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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 5 June 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Emergency Preparedness

1. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen emergency preparedness. [904357]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): The Government are taking a range of measures to strengthen our emergency preparedness. Later this year, we will update a national pandemic response exercise and undertake a full test of our emergency alert system. In April, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster also opened the new UK Resilience Academy, which will train up to 4,000 people a year. The Government will shortly publish our updated resilience strategy.

Dave Robertson: We seem to get once-in-a-generation weather events once every couple of years these days. Although some parties on the Opposition Benches do not want to take their responsibilities in that regard seriously, I know that this Government will. On flooding, the village of King's Bromley in my constituency has suffered on several occasions over the past few years, because all of the roads leading to the village have been cut off—although there has been no property flooding. What steps is the Minister taking to measure and mitigate the impact of that type of serious flooding?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for raising the issue in King's Bromley. We are working closely with our colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who are responsible for managing significant flooding. This includes the floods resilience taskforce, which I co-chair with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy). Earlier this year, we announced that we would commit a record £2.65 billion to build and maintain around 1,000 flood defences to protect lives, homes and businesses, which is a 26% uplift per annum on what the previous Government were spending.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answer. When it comes to strengthening emergency preparedness, I have to point out that floods do not just

happen in London or Cardiff; they also happen in Northern Ireland, which has the same problems. Has the Minister had the opportunity to talk to her counterparts in the province to ensure that, when it comes to emergency preparedness, the Department and the councils that have responsibilities in this area work together as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so that we can do the same thing wherever we live?

Ms Oppong-Asare: We like to work with the Northern Ireland Executive on this issue. It is important that we share best practice and deal with the problems across the board.

Cyber-security

2. **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen cyber-security. [904358]

9. **Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve national resilience against cyber-security threats. [904366]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Cyber-defence is an important part of our national security, with daily attacks against Government, businesses and individuals. Members across the House will have seen the recent attacks against British household names such as Marks & Spencer and the Co-op and, indeed, the Government's own Legal Aid Agency. Earlier this week, the Prime Minister announced that responsibility for public sector and Government cyber-security will sit with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. That will strengthen technological resilience by better integrating cyber-security and expertise into the Government Digital Service.

Daniel Francis: In recent weeks, we have seen a series of cyber-attacks on retailers, including on my former employer, Marks & Spencer, and on Government services such as the Legal Aid Agency. Will the Minister update the House on what discussions he has had with the UK's National Cyber Security Centre and others to ensure that these incidents are dealt with as swiftly as possible and that more is done to prevent such attacks succeeding in the future?

Pat McFadden: Earlier this week, I met the chief executive of the National Cyber Security Centre, which works with impacted organisations to investigate what has happened and who is responsible and to help them rebuild. It has been working with all the organisations that have been hit by recent cyber-attacks. I also made a speech about these issues at the CYBERUK conference in Manchester a few weeks ago.

Susan Murray: I thank the Minister for his answer. As has been mentioned, we have recently seen attacks against private institutions, with groups such as Marks & Spencer being targeted. I would be very interested to learn about the approach that has been taken by the statutory organisations and those in the military sphere, but I would like to know what efforts have been made to protect private businesses from cyber-attacks and to

ensure that my constituents in Mid Dunbartonshire and people across the UK have access to their daily essentials.

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member is absolutely right. The National Cyber Security Centre offers advice, guidance and tools such as Cyber Essentials to businesses to help them prepare as best they can for attacks. Unfortunately, organised crime carries out some of these attacks, and the extortion of money is often at their root. It is really important that Government, business and individuals prepare as best we can to act against the bad actors who are trying to explore cyber-vulnerabilities and often, as I said, extort money.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The Government's own cyber experts Innovate UK have warned the Government that the proposed Chinese embassy at the Royal Mint threatens to compromise the telephone and internet exchange that serves the financial City of London. The experts are now telling the Government what everyone else has known all along: the super-embassy poses a super-risk. Yet the Deputy Prime Minister's office has said that any representations on the planning application have to be made available to the applicants. Perhaps the real Deputy Prime Minister can clear this up: are the Government seriously saying that if MI5 or GCHQ have concerns about security on this site, those concerns will have to be passed to the Chinese Communist party, or has the Deputy Prime Minister got it wrong?

Pat McFadden: When it comes to both engagement with China and with an issue like this, we will engage properly while always bearing in mind our own national security considerations. The approach we do not adopt is to withdraw from engagement, which the previous Government did for a number of years—flip-flopping from that to the previous era that they called the golden era. We will engage with China when it is in our economic interest, but we will always bear our national security interests in mind.

Alex Burghart: The previous Government did not engage—sorry, they did not disengage. At the heart of this are two simple facts. First, the Government already know that this site is a security risk. It is a security risk to the City of London and, through it, our economy and the economies of all nations that trade in London. Secondly, the Government have the power to block it. Ireland and Australia have both already blocked similar embassy developments. Why are this Government too weak to act?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman was right the first time when he said that the previous Government did not engage enough. As I said, a decision on this application will be taken with full consideration of our national security considerations. Those considerations are always part of these decisions, and our engagement with China and other countries. Where I agree with him is that when it comes to national cyber-security, we must bear in mind state threats as well as non-state threats, and that is very much part of our thinking as we respond to what is going on in the cyber-sphere.

Mr Speaker: Hopefully Lancashire will help with that with the new centre at Samlesbury.

Joining Up Government

3. **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): What progress he has made on joining up government. [904359]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): We have been clear from the outset that we want to govern in a joined-up way, though as we all know the DNA in the departmental system is strong and has lasted a long time. Delivering our plan for change will require Departments to work together, whether that is to build more houses, give children the best start in life—today we announced access to free school meals for children of people on universal credit—or to protect the country against crime and security threats. It is very important that these are not goals of Departments but of the Government, and that is why we work together to achieve them.

Peter Prinsley: I am grateful for the Minister's answer. Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket is privileged to host thousands of servicemen and servicewomen from RAF Honington, RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall. They play a crucial part in the lives of our towns and villages. Can the Minister assure me that the Ministry of Defence is working with other Departments to ensure that places such as Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket will benefit from the announcements in the strategic defence review in the form of jobs, housing, investment and apprenticeships?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend raises an important point. When the Prime Minister announced the strategic defence review a few days ago, he was clear that the uplift that has been approved by the Government in defence spending is a matter not just of the Ministry of Defence budget, but of industrial policy and skills policy. For example, we have announced an extra £1.5 billion for munitions over the next five years, creating six new munitions factories and over 1,000 jobs. It is really important that these investments are of benefit to different parts of the country as we make the necessary investments to improve our defence and national security in response to a changing world.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I welcome the Minister's words on wanting a more joined-up Government, but I have concerns that the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are not working well enough together both generally and specifically on cross-Solent transport to the Isle of Wight. Will he encourage better joint working between those Departments, both generally and specifically for that most important issue for my constituents where clearly Local Government and Transport need to work together to create regulation to improve passenger experience?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member makes a strong point. I spend every day encouraging Departments to work together, but he will have heard me say that departmental DNA is strong. He is right that if we want to achieve things, we must overcome departmental DNA

sometimes and ensure that Departments work together to deliver good projects. That is exactly what we are trying to do.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): A key function of joined-up Government is joined-up procurement, and I have had the pleasure of working with the Crown Commercial Service as a supplier for over 15 years. There is an ongoing issue that the CCS runs its major procurements during holiday exercises, and this summer is no different. The construction professional services framework, which is worth billions of pounds, has been delayed and will run over the summer, meaning businesses and families have to cancel summer holidays and change their plans. What more is the Department doing to address the culture in the CCS of “buyer knows best” and not respecting supply chains?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of the CCS. We have tasked the CCS with working with suppliers and reviewing how it runs frameworks to maximise the spend with small and medium-sized businesses. That should include the timing of the framework so that everyone can take part as best as possible.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): A couple of weeks ago, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster made a statement at CYBERUK about the Golden Valley development in my constituency, which was welcomed in the constituency. Since then, a decision has been made on joining up Government with the functions of public sector and on Government cyber-security moving from his Department to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. Is he having discussions as part of that process to ensure that his DSIT colleagues are well aware of the huge opportunities and the risks to that project at west Cheltenham?

Pat McFadden: I referred to the machinery of Government change that we announced a few days ago. We are building up a real sense of expertise in DSIT, and we thought it made sense to make that change to bring together the operational and security parts of cyber policy. I am sure that my colleagues in DSIT are well aware of the hon. Member's views and of the importance of the issues that he raised.

EU Relations

4. **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [904361]

12. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [904369]

13. **Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [904370]

21. **Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [904380]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The historic deal that we signed with the EU on 19 May is in our national interest and good for bills, borders and jobs. It slashes

red tape and bureaucracy, boosts British exporters and makes life easier for holidaymakers. Indeed, I am delighted to confirm that Faro airport in Portugal will start the roll-out of e-gate access to UK arrivals this week.

Josh Dean: After years of closed doors under the Conservative party, I warmly welcome this Labour Government's landmark deal with the European Union and the opportunities that it will open up for our young people again. I welcome in particular the commitment to working towards a youth experience scheme and to exploring a return to the Erasmus programme. Will the Minister set out what progress the Government have made on the talks thus far, and will he reassure the young people in my constituency that we will move at pace to deliver?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We have agreed that we will work towards a balanced, capped and time-limited youth experience scheme. We will also work towards Erasmus+ association on much better financial terms for the UK. The exact parameters will be subject to negotiation, but we want to move forward as quickly as possible.

Wera Hobhouse: I am so pleased that there is cross-party agreement in welcoming a new youth experience scheme. My young constituents in Bath are unequivocal that they want the UK to join Erasmus+ again, because that gives them the best opportunities for study, training and internships abroad. Will the Minister reassure my young constituents in Bath that joining Erasmus+ will be one of the highest priorities for the Government as they enter into further negotiations with the EU?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Certainly, there will be great opportunities for young people, both in the youth experience scheme and in associating with Erasmus+. I too welcome the cross-party consensus—even the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), backed the youth experience scheme in the debate a couple of weeks ago.

Jon Pearce: Today is starting to feel like a bit of a love-in. Last week, I met a group of constituents who presented me with a petition that demands better access for young people to learn and work in the EU. I have heard the Minister's responses to the last questions, but will he reassure those young people in my constituency that there will be opportunities for them to learn and work in the EU in the very near future?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We will see how long the love-in will last. None the less, the deal provides great opportunities for young people. As I indicated a moment or two ago, we will work towards establishing a balanced youth experience scheme that is time-limited, capped and subject to visa controls, like the 13 we already have with different countries around the world.

Sojan Joseph: Local businesses across Ashford, Hawkinge and the villages have warmly welcomed the new agreement that this Government have signed with the European Union, telling me that it will make it easier for them to sell their products to our largest trading partner. Does the Minister agree that to build on that agreement, everything possible should be done to find long-term solutions to current post-Brexit uncertainties, such as

the entry/exit system and the regular deployment of Operation Brock on the M20, to help UK-based businesses further develop trading links with Europe?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend's local businesses are in agreement with many others that welcomed the package with the EU. It cuts red tape and opens up access to the EU market.

On Operation Brock, the deployment is a decision for the Kent and Medway resilience forum, but the Department for Transport and Kent partners are working to keep it and other traffic management measures under review to ensure that they are designed and implemented in the most effective way, through actions such as traffic forecasting, using better data and exploring the use of AI for that purpose.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I do not know how much longer the love-in will last. [HON. MEMBERS: "Aw."] I will start off nicely.

The Minister has been commendably clear that the youth mobility scheme must be capped, and has made comparisons with agreements reached by the previous Government with countries such as Australia, Canada and Uruguay. He will know that last year 9,750 youth mobility visas were issued to Australian nationals, 3,060 to Canadians and just 140 to Uruguayans. Will he be equally clear in setting out what he thinks would be a reasonable level for that cap, or is it just a matter of whatever Brussels tells him he has to accept?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It certainly will not be; it will be subject to negotiation. I genuinely welcome the Opposition's support for a youth mobility scheme. I think it came as a bit of a surprise to some of their Back Benchers in that debate, but none the less I welcome it. What I have said—and this is what the wording of the common understanding sets out—is that it has to be balanced, capped and time-limited. That is the negotiation we will take forward.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I am going to resist all attempts to involve me in a love-in. However, the Liberal Democrats very much welcome the progress that has been made in the UK-EU reset. We are particularly pleased to see the Prime Minister listen to our long-standing calls on a defence fund, on a veterinary scheme and on youth mobility, or youth experience—whatever we are calling it now. The Minister knows that I am going to continue to press him on the matter. We welcome the announcement, but we need more certainty of the scheme's scope and timescales. I am thinking particularly of those young people who want to start making plans for their future, perhaps not for this summer but maybe for next. Will the youth experience scheme be open to them? Can they start to plan for experiences in the EU? May I press the Minister for more detail on the timeline for introducing the scheme?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her support. In fairness, she has been supportive of the youth experience scheme throughout. Having

secured the agreement at the summit, we will obviously move now into a different phase of the negotiations, looking at implementation, whether that is in terms of the link with the emissions trading systems, the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement or the youth experience scheme. We obviously want to move forward as quickly as we can with implementation.

EU: Trading Relationship

5. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the new trading relationship with the EU. [904362]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): There is no question but that the new arrangements we have with the European Union will grow our economy. It will put more money in the pockets of working people, and the proof will be there for all to see as it eases pressure on food prices and cuts red tape—more prosperity, more safety, more security—but unfortunately, it seems that the Opposition's position is to unpick all of that.

Mr Mohindra: The Government continue to celebrate last month's latest EU surrender deal, continuing their long-term ambition to undo the results of a democratic vote that their leadership has never agreed with and is doing its best to reverse at every opportunity. The Government have already proven that when Labour negotiates, Britain loses. Can the Minister reassure the House that this Government have no further intentions to surrender any more hard-won Brexit freedoms?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The only thing that has been surrendered is the credibility of the Conservative party. This Government have used the independent post-Brexit trade policy to secure a deal with India, a deal with the United States, and a deal with the EU that is good for jobs, good for bills and good for borders. The Conservatives will have to explain at the next election why they want to undo all of it.

Relocating Civil Service Roles

6. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to relocate civil service roles to locations outside London. [904363]

18. **Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to relocate civil service roles to locations outside London. [904376]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): The state has to reform to secure better value for money and outcomes for the public, and to ensure that government better reflects the country it serves. I often say that I want a civil service that speaks with all the accents of this great country. We are committed to half of UK-based senior civil servants being based outside London by the end of the decade. Last month, we confirmed plans to relocate thousands of civil service roles to 13 towns and cities across the country. The aim is to bring the civil service closer to local communities and to bring good employment prospects to different parts of the country.

Ian Lavery: I welcome that reply, and it is really progressive that the Government are now relocating jobs away from London, but can I urge the Minister to look closely at how people in places like my constituency of Blyth and Ashington—people everywhere, in rural and semi-rural constituencies as well as in more urban ones—can benefit from this fantastic policy? We all need to be able to benefit from this policy, not just certain peoples in city constituencies.

Pat McFadden: I very much hear what my hon. Friend says. I cannot stand here and say that there will be a civil service location in every single constituency in the country, but we are happy to have dialogue with MPs and local authorities from all parts of the country to get the biggest benefits possible from these decisions to locate civil service jobs around the country. The truth is, in this day and age, not everyone has to work in central London. We can get better value for money and, as I said, a public service that is closer to the public it serves.

Chris McDonald: I particularly welcome the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster saying that he would like to hear more accents from different parts of the country in the civil service. Billingham in Stockton North is home to the UK's biggest biomanufacturing cluster, and we are also somewhat exposed to international trade with our steel, chemical and automotive sectors. I very much welcome the expansion of the Darlington economic campus in the area of business and trade. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this will provide good jobs for my constituents in Stockton and Billingham, and will he ensure that policy implementation is closer to the source of economic activity?

Pat McFadden: We have the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), with us today. He pushed for the Darlington economic campus, which is a good innovation, and I know the current Chancellor of the Exchequer values it greatly. We want not just to relocate jobs, though that is important, but to have thematic campuses that can build up real areas of expertise, whether in digital skills, financial skills, energy skills and so on, to make a real difference to the communities in which these offices are located.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I thank the CDL for what he said, because the Darlington economic campus has been a huge success. It recently passed the milestone of 1,000 jobs, but crucially, 80% of those people were recruited locally, providing opportunities for constituents in my rural area and across the north-east, as we have heard.

The Darlington economic campus is also pioneering a very strong cross-Government approach to working, which is helping to combat the strong departmental DNA that the CDL mentioned. Will he join me in praising the leadership team at DEC for establishing themselves as an indispensable part of Government policymaking, and will he join me in ensuring that Darlington can serve as a model template for other campuses across the UK?

Pat McFadden: I join the right hon. Gentleman in praising the leadership team at DEC. He touches on a very important point, because we do not want just to

relocate jobs; we want people to have a good career path, too. In some of the civil service offices I have visited around the country since last year, people have raised the question, "Can I pursue a career here that gets me promoted?" It cannot just be about relocation; it has to be about the chance to build a career in these places.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): My party was pleased to hear the announcement that GB Energy is coming to Aberdeen, which we have consistently said is the only sensible place for it, as Members would expect an Aberdeen MP to say. Given that GB Energy will bring a maximum of 1,000 jobs over the next 10 years, will the right hon. Gentleman please encourage his ministerial colleagues not to suggest that those jobs will replace the 400 jobs a fortnight that we are set to lose in the offshore energy industry over the next five years?

Pat McFadden: Investment in renewables is an energy policy, but it is also an economic and employment policy. I can assure the hon. Member that investment from both the public sector and the private sector will see many good new jobs created in new sources of energy over the coming years and decades.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I welcome the relocation of civil service jobs across the country. With a recent study showing that Dudley has high levels of economic inactivity, what reassurances can my right hon. Friend give me that young people in Dudley will have every opportunity to build their career in the civil service, whether through training, apprenticeships or mentorships?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear my strong enthusiasm for greater employment opportunities for young people in the Black Country. When we made the announcement about the relocation last week, we also announced a new apprenticeship scheme, because we not only have to change location; we also have to change recruitment patterns if we are really to get a civil service that speaks with all the accents of the country.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): When the Minister is moving civil service jobs outside London, may I remind him that there is much more to the north than just Manchester and Leeds? Why are the Government moving the Information Commissioner's Office away from Wilmslow to Manchester, and what assessment has been done of the impact of that move on the economy of Wilmslow?

Pat McFadden: Mr Speaker, as you can see, this issue will prompt a lot of Members to stand up for their areas, and they are quite right to do so. As we do this, we will try to bring things together in a way that creates real expertise, and it is not just about cities; it is about other urban and semi-urban areas, too. The technology that allows us to move jobs outside London also allows us to do that.

Intelligence and Security Committee

8. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent engagement his Department has had with the Intelligence and Security Committee. [904365]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden):

The Intelligence and Security Committee does important and valuable work. The Cabinet Office engages constructively with the Committee and will continue to do so over the coming months. We have agreed to the Committee's requested uplift on budgeting and resourcing, which should help it do its job properly over the course of the next Parliament. We are also working with the ISC to identify the best operating model.

Sir Edward Leigh: Has the Minister had a discussion with the Intelligence and Security Committee as to why our normally sophisticated operations have not succeeded in making any significant dent in smashing the gangs and stopping the boats? Perhaps he might ask the Committee whether its view is that such is the pull factor and the desperation of these people that the only way we will stop the boats is to do what my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) was going to do: arrest them, deport them and send them back to where they came from.

Pat McFadden: I am not quite sure that was the previous Government's plan—maybe the right hon. Gentleman wishes it was. This is a hugely important issue for us. It is a security issue as well as an immigration issue. Of course, international policing and security operations to stop these gangs and this trade is a vital part of trying to combat it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament is unique, made up of Privy Counsellors from both Houses. However, last month the Committee took the highly unusual step of publicly criticising the Government for their failure to allow the Committee the staff and independence to fulfil its role overseeing the circa £3 billion annual spend, for which

"there is no oversight capability."

The Committee is led by an experienced Labour peer, and it just wants the basics: to have staff who are not totally beholden to the Cabinet Office, so that they can do their job on behalf of Parliament and the country, and to meet the Prime Minister. The work of our intelligence services has never been more important, given the grey zone that states are acting within at the moment, which must be properly overseen.

I asked a written question about when the Prime Minister would deign to meet the Committee. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare), said that one was being arranged. Has that now happened? I also asked written questions about the independence and resources of the Committee and was told that discussions were ongoing. On a matter of this seriousness, does Parliament not deserve more than fob-off half-answers, and will the Minister provide further details now?

Pat McFadden: I do not think the shadow Minister listened to my first answer. For the avoidance of doubt, I said that we have agreed to the Committee's requested uplift on budgeting and resourcing. Of course, the Prime Minister will be happy to meet the Committee at a convenient time that both can agree.

Civilian Gallantry Awards

10. Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of increasing the five-year time limit for civilian gallantry awards. [904367]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): Civilian gallantry awards rightly recognise the bravery of people who put themselves at risk to save or attempt to save another person's life. Honours policy is not the gift of Ministers, as it is overseen by the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals. However, long-standing practice over many decades is that the incident must have taken place in the last five years, and the only exception to this is where legal proceedings are ongoing.

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the Minister for her answer and for meeting me. She knows that I have been supporting the families of PC Taylor and DS Hunt in the search for recognition of their bravery, which resulted in their deaths some years ago. They cannot understand why there is a committee to consider historic military medals but not civilian ones. It appears to them that one set of people who put themselves in harm's way to protect our country can be recognised, but another set cannot. I appreciate what the Minister said, but can we look at instituting an equal committee for civilian honours? These families just want the proper recognition that historical administrative failures prevented them from receiving.

Ms Oppong-Asare: I know that the hon. Member is frustrated and has worked really hard on this. I express my deepest sympathies to the families of DS Hunt and PC Taylor. I am sure she will agree that it is good that their families were awarded the Elizabeth Emblem by His Majesty in December, in recognition of the sacrifice they made. Honours policy is not in the gift of Ministers; as I mentioned, it is set out by the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals. I recognise that she has written to the chair of the committee on this issue, and I am sure he will reply.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Caroline Johnson—not here.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

14. Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on establishing an infected blood compensation scheme. [904371]

19. Kate Osamor (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress he has made on establishing an infected blood compensation scheme. [904377]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Payments to infected people started at the end of last year. The Government expect payments to affected people to start by the end of this year. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority, which is independent of Government, publishes updated figures fortnightly. As of 3 June, it has contacted 1,360 people to begin a claim and made offers to 324 people,

totalling £253 million. There is much further to go, but progress is being made in delivering justice to the victims of this devastating scandal.

Matthew Patrick: In Wirral West, my constituent became a victim of this scandal over 50 years ago when she was a child, and it has affected her life ever since. In her own words, victims have gone through horrible levels of distress, and now they wait for compensation. That wait is not just for financial security; it is for closure. Could the Minister please give me and my constituent assurances that the speed at which the payments will be made will be ramped up?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend's constituent is entirely right to talk about the deep distress that victims have been through. IBCA is contacting an average of 100 people to start their claim every week, and expect to have brought into claim all those who are infected and registered with a support scheme this calendar year. I will continue to support IBCA to deliver compensation as quickly as possible.

Kate Osamor: The infected blood inquiry heard from black and Asian victims who say that they were even more dramatically let down due to discrimination, which has helped to create an understandable mistrust of the authorities and a lack of faith that justice will be done. Please could the Minister ensure that he does all he can to reach out to all communities to encourage everyone who is entitled to apply for the compensation scheme to do so?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the need to reach out to all communities and ensure that every single victim secures justice. I assure her that that is absolutely what the Government are committed to doing.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the progress that is being made by IBCA. Of course, the Minister is not directly responsible for how quickly that is rolling out. I note that IBCA has announced that its plan is to prioritise those infected who are still alive; indeed, my constituent Daryn Craik was contacted last week. I suggest that the Minister set up a metric that IBCA could agree to for the time between when people are contacted and when they receive their payment. He could then report that interval back to the House, which would hold IBCA to account on the delivery for these infected people, who have suffered for too long.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I again pay tribute to my predecessor as Paymaster General for the work he did in standing up for the victims of this scandal. He is right to raise the case of his constituent, and about the balance between respecting IBCA's independence and the levers, assistance and support that Ministers, and I specifically, can offer to IBCA. I would be more than happy to have a discussion with him about his specific suggestion.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): My constituent Phill is one of the 916 people in the special category mechanism who were suddenly and inexplicably excluded from the Government's infected blood compensation scheme when it was published in February

this year, even though the Government's expert group had said in August last year that they should be compensated. Why did the criteria informing the eligibility for the scheme change without explanation, and can the Minister please provide a list of all the conditions included in the core award?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. Components of the SCM criteria are planned in both the core awards and the supplementary route, and those in receipt of SCM payments can continue to receive those payments under the infected blood support schemes route. However, as I said in my evidence to the inquiry only a few weeks ago, that is a matter that I will consider further.

Civil Service Reform

15. **Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD):** What steps he is taking to reform the civil service. [904372]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): We want to see a civil service that delivers for the public. The reforms that we are pushing through include greater adoption of technology; relocating civil service jobs around the country, as we have discussed; and, critically, a focus on outcomes in key public service areas, not just the processes that lead to them.

Marie Goldman: Many of my Chelmsford constituents are civil servants who travel into London most days of the week to perform their jobs. Last month, a Centre for Economics and Business Research report revealed that the UK may need 92,000 more public workers by 2030 to maintain the same level of output, due to falls in productivity in the sector. However, the Cabinet Office has refused to comment on reports in recent days that the Government plan to cut the number of civil servants by 10% by the end of the decade, which will have an impact on my Chelmsford constituents. Will the Minister confirm today whether a 10% cut to civil service headcount is planned and if any of that will take the form of compulsory redundancy?

Pat McFadden: It is fair to ask for productivity improvements from civil servants on behalf of the taxpayer. We have had an increase in hiring over the past 10 years. We do not have a target for a headcount reduction—that was tried under the last Government and did not work—but we do have a target for reduction in admin and overhead spend. We want to work with civil servants on how that will be done. I say to the hon. Lady that when the taxpayer is committing funds to public services, we want to ensure we get maximum productivity in the public sector; we cannot just resign ourselves to lower productivity and the answer always being to hire more people.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): How is the Cabinet Office working with the Department of Health and Social Care to bring down waiting lists, not just in Blackpool but across the UK?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend will know that waiting lists have fallen by around 200,000 since the election. We set an aim of 2 million extra appointments in the

first year; we have not had 2 million extra appointments but 3 million, and the first year is not yet over. We are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on that. We know it is just the start: it is a good start, but we have a long way to go to get the health service back to the levels that we want to see.

National Resilience

16. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening national resilience. [904373]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): In April, we launched the UK Resilience Academy. We will be undertaking a full national pandemic response exercise that will test the UK's capabilities, plans, protocols and procedures in the event of another major pandemic. I have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders to identify the gaps. As a result, we have developed a new risk vulnerability map to identify areas with high numbers of people who may need more support in a crisis.

Perran Moon: After a decade of under-investment in our critical minerals industry, the Conservative Government have left the UK wildly over-reliant on Chinese supply chains. In order to strengthen our national economic resilience, does the Minister agree that the UK's industrial strategy must support rapid acceleration of domestic production and processing of critical minerals?

Ms Oppong-Asare: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the industrial strategy, which will be published shortly. It will set out our vision to deliver growth and economic security and resilience. Alongside that, the Government are working closely with industry to publish a new critical minerals strategy this year, to help secure our supply chain for the long term and drive forward the green industries of the future.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Economic resilience is a key part of our national resilience. One of the strongest ways in which the Government can have it is to support the delivery of goods and services via British companies in the first instance. Does the Minister agree? Can he update the House on what steps the Government are taking to bolster procurement policies so that they put British supply chains first?

Ms Oppong-Asare: This Government are committed to working with and supporting British industries. That has been at the heart of our plan for delivery, which is why we have worked across and engaged with industries. Our industrial strategy is key to ensuring that that happens.

Topical Questions

T1. [904392] **David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Since our last oral questions session, the Government have secured a historic agreement with the European

Union that removes a huge amount of cost and bureaucracy from our food and drinks industry, that backs British jobs and that will help British consumers. I thank the Paymaster General for all his excellent work on securing that agreement. We have also set out details of how we will reform the state, moving thousands of civil service jobs around the country and launching a new apprenticeship scheme so that young people, wherever they live, have a better chance of good work in the public service.

David Chadwick: This week, I uncovered the Government's shocking decision to designate the Oxford to Cambridge railway line as an England and Wales project. It is clearly nothing of the sort, and the decision will cost Wales £360 million-worth of funding for our own network. Will the Minister commit to devolving full rail infrastructure powers to Wales in this Parliament?

Pat McFadden: I urge the hon. Member to have a little patience until the spending review in a few days' time. We got a taste of it yesterday, with the Chancellor announcing funding for major transport projects around the country. We are investing in public services not just in England, but right across the United Kingdom. The hon. Member will hear a lot more about that in a few days' time.

T2. [904393] **Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Despite the majority of hereditary peers leaving the other place and the limitations post-election on the Opposition's ability to appoint new peers, the House of Lords will remain disproportionately dominated by Opposition peers. Why not tweak the Fowler recommendations, set a new limit of 500 and legislate for that in the last year of this Parliament? When that is blocked, as it will be, why not leave reform of the House of Lords to be an issue at the next general election?

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I thank my hon. Friend for his innovative suggestion. He rightly points out that following the passage of the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill, the Opposition will remain the largest party in the other place. That Bill, which we are keen to see on the statute book as soon as possible, is the first step in Lords reform. The Government set out in our manifesto a number of proposals to bring about a smaller, more active second Chamber that better reflects the country it serves.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has already told the House about plans for a reduction in civil service numbers. Since he came into office, how many civil service roles in the Cabinet Office and its agencies have been eliminated?

Pat McFadden: We hope to see a reduction of around 2,000 in Cabinet Office numbers over the next few years. We have instituted a voluntary exit scheme, which will make the management of headcount easier and will come into force very soon.

