory responsibility for learning to swim, and 85% of young people learn to swim in a public pool, with almost 2 million children learning to swim outside school through Swim England's "Learn to Swim" programme each year. Seventy-five per cent of grassroots sports clubs use leisure facilities to deliver social and sporting opportunities to communities. And 66% of NHS cancer rehabilitation services take place in leisure facilities. Swimming helps to save our NHS around £357 million a year. The number of people with a limiting health condition or disability taking to the pool has grown from 15% two years ago to 24% more recently.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate on an issue that affects so many of our constituents. I recently gave medals to members of Larkfield swimming club in my constituency, and it was obvious that swimming is helping the health and fitness of so many young people, as well as teaching life lessons of leadership, teamwork, discipline, respect, how to win and how to lose. It was the club and the swimming—it all helped. Does my hon. Friend agree that swimming is a force for good, and that it is very important for our local authorities to be aware of the major benefits for mental health and physical health? They need to support the funding of these facilities.

Joe Robertson: I agree that swimming is hugely important for young people and for the mental and physical health of the nation, for all these different reasons. We rely heavily on local authorities for ensuring that these facilities remain open to the public and, crucially, accessible to less well-off people.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. I learned to swim as a boy at Tain Royal Academy in my hometown of Tain. A new school is being built, and the old school, complete with its pool, will be shut shortly. Alas, plans have fallen through to build a new pool, so my hometown could be without a swimming pool for at least a year.

[*Jamie Stone*]

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in Scotland as much as in England and Wales, it is crucial that local authorities get to grips with this? For my community to be without a swimming pool for that length of time is a joke, and it has upset people massively.

Joe Robertson: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Sadly, his town will not be the only town in the United Kingdom with a pool unavailable for a period of time or possibly forever. I agree that local authorities across the United Kingdom have responsibility, but I also believe the Government have some responsibility to support local councils.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and he is being very generous with his time. My constituency has six swimming pools. Much has been made of the health benefits, but does my hon. Friend agree that, for those of us who represent coastal communities or constituencies with large rivers, being able to swim is an important life skill?

Joe Robertson: Absolutely. I also have a coastal constituency, and swimming is a life skill that, one day, someone may rely on to save a life. I agree with my hon. Friend on that.

Councils are generally responsible for supporting the provision of both formal and informal opportunities for communities to be active. They spend £1.4 billion a year on sport, leisure, green spaces, parks and playgrounds, making local government the biggest public funder of sport and leisure services. Local government is directly responsible for 2,727 public leisure facilities, including almost 900 swimming pools. There are 4,000 more pools in England controlled or provided by other operators.

The sport and leisure infrastructure provided by councils is relied on by residents, schools and voluntary sector organisations, none of which could provide their assistance without public swimming facilities. I acknowledge the work of the Swimming Alliance, which is a collaborative group of more than 25 leading national organisations united to address the urgent and systemic challenges facing swimming participation. I will come on to the challenges that swimming facilities are facing.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Before my hon. Friend comes on to those challenges—and I am mindful of the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont)—can he tell us whether he is as disturbed as I am by the increasing number of tragic events in which people drown as a result of not being able to swim? There were more deaths in the last four years than there were previously, and most of those deaths were among young people. Learning to swim is more than recreation; it is something vital. I am delighted that a Conservative Member has secured this debate, but Members across this Chamber are of one mind on this matter.

Joe Robertson: The statistic provided by my right hon. Friend could get worse if the number of public swimming facilities declines any further, because of that

lack of swimming skills. It seems fairly obvious that, if someone is in trouble in the water, their best chance of surviving is if there is somebody nearby who can swim.

Two of the biggest costs for swimming facilities are energy and staffing, and the cost of both has increased in recent years, putting huge pressure on pools. Post-pandemic, energy is twice as expensive as it was four years ago, and according to Swim England, national insurance contribution increases in the last Budget are costing operators across the country tens of millions of pounds.

Since the pandemic, 206 pools have closed either temporarily or permanently, but local authorities are generally squeezed for funding and there is no prospect of that significantly changing in the next few years as far as I can tell. They are not in a position to substantially divert funding from core services, such as social care, to swimming facilities. Operators have already had to dip into reserves, and Community Leisure UK reports that its members across England are currently in deficit.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is spelling out the challenges that local councils face. Does he agree that we have a particularly big challenge coming down the road—albeit one that is already in front of us—in new towns? In Sherford in my constituency, a swimming pool and a leisure facility were part of the plans. People have bought into living in those new towns based on that promise, but given the lack of funding and the increased costs of running leisure facilities, there is a battle over who will deliver them. This means the facilities are kicked into the long grass, and residents like my constituents are left waiting and hoping for the facility to come. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to ensure that, as they pursue their housing plans, they are minded to fund leisure facilities so that new towns have them as required?

Joe Robertson: It is very disappointing to hear about the situation in my hon. Friend's constituency. Yes, I do think there is a role for the Government, and I will come to that in more detail. I hope she agrees with what I am suggesting.

There is also a significant problem with ageing swimming pools. Generally, they have a life expectancy of around 40 years—the average age of a pool closing due to age is 38 years—but 30% of pools in England are more than 40 years old. This means they are close to the end of their lifespan, and there is no identifiable source of funds to deal with that issue. There is considerable and growing demand for capital investment because our pools are ageing. Swim England says that, by 2030, 73% of local authorities could have a shortage of at least one swimming pool.

On the importance of swimming pools for children, currently only 72% of children leave primary school able to swim 25 metres, but the figure is just 45% in the country's most deprived areas. If our ageing pools are not upgraded or replaced, it seems obvious that those figures will only get worse.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): In my constituency, Sonning Common primary school is fighting to keep its pool open. The school's bursar spends every waking hour applying for grants but hits a dead end

time and again, often precisely because schools are not eligible for grants. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should make provision to support school swimming pools, where they exist, to ensure the continuity of swimming education?