Alex Burghart: The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster very skilfully talked about the future, rather than the past year. I will let him know that during the past year, the number of roles in his Department and its agencies has increased by 828. That cannot give the House a great deal of confidence that his future cuts will be effective. Will he guarantee that that is a one-off and that he will go back and ensure that the Cabinet Office is actually reduced in size?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman was part of a Government who regularly produced headcount targets for civil servants that were about as reliable as the immigration targets that the Conservatives also produced. I have made it clear that we do not seek a particular headcount target; it depends on what people do. We are trying to reduce the overhead spend, but we are prepared to hire more people when it comes to frontline public service delivery. That is why we are hiring more teachers and getting the waiting lists down. We are not adopting the hon. Gentleman's approach; therefore, I will not fall into the trap that he is trying to set.

T4. [904395] **Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): Businesses in my constituency often complain about the shocking Brexit deal that the Conservative party gave us, with more costs, more red tape and more paperwork. That is why Labour Members welcome the new EU deal negotiated by this Government. Can the Minister set out how businesses in my constituency—in Loughborough, Shepshed and the villages—will benefit from our new grown-up relationship with the European Union?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The package will cut red tape and reduce barriers to trade for businesses; make it easier for businesses to export iconic products such as Melton Mowbray pork pies, Red Leicester cheese and Stilton cheese; and open up wider access to the UK market. That is why it has been backed right across the business sector.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Fellow right hon. and hon. Members will have noticed that some political parties have begun accepting cryptocurrency donations—far be it from me to suggest that this might be an attempt to dodge the transparency requirements for donations. Does the Minister join me in welcoming the Electoral Commission's clear guidance that donations that do not come from a permissible or identifiable source must be returned, and will he be speaking with ministerial colleagues in other Departments about making sure that the forthcoming elections Bill ensures that any political donation involving crypto is fully transparent and in line with our laws?

Pat McFadden: It is absolutely right that as finance evolves, so too must the rules we have to ensure transparency and probity in elections. Therefore, the rules regarding the source of funding and the bona fide character of the donors must apply whatever currency is involved.

T5. [904397] **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): Labour's plan to make work pay promised to bring about the biggest wave of insourcing of public services in a generation. Insourced services are

often shown to provide better value for money. Will the Government provide an update on their work to ensure that public bodies carry out public interest tests when outsourced contracts expire?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): The Government are determined to deliver high-quality public services and better value for money for the taxpayer. We have committed to introducing a public interest test to assess whether expiring contracts could provide better outcomes and better value in-house, and that was included in the national procurement policy statement.

T7. [904400] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): A recent cyber-attack on schools and early learning IT in my constituency knocked out online access, but also underlined the need for a positive interaction between Scotland's two Governments, rather than the constant constitutional bickering we have seen in recent years. With cyber-security about to move out of the Cabinet Office, can the Minister assure us about the way in which a positive cross-governmental and intergovernmental approach to these relationships will be secured?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Lady raises a good point. At the meeting of the Council of the Nations and Regions that took place a couple of weeks ago, issues of technology were very high on the agenda. We take these forums for dialogue very seriously, and I think I am right in saying that we can have a discussion on this issue without some of the heat that characterises other subjects that come up.

T6. [904399] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): Given the extremely welcome recent news that economic growth for the first quarter of 2025 was 1.6%, indicating that the Government's mission to kick-start economic growth in the UK is beginning to work, can the Minister set out what plans exist Government-wide to make sure that that prosperity makes a positive difference to all families in the UK, including in the most deprived neighbourhoods such as Swanscombe and Temple Hill in my constituency?

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): My hon. Friend is right to celebrate the recent figures showing that the UK was the fastest-growing economy in the G7 in the first quarter of this year—a sign that this Government's focus on growth is beginning to bear fruit. We are determined to drive growth in every corner of the country. The lower Thames crossing, which my hon. Friend has long campaigned for and this Government have approved, will deliver big benefits in Dartford and beyond.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In terms of encouraging public participation in democracy and in politics, I have found that school visits are constructive, even in the far north of Scotland, and that is on a strictly non-party political basis. What thoughts might the Government have about encouraging other MPs to engage in that way? It is informative and constructive.

Ellie Reeves: Visiting schools in my constituency is one of my favourite parts of being a Member of Parliament, and I encourage all MPs to do the same. We will

legislate to lower the voting age to 16 for all UK elections—when parliamentary time allows, and following engagement and planning with relevant stakeholders—as a way to drive forward participation in democracy.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): At yesterday's meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, we heard from someone whose father was terminally ill and unlikely to survive to see the compensation to which he is entitled. It is not fair on people who have waited 40 years for justice that they are left at the starting line for compensation. Is there any way we can make a list of people who are in that situation and calculate their entitlement for their estate?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work he does with the all-party parliamentary group. He will know that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has published a prioritisation list in recent months. I can also update the House that IBCA is contacting an average of 100 people every week to start their claim, and it expects in this calendar year to have brought in to claim all those who are infected and registered with a support scheme.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will know that the UK has some of the best intelligence agencies in the world, and they have huge powers and huge budgets which they use to keep our country safe every single day of the week.

He also knows that in any large organisation mistakes are made and public confidence in those agencies is vital. Given that the Intelligence Services Act 1994 is more than 30 years old—there have been some other Acts—is it not time for the Intelligence and Security Committee to have new powers of oversight and even new powers of sanction, so that the public can have confidence that our intelligence agencies have proper scrutiny and oversight?

Pat McFadden: Let me echo the right hon. Member's words in paying tribute to the work that our intelligence and security agencies do in keeping us all safe every day. We discussed the Committee earlier in these questions. The Government have approved an uplift in resources for the Committee, and we are working closely with it on the best operating model for doing its job as effectively as possible.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Mr Speaker,

“The only good Tory is a dead Tory. Kill your local MP”—

so said the controversial Ulster rap band who remain on the bill at Glastonbury. Given that is the case, can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster reassure the House that no Cabinet Office Ministers will be attending Glastonbury this year?

Pat McFadden: I will not be going to Glastonbury, but I am very much looking forward to seeing Bruce Springsteen at Anfield stadium on Saturday night.

Business of the House

10.33 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I shall. The business for the week commencing 9 June includes:

MONDAY 9 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (day one).

TUESDAY 10 JUNE—Consideration of a Lords message to the Data (Use and Access) Bill [*Lords*], followed by remaining stages of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (day two).

WEDNESDAY 11 JUNE—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will present the spending review 2025, followed by Second Reading of the Sustainable Aviation Fuel Bill.

THURSDAY 12 JUNE—General debate on the distribution of SEND funding, followed by general debate on the fifth anniversary of the covid-19 pandemic. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 13 JUNE—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 16 June will include:

MONDAY 16 JUNE—Motion relating to the House of Commons independent complaints and grievance scheme, followed by a general debate on Windrush Day 2025. The subject for that debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 17 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Crime and Policing Bill (day one).

WEDNESDAY 18 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Crime and Policing Bill (day two).

THURSDAY 19 JUNE—Motion to approve the draft Licensing Act 2003 (UEFA Women's European Football Championship Licensing Hours) Order 2025, followed by a general debate on incontinence, followed by general debate on water safety education. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 20 JUNE—Private Members' Bills.

Colleagues may also wish to be aware that on Tuesday 24 June and Wednesday 25 June the House is expected to debate estimates.

Jesse Norman: Today has a great double significance. As the House may know, it is World Environment Day, when we celebrate the natural world and recommit ourselves as a Parliament to seek to protect it; and it is also the putative date of birth of Adam Smith, one of my great heroes, who did as much as anyone has ever done to explain the world in which we live. If I may move from the sublime to the sublimely incompetent, this week has otherwise been one disaster after another for the Government.

On Monday, we had to drag the Leader of the House to the Dispatch Box yet again, and she had to apologise—yet again—for the Government's flagrant disregard for this House of Commons in briefing out the strategic

defence review over the weekend. There is no more important issue than the defence of the realm. It is a UK-wide, long-term, all-party matter and has always been treated as such, yet the Government chose to share the document not only with their friends in the media, but with the industry, at least six hours before it came to this Chamber or to Opposition parties. It is a matter of deep embarrassment for the Government and raises serious questions about the private sharing of financially sensitive information. The Leader of the House and the Defence Secretary are both honourable people, and I have no doubt that she has made the case every week in Cabinet for doing such communications properly. It is just extraordinary that these two members of the Cabinet are being hung out to dry every week by the 12-year-olds in 10 Downing Street.

You could have granted an urgent question every single day this week, Mr Speaker, such has been the deluge of important announcements prematurely made outside this House. Today, it is free school meals. Yesterday, it was the reannouncement of Northern Rail spending. The only mitigating factor is that the Government have been so incompetent in handling their slow-motion U-turn on the winter fuel allowance that no one has noticed anything else—though we still await a statement to the House on that issue as well.

What about the strategic defence review itself? We should start by thanking the reviewers for their hard work over many months. I know everyone in this House will want to do that, but if we look at the hard substance of the review, matters become more difficult. First of all, many of the announcements largely repeat the decisions of previous Governments—for example, on submarines, on AUKUS and on warheads. Secondly, and most crucially, where is the funding? Government Ministers have tied themselves in knots over the last few days as to whether the 3% of GDP target is “an ambition”, an aim, or simply to be undertaken “when fiscal circumstances allow” or “in the next Parliament”.

Luckily, General Richard Barrons, one of the SDR reviewers, was more honest, saying that the SDR's financial profile—the assumptions against which the reviewers were working—assumed that defence will get 2.5% of GDP in financial year 2027-28 and 3% of GDP by no later than 2034. The great irony is that, not three weeks from now, we will have the NATO summit, which will call not for 3%, but for 3.5% plus 1.5%. We are light years away from that commitment. The awful truth is that real money will not begin to flow into the armed forces until the defence industrial strategy and the defence investment plan are announced later this year, hopefully in the proper way to this House. That will be 15 months after the Government took office. It is lucky that we do not have a war in Europe.

Thirdly, where is the threat to our adversaries? No extra cash means no extra commitment, no commitment means no credibility and no credibility means no increased sense of threat to those we face. What do we know? We know that there is a war in Europe in which Russia is moving men and matériel not merely to push on in Ukraine, but to threaten the Baltic states. Ukraine had a glorious victory in the past few days, but we cannot rely on such victories, and we must support it in its struggle against Russia.

What do we know? We know that Xi Jinping has directed the People's Liberation Army to develop the capability to invade Taiwan by 2027, and we know that

[Jesse Norman]

NATO allies, who have a collective responsibility to each other, in some cases have a long way to go before they are even at 2% of GDP, let alone 3.5%. Instead of giving real leadership, and putting cash on the table, our own Government are talking about readying the country for war while in reality they continue to dither and delay.

Lucy Powell: Mr Speaker, I understand that today is Press Association parliamentary editor Richard Wheeler's last day in the Gallery. He has covered our proceedings for 12 years, and I am sure we can all agree that that is quite a shift, with Brexit, covid, six Prime Ministers and many interventions from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), all having been covered by him.

As I have announced, on Monday 6 June we will debate a motion in my name to implement the recommendations of last year's independent Kernaghan review of Parliament's Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme. The ICGS was set up in 2018 in response to many serious incidents of bullying, sexual harassment, unacceptable behaviour and poor culture. Through its work and its existence, strides have been made in addressing our reputation and improving working culture. However, we must continue to do better and to respond. That is why I have tabled proposals from the independent review to strengthen and improve the processes of the ICGS. I have asked its director for a fuller briefing, which, upon receipt, I will place in the Library ahead of the debate so that Members can consider these issues more fully.

I thank the shadow Leader of the House for wanting a replay of the urgent question on Monday. Following some of the questions that were put to me then, I did say that, with your permission, Mr Speaker, I would come back to the House on some of the issues that were raised. Without going through the whole thing again, I want to be clear about some of the things that did and did not happen. The Government were endeavouring to act in good faith and to follow the procedure and practice for many previous SDRs—and I have looked at all of the procedures and practices for previous SDRs.

We recognise that there is room for improvement—there always is—but I want to let the House know that advance briefings were offered to all Opposition spokespeople, the Chair of the Defence Committee and a select few from the defence community. An embargoed copy of the full SDR was provided to the Select Committee Clerk shortly after 10 am, and hard copies were provided to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat spokespeople 90 minutes before the statement. As I reiterated on Monday, the full document was laid first in the House in the afternoon. I have spoken with you, Mr Speaker, and the Defence Secretary, who I am sure the whole House will agree takes his responsibilities to this House incredibly seriously. He wants to draw up a clear process for this Government and future Governments to follow, so that the expectations of all concerned are clear.

I really will not be taking advice from the right hon. Gentleman about respecting Parliament. He was a Minister and a Member of Parliament under the previous Government, whom the Supreme Court said had acted illegally by proroguing Parliament. There could be no greater disrespect to this House than that. He also

served under the former Prime Minister who was found to have misled Parliament. Again, no worse crime than that could be committed.

The right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about defence spending, but the Conservatives had 14 years in government to get to the 2.5% target. Did they get to 2.5% in any one of those 14 years? No, they did not. When was the last time this country spent 2.5% on defence? Oh yes, it was the last time Labour was in government. That is what we are doing again now, so he might want to look at his own record on that.

I see that today we have had a big move on the economy from the Conservatives—yes, a big move. They want to draw a line under Liz Truss. But where is the apology, because I did not hear one? They finally seem to recognise that crashing the economy was “a big error”, but they do not seem to understand that it is the ordinary working people of this country who are still paying the price for their actions. The Conservatives should be apologising for that, yet the right hon. Gentleman wants to go around spending more money. He does not seem to have got the memo on that.

Let us just be clear. It is really important that we are clear about why we took the decisions we did at the start of this Parliament. The right hon. Gentleman's Government left no fiscal responsibility—something they now want to try to retain—and they left huge, gaping black holes in the public finances. Borrowing costs were at record highs and there was a cost of living crisis crushing ordinary people. When markets lose confidence, which is what they did under his Government and what they were potentially doing at the start of this Parliament, and the economy crashes, it is those on low, fixed incomes, such as pensioners and families living in poverty, who see the cost of living going up. It is they who pay the heaviest price when the economy crashes. That is why this Labour Government put economic stability first. That was our first priority, because we recognise who pays the heaviest price when that goes wrong.

I welcome the recognition from the shadow Chancellor today, but it does not seem like everybody got the memo. The right hon. Gentleman seems to want to spend even more money from the Dispatch Box, without saying where it will come from. The shadow Business Secretary, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), seems to want to get rid of some of the tax increases from the Budget, again without saying where the money will come from.

Now that we have stabilised the economy, we are putting our values into practice further. We are seeing huge investment in the north and in the midlands on key transport infrastructure, investment in the jobs of the future, bringing down waiting lists month after month after month, and 3 million more NHS appointments. The right hon. Gentleman did not want to mention this, but today we are announcing the biggest expansion of free school meals in years, lifting 100,000 children out of poverty. That is the difference a Labour Government make: securing the real incomes of ordinary working people, putting our public services back on their feet and lifting children out of poverty.

Satvir Kaur (Southampton Test) (Lab): As it is World Environment Day, does the Leader of the House agree that while the UK has beautiful national parks, local parks and green spaces in urban cities such as Southampton

are just as treasured and as valuable in bringing communities together and improving health and wellbeing, making such cities the great places that they are? Communities in my constituency enjoyed a week-long Urban Wild festival during the half-term holiday, as part of Southampton's journey in becoming the UK's first national park city outside London. Will she join me in congratulating Christelle Blunden in particular, but also the army of volunteers, friends of groups, charities and many more who champion our local nature every day and who are behind Southampton's national park city campaign? Finally—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please sit down. This is a very important subject and I congratulate the hon. Lady—she did ask me at the beginning and it is fantastic news—but I have to get a lot of Members in today. So, please, I am sure the Leader of the House has grasped the message.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a compelling case for Southampton's national park city status, and indeed for the fantastic contribution that green spaces, nature and wild places make to our cities, making places such as Southampton a great place to live.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): The Liberal Democrats warmly welcome reports that eligibility for free school meals is being extended to all children in England whose parents receive universal credit. This is a Lib Dem policy on which we have campaigned for a long time, and it is a positive first step to help to lift children out of poverty. Of course, there is much more to do. Among other much needed changes, we would point to the importance of fully funding the policy for schools and auto-enrolling eligible children to ensure that they get the support they need.

I will also highlight, once again, something that is raised in business questions nearly every week: special educational needs. In March it was reported in the media that the Government will produce a White Paper on special educational needs to address the crisis in schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities. We are hearing rumours that this White Paper may be delayed until the autumn, or possibly until next year. Children with special educational needs are still without support, parents are still battling with local authorities, schools are still struggling to cope, and councils are still left staring at the prospect of a £5 billion deficit next year from SEND being added to their budgets. Will the Leader of the House implore the Government to, at the very least, provide a timescale for publishing the White Paper?

Lucy Powell: First, I thank the hon. Lady for what she said about free school meals. I know it is a policy the Liberal Democrats have also campaigned on, but it is this Government who have a proud record of advancing free school meals and lifting children out of poverty, which is exactly what we are doing today, and will continue to do over the coming weeks.

The hon. Lady raises the matter of special educational needs, which—she is absolutely right—is raised very often in these questions. I know that it is an issue of great importance to our constituents and to many Members

across the House, as I am sure she will accept. I will ensure that any developments in this regard are brought to the House, and that Members have ample opportunity to contribute to them. I am sure she will agree with me that in recent years our special educational needs system has not delivered the outcomes for those who need it most, and that the process is not good for parents and families either. We need to make changes to the system to deliver good outcomes in both mainstream and specialist settings. I will ensure that the House is kept fully up to date.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): The Just the Tonic comedy festival is coming to South Derbyshire in July, the festival having chosen Elvaston castle as its venue—a place I am helping the local parish council to save as publicly owned. Who does not love comedy? Yet despite being nationally loved and generating billions across live digital streaming and more, comedy remains an economically under-leveraged sector, excluded from arts funding, Government reports and the Creative Industries Council itself. Using comedy in social prescribing could help us save billions on mental healthcare, and I am working with Lou Jackson of Craic House—that is C-R-A-I-C—on a tech platform to help comedians. Will the Leader of the House dedicate time for a debate on our comedy industry?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a compelling case. Of course, comedy is no joke when it comes to the economy. [*Interruption.*] I try my best, Mr Speaker, but I am obviously not as good as those at Craic House in my hon. Friend's constituency. She makes a great point, and I am sure that Ministers will have heard her call today that the comedy sector is a vital part of our cultural and creative industries, and we will do everything to support it.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for making time this week for the debate on dementia, which was well attended, with a time limit imposed on Back-Bench speeches. However, I think she owes an apology to the proposers of the debate on the Thursday before we rose for recess, when the debate was curtailed at the Government's response so that they could make a statement, after which you, Mr Speaker, had to adjourn the House for an hour, after individuals who wanted to speak were unable to do so, before the Government finally made a statement.

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, next Thursday there will be a statement from the Business and Trade Committee. I am glad that the right hon. Lady has continued the experiment of having Backbench Business debates after Government business, with the Windrush Day debate, which I am sure will be well attended, and indeed the estimates days that have been announced. Applications are now open, and we will consider them at our meeting on 17 June. We will give priority to the Departments that were not chosen for the estimate day debates earlier this year.

In addition, the business in Westminster Hall next week is as follows: on Tuesday there will be the debate on the United States Agency for International

[*Bob Blackman*]

Development's pause on funding and its impact on UK international development; on Thursday there will be a debate on legal recognition of humanist marriages, followed by a debate on long-term conditions; on Tuesday 17 June there will be a debate on hydrogen-powered aviation; and on Thursday 19 June there will be a debate on the role of careers education in improving social mobility, followed by a debate on Down's syndrome regression disorder.

Over the weekend and earlier this week, we had our first cross-party delegation from India for many years. It included parliamentarians from all religions, and I know that many MPs and Members of the House of Lords had the opportunity to meet them. Two things came out of that delegation loudly and clearly: first, that the uneasy truce that exists between India and Pakistan could at any time be violated if further terrorist actions emanate from Pakistan; and secondly, that India is reaching out for support from the west on security and defence measures, and we must assist it. May we have a statement next week, probably from the Foreign Secretary, on what we in this Parliament will do to support India in its need to quash terrorism?

Lucy Powell: As ever, I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for announcing the forthcoming business and arranging for the estimates day applications to be opened up. I am sorry that he missed our last session before the recess. Perhaps he was not aware that I congratulated him and said that I hoped he had not had much sleep—I know that he had been out celebrating Tottenham winning some silverware for the first time in quite some time. That was a very good excuse not to be here. I was asked at that session about the Backbench Business Committee debate the previous week, and I made it clear that what happened was not of our own making. It was a challenging situation: we were having to deal with a press conference that was being hosted by the President of the United States and, of course, he was not that interested in the goings-on in Parliament that day, but we were keen to make sure that a statement was brought to the House at the earliest opportunity. That is definitely not an experience that any of us wants to repeat, if at all possible.

I thank the hon. Member for mentioning the delegation of Indian parliamentarians. I was hoping to meet them myself, but I was unable to do so on this occasion, but I hope to do so in future. He is right that our relationship with India is important, which is why this Government are so pleased that we have agreed an unprecedented trade deal with India. There are also, as he says, security and other issues between India and Pakistan, and this House has been kept updated on those matters and I shall make sure that continues to be the case.

Mr Speaker: To help Members, we will run business questions to around 11.45. We can help each other by moving quickly, so I call Leigh Ingham to provide a good example.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Two amazing young women in my constituency, Liz and Grace, are part of the team from Newport high school for girls who this week competed in the Young Enterprise finals. Liz, Grace and the rest of the team set up a company from

scratch, designed and manufactured a unique product and have made more than £2,400 in profits, all while doing their A-levels. As co-chair of the women and enterprise APPG, I am proud to see this home-grown talent. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating them, and may we have a debate on supporting the next generation of women to become involved in enterprise?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Liz and Grace on their enterprising endeavours and making such a good profit while also studying for their A-levels. My hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, who is sitting next to me, will have heard that question. Getting more young women into enterprise and business is obviously very important.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Many constituents in Potters Bar have contacted me with concerns about increases in applications for houses of multiple occupation. Streets such as Strafford Gate are quiet residential roads with semi-detached bungalows. They are really not suitable for being converted into units with five or six bedrooms. Will the Leader of the House find time for us to debate whether planning rules in respect of houses of multiple occupation are fit for purpose?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about what is happening in Potters Bar. The right hon. Member is right that the proliferation of HMOs can have a devastating effect on communities. Local authorities have some regulations and powers, but they are often not sufficient. That is why we have the Renters' Rights Bill coming through to strengthen the powers of local authorities in the private rented sector, including in relation to HMOs. I look forward to the right hon. Member supporting the Bill as it progresses.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I want to pay tribute to Doncaster boxing legend Terri Harper, who is a three-weight world champion and the first British woman to win titles in three weight divisions. She defended and retained her lightweight boxing title last month in Doncaster. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Terri on her incredible success, and will she make time in the Chamber to discuss how we can encourage girls to become the next generation of leaders in women's sport, just like Terri?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Terri. We want to see more women getting involved in sport, not only competing at the highest level like Terri but taking part, because it is really good for their life, wellbeing, health and education.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My constituent was due to have her radio teleswitch meter replaced on Thursday after three years of wrangling with her supplier, but it did not happen. We know that the RTS switch-off is happening at the end of June, and at the current rate in Scotland it will take 380 days for all the meters to be replaced. Can we get a statement from the Government on an issue that is fast becoming a crisis?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. It has been raised with me on a number of occasions by the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire,

Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) as well. No one should be left without a signal, and that is what should be happening, but I will ensure that the hon. Lady and other Members are kept updated, because this is an urgent matter.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I was in the House during business questions on 9 January when my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), Chair of the Defence Committee, referred to the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar in June 1984, ordered by the then Indian Government. Documents revealed in 2014 showed that the Thatcher Government had helped their Indian counterpart by providing advice for Operation Blue Star. Since 2014 there have been many calls to establish the extent of the British Government's involvement, and many assurances have been given. Will the Leader of the House give a statement to the House announcing an independent, judge-led public inquiry to, in her own words, get to the bottom of what happened?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. As he says, it was raised with me a few months ago, and I made it clear on that occasion what I hoped would happen. I understand the concerns of Members across the House and of members of the Sikh community, many of whom he represents. When I was asked about this issue previously, I did follow up, and I am sorry to say that I am still waiting. When I do hear from the Foreign Office, I will ensure that my hon. Friend and other Members are made fully aware and that the House is updated.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The Landywood voluntary help centre in Great Wyrley, which is completely staffed by volunteers, has been supporting people of all ages for 50 years. May we have a debate in Government time to thank such organisations for the work they do, in all our constituencies across the country, to support the most vulnerable?

Lucy Powell: I join the right hon. Member in thanking the volunteers at that help centre and all the other volunteers in all our constituencies. Voluntary work is a common theme of business questions week after week, and I am sure that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), will have heard that we would all like the opportunity to pay tribute to and thank all volunteers for the tremendous work they do in our constituencies.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): It is almost 30 years since the iconic replica of Sir Francis Drake's Golden Hinde arrived at the historic St Mary Overie dock on the Thames in Southwark. Will the Leader of the House provide time to debate what Government at every level can do to ensure that we continue celebrating our maritime history and educating future generations through amazing interactive experiences like those that the Golden Hinde provides to children from my constituency in Southwark and across the globe?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I am sure we are all familiar with the Golden Hinde from walking along the south bank. Restoring our heritage assets is really important to this Government,

and we announced additional funding to the heritage at risk programme in February. I hope that my hon. Friend and Southwark council can work together to do their bit to restore and bring back to life that great asset.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Tackling child poverty is incredibly important. On Monday, the Leader of the House told me:

"I will ensure that she and the House are updated on the timings for the child poverty taskforce".—[*Official Report*, 2 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 33.]

I would appreciate an update on the timings. When will we know when the announcements will be made?

Lucy Powell: The Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), will shortly give a statement to the House about progress with free school meals. As part of that statement, I am assured that he will let the House know where we are with the timings of the taskforce and when we can expect the report.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Many of my constituents have been deeply distressed by the story of Beth Martin, a mum of two from my constituency who tragically died in unclear circumstances on holiday in Turkey last month. My thoughts and sympathies go out to her husband Luke and her two children, and indeed to all who love her. I thank the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for his sensitive and swift work. Will the Leader of the House please make time for him to update me on his work internationally regarding this devastating death?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about that distressing case. I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our thoughts to Beth's husband Luke and her two young children at this awful time. I am pleased to hear that the Minister has been working with her. I will ensure that that continues and that she is kept constantly updated.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for the Government's assurance that the Chagos islands treaty will be debated in the House. May I draw her attention to the prayer of early-day motion 1398, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and others?

[*That the Agreement, done at London and Port Louis on 22 May 2025, between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Mauritius concerning the Chagos Archipelago including Diego Garcia, should not be ratified.*]

Compliant with the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, a debate is required within 21 sitting days of laying a treaty before the House. The treaty was laid on 22 May. Will the Government give an assurance that the motion will be debated in Government time before the expiry of those 21 days so that the House gets a proper opportunity to decide whether the treaty should be ratified?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising that issue. As he knows, the agreement was laid before both Houses on 22 May, and under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act both Houses have 21 sitting days—running to 3 July—to scrutinise and lay, as he said, anything they want to on that. We will ensure that the full CRaG process is followed at all times. He will be aware that, in addition, we will introduce legislation to implement the agreement, and there will be ample time for the House to consider the Bill to ratify the treaty.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I am delighted to have championed additional funding of more than £10 million for the Royal Wolverhampton NHS trust and over £1 million for Walsall Manor hospital for essential work and upgrades. Let us contrast that to the Tories, who oversaw a backlog of maintenance and crumbling hospitals. Will the Leader of the House meet me to continue championing safe, modern, future-fit facilities for patients and hard-working staff in Wolverhampton North East?

Lucy Powell: I am really pleased that the Government have ensured that the funding is there to provide the vital upgrades needed for the Royal Wolverhampton NHS trust. My hon. Friend is right that we inherited a hospital capital programme that was a work of fiction; there was not a penny allocated to many of the promises that had been made. We have now set out a clear timetable with allocated funding so that her hospital and many others can get the improvements they desperately need.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): The Leader of the House will be well aware that the global ocean treaty has still not had its passage through the House. With the first ever ocean conference of the parties coming up quickly, next year, will she confirm when the biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction agreement will be brought forward for ratification?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. Along with other parliamentarians, I was pleased, but also moved, to watch the “Ocean with David Attenborough” documentary with David Attenborough in the House of Lords. I can assure her that I and this Government were already resolved to ensure that that treaty was ratified and the Bill brought forward. Having watched the documentary, I will ensure that we do that in a timely fashion.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): This week, my office has had to respond to several concerning incidents of misinformation regarding police investigations in my constituency. In one case, a national newspaper sought to sensationalise a very serious incident in which an officer was investigated for gross misconduct. In another, a false claim that a mugging was carried out by an asylum seeker, when in fact it was a British national known to police, was spread on social media. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is irresponsible to cast judgment on such serious issues without full knowledge of the facts, and will she consider granting parliamentary time for a debate on how we can tackle misinformation in our communities and ensure police can carry out their duties without such interference?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the cases that my hon. Friend describes. She is right that the quick spreading of misinformation and disinformation on social media and elsewhere in such cases can be of great concern in relation to safety on our streets and protection of our public servants and others. Indeed, it can cause real problems, as we saw last summer. We are taking action in that regard. The Online Safety Act 2023 was not as strong in this area as it could have been, but we will work to strengthen the laws where necessary.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on the three flagrant breaches of the ministerial code committed by the Defence Secretary on Monday? For the record, the Opposition received their copy of the strategic defence review mid-afternoon, the media received it at 10.30 am, and defence companies received it at 8 o'clock in the morning. Within minutes, there were share price spikes in a number of defence stocks.

Section 8.11 of the “Ministerial Code” clearly states: “where commercially sensitive material is involved, no copies should be made available to the media before publication.”

Mr Speaker: I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that I understand he wants clarification, but a business question from a Front-Bench spokesperson on his own subject is not normally accepted.

Lucy Powell: Thank you for that, Mr Speaker, but I am happy to address some of the issues in that question, albeit from the right hon. Gentleman sitting on the Back Benches.

I gently remind the right hon. Gentleman that the process that was followed by the Ministry of Defence, which included making available in advance security briefings for Opposition Members and others, as well as a reading room, was exactly the same process that was followed in previous SDRs. *[Interruption.]* He may want to look at that. I understand that his Front-Bench boss, the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), was offered that briefing and to go into the reading room—a briefing that he declined to take up. That is what was followed, as on every other occasion. That is why I said earlier that the Defence Secretary, who takes his commitments to this House incredibly seriously, wants to ensure that, for this and all future Governments, there is a process to agree so that on future occasions everybody can be clear about the expectations of timings and how things can be followed.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Harry, a constituent of mine, is suffering from cancer. He has just finished gruelling chemotherapy and he now needs radiotherapy. He has been offered radiotherapy 170 miles away from where he lives. He has been told that he needs to pay for his transport and the accommodation for himself and his family during the treatment that has been offered. That is at the same time as the Rutherford centre, a state-of-the-art cancer treatment centre that is a stone's throw away from where Harry lives, has been closed for a number of years. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how the NHS and the Government can come together to ensure that that fantastic facility can be used in the best interests of people in the region?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about what is happening to Harry, and I am sure we all want to wish him well in the treatment he needs to get. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that although state-of-the-art cancer treatments are available, they are not as widely available as they should be, and we have a lot further to go in ensuring that people are quickly treated near where they live. We will publish a dedicated national cancer plan this year, and I will ensure that the House is updated on that. We have already relaunched the children and young people cancer taskforce. I will absolutely look at the case he raises and see what further can be done.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): My constituent Katie from Tring, during her exemption period for access to free NHS dental care as a new mother, looked at every dental surgery for 50 miles and was unable to get an appointment. Not only do we need to deal with the dental crisis, but Katie is calling for an extension to that exemption period. Please can we have a debate in the House on the growing crisis in dental care access?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. It is something that we and all our constituents can relate to. Access to NHS dentistry falls far short of what any of us would want it to be. The previous Conservative Government left a huge number of NHS dentistry deserts around the country, and it sounds like her constituent is living in one of them. We are taking this seriously. We are committed to rolling out 700,000 more NHS dental appointments, and I will ensure that the hon. Lady and everybody else is kept updated.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Paragraph 7.36 of “Erskine May” states the process for setting out the ratification of international treaties. The Government’s treaty tracker says the global oceans treaty that the Leader of the House referred to earlier has not been ratified, and yet the BBNJ treaty—the global oceans treaty—was laid before this House on 16 October 2023. It appears the Government are misleading themselves in believing that they have to introduce legislation implementing the treaty before they can ratify it. Would she meet me to discuss the conundrum that appears to be stopping us going to the UN oceans conference next week and laying the instrument of ratification so that the treaty can come into force?

Lucy Powell: We are absolutely committed to ratifying that treaty and agreement. The Environment Secretary is at the summit this weekend to discuss the leading role that this country is taking to protect our oceans for generations to come. We will introduce a Bill to ratify that treaty and will do so in time for when we need to do so next year. I assure my hon. Friend that the House will be updated shortly on the matter.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Yarm is being battered by Stockton’s Labour council’s rush to build far too many houses far too fast in all the wrong places. It is placing unbearable pressure on our roads, schools and GP surgery. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on how we tackle such irresponsible over-development?

Lucy Powell: We make no apology for wanting to build more homes—more affordable homes, more social homes—for people to live in, which, frankly, the hon. Member’s Government failed to do in all their time in office. But that is not to say that it is a developer free-for-all. Communities should have a say in where those homes, and what type of homes, are built, but we need to go further and faster to ensure that the affordable homes that everybody needs to live in are built.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I am regularly contacted by park home residents in my constituency, of which there are more than 500, about the unique challenges they face. Residents of Radcliffe Park and Tollerton Park, in particular, raise issues such as energy costs, their relationship with site owners and, most importantly, the 10% sales commission that traps residents in their homes. Does the Leader of the House agree that park homes should be an area of focus for this Government, and will she find time for Members to discuss this formally?

Lucy Powell: Park homes, and particularly the site owners’ commission on sales, are regularly raised with me at business questions. I am sure a debate would be very popular were my hon. Friend to apply for one. This Government will set out actions on this in due course, and I encourage him to speak to the relevant Minister, which I am happy to facilitate.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): This week the Government announced an enormous investment in transport projects in metropolitan areas, but nothing for rural areas. Given that almost a fifth of the population live in rural and coastal areas, and that many of them, like North Shropshire, have very poor public transport, can we have a debate in Government time to consider how we might invest in really good public transport projects, such as the Oswestry to Gobowen railway line, to unleash growth in rural areas?

Lucy Powell: I reassure the hon. Lady that the big announcement on the £15 billion transport infrastructure projects for metro mayoral areas was just a start, and that there is more to come. I am sure she will recognise that this Government are absolutely committed to rural transport. That is why we have the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill going through Parliament, and it is why we have capped bus fares at £3, which is particularly relevant to rural communities where fares have gone through the roof in recent years. I can assure the hon. Lady that there is more to come.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I welcome this Government’s progress on reducing NHS waiting lists in physical health, but there are currently 1.6 million people on mental health waiting lists. People are eight times more likely to have to wait 18 months for treatment if their condition is mental rather than physical. Research by the charity Rethink Mental Illness shows that long waiting lists can lead to deterioration of symptoms, suicide attempts and people dropping out of the workforce. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on mental health waiting times so that we can address this crisis in our NHS?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. He is right that mental health services are in crisis and, frankly, are just not fit for purpose. That is what we

[Lucy Powell]

inherited, which is why we are taking immediate steps to improve early intervention and prevention and to shift care into communities. We are recruiting 8,500 mental health workers, and we are currently taking the Mental Health Bill through Parliament to boost mental health in this country.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Greenergy operates a biodiesel facility at Immingham in my constituency, but it has had to go into a cold shutdown and review the future of its operations. This is in part due to subsidised imports from the US and the need to review the renewable transport fuel obligation, which affects not just the Immingham plant but businesses up and down the country. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate or an urgent statement on the renewable transport fuel obligation?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the incident in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and the impact that the renewable transport fuel obligation is having on the renewable sector there. We have Energy Security and Net Zero questions coming up next week, and he may want to raise this.

I will say that this situation is why this Government are working so hard to ensure that we have trade deals with America, and we secured one ahead of many other countries. It is also why we are absolutely committed to our clean energy mission, which is driving us forward.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I am working with local business and political leaders across Cumbria to make the case for much-needed investment in upgrading the Cumbria coast, or energy coast, rail line. This line is essential for two national endeavours: the Barrow shipyard and the nuclear decommissioning work at Sellafield. We need to improve both freight and passenger capacity on the line, so will the Leader of the House assist me in securing a meeting with ministerial colleagues in the Department for Transport to help make this case?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a strong case for how important nuclear energy is to his constituency and the whole country, and linking up the assets that exist in Barrow and Cumbria is vital to our clean energy mission. I will assist him in facilitating a meeting, because we need to join up these issues and ensure that transport and connectivity are a key part of our industrial strategy and clean energy mission.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The right of an elected representative to challenge the Executive is a core tenet of our democracy and something we are fortunate to have defended here by Mr Speaker. However, on Tuesday night in Fermanagh and Omagh district council, the Sinn Féin group moved a motion to silence an Ulster Unionist councillor—one of my party colleagues, Mark Ovens—for questioning one of their decisions. He was not just gagged; he was silenced for the entirety of that meeting. Does the Leader of the House agree that such an action was undemocratic and that, despite Labour's majority and how tempting it may be, she would never contemplate such an action in this place nor think it was appropriate in a democratically elected Chamber?

Lucy Powell: I do not know about the case the hon. Member refers to, but I can assure him that, much as I might like to silence some of my colleagues in this place, I know that my job as Leader of the House and everyone's job in this House is to ensure that every single Member has the opportunity to make their voice heard loud and clear. We will be taking steps to ensure that in local government, too, we have high standards and high levels of accountability and transparency, and that is something this Government uphold as well.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): Biosecurity is national security, and farmers in South Norfolk are on the frontline in that battle, whether they are in Morningthorpe or Norton Subcourse. We saw at first hand the effects of bluetongue and avian influenza. This week's report from the National Audit Office on animal diseases is a wake-up call for the whole House. Can we have a statement from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on what action the Minister will take in response to those concerns?

Lucy Powell: I know that my hon. Friend has been pressing this issue strongly. We will protect against animal diseases and ensure that the livelihoods of our farmers and rural communities are protected. I know that DEFRA is working with the NAO on a plan for its recommendations, and I will ensure that he and the rest of the House are updated.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Mobile phone signal across Bromsgrove and the villages is wholly inadequate. It regularly drops out, and that is if we are lucky enough to get a signal. Things are getting worse, particularly following the rolling switch-off of 3G signals across the country. A recent real-world study in Worcestershire demonstrated that signal is actually 1,000 times worse than operators claim it to be. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is unacceptable and that my constituents deserve better? Will she support my efforts to secure a debate on the Floor of the House and a meeting with the Minister to discuss improvements?¹

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member is right to raise the issue of poor mobile phone signal, and I am sorry to hear that it seems to be so bad in his constituency in Worcestershire. He is right: these days, this is the fourth utility. Many of our constituents cannot conduct their everyday lives or access services, banking, benefits or pensions without a good mobile phone signal and data. I will happily help him secure a response from the Minister and a meeting.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Since being elected last year, my postbag has been inundated with correspondence from social housing residents who struggle to get repairs done by their landlord, in some cases waiting for months with issues such as rat infestations, missing windows and holes in the ceiling. It is absolutely unacceptable. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on social housing repairs and how we hold social landlords to account for the accommodation they provide?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. She is right that social housing landlords do have legal duties to carry out high-standard repairs and maintenance

1.[Official Report, 9 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 8WC.](Correction)

but, all too often, tenants do not have the recourse they need to hold their housing providers to account. We are strengthening that in the Renters' Rights Bill, which is reaching its closing stages in the House of Lords, but we have to ensure that tenants, whether in the social or private sector, have that recourse and ability to hold their landlords to account.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): No one who has watched David Attenborough's film "Ocean", to which the Leader of the House has already referred, will fail to have been moved and terrified by the senseless destruction of our oceans, the lifeblood of our planet. In order to save our sick oceans, we need to safeguard about 30% of them; only about 3% are currently marine protected. Next week, the UN will hold an ocean conference in Nice. Will she ensure that we receive a statement from the Government on the outcome of the conference and what the Government will do to protect our very sick oceans?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member highlights just a few of the very moving and powerful impacts of that documentary, which I am sure many people have watched. It is hard to not be moved by the scale of the challenge, and the destruction in recent years, but also by the hope in that documentary that the oceans can quickly recover if we are all willing to take the steps necessary to protect it. That is why I am delighted that the Environment Secretary is going to the UN summit later this week, and it is why the Government are committed to ratifying the ocean treaty in good time.

Mr Speaker: Let us see if we can speed things up and get everybody in. If not, people will miss out.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): My constituent, who has lived here for 10 years and is from Ukraine, was joined by her parents, who were fleeing the conflict. They set up a bank account when they arrived here and tried to transfer some of their money. The bank immediately shut down their bank account, which also resulted in my constituent's bank account being shut down. There must be a number of people in this situation; it is no way to treat people who are fleeing conflict. Can we have a statement from the banking Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), so that we can find out exactly what is going on here, and force the banks to treat people with a bit more respect?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about the case that my hon. Friend identifies. I think the banking Minister will shortly be in the House for a debate this afternoon, but I will ensure that he gets a full update.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Will the Leader of the House bring forward a specific debate that focuses on the 80th anniversary of VJ Day and the end of the war in the far east, so that the horrific conditions in which those, for example, in the King's Own Scottish Borderers had to fight and the conditions that people faced as prisoners of war can be properly recognised? We had a debate on the 80th anniversary of VE Day, but—as in 1945—the end of the war in Europe overshadowed those events in the far east.

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Member is absolutely right to raise the particular lessons that we should learn from the end of the war in the far east, and the importance of recognising VJ Day in its own right. The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is in his place; I will speak to him, and look myself at whether we can allocate some time to do just as the right hon. Member asks.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will join me in congratulating Nicky Wright, who was last week named consultant of the year in the Women in Construction and Engineering Awards. Nicky's career started with work in Iraq and Angola, and now she is part of the leadership team delivering the fantastic transformation of Gatwick airport. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Nicky's achievements, and help me to make sure that great voices like Nicky's are featured in the Government's work on construction, skills and growth in the future?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Nicky Wright on what sounds like a tremendous career that we should applaud. He is right that getting more young women and girls attracted to science, technology, engineering and maths is critical, and I hope that Nicky and others will play a role in that.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): My constituent Olivia is fighting for Archie's law—new legislation to improve the quality of care for critically ill infants and children—after tragically losing her baby boy Archie. I have raised the matter with the Secretary of State, but the responses so far have failed to specifically address Archie's law, and I have waited for the latest since February. Will the Leader of the House raise the matter with the Health Secretary, and ensure that Archie's law gets a fair hearing?

Lucy Powell: I will raise the matter with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I am sorry that I do not know more detail about the proposal, but there are other devices, such as the presentation of Bills and ten-minute rule Bills, and other opportunities that the hon. Member might wish to use to raise such a new law on the Floor of the House.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Kirstie Bavington is a two-time European female welterweight boxing champion from my constituency, yet even with those achievements she is still working as a PE teacher while pursuing her dream of making boxing a full-time career. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate in Government time on increasing funding for female athletes, so that champions like Kirstie can pursue sport as a full-time career and achieve true parity in opportunity and support?

Lucy Powell: Women's sport has been raised a few times this morning. It will always make a popular topic for a debate, but I join my hon. Friend in congratulating her constituent and encouraging others.

Mr Speaker: And it is the rugby league women's cup final on Saturday.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I know that you, Mr Speaker, are an animal lover, like me and my Basildon and Billericay constituents, although sadly some people are not. After some horrific cases, will the Leader of the House push the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to get on with its consultation on licensing animal welfare centres? If not, will she allow a debate in Government time on this issue on the Floor of the House?

Lucy Powell: Last night, I attended Jo Coburn's "Daily Politics" leaving do, and the spats that the right hon. Gentleman and I had on her show on a few occasions were featured in her leaving video. I think I probably came out better than him, but we will leave that for another day!

The right hon. Gentleman raises the important matter of animal welfare, to which this Government are committed. I will ensure that DEFRA continues to keep the House updated on the very many areas where we are making progress in this regard.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Next week, we have the second day of debate on Report for the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which is important to many of my Exeter constituents. Does the Leader of the House agree with me and with Ruth Fox of the Hansard Society that consideration of the Bill should continue to be thorough and with significant time allocated to the process?

Lucy Powell: We will be debating the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill further next Friday, and probably soon thereafter. We all have different views about the issue itself, but I agree with my hon. Friend that the process has been incredibly thorough—in part thanks to your support, Mr Speaker, for ensuring that there is ample time for debate on the Floor of the House. We had a full day of debate on Second Reading, there were over 90 hours of debate in Committee and there has already been one day of debate on remaining stages, and there are likely to be a further two. That means more time will probably have been given to the Bill than to most substantial pieces of Government legislation.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): My constituent Anthony's husband's emergency and urgent care was compromised because hospital staff could not access his medical records, even though he had been treated by specialists in the same hospital. Can we have a debate on ensuring that patient records can be accessed swiftly by clinicians across hospital trusts within regions, so that patients are not endangered by the inability of software systems to communicate within the NHS?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. I am sure that many people would be surprised to realise that data sharing does not happen in the way that we all imagine it does between different parts of the NHS. We are committed to ensuring that can happen in order to unlock much improved services, and to provide us with a great deal of data and information to help us continue to improve those services.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Tomorrow marks the start of Pride weekend in Blackpool—a town that has always been a little louder and prouder than most.

Blackpool has long been a sanctuary for the LGBTQ+ community and a place where queer joy has always found a home. I am looking forward to marching in the parade on Saturday and joining locals at the Lord Street party on Sunday. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Blackpool Pride and sending everyone our best wishes for a joyful weekend?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in recognising that Blackpool is louder and prouder when it comes to Pride and celebrating our LGBT community. I hope he has a fantastic day there; I have seen him at Manchester Pride many times before.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wish to draw to attention to the increasing vulnerability of religious minorities in Syria, particularly the Alawite community. Recent reports have highlighted renewed sectarian violence, placing Alawites at heightened risk amid broader instability and government failures to foster inclusivity. In addition, Syria's 2025 interim constitution enshrined Islamic jurisprudence as the primary source of law, effectively restricting legal protections for religious minorities. Will the Leader of the House contact the Foreign Secretary to ask what assessment the Foreign Office has made of those developments and what representations he has made to press international partners?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for once again raising important issues of freedom of religion or belief—in this case, regarding the Alawite community in Syria. I will absolutely ensure that he gets a full response.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): In Kirkby, 160 households in Willow Rise and Beech Rise face eviction because their tower block has been condemned. The private owners have failed to carry out essential fire safety work, and residents would already have been forced out if it were not for Knowsley council temporarily funding a waking watch. We need urgent Government support. Will the Leader of the House pass on my thanks to the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), for meeting me and use her good offices to press the urgency of a support package to help to rehome my constituents?

Lucy Powell: That is a shocking case in my hon. Friend's constituency, which I know has rightly attracted a great deal of attention. I congratulate her on continuing to press the matter. This Government expect landlords and freeholders to cover the costs of decanting residents, including providing suitable alternative accommodation, and the loss of income that may come from that. I will absolutely ensure that the Minister continues to work with my hon. Friend to make sure that happens in this case.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): My constituent Caitlin was coerced into signing a joint lease with her abuser just four days before he was arrested on charges relating to domestic violence. He was convicted, but she is still trapped in the lease for a property that she has never lived in and she is liable for rent that he refuses to pay. The estate agents tell us that they have a legal responsibility to chase rent arrears. Survivors in Caitlin's position are unable to fully move on from their abuse,

even after justice has been done in the courts. Will the Leader of the House help me to arrange a meeting with the Minister for Safeguarding to discuss a legislative solution to this problem and better support for survivors of domestic violence?

Lucy Powell: I am sure we all recognise these cases from our own constituencies. Such circumstances are absolutely shocking. I assure my hon. Friend that our Renters' Rights Bill, which has nearly reached its concluding stages in the House of Lords, will remove fixed-term assured tenancies and prevent anyone in the future from being locked into exactly the situation that he describes. I will ensure that a Minister meets with him to discuss that.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), let me say that this week marks a tragic week: the 41st anniversary of the raid on the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Some 41 years later, questions about British involvement in the desecration of the holiest Sikh site in Amritsar remain unanswered. Labour promised in its 2017 and 2019 manifestos to hold an inquiry, and the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister pledged to do so before the last election. Will the Leader of the House allow time for an update from the Foreign Secretary on the progress of implementing that inquiry and ensure that promises made in opposition are fulfilled in government?

Lucy Powell: I really do understand how important it is for the Sikh community to see progress on this issue—that is the second time that it has been raised with me this morning. I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary is aware of the concerns being raised again on the Floor of the House and that the update I previously asked for is made available to Members and this House.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Penrith and Solway, like constituencies across the country, is littered with empty listed buildings. Many are rotting, with neglectful owners who are often not even required to pay rates. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time to discuss how we stop this disgraceful trashing of our heritage?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises the really important issue of empty listed buildings and how they could be brought back into use and made better use of. I will absolutely ensure that a Minister gives him a full reply.

Mr Speaker: I call Perran Moon.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras bras, Mr Speaker. New data from the Office for National Statistics on sickness absence rates was published yesterday. As a Cornish MP, I am particularly concerned that the south-west has the highest sickness absence across the whole of the UK. Sickness absence follows poverty, and Cornwall's poverty figures have been masked by wealthier pensioners moving there, meaning less support per capita from central Government. Does the Leader of the House agree that remote coastal areas, like Cornwall, need fairer funding settlements than those that we have had in recent years to lift people out of sickness and get them back to work?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely agree that we have to get people out of sickness and back into work. That is why this Government are bringing forward reforms to the universal credit health element to ensure that people are not consigned to sickness for a long period, but encouraged back to work.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Rochdale's award-winning trading standards team has led the country in exposing the spread of ghost car number plates, which allow child sex offenders, speeding motorists and drug dealers to avoid police detection cameras. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Darren Hughen and Dennis Chalmers, who visited Parliament this week, and will she support my campaign and that of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) to outlaw ghost car number plates?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes), my Parliamentary Private Secretary, is not in her place today, but I know she has been working with my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) and others on the campaign to get rid of ghost plates. Their campaigning has been fantastic at highlighting this issue and the problems it causes, and I know that Transport Ministers are looking at it.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Tough Enough To Care is a men's mental health charity that works to remove the toxic stigma around mental health. I had the privilege of attending one of its meetings in Wirksworth, where I witnessed the incredible work that that charity is doing to ensure more men get the support they need. Will the Leader of the House join me in acknowledging the great work being done by Tough Enough To Care, and acknowledge the important role that men's mental health charities play in ensuring that fewer men take their own lives?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all those who work with Tough Enough To Care, and thank him for highlighting the important work that it does. It is still absolutely shocking that the biggest cause of death for men under the age of 50 is suicide, and the work of Tough Enough To Care and others is vital in addressing that.

Mr Speaker: Let us help each other. I call Jayne Kirkham.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on a more robust range of censure and sanction options for serious breaches of the local government members' code of conduct, including suspension and removal of councillors? I know of recent incidents in which, despite egregious behaviour by councillors elected unopposed, those councillors remain in post, regardless of the wishes of their community and their council.

Lucy Powell: We want to see high standards in public life, including in local government and among councillors. We are looking at how we can take steps and bring forward legislation to continue to raise standards in local government.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I recently visited the fantastic repair café in Sawbridgeworth, which renews our everyday products and stops them going into landfill. As we mark Volunteers' Week, will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the volunteers at that repair café and all the volunteers across Hertford and Stortford for their hard work?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all those volunteers for their really hard work.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): On 12 April, a man required hospital treatment after being attacked by at least five men, who had earlier made homophobic remarks outside the Old Bridge hotel in Holmfirth in my constituency. In response, local residents have united to organise Holmfirth's first ever Pride, which will take place this Saturday. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing attendees at Pride a great time, but can we also have a debate in Government time on what further action we can take to tackle hate crime?

Lucy Powell: This Government stand absolutely against homophobic hate crimes of that kind. My hon. Friend might want to take up these issues when we consider the Crime and Policing Bill, not next week but the week after. I wish all those taking part in Holmfirth's first Pride the best of luck.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Redditch United football club is showcasing the importance of the UK's leading gambling harm charity, Gordon Moody, by displaying its logo on next year's shirts. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising Redditch United and Gordon Moody for this innovative collaboration, which demonstrates how local sport can be a force for good in tackling addiction?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Gordon Moody and Redditch United football club for all the work they are doing to support people.

Mr Speaker: And it is the Challenge cup final on Saturday.

Free School Meals

11.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): With permission, I will make a statement to update the House on free school meals for children.

This is a Government who put children first—they are at the centre of the change that we want to see, because what we do for our children, we do for our country. If we want to break the unfair link between background and success, deliver opportunity to every home and shape a fairer society, that has to start with our children. It has to start with the fundamentals: making sure that every family has a stable, loving home where no child lacks food or warmth. That simple dignity should be the uncontroversial birthright of every child as they grow up in a civilised society, but after 14 long years, that dignity was not universal, nor that birthright uncontroversial.

When this Government won the trust of the British people, which Conservative Members forfeited last July, the legacy of the Conservatives' shameful record in power was a record number of children growing up in poverty. Some 4.5 million children were robbed of opportunity and hope, of life chances and of possibilities. Child poverty is a scar on our society. It is a mark of the failure of Conservative Members to grow the economy, to spread success to working people and to deliver for the next generation the ordinary hope that tomorrow will be better than today.

The last Government did not see the growing number of families in deep poverty as a failure to be addressed, but let me be clear that the growing number of children on free school meals under the last Government was an index of failure, not a story of success. This Government are determined to turn the picture around, tackling child poverty and spreading growth and opportunity to every family in every part of our country. That is why today I am announcing the biggest expansion of free school meal eligibility in England in a generation, because we can and must end the scourge of child poverty.

Today, we are setting out that we will give every child whose family is in receipt of universal credit the entitlement to free school meals. That means not simply meals in mouths but, crucially, money back in the pockets of parents and families on an unprecedented scale. This is a historic change for children and for families, with 100,000 children lifted out of poverty. That is the mark of a Government who are serious about backing parents and tackling child poverty, the mark of a Government with a plan for change and the mark of a Government with the ideas, investment and determination to see it through.

On that note, this Government's child poverty taskforce, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education co-chairs with the Work and Pensions Secretary, is forging ahead. We have listened to parents, to charities and to people with lived experience, and now we are acting, bringing the change that children and families deserve. In the months and years to come, that change will be shaped by the child poverty strategy, which we will publish later this year.

This is an intervention that backs parents as well as children. Our free school meals expansion will put up to £495 back in parents' pockets every year. For them, that

means more freedom in how they support their families, more choice in how they care for their children and more opportunities to get on and live a good life. Our expansion of free school meals is not just about the here and now; it is an investment in our children's futures. It sets them free from the worries and strains of growing up in poverty, leaving them free to learn and play and to do their very best in school. Today's announcement is not only anti-poverty, but pro-learning. I know that Members across the House will agree with me when I say that those two causes shine brightest when they shine together. That is what the evidence tells us.

These meals need to be healthy. School food standards have not been revised since 2014, but this Government are acting quickly to put that right. That is why I am pleased to announce today that we are working with experts from across the sector to revise those standards. We are supporting schools with the latest nutritional guidance, because the benefits for children of getting a decent, healthy meal at school are huge, with their attendance higher, their focus sharper, their behaviour better, their grades stronger and their futures brighter. That chance to succeed should be open to all. That is the sort of society I want to live in and that this Government want to build, but the kind of change that our children need is not the work of a single day or a single policy, even one as important as this. That is why today's announcement is part of our wider approach and moral mission with the child poverty strategy, the opportunity mission and this Government's plan for change.

We have already begun rolling out school-based nurseries and 30 hours of Government-funded childcare, saving parents up to £7,500 a year. Children are already eating, playing and learning together as our free breakfast clubs reach 750 early adopter schools, saving parents another £450 a year. We are cutting the cost of school uniforms for 4.2 million children, saving some parents £50 in their back-to-school shop. On top of that, we are recruiting more teachers, driving high and rising standards in our schools, reforming children's social care, boosting the early years pupil premium and so much more.

Growing up in Fratton, I saw at first hand the devastating impact that poverty can have on children in Portsmouth. Friends came to school hungry and not ready to learn. That is why I am proud to stand here today as we offer a helping hand to ensure that every child, whatever their background and wherever they come from, achieves and thrives.

We are delivering the change that parents need and that children deserve—the change that will break the unfair link between background and success once and for all. That means doing everything in our power to end child poverty. Today, we say enough is enough. Today, we begin to turn the tide. Today, the fightback that began in July last year kicks up a gear. We are acting to secure a brighter future for our children and for our country too. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

11.55 am

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

The truth is that the families benefiting from today's announcement are the same ones who are paying for it, because the same group of people are hit hardest by

Labour's national insurance increase. Labour promised not to increase national insurance, but it broke that promise, and someone earning just £13,000 a year will now take home £500 less as a result of the tax increase. Someone on just £9,000 a year—the exact sort of person who is supposed to benefit from this policy—will lose 5% of their income.

The Government want to talk about the impact of the money they are giving today on poverty, but they do not want to talk about the impact of the much larger sum of money they are taking away. Disgracefully, they have not done any distributional analysis of the £25 billion that they are taking away, which is particularly targeted at low-income households. Will the Minister say how many households that will push into poverty? Will he finally admit what the figure is?

While free school meals are obviously welcome, the things that are being cut to pay for them are much less welcome. For example, the Government broke their promise to fully fund the national insurance increase for schools, and some have been short-changed by 35%. They also broke their promise to fully fund the pay award. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, that leaves a £400 million funding hole for our schools. Under the last Government, although there was an increase in achievement across the board, the biggest increase was in the lower half of the income distribution. That is much harder to achieve when the Government have taken £400 million out of our schools.

What else is being done to balance the costs? We already know that the Government have cut support for maths, science, physics, Latin, computing and cadets in schools, and got rid of the successful behaviour hubs. We know that nurseries, which the Minister talked about, are saying they are on the brink because of the national insurance increase. In fact, the Early Years Alliance says the situation is "catastrophic". We know that the Department for Education recently announced a real-terms cut of 10% to university teaching grants, and it has abolished 90% of higher apprenticeships—funnily enough, they announced that during the recess. Now the education press are saying that the next cost-saving measure to pay for announcements like this will be to abolish education, health and care plans for everything other than special schools. Will the Minister rule that out today? If he does not rule it out, the whole House will hear, and we will know exactly what is going to happen next.

Turning to the numbers, what is the real net effect of all this? Transitional protections were established in 2018 to ensure that pupils who gained FSM would not lose them while universal credit was being rolled out. That has roughly doubled the proportion of pupils who are eligible from 13.6% to 25.7%. However, the Department for Education has announced that those protections will now end in September 2026, when the new policy comes in. By how much will the end of those transitional protections reduce the number of children who are eligible for FSM? Am I right in thinking that it is by 1.2 million? Will the Minister agree—he is looking away—to finally publish a figure? How many children who have been on transitional protection will lose their free school meals when they change phase of education? Will the Minister finally admit to the figure?

There is another sting in the tail today, because school budgets are going to be hit—that is how this policy is being paid for. That is because FSM is the

[Neil O'Brien]

gateway to pupil premium funding. The pupil premium is a great achievement of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government, and it is worth £1,480 per pupil in primary schools and a bit over £1,000 in secondary schools. As a result of today's decision, schools are going to lose that funding. With 1.2 million pupils on transitional protection, bringing with them about £1,200 each, schools are going to lose the £1.5 billion currently going to them in pupil premium funding.