Joe Robertson: I agree, and schools often also rely on public swimming pools. Wherever schools need those facilities, I ask the Government to provide support. There is no other obvious support, as school and council budgets are already overstretched and must be used for other statutory duties.

Swim England's "Value of Swimming" report showed that swimming generates £2.4 billion of social value each year and improves wellbeing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) said. A 2014 Department for Culture, Media and Sport study valued swimming the highest of all the sports it included.

The Isle of Wight is representative of the challenges faced across England. Pricing for swimming activities has become less inclusive as there are cost pressures for providers, so some of the concessionary rates that benefited those who are less well off or older have been discontinued. On the island, we have the challenge of four ageing facilities, built in 1974, 1978, 1980 and 1993. In 2010, Isle of Wight council withdrew support for Ryde swimming pool, but thankfully the local community saved it through the formation of the Waterside community trust. That pool continues to operate today, albeit without any ongoing funding from the council.

In 2023, Isle of Wight council faced a £1.2 million hole in its leisure and sports development budget, and there were concerns about the continued provision of the two remaining facilities. It is my clear view that our small unitary authority cannot be expected to fund the ongoing costs of those facilities, given that energy prices and the cost of employing staff, due to national insurance contributions, are so high, and particularly when it comes to the capital investment that is needed.

Facilities on the island have benefited from Government support in recent years. I now turn to the historical funding that swimming facilities have received. The last Conservative Government created the swimming pool support fund, with £80 million of funding for swimming facilities. That was £60 million direct from the Treasury and £20 million from the national lottery. The funding was oversubscribed and has now been used—it has come to an end. On the Isle of Wight, Ryde Waterside pool and The Heights in Sandown both benefited from the support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. Obviously, the interest in it is enormous, which is why everybody is here. One of the things that I wanted to say—I probably will not get the opportunity to because of the number of Members here—is that having swimming facilities available, as we have in the neighbouring constituency to Strangford, gave people the chance to swim who never would have had it. It also gave us some Olympic champions, such as Bethany Firth—that is a fact—who learned to swim at the Aurora complex in North Down, with the Ards swimming club. Her opportunity gave us a gold medal at the last Olympics. The opportunity is there, and so are future Olympic champions.

Joe Robertson: I agree; swimming does all those things. As we are talking about Olympic champions, I have a quote from five-time Olympic swimmer Mark Foster, commenting on the support that the previous Government were able to provide. He said:

"Swimming pools are at the heart of communities, and there are so many reasons why this funding to keep almost 200 open in England is so important."

Indeed, 325 swimming pools and leisure centres across England received a share of that money. Investment helped keep them open, and has gone towards helping to meet the target of keeping 3.5 million more people active by 2030. The first £20 million of that money was directly delivered to facilities at risk of closure, and it built on the support from the £100 million in the national leisure centre recovery fund, which since 2019 has helped secure or reopen 1,100 pools. I have secured this debate today because that source of funds has been exhausted but so relied on, and so far, the current Government have not announced any plans to continue with it or to provide any alternatives to help keep pools open and upgrade them where needed.

I have some asks from Swim England. It seeks and encourages long-term capital investment and revenue funding to support the renewal of public leisure infrastructure. It wants to see a shared vision across Government for the future of public leisure, which recognises the value and contribution of swimming, particularly to the health and wellbeing of communities, and its social value. It wants greater integration between the health and leisure sectors, particularly through the work of integrated care systems.

I have some questions for the Minister, which I hope she will address towards the end of the debate. What steps is she taking to support local authorities facing increased financial pressure in maintaining and upgrading ageing swimming pool infrastructure? Does her Department have plans to set targets or a benchmark for reversing the decline in swimming pool provisions across England? If she wants to comment on the United Kingdom, so be it. Will the Minister continue to support and fund, specifically, the last Government's swimming pool support fund? If not, why not? What alternatives will she put in place?

I remind the Minister gently of a previous quote by her:

"The public leisure sector plays an important role in the delivery of sport, physical activity and leisure across the country. It does so through vital community assets and infrastructure, such as swimming pools...We know that it helps to address and prevent long-term health inequalities, both mental and physical. It helps to combat loneliness, grow the local economy and provide jobs and purpose."—[*Official Report*, 4 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 75WH.]

I could not agree with her more.

Several hon. Members rose—

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Order. We are going to struggle to get everybody in. I will have to ask hon. Members to keep to a formal two-minute limit, and if you intervene, unfortunately I will have to take you off the list. I have to call the Front-Bench spokespersons by 5.10 pm.

4.49 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) for securing the debate.

First, I declare an interest: in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran I chair the Splash group, which is working hard to restore and reopen the outdoor tidal pool in the town of Saltcoats. It has actually been in existence since about the 1890s, so that we can keep swimming pools going. Outdoor swimming has never been so popular, and the pool would be a great asset once again to our town and the constituency. Earlier today I hosted an event with UK Future Lidos, which is here to promote the excellent contribution that lidos make to public health, overall health and wellbeing, the local economy and so much more. The event was met with great enthusiasm, with many attending and showing much interest in visiting and supporting local lidos.

Swimming is very popular in the UK, and in Scotland it is one of our most successful sports. It is one of the nation's highest participation sports, and 95% of Scottish people agree that swimming pools are important for safety. Nine in 10 agree that the closure of swimming pools is bad for local communities and a cause for concern.

John Lamont: I should declare an interest: I learned to swim in Seamill in the hon. Lady's constituency. Does she agree that there is a particular challenge in Scotland because the Scottish Government are underfunding local authorities, which makes it much harder for councils to support swimming pools in the way they might want to?

Irene Campbell: I fully agree with the hon. Member's comments.