Will that funding be replaced by this announcement? No, because today the Government have for the first time broken the link between FSM eligibility and pupil premium funding. On one side of the ledger, £1.5 billion has been lost, and on the other side of the ledger, schools are not getting it back. I had wondered where all the money was coming from, and now of course we know. I ask the Minister to spit it out: how much will this decision cost schools, and how much is it saving the DFE?

On a similar point, will the Minister confirm that the Government will apply the same approach to holiday activities and food, which would also not trigger an increase in that funding? Is the same also true of home-school transport, and how is this all being paid for? I think we need a little more detail.

Opposition Members have become rather cautious about positive-sounding announcements from this Government. For example, the other day Ministers were here to announce that they would continue the adoption and special guardianship support fund, but it must just have slipped their mind to mention that it was being cut by 40%. That is why we like to know the detail when we get positive announcements.

I will end by asking some questions about the facts. Will the Minister agree to publish information on how many children are currently on transitional protection and how much the end of that protection will reduce entitlement to free school meals? Will he agree to publish how much pupil premium funding schools will lose overall as a result of breaking the link between FSM and the pupil premium? Just to ask again, so that the whole House hears the answer, will he rule out abolishing EHCPs outside special schools—yes or no?

Stephen Morgan: I cannot believe that I did not hear the Opposition spokesperson welcome our announcement. It is a shame that when the Conservatives were in government tackling child poverty was not considered a priority. I feel a little sorry for the spokesperson, who claims to care about education, given that his only policy is to give private schools a tax break. Indeed, on the Conservatives' watch, child poverty grew to record highs and they wore the increasing numbers in child poverty as a badge of honour. Frankly, that is shameful.

This increase in free school meals is fully funded, and that is possible thanks to the difficult decisions that this Government and the Chancellor have had to take to get the economy growing and put the public finances back on a stable footing. I am excited to hear the Chancellor set out more details next week. That is despite the mess we inherited from the Conservatives. Why has the spokesperson not taken the opportunity today to say

sorry for his Government's shameful record on child poverty? He has nothing to say on education for our country. Unlike them, we will not sit by and watch more children fall into poverty. Unlike them, we are not offering a tax break for private schools. We are delivering positive change for our country. We are giving children back the opportunity to achieve and thrive. With this announcement, we are ensuring that every child, no matter what their background, gets the best start in life. [Interruption.]

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I warmly welcome the expansion of the free school meals entitlement. It is an evidence-based approach for which many of us have campaigned for a long time. It will help to close the disadvantage gap in our schools, tackling child poverty, benefiting children's health and supporting children to learn.

I hope the Government will agree that every child who is eligible for this expanded entitlement should be able to receive that entitlement. Whether or not children get a free school meal to which they are entitled should not depend on somebody else making an application for them through a complicated process. The Government know which families are in receipt of universal credit, so is the Minister considering auto-enrolment for this expanded entitlement? That would be easier to achieve than auto-enrolment under the previous entitlement, and every child really should be able to benefit.

Can I seek the Minister's assurance that this very positive announcement is not an indication that other measures to reduce child poverty, such as scrapping the two-child cap, have been taken off the table?

Finally, as a London MP and a former Southwark councillor who was very proud to be part of a council that introduced universal free school meals in 2010—we have seen the benefit of that policy, and I am proud we have a Mayor who is funding universal free school meals for all primary schoolchildren in London—can I ask for confirmation that London will also receive the funding for this expanded entitlement, so it can be put to the benefit of further reducing child poverty in London?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend, the Select Committee Chair, for her constructive comments and for welcoming today's announcement. Making all children in households claiming universal credit eligible for free school meals makes it straightforward for parents to know whether they are eligible. We are supporting that by taking forward a programme of work, including improvements to our own systems, which will make applying for free schools meals easier than it ever has been. As I mentioned in my statement, our proposals are fully funded. More broadly, we will set out more details in the forthcoming child poverty strategy around a number of the other measures she describes.

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

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I, too, thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement.

I warmly welcome this announcement, which will make such a difference to the lives of children up and down the country. We know the impact that free school meals can have. A hot, healthy meal in the middle of the day helps children to learn, concentrate and thrive. Making sure a child does not go hungry in school can truly change their life. That is why Liberal Democrats have for so long championed free school meals. That is why we have long called on successive Governments to take this step. That is why this policy was in our election manifesto last year. I am delighted that, even though it was not in Labour's manifesto, they are taking our idea today. The Liberal Democrats introduced universal infant free school meals when we were in government, and we are today sharing in the joy of the tireless campaigners and struggling families for whom this announcement is such as victory. For far too long, far too many children in this country have gone hungry through the school day. The previous Conservative Government ignored the advice of their own food tsar, Henry Dimbleby, and even Michael Gove, to leave children in poverty without the meals they deserve and need.

This announcement can only be the start. We need to see the policy fully funded and properly implemented. We need to see auto-enrolment, as the Chair of the Select Committee said, so that every child receives the meals they are entitled to, because thousands of eligible children currently miss out. Now we know that the Government are finally looking to the Liberal Democrats for policy ideas on tackling the cost of learning, may I urge them to look again at capping the cost of branded uniform items, not the number of branded uniform items? Lastly, if the Government are serious about tackling the scourge of child poverty, will they finally scrap the two-child benefit cap?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Member for welcoming so positively the announcement today. She has been, like so many others in her party, a real champion on these matters. She has made clear in this place how important the policy will be to children's wellbeing, attainment and attendance, and I of course wholeheartedly agree with her. I note her call for auto-enrolment. She made those points at various intervals during the Committee stage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, and I look forward to working with her to hear her views going forward. We will, of course, continue to improve ways of registering children for free school meals, as I set out earlier, and today's announcement makes that easier for families and schools. I also pay tribute to school food campaigners, who I meet on a regular basis, for helping to get us to today's announcement. I look forward to continuing to work with the hon. Lady through the passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, and to work constructively to improve the life chances of children and young people across our country.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): In July, I came from the classroom to this Chamber. I have seen the harm that poverty does to children, particularly those from families on universal credit who were not able to claim free school meals, probably because their parents were grafting in low-paid jobs or in insecure work. Does the Minister agree that having 500,000 more children fully entitled to a nutritious school dinner will boost school attendance and help narrow the education gap that widened under the Tories?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is a real champion for children and young people in her constituency and in this place. As she rightly says, this announcement represents a significant expansion of food support for disadvantaged pupils in schools, reaching more than half a million pupils and lifting 100,000 children out of poverty. It really demonstrates that we are a mission-driven Government. The anti-poverty and pro-learning measure that we have set out today is a downpayment on the child poverty strategy. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend as we deliver this positive change for her constituency.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Many of the schools in my constituency have been unable to take up the offer of breakfast clubs because, frankly, they do not have the facilities—either to provide breakfast in the first place or for the children to eat in, which is a real challenge. I want to ask the Minister about one specific issue, because I am concerned that it may create a cliff edge for parents. If the parents of a child attending school qualify for universal credit but then later get jobs, or better-paid jobs, and therefore no longer qualify for universal credit, would that child then lose their eligibility for free school meals? That could create a real problem for many parents and present us with a cliff edge. I am sure that is not the Government's intention, but we need to make the position clear.

Stephen Morgan: The hon. Gentleman sets out the current position and what has happened in the past. What we are announcing today will lift more children out of poverty, because more children will be eligible for free school meals. He makes a number of points on breakfast clubs; obviously, we are committed to rolling out the clubs to every primary school in the country. I would be delighted to meet him to hear his particular thoughts and views on how that can make the biggest difference in his constituency.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): Hungry children do not learn, so I thank the Government for listening to those of us who have long campaigned for this announcement. This Government's reforms are starting to put more money into people's pockets, tackling the root causes of poverty, but they will take time to bed in—time that hungry children simply do not have. The Minister knows that poverty is all-encompassing and extends well beyond the school day. Will he give the 470,000 children affected by the cruel two-child benefit cap some hope today that the Government are seriously considering scrapping the cap, and considering scrapping it very soon?

Stephen Morgan: As my hon. Friend knows, this Government are determined to bring down child poverty. This is a complex area that we need to get right, and it is not for me to comment on particular speculation at the moment. Extensive work is ongoing on the child poverty strategy, which will be published later this year, and an update in the House will be provided in due course.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): As a Liberal Democrat, I warmly welcome the announcement today. I stood on a manifesto that mentioned this policy at the previous four general elections, and it is good news. However, it would be the best news if the Minister could explain

[Lisa Smart]

more about what he means by fully funded. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, where I proudly report that I am in my 19th year as a primary school governor, so I know that school budgets are stretched to the limit. Will the Minister explain what he means when he says fully funded—does that mean fully funded from existing school budgets?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for her time as a school governor, especially as we mark Volunteers' Week. The work of school governors up and down the country is invaluable, and they play a particular role in supporting schools' compliance with school food standards. We currently spend more than £1.5 billion on school food annually, delivering free school meals to around 3.5 million children. We will set out further details on the funding as part of our wider child poverty strategy in due course.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I welcome this Labour Government's announcement on expanding eligibility for free school meals to any child with a parent in receipt of universal credit. This expanded entitlement means that nearly 8,500 children in years 3 to 11 in Luton South and South Bedfordshire will be eligible for free school meals. Can the Minister confirm that this expansion will not only support children's behaviour and attainment, but save their families up to £500 per child per year?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is a real champion for children and young people in her constituency. She is absolutely right to set out the differences in the cost of living that this policy will make for parents; as she suggests, it will also have real benefits in behaviour, attendance and attainment, as I set out in my statement.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Minister has today made a big thing about every family in every corner of our country, and he has talked about how widespread this change will be. A small number of additional people in England will be able to get additional free school meals. I am glad that the Government have extended eligibility, but it does not have the geographical reach that he is trying to make out. Were he to remove the two-child benefit cap, that would have an effect in every part of these islands, reducing poverty in every constituency. Why is this issue being kicked into the long grass? He is making an announcement on free school meals, but the Government are refusing to make announcements on the child poverty strategy that was promised in the spring.

Stephen Morgan: Wasn't that a nice try, Madam Deputy Speaker? Let us be clear: we are taking urgent action in the light of the scar of poverty on our society. We have the spending review next week, and the child poverty strategy will conclude in due course.

Kirsty Blackman: When?

Stephen Morgan: If the hon. Lady had listened carefully to my statement, she would know that I said we will be announcing further details on the strategy later this year.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I have chaired the all-party parliamentary group on school food since setting it up in 2010, so I know all too well the many benefits of free school meals, from the economic to health benefits—it is why I have campaigned for more than 18 years to extend free school meal provision. Providing more children than ever with free, healthy, hot and nutritious meals can be truly life changing. In my constituency, the provision will extend to a further 5,460 children, which is very welcome indeed, so I thank the Minister and our Government. Does the Minister agree that this down payment on the child poverty strategy is only the start of this Government's mission to lift as many children out of poverty as possible, just as the previous Labour Government did?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend has been a real champion on school food issues ever since she was elected to this place. I had the pleasure of meeting her recently, along with campaigners she suggested I meet on these very points, so I know that her lobbying has directly influenced our outcomes today. We are making this announcement because of tough and necessary decisions that the Chancellor has had to make. It is a step in the right direction, and we will set out more detail on the child poverty strategy in due course.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am delighted that more children will have school meals at lunch time. It is great for pupils to be well fed—as a paediatrician, I see the value of that. However, I want to ask about transitional protection and money. The transitional protection will take 1.2 million children out of this category; some may go back into it with UC. However, the robbing of the money from pupil premiums will leave schools £1.5 billion short. How does the Minister intend to replace that £1.5 billion for schools so that children can get a good education as well as school meals?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady for her question—I think I have finally heard from someone who is actually delighted by today's announcement. On transitional protections, it is worth saying that the Department will expand free school meal eligibility from September 2026 so that all children in households in receipt of universal credit can benefit from a free nutritious lunch. As a temporary measure, we will extend transitional protections, meaning that households that are on universal credit and meet the current earned income threshold of £7,400 will keep their free school meals, regardless of any change in circumstances. Following an expansion of eligibility from September next year, our intention is to end all protections.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Tackling poverty and inequality is in our DNA, and it is why many Members on the Government Benches are in this place. I welcome this announcement, as I know the more than 3,000 children and their families who will benefit in Newcastle-under-Lyme will welcome it, too. It is good for health, good for educational attainment and, importantly, good for the futures of our young people. I very much agree with the point on auto-enrolment made by the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood

(Helen Hayes). With that in mind, I ask the Minister to speak to his officials and find some time to come and see the benefits of our commitment to tackling child poverty in Newcastle-under-Lyme for himself when this announcement is rolled out next year.

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am keen to ensure that we learn from the best in local government, as we have been on auto-enrolment activity especially. As I mentioned earlier, today's announcement will make the whole process of applying for free school meals much simpler and easier for parents, but we will certainly take on board my hon. Friend's comments. I would be very happy to meet him to discuss these issues further.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): After this, we have two Select Committee statements and two Backbench Business debates. If colleagues do not keep their questions short, they are just denying others the opportunity to speak.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Vulnerable children spend many weeks each year—during the holidays—not at school. My own Liberal Democrat-Labour partnership local authority provides funding in the form of vouchers during the school holidays. Will the Government take this opportunity to end holiday hunger and provide funding for food during the holidays?

Stephen Morgan: We have invested more than £200 million in the holiday activities and food programme, which supports children, offers enrichment opportunities and provides good-quality food during the Christmas, Easter and summer provision. That is a fantastic programme that I know Members across this House welcome, and a key part of our plan to ensure that every child can succeed and thrive.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I warmly welcome this fantastic news this morning. I think the Minister mentioned that child poverty is a scourge of society, and of course it is. It is a blight on the UK that we have so many kids who do not have a full belly when they go to school. Some 6,000 children in my constituency will now benefit from this announcement. However, can the Minister confirm that this is only the first step on a long road to universal free school meals for all children in the UK?

Stephen Morgan: Extensive work is ongoing on child poverty, and we will publish our strategy later this year. As part of that, we are considering all available levers to give every child the best start in life—whether that is on affordable housing, the cost of energy bills or supporting more parents to work. That, I think, is the change that our country needs.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome today's announcement. It is a small step in the right direction, but what we need is a giant leap to end child poverty. If the Minister were serious about that, he knows what he needs to do: scrap the two-child benefit cap. That would lift 400,000 children out of poverty. The Green party has long campaigned for universal free school meals. We know that the health, education and productivity benefits would more than pay for that

policy. The benefits would be £1.71 for every pound invested, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers. Will the Minister consider the moral and economic case for free school meals to be made universal? And, while he is at it, will he scrap the cruel two-child benefit cap?

Stephen Morgan: As the hon. Member will have heard earlier, I will not comment on speculation. Extensive work is under way on the child poverty strategy, which will conclude later this year. I describe this not as a small step today, but as an historic moment, as we lift 100,000 children out of poverty and make sure that more children across the country can access free school meals. I am delighted that so many are welcoming our announcement today.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): With one in two children in my constituency living in poverty, we now have a downpayment with a breakfast club funded by the Government at Thomas Fairchild community school and thousands of children are benefiting. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has agreed with Henry Dimbleby, who opened the “chefs in schools” programme in Hackney, that we need to keep nutrition at the top of the list. My hon. Friend the Chair of the Education Committee highlighted that this is evidence-based policy. We know that the evidence on child poverty shows that removing the two-child limit will lift most children out of poverty. Can the Minister reassure us that he is really looking at that evidence, working with the Department for Work and Pensions, to make sure that this announcement is just the downpayment on tackling child poverty?

Stephen Morgan: As always, my hon. Friend comes at this from a very informed position. It was a real pleasure to visit a school in Hackney recently to see at first hand the brilliant work of the “chefs in schools” programme. That is why I am so delighted to say that we will be announcing further details on our school food standard work to update that guidance in due course. She mentions breakfast clubs. We have obviously tripled funding into breakfast clubs to over £30 million in this financial year, and we are making huge progress in delivering that through our early adopter scheme.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I welcome this announcement from the Government and celebrate the success of the Liberal Democrats, who for many years have campaigned on this policy, including my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who has been so passionate about this issue. Indeed, this is a step in the right direction. My constituency of Harpenden and Berkhamsted is often seen as an affluent area, but there are pockets of poverty. Charities often say that it is harder in those areas, because not only are costs higher, but deprivation is hidden. Currently, the two-child benefit cap restricts universal support to two children, pushing thousands of families into poverty. Therefore, do these restrictions mean that the third and any subsequent children would not have access to free school meals, or would simply being in a household that receives universal credit be sufficient to qualify?

Stephen Morgan: I can assure the hon. Member that it will be for all children in that household. More broadly, we are introducing breakfast clubs, which is a

[Stephen Morgan]

universal offer in every primary school across the country. Other measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will cap the number of branded items on school uniform, which I think will make a real difference to the money going into parents' pockets.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I warmly welcome this statement. In my constituency, more than a quarter of all children are living in poverty, so I know that more than 6,000 children in Dudley will now be eligible for free school meals. The extra support will go a long way towards ensuring that our children are eating healthy and nutritious meals to aid their education. Will my hon. Friend assure me that these free school meals will be low in fat, sugar and salt, in order also to help tackle rising childhood obesity?

Stephen Morgan: If we are to get the benefits right on free school meals, we must ensure that the quality of the food is nutritious for all children. As I mentioned in my statement, this is good for attendance, good for behaviour and good for life chances. I hope my hon. Friend will contribute to the work that we will do in revising the school food standards.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Sadly, a local survey recently found that close to 20% of children in Leicester are worried about not having enough to eat. But, paradoxically, a quarter of the population of 10 to 11-year-olds in my city are clinically obese, and close to 40% have visual signs of dental decay. I warmly welcome this announcement, but why are the Government waiting till September 2026 to make these changes? Will the Minister reassure us that this policy will be properly funded so that schools can provide nutritious and balanced meals, and not just ultra-processed food like turkey twizzlers, which have been shown, among many other things, to reduce life expectancy?

Stephen Morgan: I can assure the hon. Member that this scheme will be fully funded. More broadly, I have set out plans for the child poverty strategy to be published later this year. The key to a mission-driven Government is to make sure that Government Departments are working together to improve life chances for children. I am delighted that we are working closely with colleagues from the Department of Health and Social Care to make that happen.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted that this announcement will see more than 2,000 extra children qualify for free school meals in my Banbury constituency. Can the Minister explain how this announcement will improve the educational attainment and behaviour of children in my constituency?

Stephen Morgan: I know that my hon. Friend is a real champion for children and young people from the time that I spent with him in his constituency. As he rightly says, this policy makes a real difference on attainment, behaviour and attendance. I look forward to working with him as we deliver this positive change for our country.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I, too, welcome the adoption of a long-standing Liberal Democrat policy and the Minister's encouragement of other Lib Dem policies in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). There has been some discussion about the pupil premium. This policy seems to break the link between free school meals and the pupil premium, so can the Minister explain to those 2.2 million pupils currently in receipt of the pupil premium what safeguards will be put in place to protect it?

Stephen Morgan: The hon. Member will know that the pupil premium is additional funding to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England. Pupil premium funding will rise to over £3 billion in 2025-26, an increase of almost 5% from 2024-25. We are reviewing how we allocate pupil premium and the national funding formula deprivation funding in the longer term and, while maintaining the overall amount we spend on tackling challenges faced by children with additional needs, we will provide more information on those matters in due course.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, with today's announcement, alongside the proactive Gravesham borough council's low-income family tracker programme, which has reached out and helped hundreds, if not thousands, of people who need it most in Gravesham, the Labour Government will lift a further 5,800 children who are eligible in Gravesham. Is this not the great, nutritious start in life that we need?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend really cares about these issues, and I thank her for raising these matters today. This is a significant first step in our ambitious strategy to tackle child poverty and its root causes and to give every child the best start in life. I commend the work that she describes; I know that it makes a real difference to areas such as her own.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I warmly welcome this today's announcement, which has been a Liberal Democrat policy for a very long time. It is so important to have proper nutrition for children so that they get the best possible start in life. In response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) about funding, the Minister said that this will come out in due course, but that it will be fully funded. Fully funded can mean that those funds come from various different places. Will the Minister rule out those funds coming from existing school budgets, and will he also rule out placing any other financial burden on to already overstretched school budgets?

Stephen Morgan: The new entitlement is fully funded and will support schools to deliver nutritious, high-quality meals that meet school food standards to over half a million additional pupils. As I said, we will set out further details on funding as part of the child poverty strategy to be published later this year.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I notice that not one Reform MP has turned up to hear an announcement that benefits so many working-class kids. I first joined a governing body of a primary school in

my constituency in 1986 and served for 37 years. From Thatcher to Sunak, I saw what was going on in our schools, and I never saw need like that under the last Conservative Government, so this is a very welcome statement indeed. But even this measure and all the other measures that I understand the Government are considering will not result in fewer children being in poverty in 2029 than are in poverty now unless we remove the two-child benefit cap. I want to add my voice to those who have already asked the Minister to assure us that the cap is being looked at.

Stephen Morgan: We know that too many life chances are scarred by poverty, which affects children up and down our country. Levels of poverty have increased by 900,000 since 2010. It is worth saying that this initiative is extra money above and beyond what already goes into schools. As I mentioned, the child poverty strategy will be published later this year and may conclude on the issues that my hon. Friend describes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. It would be churlish of anybody in this Chamber not to welcome it and say well done. It just so happens that it is this Minister and this Government who have done it so well, so I give a special thanks. I very much welcome the increase to free school meals. I read the Government's press release this morning with some interest. My question is quite specific. In Northern Ireland, one in four children experience relative poverty, with one in five in absolute poverty and two thirds of those with only one single parent working. Our children in Northern Ireland need this help. I know that it is not this Minister's responsibility, but do the announcement and these moneys mean that the Barnett consequential will ensure that some of the benefit can come to Northern Ireland directly?

Stephen Morgan: The hon. Gentleman is a real champion on these issues. He will appreciate that education is a devolved matter. The spending review next week will set out details on the Barnett consequential. The child poverty strategy is a UK-wide document, and I know that colleagues from Northern Ireland have been feeding into that review. As he knows, I meet regularly with my counterpart in Northern Ireland on issues of importance to the UK.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): As others have, I very much welcome the announcement. For the thousands of families in my constituency with children in poverty, this is a great announcement. However, I remember the Prime Minister's statement that the Government need to go further and faster, so I encourage the Minister when he goes back to his Department to ensure that the child poverty strategy is as radical as it can be and is adequately resourced. I ask him to return to the question of people on universal credit with children in poverty. Can we ensure that every child benefits from this announcement, because some families lack the capacity—for all sorts of reasons—to make the appropriate applications?

Stephen Morgan: We of course want to ensure that all families that are eligible for this roll-out benefit from it. Working with other Government Departments, we want to make the process as simple as possible. We are

determined to bring down child poverty. We appreciate that the issues are complex, and we want to get this right. We will set out more details in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. There are 15 colleagues remaining. If you want me to get you all in, work with me and keep your questions short please. I call Yasmin Qureshi.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): This is really welcome news for families in my constituency, with up to 11,450 children now set to benefit from free school meals. I know from speaking with parents that this will make a real difference both in easing pressure at home and in helping children to focus and do well in school. Does the Minister agree that this is the kind of support that families have needed for years, and it is a clear sign that the Government are serious about tackling child poverty and giving every child a fair chance?

Stephen Morgan: As I set out earlier, this is an intervention that is at once pro-learning and anti-poverty. We want to see high and rising standards in all our schools. Excellence should be for everyone. In complete contrast, the Opposition—their Members are not here now; I do not know where they have gone—want to see tax breaks for some schools for some children. The contrast has never been starker.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): As someone who grew up on free school meals in Rochdale, I know what a massive difference today's announcement will make to more than 8,000 of my constituents. One of my constituents, Laura Popham, is a single mum who is in work and was previously ineligible for the free school meals benefit. Today she sent me an email saying,

"This is exactly what I was hoping for. I am over the moon. I want to shout from the rooftops how happy I am. Only Labour would have done this."

Does the Minister agree that this is exactly the kind of change that people voted for last year?

Stephen Morgan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This is the difference that a Labour MP and a Labour Government can make. I pay tribute to Laura for raising these issues with us. Through constituents' lobbying and by hearing their concerns, we are delivering positive change for our country.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I applaud the Government's decision to extend free school meals to children across the country. This initiative is a vital step in supporting families in need and will undoubtedly benefit many children across Blackpool, which the Minister will know, as he joined me in visiting primary schools last year. Many, including the Jamie Oliver Food Foundation, have called for accelerated efforts to ensure that every child has access to nutritious meals irrespective of their background. Does the Minister agree that it is imperative that we unite in our efforts to guarantee that every child in Blackpool and across the country has the best possible start in life, with access to healthy food, quality education and opportunities for success?

Stephen Morgan: It was a pleasure to visit primary schools in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I know that he cares deeply about tackling child poverty. That

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is why I am delighted that we are taking this intervention to lift over 100,000 children out of poverty. He makes a number of points regarding good-quality nutritious food, and I hope he will work with us as we set out plans to make changes in this area in due course.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): In my constituency 5,730 children will benefit from this announcement. It means a hot meal every day and real, practical support for families who are struggling with the cost of living crisis. Does the Minister agree that while we expect the Conservative party to block this support, as they have for many years, Reform MPs could not even be bothered to turn up today? They talk about supporting families, but they are nowhere to be seen when it matters.

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; this is the stark choice that people voted for at the last election, and I am really proud that we are getting on with delivering the change that our country so desperately needs.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I welcome this announcement from the Government. In Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, it means a massive 47% increase in eligibility for free school meals, but the work will not be done until all children who are eligible for free school meals are able to access them, and I have asked my local council leader to do everything they can to ensure that. I know that the Government are considering this, but does the Minister agree that councils need to be doing everything they can to ensure that all children who are eligible are able to access their free school meals?

Stephen Morgan: I know from my hon. Friend's previous contributions in the House that she is a real champion on these issues. Making all children in households claiming universal credit eligible for free school meals makes it straightforward for parents to know whether they are eligible. We are supporting this by taking forward a programme of work, including improvements to our own systems, and we are working across Government to make that happen.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): As a Member of Parliament, I am always delighted to come to work to talk about policies such as this, which will lift 100,000 children out of poverty and give 4,500 children in my constituency access to free school meals. As a parent, I know how much of a difference this will make to the lives of parents in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that policies that give any child, wherever they are born and whatever their background, the chance to fulfil their potential are exactly what a Labour Government should be doing?

Stephen Morgan: I agree with my hon. Friend; we want to ensure that every child—whatever their background, wherever they are from—can succeed and thrive. This policy is an important step in making that happen by lifting 100,000 children out of poverty.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): Up to 3,130 children in South Norfolk will benefit from this measure, and two of my primary schools are among the 750 in

the forerunner programme for breakfast clubs. As the Minister is on such a roll in South Norfolk, will he help me fix the two schools—Brooke primary and Wreningham—that are currently in portacabins?

Stephen Morgan: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those matters further.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): In Darlington, I met a lovely mother who had recently gone back to work as a school dinner support worker. She was taking part-time, low-paid work, and her children consequently lost eligibility for free school meals, so she was worse off. I promised her that only Labour would be on the side of low-paid working families. Will the Minister join me in saying to that lady, "Promise made, promise delivered"?

Stephen Morgan: That is absolutely right: promise made, promise delivered. I am so delighted that my hon. Friend has been raising these issues with us and that we are now getting on and delivering on them.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Almost one in three children in my constituency live in poverty, and I know that going to school hungry is one of the biggest barriers to thriving not only in childhood but into adulthood, so I welcome the statement. Will the Minister confirm that this measure, along with free breakfast clubs and cutting the cost of school uniforms, will not only benefit family finances but improve school attainment, behaviour and learning outcomes?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is right to raise the benefits that this measure will bring on attendance, attainment and behaviour. I know that she is a real champion on these issues and that she will be really excited about ensuring that this happens across her constituency as quickly as possible.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): In Colchester, this measure will benefit over 5,000 children, so it is wonderful news from a Government who are indeed determined to tackle child poverty. Would the Minister like to make a return visit to Colchester, this time to visit not a pioneering pre-school but a pioneering primary school—Unity primary academy in Greenstead—which has just opened a community kitchen that creates an amazing food culture for local families?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As the Minister is on a tour, I assume that he will be coming to Sussex Weald shortly.

Stephen Morgan: I am not sure whether my office will be happy about that, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am sure we can make it happen. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I also want to pay tribute to school support staff and teachers who do so much to ensure that children across our country can achieve and thrive. They will know that this Labour Government have their back.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): In one fell swoop, this measure will take 100,000 children out of poverty. In my constituency, 2,500 children will benefit. Fighting poverty is in the Labour party's DNA, but with over 4.5 million children left in poverty by the

Conservative party, which has not turned up for the statement, will the Minister please assure me that we will not stop there and that there will be meaningful change through the child poverty strategy this autumn?

Stephen Morgan: I assure my hon. Friend that we will publish an ambitious child poverty strategy later this year to ensure that we deliver fully funded measures that make a big difference to children's lives.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): This announcement to extend free school meals will be hugely welcome news to the families of the 4,300 children in Northwich, Winsford and Middlewich that are in receipt of universal credit. There is a wealth of evidence that good nutrition at school has a significant impact on educational attainment, health and wellbeing and long-term earnings potential. If we are serious about bearing down on the rising levels of child poverty, which are now just short of 30% in my constituency, that starts with measures such as this, which I am sure will be the first of many. Does the Minister agree that this change in eligibility presents an opportunity at a national level to improve data sharing with local authorities so that we can finally facilitate auto-enrolment and ensure that the maximum number of families benefit from this policy?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is right to raise the difference that a Labour Government make and the scar of child poverty on our society. I assure him that we are working across the Department to deliver what he described.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): This change will make a difference to the lives of thousands of children in my Gateshead constituency, and may I say it would have been hugely welcomed by my grandmother who was a Gateshead dinner lady? Does the Minister agree that through 30 hours of free childcare, a limit on the number of branded school items, free breakfast clubs and lifting 100,000 children out of poverty, Labour is the party for children and families?