Additionally, 93% of Scottish people think that all children should learn to swim, and 91% think that learning to swim is an important part of every child's education. It can obviously save lives, especially for people living on the coast, as we do.

Swimming is one of the most popular participation sports for all. However, many pool operators are passing on rising operational costs to pool users, making swimming a less affordable and accessible activity, which is a challenge. Scotland still has the highest drowning statistics of all the home nations, and it is important that we help pools access funding to keep affordable and safe swimming available to all, to protect the heritage of our cultural assets, and ultimately to save lives.

4.52 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) for securing the debate.

I learned to swim in Eastbourne Sovereign Centre. Locally, we are ambitious to protect the pool for the long term. That is why I am pushing the Treasury to pilot new models of investing in the future of swimming facilities, because the current local authority "going it alone" orthodoxy is broken. Through a blend of new investment, a partnership between the UK's largest operator for leisure facilities, Better, and innovative

political leaders in my town, as well as Government flexibility on other grants we have been awarded, Eastbourne Sovereign Centre could be a test bed for a new funding model that could be replicated across the country. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me to discuss the model, and to her officials for coming down to Eastbourne last week to explore it and see our swimming magic in action.

That magic is also present in the work of Helen Nichols and the Motcombe pool community interest company team, which has secured over half a million pounds to help regenerate their local community pool; the Hillbrow sports centre, with Nick Harvey and Duncan Kerr pioneering a model that uses swimming and health together to train up general practitioners; Eastbourne swimming club, which has nurtured swimmers since 1866; Gary and his team of Eastbourne voluntary lifeguards at the Eastbourne college pool; Joe Agrela at Swimming Nature; and the Blue Lagoon in Hampden Park.

These swimming heroes and their work prove that swimming facilities are not luxuries; they are lifelines, and they produce incredible outcomes for Eastbourne. As a town, we stand ready to work with the Government to pioneer the future of the country's swimming facilities, and the discussion is always open for us.

4.54 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine.

As the Member of Parliament for North Somerset, I welcome today's debate. I speak on behalf of the many constituents I have spoken to in the past year who have told me how much they value swimming, not just as a sport but as a life skill and a vital part of our community life. Whether it be the much beloved lido in Portishead, the marine lake in Clevedon or Backwell leisure centre, to the coastal community I represent, swimming plays a vital role in supporting our physical and mental wellbeing. However, despite swimming's clear social value, swimming facilities are increasingly under strain: according to data provided by the Swimming Alliance, across the country more than 1,200 pools have closed since 2010, and many others are ageing and becoming increasingly costly and risky to maintain.

In North Somerset, we are seeing the consequences of decline at first hand, with the closure of the much-loved swimming pool at Crockerne primary school in Pill. It had taught our children to swim for the past 60 years, but a lack of funding and support has denied residents in this beautiful nook of North Somerset the opportunity to engage in one of Britain's great pastimes.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): The swimming pool in Atherstone, in my constituency, opened in 1969, and is where I learned to swim. Today it closes regularly because of boiler problems, and despite the swimming pool support fund, it is reaching the end of its life. If it closes and is rebuilt, it will inevitably be closed for around 18 months. There is a waiting list of more than two years for children to learn to swim. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the legacy that the last Government left in terms of investment in swimming facilities, not the picture painted by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) in his opening remarks?

Sadik Al-Hassan: I have to agree with my hon. Friend.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Other swimming facilities in North Somerset have benefited from the great generosity of this Government in recent months. Portishead lido, which I greatly look forward to visiting this Friday, continues to thrive, thanks not only to the hard work of its volunteers, but to the generous £1.3 million grant awarded in the latest round of the community ownership fund. Thanks to the unprecedented support shown by this Labour Government towards preserving local treasures, Portishead lido will now be able to modernise and enhance the pool and café so beloved by the local community.

That is why it is so important to have debates such as these: so that we can continue to share the triumphs and miseries of swimming facilities in our constituencies, and highlight just how important Government funding is to their sustainability. With ageing infrastructure, increased energy costs and the cost of living squeezing families' discretionary spending, it is more important than ever that we ensure that adequate levels of funding are directed towards ensuring that these treasured community assets remain open to the public for years to come.

4.57 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) for securing the debate.

I was a competitive swimmer in my teens, and my sister swam for Scotland. The hair care means that I do not swim as much as I would like now, but I want to say that my colleagues' cards are all marked: Hope for Youth Northern Ireland runs a biannual House of Commons versus House of Lords swim, and a couple of months ago I was the only MP on the team. I will be in touch when it comes around again.

I want to emphasise, from a Scottish perspective, a number of things that colleagues have already raised. Safety is important. I highlight the work of Lib Dem Councillor Aude Boubaker-Calder, who has called on local authorities to ensure support for swimming lessons in schools. We need also to think about the wider safety implications for adults.

On access to facilities, my Lib Dem colleagues in North East Fife have again done a lot of work—initially as a result of covid restrictions—to ensure that we maintain the opening hours of existing public facilities at East Sands in St Andrews and in Cupar, so that people can access the same provision as they do in other parts of Fife.

As we think about safety, it is important to think about the growth in open-water swimming. In my constituency, I have a number of tidal pools and beaches—in Cellardyke, Pittenweem, Leven and St Andrews. Whether it is the Bob and a Blether group, the Nae Richters or—my favourite—the Bluetits, swimming groups demonstrate that the demand for swimming is there, and that there is a high participation rate among women, which equals keep fit and aerobics.

Clearly, the issues are similar across the UK. They are about ageing facilities and the support to rebuild and reinvest in them. They are about the high cost of energy for swimming pools and the costs of participation.

We need to address those costs, particularly for people in poorer communities, so that they have the opportunity to learn to swim. It is for everybody's safety.

Several hon. Members rose—

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Order. To get everybody in, we will have to reduce the time limit to one minute.