Stephen Morgan: We said that we would be a child-centred Government, and that is what we are delivering. The announcement is testament to that.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly thank the Minister for this much-needed announcement. Up to 5,600 children in my constituency will no doubt be grateful for the relief it brings to their families in easing the financial pressures that many face. Will the Minister confirm that this is just the first step in a wider strategy to tackle child poverty and that areas like Leigh and Atherton will be central to that effort?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I know that one reason she is in the House is to tackle deprivation and poverty across the country and in her own constituency. I assure her that we are determined to break down barriers to opportunity and to start to bring down child poverty levels in our society.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): As the proud son of a dinner lady, I warmly welcome the Minister's statement. I also pay tribute to the Minister for Employment

at his side, who is a tribune in the Government and the House against child poverty. With nearly one in two children in my constituency in poverty—a stain left by the last Government—this will be a welcome policy. Up to 16,000 pupils will be eligible for free school meals across Peterborough because of this policy, but that is just the start. What more can the Minister do to keep a razor-sharp focus on driving down poverty and driving up opportunities for young people in my city?

Stephen Morgan: This, of course, is the latest step in our plan for change to put extra pounds in parents' pockets. It is a down payment on the child poverty strategy, as I mentioned earlier, building on our expansion of free breakfast clubs, our national minimum wage boost and our cap on universal credit deductions through the fair repayment rate. Those are real measures that will make a real difference to people's lives.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I welcome wholeheartedly the announcement, not least because it means that almost 4,000 children in my constituency will benefit from free, healthy school meals, saving parents almost £500 a year. That is in addition to the breakfast clubs, of which we have two on the early adopter scheme. Does the Minister agree that as grateful as we are to wonderful people including the bean man, who can often be seen in Willington, Repton and surrounding areas collecting food for food banks, this is a step towards lifting people out of poverty so that we will no longer need food banks?

Stephen Morgan: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I know that she will want to feed into the child poverty strategy to ensure that it is ambitious, but I assure her that that is our intention.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I see that two Joshes remain.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Today, I am thinking of the teacher from my constituency who told me that they had to keep cereal bars in their office for children who came to school hungry. That is the legacy of the Conservative party, and I am not surprised that Conservative Members have not turned up to face the music. Research shows that people living with mental health conditions are twice as likely to be living in food-insecure households. Does the Minister agree that this announcement will make a huge change to our young people's mental health, and that that is exactly what people voted for when they voted Labour?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is right to set out that mental health can be a barrier to every child having the opportunity to succeed and thrive. He will know that we are investing in mental health support teams in every school across the country as well as recruiting 8,500 mental health professionals and introducing young futures hubs in communities. I know that he will welcome those wider plans for our country and will ensure that they are rolled out effectively in his constituency.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I welcome the announcement, which will help more than 4,000 working-class children in my community. The Minister rightly emphasised that the expansion of free school meals is

[Josh Newbury]

both pro-learning and anti-poverty, and we know that the appalling cost of living crisis, which the previous Government left behind, means that so many children are coming into school hungry and not in the best position to learn. Will he set out what else the Government are doing to tackle the poverty that is holding back so many children?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend will know that we are already committed to rolling out breakfast clubs in every primary school. We want to ensure that there is more money in parents' pockets through our childcare entitlement roll-out. More broadly, the child poverty strategy will be ambitious on improving outcomes and life chances for every young person.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am personally delighted and looking forward to hosting the Minister in my constituency.

Criminal Cases Review Commission: Leadership

JUSTICE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Justice Committee. Andy Slaughter will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions and not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in the questioning.

12.49 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this statement.

I rise to make a statement on the third report of the Justice Committee, which is titled "Leadership of the Criminal Cases Review Commission". I first want to place on the record my thanks to the Committee secretariat for their work in preparing the report and to the members of the Committee. Even though I thank all my colleagues, I will particularly mention the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for her thorough questioning of witnesses at our evidence session.

The Criminal Cases Review Commission is an independent body with statutory responsibility for investigating alleged miscarriages of justice in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It has the power to refer a case back to an appeal court if it considers that there is a real possibility that the court will quash the conviction or reduce the sentence in that case. The CCRC is a hugely important organisation, and it is essential to the proper functioning of the criminal justice system that it works effectively. Our report found that that was not currently the case.

On 14 January 2025, the chair of the CCRC, Helen Pitcher, resigned following the decision of an independent panel convened by the Lord Chancellor, which concluded by a majority that she should no longer head the organisation. The panel found that the chair had failed to restore confidence in the CCRC in the aftermath of Andrew Malkinson's acquittal by the Court of Appeal in July 2023. The panel also found that she had not sufficiently challenged the performance of the chief executive of the CCRC, Karen Kneller.

On 29 April 2025, the Committee held an evidence session with Karen Kneller and Amanda Pearce, casework operations director at the CCRC. Both are very long-serving senior managers. The Committee asked the witnesses about Chris Henley KC's independent review of their handling of the Andrew Malkinson case, their leadership of the CCRC and the CCRC's remote working policies. Before and after the session on 29 April, the Committee received a significant amount of information from individuals who have worked with and for the CCRC, from casework managers to commissioners. The evidence presented to the Committee indicated that, in an echo

of Mr Malkinson's own words, a root-and-branch review of how the CCRC operates is urgently needed. We intend our findings to inform that work.

Since our report was published on 23 May, Dame Vera Baird KC has been appointed as interim chair of the CCRC. I welcome the appointment of such an experienced and respected figure who has the skills and robustness to reform an organisation that has lost its way so fundamentally. I also welcome that, at the Committee's request, the chair of the CCRC has been added to the list of roles for which the Justice Committee conducts pre-appointment scrutiny.

The cases of Andrew Malkinson, who was imprisoned for almost 20 years for a crime he did not commit, and Peter Sullivan, who spent 38 years in prison for a crime he did not commit, underline the importance of the CCRC's role. Both Mr Malkinson and Mr Sullivan made applications to the CCRC, which were rejected. The failings in the Malkinson case have been made abundantly clear by Chris Henley KC's review. Our report does not rehearse the facts of that case; rather, it addresses the way the CCRC conducted itself in response.

I want to highlight two key points in relation to the Henley report: the insufficiency of the CCRC's apology to Mr Malkinson and the delays in the publication of the report. It should not have taken an independent review for the CCRC to apologise to Andrew Malkinson. The public statements of the then chair, Helen Pitcher, after Andrew Malkinson's acquittal were woefully inadequate and showed a worrying lack of understanding of the potential damage to the CCRC's reputation and public confidence that would almost inevitably arise from a failure to admit its mistakes and apologise. By failing to offer a timely apology, the leadership of the CCRC caused significant damage to the organisation's reputation. The CCRC's statements gave the impression that the organisation and its leadership were more concerned with defending their own reputation than offering an honest assessment of how they had failed Andrew Malkinson.

The Committee was unpersuaded by the justifications given by Karen Kneller for the delays in the publication of the Henley report. The report was provided to the CCRC in January 2024, but not published until July 2024. Among the reasons for the delay in publication given to us by Ms Kneller on 29 April was that the report was a draft that contained typographical errors that needed correcting. In an exchange of letters with the Committee, Chris Henley KC told us that his report had not contained typographical errors, but that the CCRC had instead asked him to make substantive changes to its wording, and he provided us with evidence of that.

We also found it was inappropriate for the CCRC to suggest to Chris Henley KC that his report should not draw broader conclusions on the CCRC as an organisation based on his analysis of their handling of Andrew Malkinson's case. The CCRC's leadership should have accepted the gravity of the failings in the handling of the case and their wider implications. We were further unpersuaded by Karen Kneller and Amanda Pearce's explanation that publication of the Henley report was not possible because of the proximity of the general election.

When Karen Kneller and Amanda Pearce appeared before us on 29 April, we provided them with an opportunity to respond to public criticisms of the

leadership's recent performance. The answers provided to the Committee did not inspire confidence; on the contrary, the partial nature of their answers led Chris Henley KC and Chris Webb—a crisis communications consultant employed by the CCRC to advise on the Henley report and the response to it—to write to us to correct points made by Karen Kneller on 29 April. Both Chris Henley and Chris Webb made allegations that Ms Kneller had misled the Committee. In the spirit of fairness, the Committee offered Karen Kneller the opportunity to respond directly in writing to those allegations and incorporated her responses into our report.

The allegations made by Chris Henley and Chris Webb served to reinforce the sense that the leadership of the CCRC had continually failed to learn from its mistakes and confront its failings with the seriousness required. As a result of our concerns regarding the performance of the CCRC and the unpersuasive evidence Karen Kneller provided to the Committee, the Committee concluded it was no longer tenable for her to continue as chief executive of the CCRC.

The conclusions the Committee reached were far broader than just those relating to the chief executive and to the organisation as a whole. Commissioners form the body corporate of the organisation and make the key decisions with regard to the CCRC's work, and we were alarmed that the CCRC had operated without a full quota of commissioners since 2023. We were also disappointed that the terms of commissioner recruitment only require commissioners to work 52 days per year. The responsibility for the lack of commissioner recruitment in recent years is an issue for both the Ministry of Justice and the CCRC. We made recommendations that the incoming interim chair's review of the organisation should consider whether the terms of appointment for commissioners, the corporate structure of the CCRC and the commission's relationship with the MOJ are currently appropriate to ensure that the CCRC has the resources it needs to operate effectively. I understand that the terms of reference of that review will be published shortly.

During the pandemic, the CCRC moved to remote-first as a means of operation, which it has retained. That is out of step with the rest of the public sector and seems unsuited to the nature of the commission's work. We were particularly shocked that both Ms Kneller and Ms Pearce, the senior leadership of the organisation, only attend the office once or twice every few months. We recommended that senior leadership should have a regular presence in the office, particularly in the light of recent events and the high-profile criticism directed at the commission.

Exclusively remote working is not suited to a body that relies on investigation and challenge to correct miscarriages of justice. The CCRC is a hugely important organisation and the senior leadership could have done much more in their evidence to reassure us that they understood the seriousness of the criticisms it has faced, and the need for an overhaul of the organisation to rebuild public trust and provide applicants to the CCRC with the justice they deserve.

For an organisation that is designed to identify failures within the criminal justice system, the CCRC's leadership has shown a remarkable inability to learn from its own

[*Andy Slaughter*]

mistakes. The new interim chair, Dame Vera Baird KC, will now conduct a review of the CCRC, and it is already clear from her public statements that she is across the scale and complexity of the task that she has been set, including the issues raised in our report. There is a real prospect of changes being made at CCRC, and I am hopeful that that will lead to better outcomes for those who have been victims of miscarriages of justice.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I very much welcome the appointment of Dame Vera Baird. However, the culture that has built up at the CCRC around the remote-first policy seems to have led to very lax working practices. After she has finished in the role of interim chair, what is the future for scrutinising the CCRC so that it does not fall back into that sort of lax behaviour?

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful to my hon. Friend because although that is a management point, it is a substantive one because the work done by caseworkers within the CCRC requires investigation and is sensitive, and they have to be robust and thorough in what they do. The collegiate experience that people get from working in an office together is essential to that. Similar bodies would expend at least 60% of their time in the office. Those are the sort of criteria I would expect to be addressed in Dame Vera Baird's review so we can go forward with an organisation that is fit for purpose.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his presentation. In his introduction, he referred to the input from Northern Ireland. Did that involve the policing and justice Minister and all the major political parties to ensure that we have a collective point of view on the delivery of the recommendations?

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful, as always, to the hon. Gentleman for his question. All I can say today is that the CCRC covers Northern Ireland and that any recommendations that come from Dame Vera Baird's review must also affect the other jurisdictions in which the CCRC has a role. Clearly, most of the points that we dealt with in what was a relatively short inquiry related to England and Wales, but I will ensure that Northern Ireland is not forgotten going forward.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I welcome the statement from the Chair of the Select Committee and the appointment of Dame Vera Baird as the interim chair. Does my hon. Friend share a certain incredulity that the Ministry of Justice took three years to resolve the fee that would be paid to commissioners, and that the recruitment exercise appears to be taking 18 months to resolve? What is going on there? Does he believe that the terms of appointment for commissioners should be reviewed to ensure that they can play a greater role in the day-to-day running of the CCRC?

Andy Slaughter: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I see that the Minister, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), is in her place and she was no doubt listening, because there are some quite trenchant criticisms of the Ministry of Justice, as well as of the CCRC itself, in the report—in particular, the feeling that both organisations have taken their eye off the ball on overall governance. When the CCRC was set up, commissioners were in full-time, salaried positions and had a substantial role in the running of the organisation. They now work remotely part time and on a fee-paid basis.

My hon. Friend praised Dame Vera Baird, and I would like to add that this is a difficult job, which may be why the review is taking so long and why it took so long to appoint her. The role needs someone with both an eye for detail and the gravitas to do it. I am confident that she has that, but to leave the organisation in a fit state, she will need to do something fundamental about its governance, and the commissioners will be central to that.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his remarks. As a member of the Committee, I can attest to our dismay at what we heard in those hearings. I ask the Chair to encourage Dame Vera Baird to take a robust approach to her review of the leadership of such an important public body.

Andy Slaughter: I thank my hon. Friend, who is an assiduous and very qualified member of the Committee, and often puts me to shame in relation to my knowledge of matters. Anybody who listened to Dame Vera's interview on the "Today" programme this week, in which she addressed several times the report and these findings, as well as three other reports that there have been over the past 10 years, will be under no illusion about whether she understands the scale of the task she faces and has the skills to tackle it.

Governing the Marine Environment

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

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

1.4 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am pleased to present to the House the Environmental Audit Committee's report on "Governing the marine environment". Ahead of World Ocean Day and the United Nations ocean conference next week, there is an opportunity for the Government to send a clear signal that the UK is serious about protecting our marine environment. That is why the Committee worked hard to publish our report in a timely manner to advance that effort.

I am grateful to all members of the Committee for their contributions. This is the first inquiry that has been initiated and completed by this Committee, and it has been a pleasure to conduct the inquiry together. I wish to record my, and the whole Committee's, huge gratitude to the staff of the Environmental Audit Committee, in particular Dr Misha Patel, who worked tirelessly and swiftly to produce the report.

The Committee initiated the inquiry due to the critical importance of, and risks to, our marine environment. Oceans regulate the Earth's temperature, absorb carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, support biodiversity, underpin diverse industries and offer significant cultural, heritage and recreational value. At the same time, they are under immense pressure from a variety of activities, and those activities are governed by a complex and fragmented regime of regulation and policy. The Committee heard that this lack of joined-up governance and effective stakeholder engagement risks the unsustainable management and potential depletion of critical marine resources. In fact, UK waters are already failing assessments of their environmental health, leading the Office for Environmental Protection to investigate a suspected failure by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to take the necessary measures to achieve "good environmental status" of marine waters.

It was a great pleasure and honour for many Members of Parliament to watch the film "Ocean" in the company of Sir David Attenborough yesterday. We heard the Prime Minister, in his warm embrace of Sir David, assert that his Government would take nature seriously, echoing the importance of action on oceans ahead of next week's conference. The Committee is in excited anticipation of the announcements that the Government will make ahead of next week's conference.

Turning to the report's findings in more detail, I wish to highlight four topics on which the Committee heard detailed evidence and has made recommendations to the Government. The first is on bottom trawling. While

marine protected areas cover nearly 900,000 square kilometres of English waters, activities that harm marine life are still allowed in lots of those areas. The film "Ocean" I referred to clearly showed the devastation of the seabed caused by bottom trawling. Extractive and damaging practices undermine the very objectives that MPAs were established to address. While the Government have indicated that they are committed to not having bottom trawling in areas that damage MPAs, they have not yet set out a timeline for implementing the change. Every day we wait, further damage is done to the seabed and crucial ocean ecosystems. The Committee concluded that damaging practices, such as bottom trawling, dredging and mining aggregates, should be banned in offshore protected areas.

Beyond protected areas at sea, the Committee heard that the overarching vision for how our oceans are used and managed is outdated and does not reflect the current or evolving pressures on the marine environment. The current marine policy statement published in 2011, for example, seeks to maximise the production of oil and gas. That is clearly not the current Government's policy, but it is according to the MPS. The Committee recommends that the Government bring forward a long overdue review of the marine policy statement to update it to ensure that it reflects current Government policy and sets out how decisions will be made to balance marine exploitation and marine protection.

On marine spatial planning, the Committee heard that the marine spatial prioritisation programme should be key in guiding marine governance and spatial planning of activities at sea, such as protected areas, renewables development and fishing. However, it remains unclear what outcomes are expected and what has been delivered by the programme to date. We urge the Government to clarify the scope, objectives and outputs of the marine spatial prioritisation programme to ensure that it effectively implements the Government's vision for the sustainable use of the marine environment. Changes in marine spatial planning will have real impacts on those who rely on the sea for their livelihoods. The Government must ensure that traditional marine sectors are supported through these changes to retain their expertise and support sustainable practices.

Finally, the Committee heard that despite signing the UN high seas treaty in September 2023, the UK has so far failed to ratify it. This crucial treaty would protect marine life in the high seas by establishing protected areas in international waters. Until the treaty is ratified by 60 nations, it will not come into force. We urge the Government to set a clear timeline for introducing the required legislation for ratifying the treaty before September 2025, which will mark two years since the UK signed it. This would send a clear signal that global marine protection is a priority for the Government, and it would take the UK and the world one step closer to real protection for marine life in the high seas.

In our hearings, Ministers confirmed that it remains Government policy to ratify the treaty but explained that not enough time had been found in the parliamentary schedule for legislation. It is crucial, both for the UK's contribution and for the treaty to come into force, that it is ratified. We call on the Government to bring that forward now.

While the urgency of the situation for the marine environment is clear, there is an opportunity to turn things around. The evidence is indisputable, and the

[Mr Toby Perkins]

Government have a number of policy tools and options at their disposal. It is time to act to protect the marine environment. Ahead of the UN ocean conference next week, I look forward to hearing from the Minister the Government's plans to safeguard our oceans for the future.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his statement, and I congratulate the Environmental Audit Committee for its excellent and thoughtful report on governing the marine environment. A key component in that is marine conservation and protection, including the myriad species living in that environment, such as cetaceans.

There is no humane way to kill a whale, and sadly the barbaric practice of hunting and killing whales and dolphins still continues. Does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that the United Kingdom can play a pivotal role in ending this practice with its global soft power, and in treaty negotiations, trade deals and fisheries negotiations, by putting pressure on countries like Japan, Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands to stop this horrific practice in our seas and oceans once and for all?

Mr Perkins: The shadow Minister makes an important point. I know that the previous Government wrestled with this, and the current Government will too. It was not featured in our report, but I know my Front-Bench colleagues will listen and take it seriously. I thank him for raising that point.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his statement. It has been a privilege to be involved in the Committee's work on this report. Does he agree that next week's UN ocean conference offers the Government a unique opportunity to take a global lead on banning destructive practices such as bottom trawling in marine protected areas, as our report recommends?

Mr Perkins: I thank my hon. Friend and Committee colleague for her contribution. I absolutely agree. The warm words we heard from the Prime Minister yesterday were incredibly encouraging, but we need to see them backed up with real action. I look forward to hearing what the Government have to say at the conference.

It is important that we negotiate strongly overseas, but we must also get our own act in order in this country. It would be a valuable signal ahead of the ocean conference if the Government committed to what we signed up to in opposition, and in our manifesto, and banned bottom trawling in marine protected areas.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his statement. It is a privilege to serve on the Environmental Audit Committee.

While the UK Government have committed to not allowing any new oil and gas licences—I would like to see them go further—the marine spatial plan still says that we should maximise production of oil and gas. Is that not outrageously out of date, and is it not urgent that the Government update the strategy so that we have joined-up policy to tackle the climate crisis?

Mr Perkins: I absolutely agree. We know that that is not the Government's policy, but according to the MPS it is. That demonstrates the urgency of updating the plan, which goes back to 2011. It was updated after Brexit, but it clearly bears no relationship to the Government's current policies. We expect those who use the sea in different ways to listen to the plan, so it is important that the plan reflects current policy. That is an important recommendation we made in our report, and I entirely agree with the hon. Lady.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for how he has conducted this inquiry and presented the report to the House. I also thank the Clerks and officials who prepared the report under considerable stress—we are very grateful for their work.

I ask my hon. Friend to reflect further on the situation with the BBNJ treaty. I spoke this morning to the Journal Office, the House of Commons Library specialist and the Clerk of the House, and it has become clear that the BBNJ treaty was in fact laid on the Table of the House on 16 October 2023, and its 21-day sitting period has therefore long since passed without objection.

It appears that the Government are misleading themselves by saying that they have to pass the implementing primary legislation before they can ratify it and table the instrument of ratification at the United Nations ocean conference next week. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given that ratification by 60 states is vital—we are two short at the moment, as I understand it—it is important that there is no statutory objection to our tabling the instrument next week, and that we should get on and do it?

Mr Perkins: I certainly think we should get on and do it. My hon. Friend raises an important point about whether primary legislation is needed. It is clear that the Government believe it is, and the evidence our Committee heard is that the Government are trying to find time for that. My hon. Friend makes an innovative suggestion, and I am sure the Government will listen. I think there is agreement across the House that this is important. It was the policy of the previous Government, but it was never brought forward; it is the policy of this Government, and it has never been brought forward. I think we would all agree that it is tremendously important for ratification to take place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee for introducing the report and for mentioning bottom trawling. My understanding from speaking to the fish producers' organisations in my constituency and across Northern Ireland is that they are committed to the vision of stopping bottom trawling, and I think the feeling is the same across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. If our fishermen and fisherwomen have the vision to stop bottom trawling, what is being done to ensure that other European countries have the same vision?

Mr Perkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point and for his attention to these matters. The Committee looked in detail at bottom trawling, and we heard from a number of experts. It is also important to say that there is a devolved element. We considered the

question of whether the Government's plan should impose highly protected marine areas on devolved jurisdictions. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need consistency on this across the UK, and that we must insist on the same from nations across Europe and the rest of the world.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): David Attenborough has said that we know more about the surface of the moon than we know about the bottom of our oceans and the ecosystems that exist down there. It is disturbing that Donald Trump—who else?—has signed a directive allowing deep-sea mining. Can this issue be taken up at next week's conference to try to secure co-operation on studying the bottom of our oceans and understanding the ecosystems before we do permanent damage that we might regret?

Mr Perkins: My hon. Friend characteristically makes an important point. I am sure the Minister heard and will consider it. We commented on deep-sea mining in marine protected areas in our report. The film "Ocean" demonstrated how much we are already starting to learn, and the vastness of our knowledge gap in this area. My hon. Friend is right that we must continue to invest. The report talks about making sure that we have better data and information, and making sure that, on a global basis, we do not allow further degradation of this crucial ecosystem.

BILL PRESENTED

PENSION SCHEMES

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Liz Kendall, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary John Healy, Secretary Shabana Mahmood, Secretary Bridget Phillipson, Secretary Peter Kyle, Jim McMahon, Ellie Reeves, Georgia Gould, Al Carns and Mary Creagh presented a Bill to make provision about pension schemes; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 9 June, and to be printed (Bill 255), with explanatory notes (Bill 255-EN).

Backbench Business

Bank Closures and Banking Hubs

1.20 pm

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the importance of banking facilities to local communities and expresses concern over the precipitous decline over the past 40 years; notes the change to banking habits through online services; further recognises that, for vulnerable people, face-to-face banking is a vital service and a reduction of branches risks significant financial exclusion; further notes the impact of a loss of physical banking on small businesses through lost productivity and lost footfall; also notes the innovative nature of banking hubs as a solution to a loss of high street banking, but recognises that Financial Conduct Authority rules for their recommendation are too inflexible; and calls on the Government to instigate a review into the impact on communities of bank branch loss and a change to the regulations to ensure communities have appropriate access to banking facilities.

On 26 February, I held a debate in Westminster Hall on high street banking and bank closures. Despite the fact that it was only a 30-minute debate, it was incredibly well attended. Such was the demand for a debate on the issues facing almost every community and constituency that, at its conclusion, I was urged to apply for a Backbench Business debate—so here we are this afternoon. I want to put on record my thanks to the Committee for granting such an important debate and to all the Members across the House who co-signed my application, in particular the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), who co-sponsored it.

This debate, like the previous one, is timely. There has been a precipitous decline in banking provision in the UK over a period of four decades. It has been partially driven by the rapid advances in technology, which have seen a huge uptake of internet banking, but we should not kid ourselves—it has also been driven by a desire from banks still raking in enormous profits to centralise and cut costs, with no regard for the communities they purport to serve.

Communities are being sacrificed at the altar of greed, at the behest of banks that no longer see the services they provide as profitable, and as is so often the case, the elderly, the disabled and the poor, who either cannot cope with computers or cannot afford expensive broadband, are the ones who have been hit the hardest. Moreover, the closures have further eroded local economies, with fewer visits to the high street being made and local businesses having additional costs linked to such practicalities as making cash deposits.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the issues caused for businesses. There are also significant issues for charities. In my constituency, many local charities and community groups receive cash donations and struggle to find a place to bank them. Does he agree that this is an issue for charities, just as much as it is for local businesses?

Ian Lavery: That is a very valid point. My hon. Friend is right: when we look at who suffers as a consequence of these decisions, charities are way up there.

[*Ian Lavery*]

The regulatory framework in place to protect communities has found itself totally lacking, and that has been the case for some time. That is the reason for this debate. My predecessor for the old Wansbeck seat, Denis Murphy, campaigned vigorously alongside local people against the closure of bank branches in both Newbiggin-by-the-Sea and Guide Post, but despite overwhelming public support, the banks closed regardless. Both those communities have been without their own banks for more than 25 years. Since 2013, the Financial Conduct Authority has been tasked with regulating banking services, including branch closures.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this incredibly important debate. Last month, the well-used Chiswick post office in my constituency closed without notice. I met Post Office Ltd yesterday, and it assured me that a service would be restored shortly. Does he agree that this volatility and uncertainty in the market is damaging to both local communities and the reputation of financial institutions?

Ian Lavery: That is massively important. People are told that they can rely on post offices to replace the banks. The vast majority of post offices in our communities are now run by a single person and are not making a profit. They can easily just withdraw the services—it does happen, and it has happened lots of times in my career—leaving the communities without anything whatsoever. That is a really important point, which I will probably touch on later.

In my experience of dealing with branch closures in my constituency, the FCA's powers to force the banking industry to rectify the consequential difficulties are totally and utterly inadequate.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. The fact that there are so many Members in the House this afternoon underlines that this is a very big problem that crosses party political boundaries and all kinds of constituencies. Harwich, Brightlingsea, Manningtree and other places in my constituency are losing their banking facilities. The Government are spending money on trying to revive Harwich high street, but neither the previous Government nor this Government have done anything to secure the banking facilities that are the lifeblood of a high street. I really welcome this debate. I am not sure that post offices are the answer. I think we need to make sure there is a proper bank on every high street.

Ian Lavery: I do agree with that. These problems are happening across communities, regardless of whether we are red, blue, green or yellow—it is happening on every high street. Many of them have lost their banks—they are gone—and it cannot be allowed to continue.

Under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, the FCA can require banks to consult interested parties to consider the effects of closures and can ask the private sector cash machine operator Link to assess the consequences of closures and to recommend where alternatives such as shared banking hub facilities should be created to fill the gaps.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He mentioned that this problem is happening in every high street across the country, and that is certainly the case in my constituency, where we have seen the almost wholesale withdrawal of banks in West Norwood, Dulwich and Brixton—across the piece, they are closing. Where they close, the banks often say, “We’ll make our services available in a banking hub in the local library,” for example. The service is then poorly advertised and publicised and is not particularly convenient. The banks come along a few months later and say, “We’re closing it because of a lack of demand.” Does he agree that the banks are taking a cynical approach and are failing to provide an adequate service to our constituents?

Ian Lavery: Of course it is a cynical approach. The banks do not want to be on the high street. They do not want to be supporting local communities—the very same communities that have supported the banks through the darkest of times. That is the reality, and that is why this debate is so important. We need more regulation to support people in their communities.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. When the last bank in town closes in communities such as Tenbury Wells and Pershore, it is a cumbersome process for them to qualify for a banking hub. He mentioned the role of the regulator. Does he agree that when the last bank in town closes, a banking hub ought to be provided automatically?

Ian Lavery: There is definitely room for discussion in that respect. We have got to make sure that people have financial services on the high street. It is pretty simple.

Link assesses the consequences of bank closures, but its objectives are directed by the FCA requirements, and basically, it can only assess a community based on access to cash—nothing else. No other social discussions take place; it is just based on access to cash.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In Eltham, our last bank has closed, but because we still have a Nationwide in the town centre, the banks will not consider the option of a banking hub. That needs to change. Does he agree that we need a review of the criteria, so that we can have a chance of getting the banks at least to co-operate in a banking hub? They should not rely on Nationwide.

Ian Lavery: I of course agree: the criteria laid down by the Government, the banks, the FCA and Link need to be utterly overhauled to represent people in our communities. I will come on to some of the points that my hon. Friend raises.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): All of us in this House share the concern that the disabled and the vulnerable are losing access not just to cash, but to services. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is high time we asked the Government to ensure that the FCA reviews its guidelines on this?

Ian Lavery: My ask will be a bit stronger than that. I might get my backside kicked, but hey, it will not be the first time. I will ask the Government to insist on legislation that changes the structures to what we are all crying out for. It will not cost the Government a ha'penny to provide services to the people who actually need them.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The number of banks that have left my constituency has driven me mad: in the 336 square miles of Mid Buckinghamshire, only one high street bank is left standing. One of the most absurd things that I have heard multiple banks say over the years is: "Oh, but there's a bank just a few miles away." That might be technically true on Google Maps, but to pick somewhere close to my constituency entirely at random—I see the Economic Secretary to the Treasury in her place—in High Wycombe it takes an enormous amount of time compared with how it looks on Google Maps to get into the town centre and back again. If one bit of the criteria needs to change, it is that banks should not be able just to say, "Oh, there's a bank a few miles away." They need to look at the time it takes in real life to get from a village to a nearby town.