4.59 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I remember that when I learned to swim in Hartlepool in the 1980s, it was freezing. The only reason I went along to the swimming lessons was because my mam promised me a packet of salt and vinegar crisps afterwards. None the less, it started a real interest in swimming. I spent the summers of my teenage years mostly in the pool, and I am now a keen outdoor and indoor swimmer. I like swimming outdoors because it is good for my mental and physical wellbeing; I like swimming indoors because I like the flumes more than anything else.

Throughout my life, I have relied on the investment that local authorities have made in swimming, no more so than in Stockton, where we have a great pool at Billingham Forum. It is home to the Billingham amateur swimming club, which did so well at the South Tyneside Gala a couple of weeks ago. There is also Splash in Stockton, in which the council is investing £18.5 million to enhance the facility.

Although Stockton has done well, there has been a net loss of 500 swimming pools across the country since 2010, which really is the legacy of the last Conservative Government. That has had an impact on children's ability to swim and, of course, on the saving of lives. I want the Minister to take that into account as she thinks about how we can invest in local authorities' swimming facilities in the future.

5 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Thank you for calling me to speak, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) on securing this debate.

A young lady called Imogen wrote to me recently to tell me about her concerns over swimming safety. She notes that Norfolk has many beautiful rivers, but she worries about people who do not have enough experience of swimming to stay safe, and she urges us to act to improve this situation. I am pleased to be here today in Westminster Hall to speak up for her and express her concerns.

In North Norfolk, fantastic progress is being made to support our swimming facilities. When it comes to securing investment in and improvement to those facilities, Liberal Democrat-led North Norfolk district council has really dived in head-first. *[Interruption.]* Thank you. In 2021, the Reef leisure centre in Sheringham, which has a swimming pool, reopened after a major rebuild. Moreover, although it is just outside my constituency, I am also thrilled that in the last week planning consent has been granted for an expansion of the leisure centre in Fakenham, which we hope will be completed in 2026. That has been made possible by the Lib Dems securing Government funding to support an £11 million scheme that will transform the centre into another high-quality amenity for local people.

[Steff Aquarone]

At a time when many other local authorities are backing out of projects because of surging energy prices and slashed Government funding, I am pleased that my residents, supported by the Lib Dem-led council, will have fantastic swimming facilities to enjoy for years to come.

5.1 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Falmouth is a town of young people which juts out into the Atlantic on a finger-like peninsula, so it is vital that people there learn how to swim, yet statistics from a primary school in Falmouth show that the percentage of young children who are unable to swim 25 metres has shot up dramatically, from less than 10% to 50%. That is not coincidental. Schools in Falmouth are struggling, because Falmouth no longer has a swimming pool. It was decommissioned in 2022 by Cornwall's Tory-run unitary council, which said it was too expensive to run. There is no other swimming facility within a half-hour drive. Primary schools in Falmouth are trying to bus their children for up to 40 minutes to swimming facilities, but that is much too expensive and people are now struggling to learn how to swim.

As things stand, the Falmouth and Penryn Community Area Partnership, which covers a population of 50,000, is the only one in Cornwall without a pool in its area. Falmouth town council took a risk, took on the leisure centre on Pendennis headland and is trying to redevelop the site, but it is struggling to do so. Collaboration with the private sector will be essential, but we also need help from the Government. I know they recognise how important swimming is for our children and young people.

5.2 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): My constituency is home to a number of public swimming pools, including the remarkable Pells pool lido in Lewes. Opened in 1861, it is the UK's oldest outdoor freshwater swimming pool still operating. Today, however, I will focus on another one of our local pools.

Back in the 1970s, the people of Ringmer demonstrated extraordinary community spirit by spending years tirelessly raising money for their own swimming pool. It opened in 1981 and became a vital local asset, but was forced to close during covid. Now, after further relentless campaigning by local people, Ringmer swimming pool is reopening. Lewes district council, working closely with its longstanding leisure partner Wave Active, stepped forward to rescue and run this essential facility. A new lease agreement with East Sussex county council now ensures that the pool will remain open all day and will be accessible to all, including the local secondary school. This is local government at its best, and I highlight in particular the relentless commitment shown by Councillor Johnny Denis, who has championed this cause every step of the way.

On 14 June, Ringmer will celebrate the full relaunch of its swimming pool. The pool is not just reopening; the relaunch is a victory for the community. I suggest that the example of Ringmer is a clear inspiration and sends out a clear message. Leisure facilities are not optional luxuries; they are lifelines. Let us ensure that

pools across my constituency, including those in Seaford, Newhaven and Lewes, and other pools across our nation receive the support they deserve.

5.4 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Sixty seconds is not long enough for a speech, but there is clearly a lot of strong feeling in the Chamber today about this issue, so I hope that one day we will make more time for a longer conversation about this really important issue.

We all know what the physical and mental health benefits of swimming are. For me, one statistic that really stands out is that nearly half a million people have either reduced or stopped taking medication for their mental health because of swimming. Today though, I will quickly mention Crook in my constituency—it lost its swimming pool over a decade ago, and every promise of one since has come to nothing—and Stanhope, which lost its lido during covid and it has never reopened.

Pools like these are important parts of our social infrastructure that keep people fit and healthy. It is important that we look at funding models for swimming, potentially looking to pension funds for the investment we need for new infrastructure, and support swimming pools in combining swimming with other social infrastructure to make them viable.

Finally, I will give a quick shout-out for open swimming. We need more safe open swimming spaces. I welcome the work that this Government are doing to clean up sewage, so that people can enjoy open water swims.

5.5 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) for securing this debate, which is important to my constituents in North Devon.