Ian Lavery: It feels really strange to agree with so many Conservative Members—it does not make me terribly comfortable, but it shows the power of the argument and, importantly, the support that it has across the House, which is relatively rare. The number of interventions that I have taken has meant that lots of the points in my speech have already been made. I will try to be as quick as possible.

Link does a decent job under the criteria that have been set, which really need to be changed. Link can pause a bank closure but cannot stop one, or set its own timetable for the establishment of banking hubs. Moreover, there is no provision for the FCA to initiate retrospective assessments of the need for banking hubs in areas where banks have left the high street, resulting in banking deserts, many years ago, prior to the 2023 Act.

The Government simply must take a fresh look at this issue and bring forward the necessary legislation to force the banking industry to fulfil its social responsibilities. The customers and communities from whom they have extracted so much profit over the years deserve nothing less. We should not forget that these are the very same banks and financial institutions that we had to bail out in 2008-09 because of their reckless pursuit of ever-increasing profits. They then made fortunes through the quantitative easing that the Bank of England initiated to save the economy after the crash that they caused. They are now abandoning the very taxpayers who bailed them out.

As I mentioned, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of banks on our high streets. In 1986 there were 21,643 bank and building society branches in the UK; by 2024, around 6,800 were left. Clearly, the switch to online banking has had an impact, but even those of us who use online banking sometimes need the certainty that a branch offers. The House of Lords April 2025 report "Closure of bank branches: Impact on rural communities" quotes Sarah Coles, a senior personal finance analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown:

"The closure of bank branches is a vicious circle. The more that close, the more people move online, so there are fewer people relying on high street branches, so more of them close. The

pandemic picked up the pace around this ever-decreasing circle, closing more branches temporarily and causing online banking to spike."

The banks say that fewer people are using branches. If a high street branch closes, people cannot use it, as it is not there any more. Does that not result in an automatic reduction in usage? This is not rocket science. It is a vicious circle, which is why we need change from the Government.

Northumberland, my home county, has lost more than half of its bank branches since 2015. In my constituency of Blyth and Ashington, the large villages have been left without high street banks for more than a quarter of a decade. Blyth, Northumberland's largest town, will be left without a high street bank in a few months' time, though a building society will remain—the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford).

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): The hon. Member has been very generous. He mentions building societies, and the Nationwide problem was mentioned. In Harpenden, the hard work of local campaigners has managed to secure a banking hub, despite our having a Nationwide. Does he agree that local communities need access to a full range of banking services that building societies do not provide, and will he join me in thanking Harpenden town council and especially Derek French, who has campaigned on this issue locally and nationally? Perhaps this could be an example that could help other towns to find out how they could get a banking hub despite having a Nationwide.

Ian Lavery: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention; I will cover some of those points.

I mentioned Blyth, the biggest town in my constituency. The third largest town in Northumberland, Bedlington, saw its last branch close just last month. From August in my constituency, only Ashington, the county's third largest town, will have a high street bank, but many will wonder how long that will last. Who is affected by these bank closures? Like any change of this nature, is it not the most vulnerable who find it the most difficult? The FCA's research in 2019 set out how problematic the requirement to travel bigger distances for banking services was for older people, and provided evidence for the slow uptake of online banking services by older people.

Only last week, my office was contacted by an elderly gentleman from Guide Post. His local bank closed in 2000. He moved to the branch in Bedlington, a few miles away, where he stayed for nigh on 25 years before that closed. Then he moved to the one in Blyth, a few miles further away; that branch is now to be closed, as I mentioned earlier. He is unable to access internet banking, he does not have any family, and he is unable to travel any further distances, whether by using basic transport services or otherwise.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): As others have said, the hon. Member has been very generous. His speech is making me think about vulnerable customers, and access to responsible credit for them. Just a couple of weeks ago, the all-party parliamentary group on fair banking had a roundtable. Actually, online banking services do not help those really vulnerable people, where there is a sense of shame in potentially needing

[Wendy Chamberlain]

small amounts of help and support. Does he agree that that is something else that we, and the Government, need to consider?

Ian Lavery: I fully agree with the hon. Lady's intervention. It is up to us, in this place, to speak up for those vulnerable people.

We know that the banks profit and make savings from branch closures. In January 2020, a House of Commons Library briefing pointed to the major banks enjoying a 6% decrease in overhead costs through branch closures. In 2024, HSBC reported the highest net profit among the largest UK banks, reaching just under £20 billion; Barclays followed, with around £6.36 billion; and NatWest's net profit was approximately £4.8 billion. The big four UK banks—Barclays, NatWest, Lloyds and HSBC—are estimated to have made a combined £44.7 billion in profit. They are not hard up, you know—they really are not hard up. That is why it is important that we, as elected representatives, press that point home to Government.

The FCA's current powers around bank closures have been mentioned two or three times already, and they go to the heart of the issue. Unfortunately, the banks are a law unto themselves. The FCA has no statutory powers to prevent bank closures. It can only seek to influence such decisions through its guidance notes. On branch closures, the FCA guidance requires banks to assess how closures will affect customers, especially those with vulnerabilities, using data on usage trends; consider alternative solutions to customers' needs, such as free ATMs, post offices and banking hubs; and ensure that customers are given clear information and that they are not misled. Although the FCA cannot stop closures, it can require pauses in branch closures if it is not satisfied that the important matters that I have just mentioned have been considered adequately. Given everything we are talking about, I think that approach fails. Legislative changes are needed to ensure there is much more flexibility in that guidance.

Link is a not-for-profit company that is charged with making access to cash available, largely through ATMs. It can charge for using its ATMs and is allowed to charge more in rural areas. Prior to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, the major banks ran a voluntary assessment scheme using Link to carry out research into the effects of planned branch closures. The Act made the Link assessments mandatory but did not significantly widen their scope. The Link assessments analyse the impact of branch closures in terms of access to cash, and outline existing and recommended new alternatives, such as banking hubs.

In Blyth, which is Northumberland's largest town, the banks ran out of cash over a bank holiday weekend not many weeks ago. Blyth—it is a massive place—did not have any cash. Can you imagine that? It did not have any cash whatsoever simply because the cash machines ran out and the Morrisons supermarket cash machines were inside the closed store. An hon. Member raised the point about having different cash machines in different places, but if people rely on a supermarket for access to cash, perhaps as a last resort, and it closes at 7pm or 8pm, then they do not have any access to cash.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. To expand on his comment about supermarkets, in Wetherby in my constituency, Morrisons has the only cashpoints and they are outside, but they had run out of cash by Saturday lunch time

Ian Lavery: That sounds like the same sort of situation as the one we had in Blyth. There were cash machines outside and inside, but the cash machines outside ran out of cash. There were people knocking on the shop windows asking the people who were filling the shelves to get some money for them from the cash machines inside—how ludicrous is that? How ridiculous!

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I welcome the point that the hon. Gentleman is raising. There is also an issue with cash machines inside shops that may be open for longer, but they are stocked from the shop by the cash received in the premises. There can be cash machines in a shop that have no cash in them, but Link has to take them into account when assessing whether there should be a free-to-use cash machine in a community.

Ian Lavery: I totally agree with the right hon. Gentleman's point. I like bringing school kids into Parliament. Down in one of the corridors there is an ATM that says "Free cash", and I tell all the kids, "That's what you get if you are an MP—you can get as much cash as you want from here—it's free, it's free!" [Laughter.] And they all ask me if I can get them some cash before they go to their mams. Free cash? There are ATMs where people have to pay a huge percentage to get their own money. That is an issue that I will cover very shortly.

My own experience of dealing with Link saw me almost guaranteed that a banking hub would be delivered in Bedlington just before the election, but on receiving the assessment, no such facility was proposed and instead worried locals were asked to travel to nearby Cramlington to conduct their financial affairs. That is not acceptable. It is correct to say that banking hubs are an innovative solution for high streets left without banking facilities, but Link's briefing note on banking hubs published on 2 June 2025 says:

"Banking hubs are shared services that enable customers of any of the major high street banks to access basic banking services and advice from community bankers. Hubs are delivered by a bank-owned company called Cash Access UK, and are currently operated by the Post Office."

The Government have stated that they expect 350 banking hubs to be open by the end of this Parliament. We are well on-track to surpass that figure. Link has already identified a need for 226 banking hubs across the UK, and a similar number of other cash services, such as new deposit services. Over 150 banking hubs are already operational. There is no doubt that that is progress, but we need far more to provide the service that our constituents deserve. The figure of 350 banking hubs might sound impressive, but there are 650 constituencies represented in Parliament. In my constituency alone, banking hubs should be at the heart of the high streets in Ashington, Bedlington, Blyth, Guidepost and Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, but at the current rate, we will need 10 times the amount being talked about by the end of this Parliament. Our high streets have been hollowed out by online and out-of-town shopping.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In West Ealing, in my constituency, we have seen all the banks close over the past decade or so. In fact, the town centre itself has visibly declined, in the way that he alluded to. Does he agree that the Labour Government's decision to permanently reduce business rates for retail and hospitality businesses and to end the scourge of late payments, along with the 350 banking hubs that he mentions, will help revitalise places like West Ealing?

Ian Lavery: I agree that that will help to revitalise high streets, but the debate this afternoon is about how we assist the people in our communities, mainly the least well off, the disabled and the elderly who simply want a bank to use.

As I mentioned, our high streets have been hollowed out, but we can share some community pride—or indeed some community shame—on this issue. We can start a move towards the former by moving much-needed services, like banking hubs, into the hearts of the communities that we all represent. To do so, we need proper regulation of the banks. It should be abundantly clear to anyone who has paid any attention that the banks cannot be allowed to police themselves.

The FCA needs proper teeth and the Financial Services and Marketing Act 2023 should be amended to ensure essential face-to-face services are protected alongside access to cash. During the debate on Lords Amendments to the Financial Services and Markets Bill, before it was enacted, the then shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq), said:

“I am disappointed that the amendments will do nothing to protect essential face-to-face services. Analysis published by consumer group Which? found that over half of the UK's bank and building society branches have closed since January 2015—a shocking rate of about 54 closures each month—which risks excluding millions of people who rely on in-person services for help with opening new accounts, applying for loans, making or receiving payments, and standing orders.”—[*Official Report*, 26 June 2023; Vol. 735, c. 71.]

The Labour party is proudly in power, and I am sure that we will address these issues. We are now in government, and it is time to take action. We need to curb the power of the big banks once and for all. We need to start a review into the impact on communities that are losing bank branches. We need to change legislation to ensure that community factors and face-to-face services are considered when a closure is announced. We need to be bold with proposals for banking hubs by directing the funding, which should come from the banks themselves, to create thousands of hubs up and down the UK. It is firmly in the remit of the Government to do just that, and I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to take the cross-party support that we have seen already today and consider the steps to deliver justice to our communities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have shy of 30 Members hoping to contribute, so we will have a hard speaking limit of four minutes to begin with.

1.50 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for his persistence, for securing this debate and for the work he has done

and is doing to get banks back on the high street. Perhaps we should be grateful to the bankers, because, by their actions, they are the only group of people less popular than politicians. Unfortunately, in their endeavour to become the most unpopular people in the country, they are doing huge damage to our local communities. To put that in context, since 2010 more than 10,000 banks have closed across the country, and there are now only 3,000 bank branches left open in this country. In fact, we have more chance of finding a Labour voter on a farm than we have of seeing a bank in a rural community.

The hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington rightly pointed out that the loss of banking facilities has left vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and the disabled, particularly affected and financially excluded. So too are residents in rural areas, where internet access is poor and unreliable. People struggle to get on to the internet to do transactions or for any customer assistance, yet banks continue to withdraw physical services from their customers. When we walk down most high streets, we see that banks have become cafés, bars and pubs.

I will focus my attention on Tatton and my local high streets, because the scale of the closures there is stark. In Knutsford, we have lost Santander, Barclays, NatWest, Lloyds and HSBC since 2018, and only Nationwide building society remains. Knutsford is a prosperous town with more than 1,000 businesses operating locally; there is high demand for banking services, yet they have closed their doors. In Wilmslow, the Royal Bank of Scotland and TSB have closed, with only Halifax and NatWest remaining, which are also going to close. That means that only Santander and Nationwide will remain. In Alderley Edge and Handforth, there are no branches at all, forcing residents to travel long distances.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Like the constituencies of Members across the House, Epping Forest has seen a series of bank closures over the years. Tragically, Lloyds bank has said that later this year it will close its branch in Debden in my constituency. Like the banks in my right hon. Friend's community, that branch is a lifeline; many people rely on it for face-to-face banking and will struggle to get to other branches. Does she agree that banks such as Lloyds need to rethink and stop those closures, and that the Government and Link need to step in and support high street banking?

Esther McVey: I agree—the lack of banks is a disgrace. Where do people go for their banking needs? The reality is that the banks that are closing have entered into an agreement with businesses and individuals; when they opened their bank account, they opened it with the bank on the high street. The business was there because it expected a certain amount of customer service—that is why they went there in the first place. Face-to-face banking offers confidence, security and efficiency, especially for businesses handing over cash and making significant financial decisions. Without those services, it just will not work.

In 2022, the Federation of Small Businesses found that four in 10 small businesses still relied on cash as a primary payment, and six in 10 needed to make regular cash deposits. I regularly hear from businesses in Tatton that they simply cannot deposit cash or access the basic services needed. Why? Well, that is because 64% of bank branches have closed in the last decade and 65% of

[*Esther McVey*]

cashpoints have gone. That is reducing the ability of businesses to deposit cash in the local area. The shift to online poses risks from technical failures and cyber-attacks. We have heard that through this monopoly and lack of access, there is a squeeze, and commission is being charged for the transactions of these businesses.

Our high streets are at the heart of our communities, but without access to banking services, our high streets, which are already under pressure, have become even harder places to trade, grow and thrive. If we are serious about supporting small businesses and seeing investment on our local high streets and in our town centres, we must stop the decline in banking infrastructure.

Some may argue that closures would be reasonable if banks were losing money and needed to take cost-cutting measures, but that is simply not the case. Banks are not struggling institutions. Last year, HSBC reported nearly \$25 billion in post-tax profits. Barclays made \$6.4 billion. Lloyds made \$4.5 billion. NatWest made \$4.8 billion. Those are all eye-watering profits—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

1.56 pm

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for securing this important debate. Too often, I feel the issues that significantly affect the day-to-day lives of our constituents are pushed aside in favour of larger, headline-grabbing national concerns, but this topic of access to banking services—more specifically, access to cash—deserves far greater attention than it receives.

While colleagues here will be familiar with my No. 1 concern on the Isle of Wight—ferry connectivity—another issue came up repeatedly during the '24 general election: high street bank closures. What struck me most was just how deeply that issue resonates with people. Many of the residents I have spoken with feel very abandoned by the institutions they once trusted with their life savings. They are expected to navigate an increasingly digital world, often without the necessary tools, skills or support. The result is a growing sense of exclusion and frustration, which is why the need for reliable, in-person banking services is not just important, but urgent. That is why I am pleased to report a positive development following a meeting with Link last month: a banking hub has opened in East Cowes, with plans for a permanent hub in West Cowes. While I do not claim that that hub alone solves the broader issue of financial inclusion on the island, it is a welcome and tangible step in the right direction.

However, we cannot ignore this trend and the anxiety that it causes our constituents. Across the country, rural and coastal communities are seeing their bank branches vanish from the high street. In many cases, residents must travel miles, sometimes without reliable transport, just to deposit a cheque. [*Interruption.*] Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was getting overexcited. According to the Financial Conduct Authority, around 1.1 million adults in the UK are unbanked. That is 1.1 million people without access to basic banking facilities—something that many of us take entirely for granted. Additionally, one in 10 adults have no cash savings whatsoever. Those figures should concern us all.

I worry especially for the older members of our communities. A 2023 report from Age UK found that three in four accountholders aged 65 and over would prefer to carry out at least one banking transaction at a branch. Those are not people resisting change for the sake of it: they are individuals who genuinely rely on physical, face-to-face interactions for their financial wellbeing. They are disproportionately concentrated in rural constituencies such as mine, where the proportion of residents over the age of 65 is nearly 10% higher than the national average. It is imperative that we do not leave those individuals behind.

This is not simply about preserving social interaction for its own sake: we are talking about people's livelihoods—their savings, pensions and financial security. It is entirely reasonable for individuals to want the reassurance of speaking to a real person, face to face, when managing something as vital as their money. That is where banking hubs come in. These shared facilities provide a practical, community-focused solution. They combine the services of multiple banks in a single accessible location, supported by the post office network. They are staffed by real people who can help with deposits, withdrawals, and even financial guidance. Banking hubs are not just a stopgap; they are a forward-thinking solution that helps us bridge the digital divide, support more small businesses and charities that still rely heavily on cash, and maintain community cohesion in towns and villages that increasingly feel cut off.

All of this has reinforced my belief that banking hubs are not just a temporary fix; they could very well be a long-term solution, restoring vital financial services in the areas where they are needed most. Let us ensure that no community—whether rural, coastal or urban—is denied access to the essential services its people need to live with financial freedom. I thank Link and Cash Access UK for their work.

2 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I am most grateful to the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for bringing this debate on banking before the House. I think bank closures affect every single constituency and every single person in the country, as we will hear throughout this debate.

The final two banks in the town of Wetherby closed literally last month, but we were lucky, in the sense that we knew those closures were coming. I was working with the banks to get a banking hub in for a couple of years, and it has been in place in the town hall. This has given a huge advantage to the town of Wetherby, because the banks that had closed in the past are now represented again in that banking hub. Now that those last two branches have closed, the hub is going to take up residence in one of those ex-banks. That goes to show that if we can get a banking hub, we have the ability to bring things back to the community. The banks that have closed will have a representative in there on different days of the week, and as the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington pointed out, it is vital that people are able to have that face-to-face interaction.

However, in other towns in my constituency—such as Boroughbridge and Tadcaster, which have a huge number of businesses—there is no banking, and there is no banking hub. The residents of those towns have been told that they are close enough to go to other areas, but

as has been pointed out, that is not always the easiest thing to do. Then we come to Easingwold, at the further end of my constituency. Nationwide, with its policy of not shutting banks, still has its branch open, so Easingwold does not qualify for a banking hub. People are told that they have to go to Thirsk, a major town that is not easy to get to.

As the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington outlined, there is a problem with the excuse that not enough people are using branches and therefore the banks shut them down. When branches have been shut down in the past and I ask the banks, “Can you please reconsider this?”, they say, “Well, we only had a few people come in last week—we cannot keep it open,” but they never actually do anything to encourage people to go to those branches. They never give an indication that the branch may be shut, and then they just shut it. Of course, people then miss the service, and the banks say, “There is one close by in another area.” As has been described, people are being charged to withdraw their money from a cash machine. As the hon. Gentleman said about free cash, it is their money to start with, but when banks tell people that they have to get a bus to go to the bank, they are also charging people to get their money out. Everything we are discussing passes on the cost from the banks to the consumer, just to get their money out.

I am lucky that I have a banking hub in my constituency. Other towns are going to need them—they do bring advantages—but the way that the whole high street industry of banking is operating is causing huge disadvantages to people. Ultimately, it is constantly charging them to get their own money out.

2.3 pm

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Cash is still alive and well, and for some, access to it is still a necessity—indeed, last year £80 billion in cash was withdrawn from the Link network. However, with the rise and rise of internet banking and contactless payments, we have seen a near-complete withdrawal of bank branches from certain parts of the country. As has been mentioned, there were 10,000 branches 10 years ago; now, there are just 3,000. One of those closures was the NatWest bank in Bakewell, in February 2024. It was not just the last bank in Bakewell; it was the last bank in the entire Peak District national park. In a few weeks’ time, when the Lloyds bank in Ashbourne closes, there will be no banks in the entire Derbyshire Dales constituency—an area of nearly 400 square miles.

There are many reasons why people need access to cash, all of which are ably demonstrated by the magnificent market town of Bakewell. Of course, there are residents there on low incomes or benefits, who find it much easier to budget using cash and are less likely to have access to the internet. There is an ageing population there who simply will not want to change, or do not trust the technology. We have had elderly residents taking two-hour round trips on the bus simply to withdraw cash from what was their new nearest bank, rather than use the ATMs in Bakewell. There are several successful markets each week; the traders will all have electronic card readers to take payments with, but despite what the mobile networks may say, people struggle to get a signal in Bakewell and traders often have to ask shoppers to pay in cash. There are also numerous independent shops that serve Bakewell’s 6 million visitors. Those

shops need cash to run, and when they queued up for cash at the post office they found that they were being rationed, as it simply could not cope with the demand.

Despite all its attributes, Bakewell was turned down for a banking hub the first time around. When I was elected, I went back to Link, which does the assessments and makes the decisions on banking hubs. Over the course of several conversations, I tried to understand what had been missed the first time around. I have to say that Link was very responsive, and after we had submitted another application following a slight relaxation of its criteria on population size, its representatives were happy to come back to Bakewell. I took them to the agricultural business centre to see the livestock markets, where the auctioneers demonstrated to them the staggering number of transactions taking place using cheques. This, I am glad to say, seemed to be the missing part of the puzzle. Back in December, we were told that we had been given a full counter service banking hub—it was the best Christmas present ever.

The experience in Ashbourne was completely different, showing that one size does not fit all. The process there was seamless: Lloyds announced that it would close, an assessment was done, the criteria were all met, and I liaised with Cash Access UK over timeframes, locations and so on. I am very glad to say that the permanent Ashbourne banking hub will open on 27 June, and it looks like the permanent Bakewell hub will follow towards the end of July. This will continue the excellent work and growing reputation of the temporary Bakewell hub.

A national Cash Access UK report suggests that over 90% of customers believe that banking hubs are extremely important to the community, and the feedback that I get from service users is all positive. The evidence suggests that banking hubs increase footfall and boost the local economy, and I am very relieved that we will shortly have two in the Derbyshire Dales.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The speaking limit is now three minutes. I call David Mundell.

2.7 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): In that case, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will start with my ask of the Minister, which is that the criteria for assessing whether there should be a free-to-use cash machine in a community be reassessed. For example, in my constituency, the Bank of Scotland closed its branch in the community of Moffat on the same day as it closed four other branches. At the moment, Link has to take into account every other cash machine in the vicinity, regardless of whether there is any cash in those machines—often, machines in retail outlets are not fully stocked with cash all the time; they rely on cash coming in through the till to go into the machine—or whether premises are open for 24 hours or are particularly disabled or vulnerable people-friendly. At this moment, we cannot get another cash machine because it has been assessed that the number is sufficient, without any assessment of those cash machines.

The closures I referred to mean that for 75 miles along the M74 motorway, from the border to Hamilton, you will not find a bank branch. When it comes to bank buildings being taken up by others, I have not been as lucky as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey): they are often very large buildings on

[David Mundell]

small high streets, and unless the banks are willing to do something themselves, there are not often other users. The Bank of Scotland previously said that it would allow the Peebles branch that is closing to be for community use, and the community have engaged, so I am disappointed to hear that they find today that a “For sale” sign has appeared outside that branch. I hope that the Bank of Scotland will keep that community access.

My third point is that we need to join up what is happening. The Bank of Scotland in Sanquhar in my constituency is closing. The bank is putting a bank consultant into the community to look after its customers, it says, but that person will not be in the post office that has been designated by Link as the effective banking hub in that community. That person will hold separate meetings in a council office. There just is not joined-up thinking.

My final point is that we talk about post offices when many people do not have a physical post office, but a temporary post office delivered out of the back of a van, which is not capable of providing a banking hub service.

2.10 pm

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): The banks have more or less abandoned my constituency, and it sounds like that is the case for many others. Some 6,500 branches have closed in recent years, as have more than 200 post offices. There are 23 separate settlements in my constituency with no access to banking. We do have banking hubs. It is an hour each way by bus to get to one, and it costs at least six quid to get there and back. I represent large numbers of people living in poverty, and it is hard for them to raise that kind of money just to have access to banking services.

I will make two other points about my constituency and then a general point. The bus services are very poor. As I have just said, it can take an hour each way to get to the banking hub, and the banking hub does not provide all the services that a bank should provide.

My other point about my constituency is that there are 15 zones for the internet, and 11 of those 15 zones are among the worst for internet provision in the country. How on earth is someone supposed to access banking on an internet system that is simply not working? It shows the extent to which Britain’s infrastructure is creaking, and it is not acceptable that banks should abandon the people who helped to create them in the first place.

I will just make this final point about mobility and accessibility. One in four households in my constituency has no access at all to a vehicle. That is more than 20,000 people without a van or a car to get them to a bank, even if a bank were available. It is a disgrace that the banks have turned their backs on all those people who were their loyal customers for so many years. Businesses that rely on cash and collect cash each day have nowhere to deposit it. People are driving home from their place of work or their business with cash in the boot and nowhere safe to put it. That is a dangerous thing.

It is odd, ideologically, to hear Members from the party of free enterprise and the free market saying, “We have to do something about capitalism withdrawing from communities.” That is what is happening, and that

is the nature of capitalism itself. We should just say that the financial sector in this country is worth £17 trillion, which dwarfs our GDP of £2.5 trillion. The banks are worth eight times more than the total output of the whole UK. As we have heard elsewhere, £44 billion of profit has been made by the banks in recent years. It is time we brought the banks in order to serve our communities—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Helen Morgan. [*Interruption.*]

2.13 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was so absorbed by the debate that I did not hear you call my name. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) on securing this debate, which is important.

In my constituency of North Shropshire, there are five market towns, but only one will have a commercial banking branch left after the closure of the NatWest in Market Drayton this year. We find ourselves in a situation of managed decline for rural constituents, with essential services slowly removed bit by bit every year.

Just two months ago, I attended the opening of the Whitchurch banking hub, which is providing a vital service to a town of around 10,000 people that had lost its final bank branch. While that is great news for Whitchurch and the best alternative to a network of commercial banks, we must consider now those market towns that do not meet the criteria set by Link. For example, the lovely, historic, but quite small town of Ellesmere in North Shropshire has a population of around 5,000 people and 90 commercial units. It is a hub for a large rural area and there is no bank and no prospect of getting one, according to Link, because it does not meet the criteria.

Ellesmere still has a post office, which is relied upon by local businesses for cash services. Having been the financial controller of a business in an area served only by a post office, I can tell the House that people need to do more than simply deposit and withdraw cash. Although I was a big fan of Prees post office and village store, if I needed to change the signatory on a bank account or set up a new one, it was a logistical nightmare; if I did not want to post valuable and sensitive documents, it required a half-day trip to a town with a physical branch.

For someone in Ellesmere, the nearest town is Oswestry. To visit an actual bank in person is a 45-minute round trip on public transport. Someone living in the surrounding villages is in a difficult situation. Those residents might also have used their post office at some point, but now those post offices are being systematically closed down. In my constituency, from Knockin to Hadnall and from Weston Rhyn to Shawbury, outreach post offices have been closed in one fell swoop with a couple of weeks’ notice. A Post Office representative sounded surprised recently when they told me that outreach services only available for one hour a week were not well used. It seemed not to have occurred to them that if the post office is only available for a single hour, that might not be terribly convenient.

I have little time left, so I will just say that for places with poor digital access, where many people cannot access online banking, it is essential that we review the

criteria that Link uses to assess the need for a banking hub. A medieval market town that has been serving the centre of its community for hundreds and hundreds of years is on its knees because there is no access to banking. It is essential that we get those services back into high streets to revitalise towns such as Ellesmere and Wem as soon as possible.

2.16 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for securing this important debate.

From Farnworth and Kearsley to Walkden and beyond, people across my constituency have seen at first hand the impact of losing high street banks. In Farnworth, for example, last month we saw NatWest on Market Street close on 15 May and Lloyds on the same street close on 28 May. Those were not just buildings, but vital services that people have depended on for decades. In Walkden, we are now set to lose the Halifax branch on Bolton Road. People are telling me that they are worried about how they will manage, especially those who do not bank online. One woman in her late 70s told me:

“I never thought I’d see the day when there wasn’t a single bank left in town.”

A gentleman in his early 70s said he does not feel safe banking online, and must go all the way into Bolton just to do basic transactions. These things are a necessity, not a luxury for them.

The issue is impacting small businesses, too, especially small traders who trade in cash. Some are now forced to drive out of town just to deposit takings. That means lost time, lost footfall and more pressure on our already struggling high streets. That is why I strongly support the idea of banking hubs. They are shared spaces that allow customers from different banks to access services under one roof, with in-person staff available. Under the current rules, Farnworth, which is undergoing a major regeneration, does not qualify for a hub because it has nearby cash machines. A few ATMs do not meet the needs of a whole town; what people need is real, face-to-face advice and service, especially those who are vulnerable or less digitally confident.

The criteria set by the Financial Conduct Authority are far too rigid. They do not take account of the local picture, the age of the population, digital exclusion or public transport access. Millions of people in the UK still rely on cash to budget, and last year alone £80 billion was withdrawn through the Link network. That is £1,400 a person.

In Farnworth, a local petition has been launched calling for a banking hub that properly serves the needs of residents in Farnworth and Kearsley. Will the Minister please review the true impact of branch closures on communities such as mine? Will they reform the criteria for banking hubs so that they reflect real-life need, not just cashpoint numbers, and will they ensure that face-to-face banking is protected not just in principle, but in practice? It is about managing things fairly.

2.19 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) on securing this important debate. In a world dominated

by contactless payments and banking apps, it is very easy for some people to live cash-free and seldom visit a bank, but we must not overlook the 3 million to 5 million people who still rely on cash on a daily basis. These consumers are far more likely to be digitally excluded and financially vulnerable.

I recently conducted a cash access survey in my constituency. Some 55% of respondents said that they use cash on a daily basis, and 91% believe the Government should safeguard the acceptance of cash as a valid form of payment. It is vital that access to cash and banking services is protected. It is important for those who use cash, but we must consider the resilience of the wider banking and financial system too. We have recently witnessed a major power outage at Heathrow, as well as large-scale power cuts in Iberia. We are increasingly aware of threats posed by hostile states that want to conduct cyber-attacks to disrupt our national infrastructure, so cash and local banking services must remain accessible to allow society to function in the event of any major disruption. This is a matter of national security.