I will briefly raise the case of a brave young man from North Devon. His name is Oscar, he is 14 years old, and he recently saved the life of a man who got into trouble in the sea off Saunton Sands. Oscar learnt his lifesaving skills at Barnstaple swimming club and with Saunton Sands surf life saving club, but their local pool is run by a private operator and is among the most expensive in Devon. I thank my constituent Rob Enever for his hard work to highlight that there are no concessionary rates for low-income families. Many concerned parents have written to me, worried that basic access to swimming is becoming a question of the haves and have-nots. That means fewer children learning to swim, fewer thriving swimming clubs, and perhaps—if we cannot keep access to swimming available and affordable—fewer heroes like Oscar.

I hope that when the Government are able to look at this issue again, there is greater recognition of the public safety aspect to this whole question, especially in coastal areas such as mine in North Devon.

5.6 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The proposed imminent loss of two public swimming pools in my constituency of Bedford, citing unaffordable repairs and running costs, is a matter of significant concern for myself, residents and local representatives.

The Oasis and Trinity pools—one run by the local authority and the other managed by the local college—serve many constituents who swim for leisure. Local schools, for which swimming provision is mandated by the national curriculum, competitive teams and other groups all fear that they will be left without adequate provision or the opportunity to swim for health and leisure. I urge the Government to support the provision of public swimming facilities, and I am looking forward to hearing how they intend to do so.

5.7 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Water is so important to Bournemouth, the coastal town that I represent. I commend Bournemouth swimming club and the 1.4 mile swim between Boscombe and Bournemouth piers, which is one of Europe's largest charity swimming events.

We have swimming pools in Bournemouth, but only a few of them. Foremost among them is the Littledown centre's 25-metre swimming pool, but schools tell me that they have limited opportunities for children to swim. If schools have few feasible places to go to, swimming opportunities are reduced. We can tackle child poverty, we can improve people's life chances by, for example, resurrecting Sure Start and extending free school meals to families in receipt of universal credit, but we can also subsidise swimming lessons, provide free swimming passes, and invest in the swimming facilities that have been run down for so long. Leisure provision should be a statutory duty for local authorities, and we should have a Government—as we do with this Labour Government—who are committed to improving swimming for all.

5.8 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): A report last year by the Royal Life Saving Society found that the number of child drownings in England had doubled over a four-year period. That was 125 lives lost. Two years ago, *The Guardian* reported that England had lost almost 400 swimming pools since 2010, including local authority and community-owned pools, privately owned leisure facilities, school and sports club pools, and the Deepings leisure centre, which previously hosted the renowned Deepings swimming club. My question to the Minister is straightforward. How can I obtain funding, in tune with the previous Government's swimming pool support fund, to help that much-loved community facility to reopen, and so make swimming available to children and adults in the community?

5.9 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) on securing this important debate.

We are in the midst of a massive public health crisis caused by two things: the poor food that we all eat, which the system encourages us to eat, and sedentary lifestyles. Not enough people take part in basic physical activity and sport. As a nation, we have stumbled into this dire situation in which systemic pressure is applied to discourage healthy lifestyles, and the impacts on our precious NHS are clear. Swimming must be part of the solution.

As a form of exercise, swimming is enormously beneficial to most people, even rubbish swimmers like me. It is easy for me because I do not have any hair care to deal with afterwards, to reference the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), the Liberal Democrat Chief Whip. That is particularly true for people with disabilities, for older people and those with health conditions who might struggle to exercise on dry land. Research shows that those who begin swimming tend to stick with it to a greater extent than those who take up other forms of exercise. It clearly has something that keeps people involved.

Nuffield Health is the largest private pool provider in the country. Its research has revealed that adults who swim retain their gym memberships for five months longer than those who do not. It is clearly a popular form of exercise among the public and deserving of more Government attention, yet the picture nationally is one of decline. In 2019, 14 million adults—more than 30% of the adult population—went swimming, but despite the popularity of the sport, since the pandemic we have lost 427 public pools. That is a shocking statistic. The average age of a swimming pool at closure is 38 years. Some 1,200 pools in England are 40 years old or more and are approaching end of life. I have seen this at first hand in Cheltenham.

Last year our pool at Cheltenham leisure centre was partially closed due to the discovery of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. It was closed for six weeks. Our leisure centre is at the end of its life and we need a new one. There are countless similar cases across the country. The effects of diminishing access to swimming pools can already be seen among children in the childhood obesity crisis. Swim England estimates that only 72% of year 7 pupils meet the guidelines to swim competently and confidently. That is a worrying increase from previous years and reflects poor uptake of a potentially lifesaving skill. Last year's "State of the UK Swimming Industry Report" identified rising energy costs, ageing infrastructure and difficulties in recruiting swimming teachers and lifeguards as the main factors driving those losses, but it is worth noting that reporting back via schools is really difficult to do and is not done properly in this country.

Rising energy costs have impacted all areas of life over the past few years, but for swimming pools energy costs are now twice what they were in 2021. There are solutions, though, and again I look locally. Cheltenham lido has installed solar panels to reduce its energy costs; this has brought with it the added benefit of improving the lido's carbon emissions—an important measure, given that swimming pools are large producers of carbon emissions and have high energy bills. The lido's trust tells me that its stats show savings of an incredible 4.4 tonnes of CO₂ in the first fortnight that the solar panels were in operation.

SF Planning, the agent for the planning development, reckons the solar panels will provide 93% of the power needed to run the lido. With the help of Professor Jeremy Miller, it is looking to go even further by harnessing even more renewable energy. I would like to place on the record my thanks to the lido chief executive officer, Julie Sergeant, who is in the Public Gallery—hello, Julie—and to Rick Jones, the chair of the lido's trust, alongside all the trustees and staff of Cheltenham's lido. The facility recently celebrated its 90th birthday.

[Max Wilkinson]

Thanks to their leadership, I am confident it will continue to serve the public for many more years to come. I fully intend to be there to see it through to 120. Or 130—crikey!

The Liberal Democrats are calling for swimming pools and leisure centres to be designated as critical health infrastructure, in order to protect the swimming pools in our communities against closure. It is vital that we do this to uphold what we know is true, which is that people who go swimming like swimming and make themselves healthier and happier as a result.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I call Louie French.

5.14 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Thank you, Ms Jardine—excellently chaired, as always. I would like to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) for securing this important debate. We have had some excellent contributions across the Chamber. He spoke passionately about the case for more investment in swimming facilities across England. He also had brilliant contributions from colleagues in Scotland about important safety issues, particularly in open water swimming. I wholeheartedly agree with a lot of the arguments that have been made. I thank Swim England and those in the Swimming Alliance who are here today for their ongoing engagement with us as the official Opposition.

Swimming, as we have heard already, is a valuable life skill. Going for a swim can keep people of all ages fit and healthy, both physically and mentally. Knowing how to swim can save your life or someone else's. That is why it is rightly part of the national curriculum. But, worryingly, we have seen a decline in young people's swimming capabilities following the pandemic. According to Swim England, nearly a third of children leaving primary school cannot swim confidently, safely and unaided over 25 metres. As the sports body warns, there is a risk that many in this generation will simply not learn to swim. The complex causes of that are often seen in London, where swimming facilities are actually a lot better than other parts of the country.

Jamie Stone: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will share my dismay that death by drowning is twice as common per head of population in Scotland as it is in England. Does that not say something about the under-provision that we currently have north of the border?

Mr French: Sadly, it does. Parts of the Swimming Alliance are looking very closely at the open swimming element because of the tragic examples where people lose their lives. We have to be conscious of that as we go into the summer months across Great Britain, when people are more likely to swim in open water.

We have sadly seen the closure of too many swimming pools in recent years, with the number of new pools opening being only half that of those that have closed. It is a trend that the previous Conservative Government fought hard against. In 2020, we launched the £100 million national leisure recovery fund to keep leisure centres open in more than 260 local authorities.

More recently, in 2023, when rising energy prices threatened to close more swimming pools, we launched the £80 million swimming pool support fund. That crucial

funding helped 102 local authorities to cover the spiralling costs that threatened to reduce and close even more facilities. Importantly, it funded nearly 550 projects across almost 350 leisure facilities to help them to reduce their energy bills. Those facilities included two in my home borough, the London borough of Bexley, where swimming remains very popular among my constituents. It is also where I learnt to swim, at the Crook Log leisure centre—not very well, I must say, although that is not a comment on their swimming lessons.

We invested to protect swimming facilities, but I now fear that, sadly, the trend of closure could accelerate under this new Government without new proposals coming forward. Schools struggling with the cost of the Labour Government's national insurance increase might not be able to afford travel costs to local swimming pools. I am worried that the school tax will impact the areas of the country where the private pool in a school is the only swimming facility available, and about how that may impact local clubs looking to use it.

Councils are also braced for more spending pressures as inflation rises again and will struggle to keep public facilities afloat under Labour. My council has been hit with a £5 million extra cost this year just because of national insurance. Leisure facility costs are still rising, as we have heard, thanks in no small part to similar tax hikes. We have only to look at the letter from a number of providers that was made public yesterday to see their concern about the Government's inaction.

While I appreciate that some of those matters are beyond the brief of the Minister for Sport, they are a consequence of her Government's decisions. It is against that backdrop that she needs to lay out the Government's plans to not only prevent more closures but open more swimming facilities, particularly in underserved communities around the country. What representations has the Minister made to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the potential impact of council finances on swimming facilities? Will the Department for Culture, Media and Sport continue to provide capital funding to improve energy efficiency at our leisure centres and pools? What is her plan to reverse the trend of swimming pools closing, and promote open swimming because of the safety aspects that we have discussed, so that every generation has a chance to learn to swim?

This is an important issue for not only people's health and wellbeing, but Britain's sporting prowess. We all know the amazing British Paralympic and Olympic athletes and the representations they have made at the elite end of the sport. This is something that this Government must address to ensure that everyone can swim safely, and we will hold them to account to ensure that that happens in the years to come.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) on securing this important debate. The Government are committed to ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, has access to and benefits from quality sport and physical activity opportunities. I have been clear in Parliament and beyond that I know just how important public leisure facilities are. They are great

places for people of all ages to stay fit and healthy, offer vital social spaces and play an important role within communities.

I will respond to points raised during the debate and then elaborate further on some of them as I progress through my speech. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight East made a very clear case for the important role that quality and accessible community swimming facilities can play in his constituency and across the UK. He clearly illustrated his commitment through securing the debate and his speech. I was struck by one of the statistics he shared: 27% of the population have taken part in some form of swimming over the last 12 months. I very much heard his asks from Swim England, and I am pleased to echo the comments he quoted from one of my previous speeches about how I am committed to public leisure and greater integration between health and sport, which I will come on to speak about.

The hon. Gentleman asked about specific support for local authorities, which is an issue for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. He asked about specific targets. We do not have plans to set targets, as it is for local areas to determine what they need, but we believe that robust plans should be in place. The shadow Minister and the hon. Gentleman also spoke about the swimming support fund. I am very aware of the benefit it had, but I cannot comment on that ahead of the spending review.

I was pleased to meet the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) a few weeks ago. He highlighted some of the creative opportunities available. I was pleased that my officials were able to visit his constituency, and they said that they had a productive visit. I look forward to continuing that dialogue with him. A number of Members from across the House spoke about the importance of safety, including the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome)—he paid tribute to Oscar, and I echo those comments—and my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald). The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) made a really important point about the tragic increase in deaths.

Sir John Hayes: In order to help the Minister, because I know she does not have much time, would she agree to meet me offline to discuss that? It would be much easier if I could meet her with a community group from the Deepings, and we can take that forward.