In Bromsgrove and the villages, we are experiencing the effects of changes in the way that people bank. With the closure of Lloyds and Halifax, Bromsgrove high street will have lost four banks in just three years. Such banks are a lifeline for so many small businesses—particularly those run by independent entrepreneurs—as well as for local residents, who rely on banking services every single day. If we are not careful, Bromsgrove risks becoming a banking desert with an increasingly empty high street. I know that Bromsgrove is not eligible for a formal banking hub, so I call on the Minister to review the true impact of the closure of banks across the country, and to review the criteria that a community has to meet in order for a banking hub to be provided.

In the limited time I have left I want to draw attention to the further decline of high streets and the important role that banks provide in drawing people into their communities. Banks often occupy some of the most prominent, most beautiful and most significant historic buildings. Once they are vacant, they are often left empty, and they become eyesores and further symbols of the deterioration of high streets, which affects so many of the communities that we represent.

I ask the Government to review the criteria for banking hubs, and to focus on serious, long-term business rates reform that will enable high streets to thrive into the future. Collectively, as a House of Commons, we must put pressure on the banking system to ensure that cash access remains a part of our functioning economy, and that as many of our constituents as possible have access to day-to-day retail banking services.

2.22 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) on securing the debate.

South Norfolk is no stranger to the creeping erosion of our local banking infrastructure. In January this year, Lloyds bank announced that it will close its branch in Wymondham, which is the last high street bank in the town. That leaves only a single branch of the Nationwide building society to serve a growing population of over 17,000. The day after the closure was announced, on 30 January, I secured an emergency meeting with Lloyds bank and made it clear that, without alternative

[Ben Goldsborough]

provision, the closure would have serious consequences, especially for small businesses, and the data bears this out. Lloyds bank's own data shows that Wymondham cashpoint use increased by 17% between 2019 and 2024. That is not a service in decline, but a service in demand. It is absolutely clear that a new banking hub must be up and running before the bank branch closes next March. I am pleased to report that this has now been arranged and that the site is currently being finalised. I will continue to do everything within my power to ensure that Wymondham is not left behind.

However, this issue is not limited to my largest town in South Norfolk. Loddon lost its Barclays bank in 2017, Long Stratton lost its Barclays bank in 2015, and if we are not careful, the story will be repeated across every rural constituency in the country. For rural communities such as mine, access to cash is not a matter of convenience; it is essential. Many of our villages still experience patchy mobile signal and poor internet connectivity, and when card machines go down or wi-fi drops out, it is cash that keeps the local economy going.

We must remember that rural Norfolk has one of the oldest populations in the country. Many residents prefer, or simply need, to manage their money in person. For them, travelling 20 or 30 miles to the nearest bank in Norwich is not going to work. That is why we need to be far more imaginative about how we can ensure that people have access to cash. One idea is to reimagine how we use our post offices and pubs. We all know that pubs are the hubs of our communities in village life, but too many are struggling to stay open. Letting them provide additional services, such as access to cash and postal services, would be a way to keep those hubs of rural village life going.

Community banking should not be something that we fight tooth and nail to preserve; it should be the backbone of a fair and functioning economy. Our rural towns and villages should not be told that their need is out of date or out of scope. I will keep fighting for that in Wymondham, Loddon, Long Stratton and all the villages of South Norfolk, and I know that many of my hon. Friends will be doing the same for their rural communities.

2.25 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) and the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for bringing this debate before us today. I want to make a few comments.

I agree with the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) that access to banking services is a major issue in rural constituencies, but it can also be an issue in urban constituencies. In parts of my constituency, which is wholly urban, some communities have been left without banks. Owing to the way public transport works and its unaffordability in some places, accessing banks can still be hard, even if people live in a community that is part of a city, so we need to make sure that we are looking at this issue as a whole in all the communities affected. Public transport can be a significant issue.

Where capitalism fails, we need market intervention—that is what should happen. We need more market intervention to ensure that there is at least a minimum, if not a

universal, banking service. A number of the banks that have closed in my constituency have said, “It’s okay, because people will be able to go to the post office.” However, the post office in Seaton has closed, and we have been fighting for years to get a new post office in the community, but nobody is willing to take it up. That community is left without either of those services, and people have to travel. In common with the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), a significant proportion of my constituents—at least a third—do not have access to a car, and getting around the city and to the bank can be pretty difficult for them.

We have universal service obligations when it comes to broadband and to Royal Mail delivery, but we do not have them when it comes to post office services and banking services, yet cash is incredibly important. The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) mentioned access to cash, but that is not the only reason we need banking services. There are some things that can only be done in a bank—whether that is businesses depositing the cash that they have taken, people taking cash out of a cash machine, or individuals signing forms to approve a loan or a mortgage. Some of those things can only be done physically in the bank, including things that people need to do only once a year. Someone living in Banff, Aberdeenshire, will have to spend an hour and a half to two hours on public transport to get into the city—a significant length of time. As the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) said earlier, we are charging people for that privilege. Even though it might be free to withdraw cash, the public transport that they need to take in order to get to a bank is not free.

I urge the Government to look at the minimum services that people need in order to access cash and banking services that are close to them, and that they can access by whatever method of transport they happen to have. Could the Government please take action on this?

2.28 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for bringing this really important debate to this House, and I think we speak with one voice on this particular issue. We both represent post-industrial towns, and we can both see the decline of our high streets.

Banks have long been pillars of our high street in supporting local businesses, sustaining jobs, and driving regional growth and economic stability. In an increasingly digital age of contactless payments and banking apps, it is easy to underestimate the value of physical bank branches in our town centres. With the ongoing closure of trusted high street banks, many communities are being left isolated and underserved, so banking hubs can provide vital in-person services, particularly for older residents, those with long-term health conditions and people at risk of economic abuse. I feel that we need to speak further about this subject and I will write to the Minister, because economic abuse and financial inclusion are really big issues.

Organisations such as Link play a key role in supporting the transition to a digital economy, having committed to ensuring 98% of people have reasonable access to free cash services. However, this commitment does not

go far enough for areas such as Atherton and Golborne—two places with ageing populations, active local businesses and expanding communities. In Golborne, 18.6% of residents are over 65, the second-highest area in the Wigan borough. Atherton, with a busy train station and a thriving night-time economy, still has no remaining bank. Significant housing developments in both areas are further increasing demand for financial services, yet the infrastructure continues to shrink. Atherton residents often travel to Leigh for banking, leaving their own town centre with declining footfall and empty retail units. Although evidence-based proposals for banking hubs have been made, recent Link assessments did not recommend any new cash services in our area, leaving people excluded and unheard. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government are reviewing the assessment process to ensure that such communities are properly heard and their needs fully met?

In looking to the future, I urge the Government to consider the inclusion of credit unions, a co-operative model of banking such as the Unify credit union in my constituency, as part of their wider financial inclusion strategy.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): A point that has not yet been made is the importance of credit unions and access to responsible lending. One thing that people can do at a high street bank but cannot do at a banking hub is get a loan, so I am grateful to the hon. Member for mentioning credit unions. In my area, Nationwide on the A6 in Hazel Grove has shut, which is having a massive impact on what people can do beyond access to cash.

Jo Platt: I agree with the hon. Member, and Unify credit union in my constituency does give out loans in an ethical way to community organisations and people who are struggling.

Banking hubs are not just about financial transactions; they are also about sustaining the health, growth and regeneration of our towns. Let us ensure that we are protecting the digitally excluded, supporting the financially vulnerable and doing everything possible to keep our high streets alive.

2.31 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I start, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) did, with an ask of the Minister. As she will have heard, this issue is apolitical, and we are raising it very much because we care about our communities. Can we increase the flexibility for banking hubs to be rolled out throughout the country? I apologise, because I should really have started by congratulating the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) on securing this important debate.

In South West Hertfordshire I have seen the decline of high streets, including a reduction in the number of banking branches. Nationwide, which has been mentioned, deserves credit for proactively retaining its high street presence, which does help my residents and, I am sure, others across the country. In Rickmansworth in my constituency, the local post office manager, Danny, has stepped up and is now managing a banking hub, which allows my residents access to the frontline banking services to which they would not normally have access.

I am also working alongside two of my councillors in Abbots Langley—Councillor Vicky Edwards and Councillor Ian Campbell—and I hope the Minister will encourage the powers that be to see that, where there is a real need for communities to have a banking presence, banking hubs are an obvious solution. If we want our high streets to remain viable, we need to encourage people to continue to come down to the high street. Historically, that has meant services such as banking. That will, I hope, increase footfall for our local cafés, hairdressers and all the other services associated with the high street.

We have heard about the 6,300 banks that have closed since 2015. I am a former retailer, and I understand that high streets change, but from a policy perspective, Parliament needs to create the framework that ensures high streets are as we want them to be. If we do not proactively encourage banking hubs to be in the centre of our towns—yes, ATMs are important, but they are typically in places such as out-of-town petrol stations—we are not helping small retailers and convenience stores that rely on emergency purchases of a pint of milk and the like.

I will close, because I am conscious of the time, with a pledge from me—and, I hope, those on my Front Bench—that if the Government step up and say they will increase the flexibility of banking hubs, they will have our support, because cash remains king. We have spoken before about digital exclusion, and it will have a massive impact on a minority of our population if we do not get this right.

2.34 pm

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for securing this important debate.

Access to cash is important, but it is only one part of the story. The closure of bank branches strips communities across our country not just of access to money, but of access to advice and support services that cannot simply be replicated online. It goes further than that. For some elderly residents this is about a sense of community and purpose, such as the weekly trip with friends to interact with others, plan a food shop, go to a supermarket or even visit friends.

I remember when I was a child, when my grandfather was due to make his regular trip to the bank, he would get suited and booted, have a haircut and tell us all proudly that he was off to the bank. It was also the highlight of my week, because I always received a £5 note afterwards.

In my constituency of Gillingham and Rainham, I was pleased to announce only last week that we will be getting a banking hub, following a recent campaign. For clarity, we do have a Nationwide on site at the minute. I have heard directly from residents about how much this means to them. I have received numerous letters describing their struggles when they have not been able to access banking services. Many residents have described long journeys to neighbouring towns, often relying on friends or public transport just to withdraw cash or speak to somebody in person.

Other residents have spoken of the confusion and anxiety caused by using online banking that they neither trusted nor understood. We are talking about people who find themselves in effect locked out of the system simply because they do not use an app or a smartphone.

[Naushabah Khan]

These are real people in our communities, not a small minority. According to Age UK, more than 2.5 million people over 65 have never used the internet, and the access to cash review found that around 10 million UK adults would struggle in a cashless society. Many of them also lack digital literacy or the infrastructure to bank online. This includes people with disabilities, carers, those for whom English is not a first language, and people living on low incomes who cannot afford broadband or mobile data. We should not expect them to adapt to a system that was not designed for them in the first place.

The reality is that high street banks have for some time been taking decisions based on commercial viability rather than community need. I understand that banks are not charities, but the Government do have a responsibility to ensure that no one is cut off from basic services because they are not digital or because they are not profitable. If we want to prevent digital exclusion from becoming a permanent feature of our society, banking hubs must be part of a national strategy. That includes ensuring they are well-promoted, well-resourced and available in all the places of greatest need.

I am pleased that my constituency will benefit from a banking hub, but we need to go further. The criteria need to change, and we must ensure this is based not just on access to cash but, importantly, on the services that banking hubs provide to a community.

2.37 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is clear that we all care about our constituencies. My constituency of North East Fife is well below the UK average in the statistics on access to cash. The new powers and obligations given to the FCA under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 have gone some way towards addressing these problems. It is important to remember that everything happening before was voluntary. We have twice gone through the review process with Link—successfully in Anstruther, but frustratingly not so in Cupar.

The Anstruther banking counter is to some extent a success story. The banks closed and the post office closed, but a review was carried out and recommendations were made for a counter providing cash deposits and withdrawals. However, there were some problems with the process that I hope can be ironed out. The review was requested by a local organisation that had hoped to provide space for the counter, if recommended, knowing that a lot of its customers use cash and there is no nearby ATM, but it was not automatically advised of the outcome of the assessment and found out only after the fact. That meant it did not get the chance to make an input to those making an assessment of possible locations. I myself was not aware of the opening of the hub until I heard incidentally from a local councillor who was involved in the running of the location where the hub opened. If elected representatives and the local media do not know about counters opening, I am very concerned that the public will not know either.

However, the main issue, which many have picked up, is that the cash counter is not a banking hub. Part of the picture, as I understand it, is that we could have more support in Anstruther if someone was willing to take on

the post office, but no one wants to, and having met the National Federation of SubPostmasters earlier this year, I can understand why. This is a problem that the Government need to address and I hope the Minister can do so in her remarks. What are the Government doing to make taking on a post office more attractive? They are vital to the success of banking hubs, but also the health of communities more generally.

The other part of the picture, as others have touched on, is that the legislation only requires maintaining access to cash, not banking services. That is a real oversight. I mentioned, in my intervention on the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery)—I congratulate him on securing the debate—that the all-party parliamentary group on fair banking gave us some quite worrying stats on the financial health of household incomes. It is incumbent on banks to help people better manage their finances so that we do not end up with situations where people are in debt. I asked the Minister whether the financial inclusion committee, which she chairs, would look at access to banking services. I hope she will be able to update us on that today.

The last point I want to make, which others have mentioned, is about the challenge around ATMs. We have had a big problem in Leven where, in just the last few weeks, the final bank has closed. We have a Nationwide, but it consistently runs out of money and customers are really showing their frustration. Whether it is more cashpoints or more replenishing of what is already there, something has to be done. The assessments need to take better consideration of what cash usage actually looks like in an area.

2.40 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) on securing this important debate.

In just the last two years, Bitterne Precinct in my constituency has lost four high street banks and, unfortunately, Nationwide building society. Add to that NatWest in 2023, and now Halifax and Lloyds both close next Monday. These closures are leaving a community which, by Link's own assessment, counts 32,000 people among it with no branch banking provision at all.

We all recognise that technology has changed the way we bank, and mostly for the better, but it is not always a substitute for in-person services. People still need to deposit cash, sort out complex issues, or just get advice from another human being. For too many, this is not about convenience; it ends up with them being cut off.

Let me share some words from my constituents I spoke to in the precinct. Kayley, a former bank worker in Thornhill, told me:

"Some customers are unable to access online banking...visiting the bank is their only human interaction that day. Face-to-face service is imperative."

Mandy from Bitterne described how her elderly, blind mother broke down in tears when she learned her local branch would be closing. Mandy said:

"Banking in Bitterne gave her a lifeline. It kept her independence. She doesn't bank online because she can't see the screen, but she can still walk into Bitterne to manage her affairs."

Frederick, another resident, highlighted the rising cost of exclusion, and I wonder if we have really counted that in. He said:

"A banking hub would put money in people's pockets by saving them the cost of taking Ubers or buses just to withdraw cash."

Link tells us that a post office can be a substitute, but our local post office has no outside cashpoint and it cannot cash certain cheques, so when Halifax and Lloyds close next week there will be no outside cash access in the entire area and no high street banks on the entire eastern side of Southampton.

I therefore welcome the Government's commitment to roll out 350 banking hubs over the next five years, but I want to be clear that Bitterne should be at the front of that queue. It would not only restore access to banking, but help—others have eloquently made the point—to secure the future of the high street, support local businesses and protect residents from financial isolation.

Hundreds of people have signed my petition to bring a banking hub to Bitterne, and many more have written to me. Like others, I met Link. I have to share my frustration with the House about how the reviews are being conducted. The Link survey suggested that my constituents could quite easily take a bus into Southampton city centre in 12 minutes. That is for the birds. If they do it in the dead of night with no traffic on the road and ignoring the speed limits, then maybe, but it can take up to 90 minutes to do that round trip.

Let us set up the banking hubs to succeed. I ask the Minister: how are we going to achieve that manifesto commitment when we are essentially outsourcing it to Link? Let us invest in solutions that do not leave anyone behind and let us bring banking back to Bitterne.

2.43 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for securing this important debate.

Like so many places across the country, bank branches have closed at an alarming rate in my constituency. Not so long ago, residents could pop down to a branch of every major high street bank in the towns of Waltham Cross, Cheshunt and Hoddesdon. Just last week, Halifax became the latest bank branch to shut its doors in Waltham Cross, while in Hoddesdon the former site of the Barclays remains empty, a scar on an otherwise vibrant town centre. In my town of Cheshunt, a town of 40,000 people, not a single bank branch remains. That simply cannot be right.

The lack of in-person banking facilities is depriving people of access to vital services. For so many older and vulnerable people, it is causing huge difficulty and frustration, as they are forced to rely on digital services such as apps and smartphones.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I particularly wish to draw his attention to the plight of blind people. Royal National Institute of Blind People research in 2023 found that 28% of blind and partially sighted people never used the internet, they struggle with ATMs, and they struggle too with travel to banks.

Lewis Cocking: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is really important that we expand the rules to get banking hubs in more locations across the country. Not least of all, my nan does not do online banking.

Every time I go and see her, she badgers me about it. She will specifically bank with someone where she can have face-to-face services, because she will not do online banking. It is a real struggle, because some banks say, "Well, you've got to telephone." But even then, one has to have a smartphone to get a code on the app for security, so it is very difficult for our older and disabled constituents to access those vital services.

When Barclays went from the high street in Hoddesdon, it did a "Barclays local". Through the good work of my Conservative-run Broxbourne council, we managed to get it into the Spotlight, our local theatre, but it is cashless. That is nonsense! Its bread and butter business as a high street bank is to deal with cash and get people access to its cash and banking services, but it wants to run a service that is now cashless. We tried in Cheshunt—as I said, a town of 40,000 people with no banking services—to get the NatWest banking van at the car park of our Laura Trott sports centre, but again it would only offer a cashless service. This is bread and butter to the high street banks. They should accept cash and we should bring forward legislation to ensure that our constituents across the country have access to banking services. We need to look at the rules, because waiting until the last bank is in our high street does not promote consumer choice or solve people's banking and access to cash needs.

On buses, my constituents are lucky if the bus even turns up—we get one bus once an hour—so including public transport in analysis of banking hub locations is unreliable. We need to widen the criteria to enable more banking hubs to be opened up across the country.

2.47 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) on securing such an important debate.

Next week, the Lloyds and Halifax branches in Welwyn Garden City will close their doors to customers for the last time. In Hatfield, we have already lost every bank branch from White Lion Square in the centre of town. As we have heard today, this is a wearily familiar story in communities across the country.

Regrettably, I must start by sharing my experience with Lloyds Banking Group. On its website, it talks of a "commitment to putting customers first".

I am afraid my experience, on behalf of residents in Welwyn Garden City, left me feeling that we were just another cog in the corporate wheel. Earlier this year, my office was informed of the closure of Lloyds and Halifax in Welwyn Garden City barely an hour before they hit send on the press release. The management did respond to my firmly worded letter demanding a meeting, and, in person, I made it clear that if the closure could not be overturned, I wanted to work together on a bespoke option for a community banking service. I suggested Welwyn Garden City library as an appropriate community venue, and said if that option was pursued, there should be no barriers to running a regular service, given the extremely low cost to Lloyds of hiring a room. Lloyds needed frequent chasing to respond afterwards, and eventually came back with its standardised offer: a community banking service in the library, but open just once every fortnight. That is its national policy, so Welwyn Garden City is in no worse or better a position than any of our neighbours, but I am left with the impression that Lloyds was never serious about a bespoke

[Andrew Lewin]

solution for our town. If Lloyds Banking Group is listening or watching today and wants to think again, I will happily take a call as soon as I leave this Chamber.

As other banks and building societies close, it is the role of Government to accelerate the roll-out of banking hubs. In Hatfield, we have a temporary banking hub at the post office in White Lion Square, and I know that Cash Access and Welwyn Hatfield borough council are working towards a permanent home. Some people will always want to have face-to-face conversations about their finances. The hub model is here to stay—a service underpinned by the state, via the Post Office, which we need in communities across the country.

I am equally convinced that the way banks and building societies navigate this period of change might lead to customers being increasingly open to switching. I commend Nationwide for its national commitment to keeping branches open, and note with interest that the Current Account Switch Service found last year that nearly 1.2 million Brits switched their current account, with Nationwide the beneficiary of the most net switches.

The challenge for the retail banking industry is to show they take seriously the need to engage with customers who want and need in-person support, and those who succeed might find that doing good is good business. However, where business has a choice to make, Government have an obligation. Let us fast-track our plan for banking hubs and redouble our efforts to ensure that no community is without one.

2.50 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for securing this debate.

One of the most meaningful moments I have had so far as a Member of Parliament was hearing the elderly residents of a nearby care home thank me for securing a banking hub in Ystradgynlais. That hub is now open and working, providing an essential service to residents and small businesses, many of whom were previously facing long and expensive journeys just to access basic banking services. The local response has been overwhelmingly positive, with many residents saying that the bringing back of those banking services is the first time they have seen their community restoring services in many years.

The opening of this hub did not happen by chance. I put on the record my thanks to all the staff at Link and the regulator who engaged with us throughout the process. They took the time to understand the community's cash and banking needs and sought to find a solution. Their involvement was constructive, and I commend them for it. That is how an effective regulator can make life better for ordinary people by reining in corporate greed.

If the Government are looking for ways to win back favour, surely committing to more banking hubs must be one of them. The Government have committed to 350, but in reality, as we have heard, the country needs far more. The demand is there and the model works, but the current framework is far too restrictive. I have submitted applications for new hubs in my constituency in Pontardawe, Brecon, Presteigne and Builth Wells, each of which has a clear case. We need a system that supports those applications, instead of holding them back through outdated rules and artificial limits.

In Brecon, we have one final bank branch remaining. In Hay-on-Wye—a town blessed with a bustling high street and a number of independent businesses—not a single bank remains. Elsewhere in Radnorshire, Presteigne saw its last bank close earlier this year, and Rhayader is troubled by community bankers who do not wish to visit it. In Pontardawe, in the Swansea valley, Lloyds is due to close the final remaining branch later this year citing a lack of footfall, despite queues from the door to the counter. All the while, banks continue to report billions of pounds in annual profits and rising dividends. They say they have no option but to close these branches because of the digital transformation, yet some of them cite statistics showing that up to 50% of their customers still need physical services.

The banks have fundamentally changed their service offering. Who would now deposit their life savings with someone that offers to meet them in a car park once a week? That is what Charlie Nunn, the CEO of Lloyds Banking Group, has done to his customers in Presteigne, Brecon, Ystradgynlais and now Pontardawe. He took home a staggering £5.6 million last year, having closed more than 140 bank branches to save his company some overheads, and managing to bump up the Lloyds dividend by 13%. Does he deserve that? Does he know the misery he has caused people in doing so? Will he stop the closure of the Pontardawe branch, something that more than 500 local residents have called on him to do?

2.53 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I do not intend to labour too long on rehashing points that have already been made. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling it.

It is very clear that access to a physical bank is important for many people in our communities. My constituency, like those of colleagues present, has not been spared the loss of banks. In Lichfield, we have recently lost our Barclays branch, but up the road in Burntwood we have a much more difficult situation: every single bank branch has been closed for a number of years. The community has stepped up, as it so often does in Burntwood, and the post office has filled the breach. There is some access to banking services, but that is not the same as a physical branch.

As I sit and listen to the debate today, I realise that there is one word that sums up the importance of this matter—regeneration. Burntwood has a high street that is almost ready to go. Some businesses are thriving and the footfall is massive, but there is not the investment to make it kick on and become a town centre of which the whole town can be proud.

In Lichfield, where the banks are more present, there is a thriving cafe culture. Although everything is not all sunshine and rainbows in Lichfield and it never will be, we can really see the difference in the two town centres. What we are seeing here is almost an unvirtuous circle, where high streets start to struggle, footfall drops off, banks start to struggle and withdraw, footfall drops further, shops struggle more, and so on. It is a spiral to the bottom.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is becoming an hon. Friend. What happens is that the banks encourage their customers to do things online. You cannot open

an account in a branch—where branches still exist—and then say that online banking is replacing face-to-face contact.

Dave Robertson: It is important to say that internet banking is not going away. These two ideas—face-to-face banking and internet banking—should be two sides of the same coin. All our high street banks should recognise that they have a responsibility to both ways of working. I prefer to bank online because I am busy and spend half my life on trains, but there are people who do not have that luxury, as they are technologically reluctant to engage. I hear many people ask the Government, “What can we do to get more banking hubs? What can we do to encourage more physical banks?” That is something that I would support, particularly for towns such as Burntwood, where bringing those banks back could be that spark of regeneration—the thing that starts to reverse that unvirtuous circle, so that it becomes a virtuous circle, where those banks are present and they drive footfall: it is easier to get cash, easier for businesses to bank there and easier for the high street to come back.

We all know that the high street is the physical representation of how people feel the economy is going. One reason people are so worried about the economy is that our high streets have been failing for decades. Governments have not supported high streets for far too long, and I am proud that this Government are saying that they will now do so. Getting banks back on to the high street, where they belong, can be that first step for towns such as Burntwood and the others that we have heard about in today’s debate.

2.57 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for securing this debate.

In my constituency of Farnham and Bordon, the situation is stark. Although I welcome the fact that we have secured a temporary banking hub in The Shed, in Bordon, on the Hampshire side, it rapidly needs to have a permanent location. In Liphook, there is no banking hub, no agreed plan and no clear process for securing one. Across the border in Surrey, in Haslemere, we are fortunate to have one of the 100 national hubs up and running, but in nearby Farnham, Barclays has just gone and Santander goes next month. All this means that more than 100,000 people across my constituency have not a single bank and only one building society. Constituents are right to be concerned. Link, the UK’s main cash access body, has stated that Santander’s closure will have, “no significant impact on the community”.

I strongly disagree; it absolutely will. This cannot continue to be a postcode lottery. Banks were once embedded in towns and communities but now they are being erased with little left behind. Banking hubs are a partial answer, but the system needs reforms. The process is slow, the criteria too narrow and the scope of services too limited. Hubs must be located centrally, open five or six days a week, accessible to those with limited mobility and reachable without a car. They should serve both individuals and small businesses and, crucially, offer face-to-face banking, not just cash points and machines.

Bradley Thomas: In a society where collective trust is depleting, does my hon. Friend agree that the presence of face-to-face banking services and banking customers

being able to have a direct in-person relationship with real people is one step that we can all take to help rebuild collective trust in the institutions that underpin society?

Gregory Stafford: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend; he makes a very convincing point. When we are dealing with something as vital as personal finances, it should not be too much to demand to see a person face to face.

The legislation we rely on to manage access to banking, including the Financial Services and Markets Act, remains focused almost exclusively on access to cash, not access to banking services. That distinction matters. Depositing takings, seeking support with financial abuse and getting advice are all services that cannot be delivered by a machine.

Even when residents are confident and willing to bank online, they are often held back by something much simpler: their connection. In many parts of my constituency, mobile coverage and broadband access are so poor that digital banking is unreliable, if not impossible. The digital divide is no longer just a social challenge but a financial one too.

Older people, disabled people, rural residents and small businesses all deserve access to a banking system that works for them, not just for those who are already digitally fluent or living in better-connected areas. That means that physical services, in-person advice and real access to cash must remain part of the infrastructure of modern life.

Will the Minister work with Link, Cash Access UK and local authorities to accelerate the roll-out of banking hubs? Will she expand the remit of the Financial Services and Markets Act to protect access to full banking services, not just to cash? Finally, will she meet me to discuss how we can support the roll-out of permanent, accessible banking hubs in Liphook and Farnham? No one should be excluded from essential financial services because of their postcode, their age, or the strength of their wi-fi signal.

3.1 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for securing this important debate. For five years, I worked as a support worker for children with autism across the north-east, and I have many fond memories of his constituency, in particular Blyth beach. The communities we served there as support workers often had complex needs, and in many ways they were some of the people who were most vulnerable to the digital-by-default approach to public services like banking, which has been one of the excuses for high street bank closures and one of the reasons for public anger at the loss of services.

It was a huge privilege to spend that time working with young people with disabilities, and I learned so much about humanity and community. I also learned about the state’s role as an essential safeguard and why we need to build inclusion and safeguards into planning. Banking is no exception. I have been really encouraged by this Government’s work on banking hubs as a way to mitigate banking closures, but it is clear that far more needs to be done.

While the debate understandably focuses on more rural communities, I echo the comment of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) that it

[*Dan Aldridge*]

is a myth that this sort of disenfranchisement is exclusive to rural areas. I have seen the barriers at first hand, whether in my experiences as a care worker or from trying to convince my younger brother to change his behaviour. He has autism, and it is not the easiest thing to try to get him to do something new.

Changes that I and many others take in our stride are profound and insurmountable for some, and I urge my colleagues in Government to be ambitious in fostering more inclusive services. We should set the bar high for inclusive services in this country. While I am a big fan of digital transformation and consider myself to be a tech evangelist, changes cannot and must not come at the expense of people who cannot or choose not to engage.

The issue of high street bank closures in my constituency is keenly felt in Worle. Despite the valiant campaign led by the formidable Jill Leahy to keep the Lloyds open on Worle high street, we could secure only a short stay of execution, and now Worle is without a bank. To compound this, the post office in north Worle closed recently. What is left is a growing sense of frustration among residents, especially older people and those with disabilities, who may not be comfortable with using or able to use online banking for digital payments. For them, face-to-face services are not a preference but a necessity.

Following the campaign by Jill, local campaigners such as Sally Heap have recently been working hard to advocate a banking hub in Worle. We are hoping to be successful in that bid, and I have written to the Minister to put my support behind Sally's campaign. I urge the Government and financial institutions to listen carefully to constituencies and communities like mine. A new banking hub in Worle would be a lifeline not only to individuals but to the resilience and prosperity of the town. Let us make sure that our high streets have a future and that no one is left behind in the rush to become digital-first, which works for many but leaves some of our most vulnerable in an intolerable situation.