Stephanie Peacock: I would be very happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman. I was going to say that I would write to him after the spending review, but he has very keenly got me to agree to a meeting. It would be an absolute pleasure, and we can continue the conversation.

Sport and physical activity, especially swimming, plays a vital role in tackling the health challenges facing our nation through helping to treat and manage a wide range of conditions. Swim England's "Value of Swimming" report highlighted that 1.4 million adults felt that swimming significantly reduced their anxiety or depression. That report has been quoted more than once today. Swimming has saved the NHS and social care system more than £357 million annually. Physical activity interventions contribute an immense saving to our NHS by preventing 900,000 cases of diabetes and 93,000 cases of dementia every year. The Government are committed to focusing

our health system on prevention, and sport and physical activity are central to that. The biggest health gain comes from supporting those who are inactive or less active to move more.

Across the country, there is a direct correlation between increased activity levels and the number of accessible facilities that are safe, inclusive and affordable on offer. We must therefore ensure that these spaces are both present and accessible as a key part of getting people active and thereby tackling health inequalities. Whether through team sports, gym classes or children's swimming lessons, these spaces can create a sense of pride in place and improved community cohesion. In my constituency of Barnsley, we are lucky to have access to some brilliant swimming facilities. Everyone in the local area knows the Barnsley Metrodome—I always remember it as where the general election declaration is made—and we also have the Dearnside and Hoyland leisure centres. All are incredibly popular. Many local people enjoy our public pools, and swimming is a great way to look after our physical and mental health.

In my role as sports Minister, I joined Mental Health Swims last month for a cold water swim in the Hampstead ponds to mark Mental Health Awareness Week. A number of Members have talked about the benefit of cold water and outdoor swimming. Mental Health Swims is a peer group that hosts free and inclusive swim meets in more than 150 locations across the UK. I got to experience at first hand some of the benefits of outdoor swimming. I know people across the country enjoy the activity too; indeed, people in South Yorkshire often visit the Manvers lake just down the road from my constituency, which has some of the best facilities for open water swimming in the country. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) made some really important points on that topic.

I also saw the impact of swimming when I visited Active Essex. Local council leaders are working in partnership with Active Essex, local health services and leisure providers to knit together services. They are building strong links between health and leisure sectors, including co-locating services so that people have easy access to a wide range of physical activity opportunities. That means, for example, that people with long-term health conditions can have access to activities that not only improve their physical health but are fun and social and, in some cases, contribute to them getting back to work.

I will share with the House an example. I spoke to a woman who had had a terrible accident, and she was on medication. She did not work, but through the project, she had come off medication and was retraining and looking for work. It was incredibly inspiring to speak to her, and a really good example of what knitting together local government, health and sport can do. These visits have reinforced the positive impact that sport can have on mental health.

I acknowledge the importance of swimming lessons in my constituency, as a number of hon. Members have done for their constituencies. There are a number of open-water spaces in Barnsley that are not appropriate for swimming, but it is important to know how to swim in the event of an emergency in water. I am a former teacher, so I know how important it is to ensure swimming proficiency for schoolchildren. It is not just a great way to get active, but a fundamental life skill. Swimming and water safety are compulsory elements of the physical

[Stephanie Peacock]

education national curriculum at key stages 1 and 2. Pupils should be taught to swim a minimum of 25 metres using a range of strokes and be able to perform safe self-rescue, but it is clear that we face significant challenges.

The numbers of children leaving school able to swim the required 25 metres unaided is falling. Last year's data shows that only 70% of year 7 pupils aged 11 to 12 can swim confidently and proficiently over a distance of at least 25 metres—a fall of seven percentage points compared with six years ago. That is clearly a very worrying trend, and it is clear that inequalities between those who do and do not have access to opportunities to swim are widening further. We are aware of that, and through the Government's work to reform school sport, we are committed to supporting schools to provide opportunities for every pupil to learn to swim.

We are committed to protecting time for physical education in schools. The ongoing independent, expert-led review of the curriculum will ensure that all children can engage with a broad range of subjects, including PE and sport. Local government has an integral role to play. We encourage local leaders to prioritise access to sport and physical activity wherever possible and to support public and private sectors to work together to ensure that provision is accessible and reflects the needs of local communities.

Although local authorities are responsible for decisions regarding sport and leisure provision in their area, we recognise the challenges faced, especially by smaller councils. The Government are taking immediate action to begin addressing those challenges by ensuring that funding in the latest local government finance settlement goes to the places that need it most. Overall, the provisional settlement will ensure that local government will receive a real-terms increase in core spending of around 3.2%. I am committed to working to support our leisure sector up and down the country.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), asked whether I speak to those at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. I very much do, and I am very keen to continue those conversations, because my Department is responsible for the overall approach to sport and leisure provision across the country. We work closely with Sport England, the Government's arm's length body for community sport, to invest more than £250 million of national lottery and Government money annually in

some of the most deprived areas of the country to help them to increase levels of physical activity. That includes the vital £10.6 million from Sport England for grassroots swimming, empowering more people to learn to swim, enjoy water and compete safely. Sport England's place-based investment approach, which is now expanding to a further 53 communities, places local voices at the heart of decision making and is testament to our evolving strategy, but we recognise that the journey does not end here.

We appreciate the huge contribution that publicly accessible sport and leisure facilities make to health and wellbeing. My Department will continue to look at ways to support such thinking, as we look ahead to future policy around community sport and leisure facilities and their contribution towards genuinely tackling inactivity and inequalities. I am hugely passionate about that agenda, and I know that being physically active and playing sport genuinely changes lives. Hon. Members have made really important contributions; we can see how much people care about this issue up and down the country from how well-attended the debate has been. I thank Members for taking part.

5.28 pm

Joe Robertson: I am grateful to Members for attending this important debate and making so many good contributions. There is plainly unanimous agreement about the importance of swimming for the health and mental health of young people, as well as for safety and other reasons. I hope that there is general support, at least, for the Government having a role to play in ensuring public facilities are available to everyone and are affordable.

I welcome the sentiment expressed by the Minister, although it is obviously disappointing that she is unable to commit to previous Government funding pots to secure swimming facilities. I hope in the coming weeks that she and her Government are able to translate that sentiment into funding promises, so that local government and other providers have the security they need to continue to provide swimming facilities for the public.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for swimming facilities.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Wednesday 4 June 2025

TRANSPORT

National Policy Statement for Ports: Proposed Revision

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): Today, I am laying before Parliament the draft amended national policy statement for ports.

The extant NPSP was designated in 2012. It sets out the need for development of ports in England, and at reserved trust ports in Wales, currently Milford Haven. The NPSP provides guidance for applicants in preparing, and for the Secretary of State in determining, applications for development consent orders for seaport applications.

The previous Government announced a review of the current NPSP in a written ministerial statement in March 2023. In light of our missions and priorities, this Government continued that review and have decided to amend the document.

Today, I have launched a public consultation on a draft revised NPSP, along with an appraisal of sustainability and a habitats regulations assessment. These are subject to a public consultation period of eight weeks and to parliamentary scrutiny in parallel. My Department is also publishing port freight demand forecasts for the United Kingdom as a whole, to which the draft NPSP refers. The documents are available on gov.uk.

I will place copies of the public consultation document, the appraisal of sustainability, and the habitats regulation assessment in the Library of the House. The public consultation will close on 29 July 2025. The relevant period for parliamentary scrutiny will be from 4 June to 14 November 2025.

The review of the NPSP is proceeding in parallel with our wider programme of planning reforms, including the Planning and Infrastructure Bill currently before this House, designed to expedite and facilitate decision making, and stimulate growth and green energy transformation.

[HCWS681]

Petitions

Wednesday 4 June 2025

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Windsor Post Office

The petition of residents of the constituency of Windsor,

Declares that the popular Peascod Street branch of the Post Office in central Windsor has been earmarked for potential closure, which would take away vital mail, travel, driving, identity and money services from the town centre; notes that this is at a time when the town centre faces multiple challenges, including increased car parking charges, the state of the public realm and increased business taxes; and further notes that 1,402 people have signed an online petition on this matter.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the Post Office to ensure that the Peascod Street branch of the Post Office in central Windsor remains open.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jack Rankin, *Official Report*, 23 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 1174.]

[P003063]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):

I thank the petitioners for raising concerns regarding the potential closure of Windsor post office.

This decision by the Post Office to move to a fully franchised network has taken many months of careful planning on the part of the Post Office, in consultation with various stakeholders including unions and the postmaster consultative council. Despite accounting for less than 1% of the total network, directly managed branches generate significant losses for the Post Office. To address the losses these branches incur, and having reviewed all the options put forward by the unions in detail, the Post Office has concluded that moving to a fully franchised network is the only solution that protects post office services in communities. Transitioning to a franchise model will help in tackling the losses the DMBs incur on a sustainable basis. This is expected to result in over £100 million of savings for the company over the next five years. This aligns with the Post Office's commitment to deliver a new deal for postmasters. The savings created by these changes will put the Post Office in a better position to increase remuneration for postmasters across the UK.

While the potential location of a post office outlet remains an operational matter for the Post Office, it may alleviate the petitioners' concerns to learn that the Post Office intends to replace DMBs with mains branches where possible. Main branches offer similar services to DMBs. Where this is not possible, the Post Office has committed to ensure that all communities currently

served by a DMB will have at least one main branch within a 1-mile radius of the existing branch, meaning customers continue to have access to a full suite of products and services, including cash deposits and withdrawals and key Government services, such as passport applications and Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency services.

The Post Office is currently working with prospective franchise partners to find the best outcome for each DMB location. In terms of what this means at a local level for each DMB, the Post Office will keep staff and customers informed about changes to individual branches as plans progress. Any decisions on staffing remain an operational matter for the Post Office, although we would expect any changes to be carried out in line with due process including engagement and consultation.

TRANSPORT

Traffic calming measures around The Oval School in Garretts Green

The petition of residents of the Garretts Green Ward, Birmingham,

Declares that traffic calming measures need to be put in place in the vicinity of The Oval School in the Garretts Green Ward to ensure the safety of children; further that Birmingham City Council needs to act on the concerns of parents after accidents on the road surrounding the school.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Birmingham Council to take immediate action to ensure that traffic calming measures, in the form of zebra crossings, are installed on Deepmoor Road and Wheatcroft Road around The Oval School in Garretts Green, Birmingham.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Byrne, *Official Report*, 21 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 1138.]

[P003073]

Observations by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

Local authorities are free to make their own decisions about the design of the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. They have a range of traffic management tools available to them to improve safety near schools, including traffic calming, pedestrian crossings and school streets. The Government expect local authorities like Birmingham city council to work with local parents and children to address their concerns about road safety in their local area.

The Department for Transport has published guidance on the design of pedestrian crossings in chapter 6 of the traffic signs manual. This is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/traffic-signs-manual

Guidance on traffic calming measures is published in local transport note 1/07, "Traffic Calming", which is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-transport-notes

Written Correction

Wednesday 4 June 2025

Other Correction

MRS HODGSON

Women's Health

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Women's Health on 27 February 2025.

Mrs Hodgson: ...The UK has the largest female health gap in the G20, and that is attributed in part to the misdiagnosis of conditions in women. It is absolutely shocking that eight in 10 women in this country report not being listened to by healthcare professionals.

[*Official Report*, 27 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 498WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson):

Mrs Hodgson: ...**The UK's gender health gap can be attributed in part to the misdiagnosis of conditions in women.** It is absolutely shocking that eight in 10 women in this country report not being listened to by healthcare professionals.

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