3.4 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): In the last five years, 11 bank branches have closed in my constituency, leaving most towns without traditional banking facilities. For example, two years ago the closure of Barclays in Chalfont St Peter triggered the assessment for a formal banking hub. While I recognise that alternative provision is now delivered by the post office or in small pop-up locations on an appointment-only basis, those alternatives do not go far enough. They are unable to meet all needs, forcing people to travel further afield to find basic banking services and advice on mortgages and debt—and, as the Minister will be all too aware, asking people to rely on a bus network that is increasingly cutting services.

Link found that Chalfont St Peter did not meet the criteria for a banking hub, yet one in five people there is over the age of 65, and Age UK found that 40% of over-65s with a bank account do not manage their money online. Some of my constituents in more rural areas also face broadband connectivity issues, restricting their access to online banking. My plea to the Minister echoes the calls already stated to review the criteria by which towns are assessed for banking hubs. Accessibility gaps must be considered, including access to broadband,

and whether residents have adequate access to not only cash—the current criterion—but in-person banking services.

3.6 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery). It is an honour to speak about the impact of the decline of local bank branches, which is an issue of such importance to my constituents. The closure of the Santander in Rustington is just the latest blow. The need for a robust and fair system of banking hubs is urgent.

High streets have changed beyond recognition. Once, we had Barclays, NatWest and Lloyds on every corner. Now, 6,300 branches have closed since 2015, which is a 64% fall. Cash use may have dropped to 14% of payments, but millions still depend on it, especially the elderly, the disabled and the vulnerable. In places like Rustington, entire communities have been left without local banking. Some are forced online against their wishes, even when they cannot afford the technology or cannot physically use it. At the same time, they are increasing their exposure to phishing attacks. My constituent Roger Mallock has lost a life-changing sum of money to cyber-scammers.

Post offices cannot fill the gaps; the queues are longer, and they cannot handle complex banking needs or take large cash deposits. Despite my appeals to Link, Rustington was denied a banking hub. I raised the matter directly with the Prime Minister and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. As one constituent put it:

“Banks are licensed by the Government. Those licences should come with a duty to maintain local branches.”

Consider a Ukrainian couple who came to Bognor Regis under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Thanks to the Santander branch, they opened accounts, and they continue to rely on in-person support due to language barriers; without it, they would lose hours from work and face serious barriers to managing their finances. They are not alone: many elderly and less mobile customers depend on face-to-face services.

Banking hubs offer a limited solution. Only 108 hubs are operational out of the 224 planned, and they can take up to 12 months to open. Worse, the FCA's rules are too narrow, focused only on cash rather than on broader services. The last Government introduced the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, which was a start but does not go far enough. Banking is not a luxury; it is a lifeline. We must ensure that digital innovation does not leave millions behind.

3.9 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): At the risk of disappointing the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery), I rise not entirely to criticise the banks, which have done tremendous work on apps and the like, and many people—not all of them spring chickens—make great use of them. But as banks retreat from bricks and mortar locations, a problem is that even silver surfers who are comfortable with the technology may simply not be able to get the relevant app to work. In rural Dumfries and Galloway, we have too many notspots, where the mobile phone signal is sketchy at best and non-existent at worst. Similarly, there is a lack of decent broadband. The ground truth is that while it might be easy-PC for some to get online, sclerotic broadband

and thick stone walls designed to keep out the Scottish damp make too many computers and smartphones expensive placemats.

The need for access to face-to-face banking services remains high, as we have heard. As we have also heard, there are numerous issues with the current banking hub regime. Take Wigtown in my constituency: it is Scotland's official book town, yet the current banking hub criteria fail to capture the significance of that. Wigtown is evaluated on its modest resident population, with no account taken of the huge influx of visitors when its famous book festival opens its covers. I have a stream of reports of the town centre cash machine running out of spondulicks outwith the festival and anecdotal reports of people gathering for a trip to the nearest hub in Newton Stewart to lift their pensions. That hub is 12 miles distant, and notwithstanding our positively balmy climate in Dumfries and Galloway—no, really—it is not walkable. As for the public transport system, let us just say that we need a calendar and not a stopwatch to time the buses.

When Dalbeattie, the third biggest town in my constituency with a population of more than 4,000 souls and a slew of thriving businesses, struggles to get a banking hub, surely there is a compelling case for lowering the threshold for hubs. I accept that we cannot have an ethos of “wherever two or three are gathered, there shall be a banking hub”, yet equally, we cannot expect one ATM to carry the banking needs of hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

Banking has come on in leaps and bounds since the days of little pens chained to counters and limited opening hours, but on balance, too many people are being left behind in the technological revolution. American banker Felix Rohatyn, who rescued New York from financial disaster, said:

“banking is not simply about profit, but about personal relationships.”

Even in this digital age, we need to capture some of that spirit via our banking hubs.

3.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) on setting the scene and on his introduction of the issue. As an MP for an area that has been hard hit by the removal of 11 banks, first in rural villages and now increasingly in even the main towns of Strangford, the issue is incredibly important. We need the regulation of access to banking services in legislation and to stop the drain towards online and city-centre banking only.

Millions of people in the UK still rely on cash day to day; in fact, some 1.1 million people in the UK remain unbanked and rely entirely on cash, while more than 8 million adults report that they would struggle to cope in a cashless society. A YouGov survey found that nearly 28% of small businesses use cash at least weekly. The British Retail Consortium has shown a rise in the use of cash for the second year in a row to 20% of transactions in 2023, as more and more people use cash to manage their budgets in a difficult economic environment.

While closing branches, banks have managed to increase their profits by some £2.5 billion. It is clear where their focus is. However, once the banks are closed and the profits are allocated to shareholders, how will they continue to up the profits? What services will be removed next?

The percentage of branch closures is lower in larger and medium-sized towns and highest in villages and smaller communities, at 50% and 70% respectively.

Sir John Hayes: That is why the Link criteria need to change, is it not? The trouble is that rural areas are disproportionately damaged by the fact that the population size is not big enough. People cannot get access to banking in The Deepings, Long Sutton, Donington and elsewhere in my constituency. I am sure it is the same in the hon. Gentleman's.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; that is replicated not just in his constituency and mine, but probably in those of everyone here today. Those in rural areas are twice as likely as those in urban areas to depend on their local post office branch for cash and banking services. With 11 banks closing and two banking hubs opening, we depend more than ever on the post office. We have credit unions but what we can do with them is very limited, despite being very welcome.

While bank networks decline, the Post Office continues to provide free and convenient access to cash through its branch network. However, the branch in Newtownards in Strangford is set to close—there is potential for that to happen, anyway—and that is absolutely devastating because the range of services that are not available in the local garage, which has a sub-post office, will only grow. Even the Post Office must therefore rethink its obligations.

Through the banking framework that the Post Office has with 30 UK banks and building societies, postmasters support over £3 billion in withdrawals and deposits each month, providing a trusted, convenient face-to-face service at the heart of communities. However, large branches such as the one in Newtownards must be left open if we are truly to have a full service.

According to Age UK, 27% of over-65s and 58% of over-85s rely on face-to-face banking. Nearly a third—31%—of people over the age of 65 said they were “uncomfortable” with the idea of banking online. The age sector must be protected, and the way to do that is to require legislatively a better minimum service from banks and post offices that are trying to fill the gap but are pulling back.

So what do I want? I want banks to be required through legislation that they deliver for their customers. I want to ensure that the post offices, including the main post office, are in place in my constituency and to see opportunities through credit unions. I look to the Minister to outline how the Labour Government will protect access to cash, face-to-face banking and a full-service post office in each area.

3.15 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It has been a pleasure to be part of the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) and the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for bringing it forward. It would normally be customary, with so many contributors, to say that there has been a wide range of views, but I do not actually think there has been. There has been a wide degree of unanimity on the fact that banking services in this country are in crisis. The lack of access to banking for many of our constituents

[Sarah Olney]

right across the country is leading to social exclusion, limiting entrepreneurship and having a devastating impact on many of our local economies. I have heard from many hon. and right hon. Members that services cannot just be replaced by online banking, particularly for those who have poor digital connections in their constituencies. The difficulty of accessing banking is a massive problem for those who are reliant on public transport, those who are disabled and those who are elderly or have additional needs.

It is good to hear how banking hubs are making up some of the gap that so many communities are experiencing, but clearly there is a lack of banking hubs, and they do not do everything needed to close the gap in accessing cash or loan facilities. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on that.

The Liberal Democrats are strong champions of their local communities. We want to see the reversal of the damage caused to our local economies by the lack of access to banking. One of the things I call on the Minister to look at is reversing cuts to the interchange fee paid to ATM providers, which would go a long way to increasing ATM provision in many of our communities. The hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington gave a stark example of what happens when cash runs out in certain town centres.

More needs to be done on digital inclusion because, clearly, digital banking will be part of our future banking provision, and for those who struggle to access it, more can be done to assist them. The Liberal Democrats call on the Government to consider a fair banking Act to look at this problem in the round, to think about banking exclusion not just for individuals, families and small communities, but for the wider business sector, and to look at what more can be done to connect our communities and businesses.

I will close by adding my praise to Nationwide for its commitment to maintaining banking services on the high street. I was privileged to join my local Nationwide branch in central Richmond just before recess. The branch celebrates 110 years of being on Richmond high street. While I was there, I chatted to the local staff, who generously gave me some of the birthday cake. Many members of the local community were coming in to do their banking face to face. It was clear not only that it was good for my constituents to be able to use that face-to-face service, but that the staff got great satisfaction from helping customers and being that point of contact in the community. Other banks should be making available that sense of satisfaction to more of their staff, and I would like to see more banks making that commitment to community banking.

3.18 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I also congratulate the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) on securing this debate.

A great strength of feeling about banks has been evident in this debate, and it is important to remember the importance of banks not just to our communities but to the wider economy. Banks provide services for businesses and individuals, but they also provide two other fundamental services. First, banks and building

societies take money from where it has accumulated and distribute it to where it is needed for investment in infrastructure, businesses and jobs. Secondly, banks take overnight deposits and turn them into 25-year mortgages—so that our constituents can create a home and build a family—which is quite difficult for banks to do.

The hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington made a couple of important points that I would like to address. The first was about the profits that banks make, and the second was about the policing of banks and the fact that banks apparently police themselves.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, there was obviously a huge number of problems in the banking system. The Financial Services Act 2012 created two regulators, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority, both of which—and particularly the PRA—are responsible for making sure that our banking system is sound. Banks need to have strong balance sheets, and to do that they need to make profits to a certain extent. I agree that some of those profits look obscene, and perhaps some banks could put some of that money back into our communities. None the less, if banks spend their money unwisely, we potentially run the risk of another banking crisis.

Along with the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Pat McFadden), I am one of only two Members left in this House who sat on the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards from 2013 to 2015. Our work on that commission underlines the importance of banks in modern life, about which we have heard so much today. The commission found that holding and operating a bank account is now essential to participate in society and the economy, whether it is receiving wages, paying bills or accessing benefits. But we also found that people's views on banks are shaped by their direct experiences. The more a person knows their bank, the more likely they are to have confidence in it. That means that if banks want to retain their customers, they must provide good, wide-ranging services. An inability to access banking services risks eroding that trust and confidence, as we have heard today, especially among the most vulnerable.

David Mundell: Does my hon. Friend understand that people are very angry about bank closures, and about the fact they feel that the banks just do not listen to them when they go through some consultation exercise? That is why in Moffat, at 2 pm tomorrow, there will be a protest outside the closing Bank of Scotland.

Mark Garnier: I agree 100%. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Let us be clear that the decline of our high streets and the decline of bank branches have run concurrently as behaviour has changed over the last couple of decades and retail activity has increasingly moved online. Banks are, of course, commercial entities, and their decisions to close branches are often driven by commercial imperatives, which is not necessarily what we want to hear in this debate. Falling footfall, the rise of digital banking and the need to be cost-effective are just some of those reasons.

As we have heard so often, there are now just 3,000 bank branches remaining in the UK, and that number is expected to drop even further in coming years. ATM

numbers, especially free-to-use machines, have also declined. Only 14% of payments in the UK were made with cash in 2022, and withdrawals from the Link network are down 50% on pre-covid levels.

Sir John Hayes: The clue is in the phrase “banking service”. It is about providing a service to people. As the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) said, banks dignify communities too. This is about personal interactions, trust and building relationships. That is what we do when we go into a bank, and we could never do that in the same way online.

Mark Garnier: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. This is about face-to-face relationships, not something done through an app.

Behind the statistics I cited are real people and real communities. The digitally excluded, older people, those in poor health and people with lower financial resilience mostly rely on cash. Small businesses and rural communities are hard hit. The question for Members who want to compel banks to keep branches open is how much digital-first customers should be charged to retain loss-making branches—notwithstanding, of course, that profit question.

Of course, the answer cannot simply be to do nothing and to walk away from our responsibilities to those who are left behind. The previous Government recognised the importance of maintaining essential banking services as a foundation for public confidence in this sector. Through the post office network, we provided a system of free and convenient access to banking services, and the banking framework partnership between the Post Office and over 30 of the UK’s banks and building societies means consumers and businesses can access basic banking services through the post office network. The Post Office now has more branches than all the banks and building societies combined, and according to the Financial Conduct Authority, post office branches make up more than 66% of all branch-based cash access points in the UK. The last Government also introduced banking hubs, which we have heard a great deal about.

I am conscious of time, and I do not want to incur your wrath, Madam Deputy Speaker, so although I have a lot more to say, I think it would be prudent for me to step aside and allow the Minister to face up to the passion about this issue from Members representing their communities.

3.25 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I want to thank and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) on bringing forward this important debate, which was heavily subscribed across the House. He highlighted the needs of his constituents, particularly the elderly, the vulnerable and the disabled. My hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt), and the hon. Members for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas), for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) and for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) all stressed the importance of in-person services, particularly for vulnerable constituents.

I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley), for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) and for Gillingham and Rainham (Naushabah Khan), the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) and the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) on securing banking hubs in their constituencies—in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales, two banking hubs are soon to open, as I understand it.

Other Members spoke about their campaigns to secure banking hubs, including my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin)—who is apparently expecting a call from one such bank—and the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking). My hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) and the hon. Members for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the importance of access to cash and banking services in rural areas.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Emma Reynolds: I do not have very long left, I am afraid.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare rightly stressed the importance of these services in urban areas as well. I will not go through all of them, but we heard lots of really good speeches on both sides of the House and a surprising degree of consensus, which is not always the case. It is interesting to see the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington so closely aligned, which is not something I expected.

Through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, the last Government legislated to protect reasonable access to cash, giving the Financial Conduct Authority new powers to ensure that communities could both withdraw and deposit cash. The Government recognise that the ability to access cash and in-person banking support remains essential for many, particularly in rural areas and for vulnerable people, which is why we have secured the industry’s commitment to roll out 350 banking hubs by the end of this Parliament, ensuring that access to face-to-face banking is protected. Over 220 have been agreed, and more than 160 are open.

Banking hubs are a voluntary initiative by banks as part of meeting their access to cash obligations, as legislated for in FSMA. Many Members have asked the Government to demand that Link reviews its assessment procedure, but it is worth reminding colleagues that the process for deciding where hubs are needed is independently determined by Link, the operator of the UK’s largest ATM network. The Government are not minded to review the legislation passed by the previous Government.

A number of Members—including the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway, who mentioned this to me yesterday as well—talked about ATMs’ lack of reliability. I have done a little bit of work on that, and Link assures me that it takes a hard line with its members over the functionality of ATMs. However, I urge Members to raise these issues with me, so that I can raise them with

[Emma Reynolds]

Link. I am soon to meet John Howells, the chief executive of Link, and I will feed back the concerns that Members have raised today about how Link applies its criteria.

I know that this is not necessarily the conclusion to the speech that Members were hoping for, but we think it is important that local communities have access to cash and banking services, which is why our Government are committed to rolling out 350 banking hubs across the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Ian Lavery to wind up very briefly.

3.29 pm

Ian Lavery: With the leave of the House, I will simply say a very brief thank you to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate, and to everybody who has participated in it. What my hon. Friend the Minister just said is exactly right. I am someone who has been criticised by Opposition Members as a left-wing dinosaur—I wear it as a badge of honour—but that would hardly be said of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). People should recognise that when someone with my politics and someone with her politics absolutely agree with everything that has been said, there is surely something wrong.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the importance of banking facilities to local communities and expresses concern over the precipitous decline over the past 40 years; notes the change to banking habits through online services; further recognises that, for vulnerable people, face-to-face banking is a vital service and a reduction of branches risks significant financial exclusion; further notes the impact of a loss of physical banking on small businesses through lost productivity and lost footfall; also notes the innovative nature of banking hubs as a solution to a loss of high street banking, but recognises that Financial Conduct Authority rules for their recommendation are too inflexible; and calls on the Government to instigate a review into the impact on communities of bank branch loss and a change to the regulations to ensure communities have appropriate access to banking facilities.

Battery Energy Storage Sites: Safety Regulations

3.31 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): This is a subject in which I might have more than a passing interest.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the unique challenges posed by lithium-ion fires in battery energy storage sites; and calls on the Government to bring forward enforceable national regulations for their design and construction.

I have asked for this debate in order to highlight important issues associated with lithium-ion batteries when deployed at grid scale. These installations are known as battery energy storage systems, or BESSs. In particular, I am calling for clear national regulations that could be applied in the same way in every part of the UK. We need legislation, and I hope that this debate will push the Government further along the road to passing it.

The UK has set a target to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. To achieve that, many wind and solar farms have been constructed and permissions are being sought for many more. I fully support the drive towards renewable energy; the enhanced regulation that I am suggesting today is intended to secure the industry's future, not to create more obstacles. I think it is perfectly possible to draw up regulations that will not stand in the way of BESS roll-out, and which in the long term could actually save the industry from a wholly avoidable setback in the event of an accident.

BESSs solve the classic question of what to do when the sun don't shine and the wind don't blow. They provide a number of highly useful functions, including load balancing, peak shaving and energy arbitrage. Above all, they make it practical to meet a much larger percentage of our national energy needs from renewables. However, every energy system carries some kind of risk, and most BESSs currently use lithium-ion battery technology. In the event of an accident—and sooner or later there are always accidents—lithium-ion batteries catch fire in a different way from other materials, in a process known as thermal runaway. It is important to note that most BESSs now rely on lithium iron phosphate or LFP batteries. This chemistry is much more stable than lithium nickel manganese cobalt oxide or NMC cells, which are common in consumer uses. That means fewer incidents, but those incidents can still be dangerous. In the future, there will undoubtedly be other chemistries, so we need to leave space for innovation.

Thermal runaway generates very high temperatures and requires different firefighting methods. It is usually best not to try to put out the fire, but rather to control the spread. Firefighters also have to contend with severely toxic gas emissions, the risk of an explosion, soil contamination and damage to watercourses. To repeat, I am in no way suggesting that battery energy storage systems are inherently unsafe. The risks they entail may be different from those of traditional systems, but they are perfectly controllable.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the location of many of these sites are in rural areas, which are often served primarily by retained firefighters?

They are a long way from where specialist firefighting resources would come from, and that does not seem to be taken into account fully in the planning process.

John Milne: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. I agree that such sites can be in remote locations where there are fewer resources. As I will say later in my remarks, fire officer training is very much part of what I am recommending.

There is a strong case for mandating water-based suppression systems, off-gas detection, ventilation systems and thermal runaway mitigation as design conditions. Unfortunately, that is far from the case today. The guidelines for planning approval are imprecise and vary across the devolved nations. Currently, the burden of responsibility falls on individual local authority planning officers who have no specific training or background in lithium-ion technology—and why on earth would they?

For reasons that are hard to understand—perhaps the Minister can explain—fire and rescue services have not been made statutory consultees for planning applications. The current guidance states that applicants are “encouraged to engage” rather than required to do so, but even compulsory consultation is not enough by itself because the fire services themselves do not always have the expertise. Within the last fortnight, Henry Griffin, Suffolk's deputy chief fire officer asked for fire services to be given new powers, saying:

“I'd like to see a power that is akin to a regulatory order like those for a commercial property, where we would have the power to enforce safety measures on those sites.”

He explained that the fire service is currently just a “contributing partner”, able to give “direction and professional advice”, but not necessarily to require what it might like.

The result is inconsistency, which is destructive both of public trust and of the success of the industry. In my own constituency of Horsham, the local planning authority has rejected a BESS application, while a similar site, just half a mile away, across the border in Mid Sussex, has won approval. Such inconsistencies show alarming parallels with Grenfell. The Grenfell disaster was the end result of many failings by both individuals and companies, but at heart it was a failure of regulation. The rules left things wide open for exploitation by cost-cutting developers, which is exactly what happened. Just as with lithium-ion batteries, a new technology—in that case cladding—was being used at scale for the first time, without proper understanding of the risks. The time to act is now because the number of BESS applications is expanding exponentially.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. He is right to highlight the issues around lithium-ion batteries and thermal runaway; we are all reminded of explosions and fires in Liverpool in 2019 and in Kilwinning, in Scotland, in 2025. He referred to the need for legislation for the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but that needs to start here. Is it his intention to ask the Minister to confirm in her response that that will happen, so that the legislation can then fan out to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales?

John Milne: The hon. Gentleman is better acquainted than I am with the way that devolution works, but yes, I hope that the Minister will be able to set out whatever course of action is required to get to that point.

It is essential that we build battery energy storage sites to proper safety standards so that we do not find ourselves facing the need for a massively more expensive retrofit, with consequences for the entire energy network.

What accidents have there been so far? In September 2020, a fire at a BESS site in Liverpool created a significant blast and took 59 hours to extinguish. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service said that the blaze on Carnegie Road

“appears to be the first significant fire of its type to occur within the UK”.

However, this was only a small BESS, with just four containers and a modest 20 MWh output in total.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): In common with the hon. Gentleman, I welcome renewable energy. Safety is hugely important. In my constituency there are lots of battery sites that are being placed in pockets around beautiful little villages because there are connections to the national grid. Because of the potential fire hazards and possible toxic run-off into local rivers, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should prioritise brownfield sites as opposed to such pockets around pretty little villages?

John Milne: The issue of site choice is closely associated with grid capacity, so that is a factor. That is why some of these sites are ending up in otherwise somewhat improbable and very un-industrial settings. Rules around the pollution of watercourses are one of the most important measures to be brought in, and a wider discussion of land use is going on that could help with that.

There was another accident in February this year. Essex firefighters dealt with a fire at a BESS project that was still under construction and therefore not even operating at full power. The most serious incident internationally, which caused serious injury, was in McMicken, Arizona in 2019. As a result, America, along with Germany, has some of the most effective BESS protocols in the world, which I think could be copied.

Overall, BESS fires are high risk in their impact but low in incidence. The Faraday Institution estimates that only one in 40 million battery cells will experience failure resulting in fire. That is an exceptionally high standard of safety, but there are millions of batteries, so there will be accidents—and, of course, in a BESS scenario one battery can trigger another. Grenfell was one fire in one building, yet the ramifications continue today. It has left us with the huge cost of retrofitting large numbers of high-rise buildings across the UK built with similar cladding methods. Even a single failure can therefore undermine an entire industry if it turns out to be the result of a systemic mistake in design.

The UK's regulatory approach to BESS safety relies on performance-based regulations such as the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and the Building Regulations 2010. They place the responsibility on the responsible person—the site owner—to ensure that adequate safety measures are in place, but they lack specific provisions tailored to BESSs. Too much reliance is being placed on individual owners to mark their own homework. The National Fire Chiefs Council provides guidance for the fire and rescue services, but that needs to be more comprehensive and updated constantly in line with changes in technology if it is to serve a proper regulatory purpose. On fire response regulation, recent

[John Milne]

changes to the International Electrotechnical Commission standards suggest a global shift towards mandatory water-based suppression and proactive risk mitigation, but that has not yet been echoed in UK law.

There are also the environmental impacts. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Water Resources Act 1991 provide a general framework for managing environmental impacts but, again, they do not specifically address the challenges posed by BESS fires. Existing regulators do not seem to know whose responsibility this should be. In a recent application for a solar park at Cleve Hill in Kent, which includes battery storage, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero stated that the Health and Safety Commission should be consulted on safety advice, but the HSC itself said that commenting on battery safety management plans was not in its remit. That confusion is not exactly reassuring.

It is important to note that if the batteries themselves are not manufactured in the UK, the Government have limited scope to regulate. However, because batteries are produced under controllable factory conditions, their failure rate is low. The focus of UK regulation should instead be on the processes that can happen in this country, especially the design of the battery containers and the overall site.

I understand from the Electricity Storage Network, which is the industry group for electricity storage in Great Britain, that it is currently talking to officials at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about a new permitting system. It is also talking to the British Standards Institution about laying down new standards for design and emergency response. However, the Government have responded to all questions from myself and others saying that they consider the present regulatory regime to be “robust”. I am tempted to say that pride comes before a fall.

In the last few weeks, a spokesperson for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has stated:

“Battery fires at storage sites are rare in the UK. We already have high safety standards in place that require manufacturers and industry to ensure batteries are safe throughout their lifespan.”

That is just too complacent. Fires as a result of cladding were also incredibly rare, but that did not save 72 lives at Grenfell.

I and others have been asking for action for some time, but so far without success. It feels like the message still is not getting through. It is very concerning that many questions are passed from Department to Department, with no one seeming to be sure exactly whose responsibility it is. Because of inadequate regulation, some BESS units have already been fitted with inappropriate fire suppression techniques, which might actually make the problem worse, but they were installed in good faith by operators looking to do the right thing. Why are the Government so reluctant to act? I hope that the Minister will explain. Perhaps the Government are worried that regulations would slow down the planning process, but I would argue that clearer rules will actually make life easier for planning officers and councillors. Currently, they have to grapple with a complex technical subject for the first time each time—that is too much to ask of non-experts. I further suggest that it would be easier to win public consent if there were more clarity and consistency.

Perhaps the Government fear stifling innovation in a new and rapidly changing industry. I wholly agree that any regulations need to be carefully drafted and have sufficient flexibility. Any guidance needs to cover a number of areas, including the transportation of batteries to the site, design and construction, firefighting, ongoing inspection and decommissioning. In the short term, if the Government are—for any reason—still reluctant to regulate, perhaps they could issue clear national guidelines that are capable of being updated annually. Enforcement might then take place through the insurance industry, which would be likely to insist that any new applications follow such guidelines. As no project can go ahead without insurance, this would be enforcement by the back door.

Grenfell was a wholly predictable tragedy. A similar fire at Lakanal House in Camberwell, which killed six people, should have made us understand the risk, but that warning was not heeded and history took its course. We cannot go back in time to stop Grenfell, but we can act now to avoid making the same mistake again with battery energy storage systems.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Members will be able to see how many are standing. I do not intend to put a formal time limit on, but if Members can keep their contributions below five minutes, everybody will just about squeeze in.

3.46 pm

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): First of all, I support the fact that there is a debate on this issue, and I support some of the points that the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) has just made. It is clear that technology is moving fast, and when it does, it is essential that public authorities move even faster so that we feel properly secure and protected. I do not think we are quite there yet, and it is clear that there are different patterns of operation by public authorities in different parts of the country. We need an overall pattern.

I also agree that we do not want to turn our back on this new technology. It is very important that we continue to transform our energy provision across the country as a whole, but the fact of the matter is that the fires that occur from time to time pose serious problems for fire authorities. Those authorities should take a central role in any national conversation about this matter. Guidance from the National Fire Chiefs Council says that at least 1,900 litres of water per minute are needed to try to control a fire once it gets started. That is an incredible amount of water to deliver, and many sites simply cannot deliver it, although they seem to be making progress in some cases.

The Government have said that there have not been many fires, but there have been quite a few. The one in Liverpool that the hon. Member for Horsham mentioned burned for a substantial period of time—59 hours—and there was one in California that lasted for five days. There have been three other fires in the UK this year, and we are only halfway through the year. When the fire authorities are trying to eliminate a fire, it is obviously complex, but it can lead to pollutants going into the ground and into watercourses, which itself is very dangerous.

It has been shown that in Liverpool, when the smoke from the fire was sprayed by water, it produced hydrochloric acid that was distributed through the community—obviously, not a very healthy thing to have. Additionally, toxic fumes were created, which travelled a long way.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Jon Trickett: I will, but quickly.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. He refers to the pollution of watercourses; in my constituency, the salmon fishing industry is hugely important to tourism and the local economy, so that could be a disaster waiting to happen.

Jon Trickett: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and take his point entirely.

Some authorities have suggested that a two-mile radius is needed if a fire starts. People need to keep their windows and doors closed while the fumes are in the air, as there is a risk of children, elderly people and others breathing them in. In my constituency, there are two applications in place, both in beautiful parts of Yorkshire. In Heath, which is regarded as one of the crown jewels of Wakefield, there is a proposal for a large battery storage provision. Hundreds of people objected to it. The chief fire officer said:

“The risks of vapour cloud, thermal runaway and explosion are unfortunately very real and are becoming more common as we see an increase”

in battery storage. He talks about choices being given to the fire authorities, in whether they allow the fire to just burn itself out, with the risk of pollution of the atmosphere, or whether they attempt to tackle it. To control a fire at the site in Heath would require millions of litres of water in a 24-hour period. It is almost impossible to deliver that level of water and, anyway, what happens to the millions of litres of water used to try to eliminate such a fire?

There is a second proposal in Old Snydale, a beautiful village in my constituency. It is a one-road village, and the people who live there work hard or have worked hard. The proposed site will be almost next to the village, and there is no road access or egress. I do not know how the fire engines and other emergency services would get in. The proposal is completely inappropriate, but the two communities of Heath and Old Snydale are sitting there with planning applications in place and the fire officers expressing great worries about the risk of potential fire and how they will control it. Without national guidance and proper regulations that are sensitive to the prospect of fires, our local planning officers are having to reinvent the wheel, as are other planning officers in other authorities. I support the points made by the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) in introducing this debate.

3.51 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) not just on securing this debate, but on giving it such a wide-ranging and thoroughly comprehensive introduction. I am sure that many Members would have mentioned many of the areas he discussed in their own way. Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I are very good

friends, and I know that you have been concerned about battery storage plants near the River Test and potential runaway fires that may lead to pollutants going into the river. As you are in your place, you cannot comment on that, so I thought it important to get that on the record.

The hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) was focusing on some of the planning issues, and that is where I want to go, too. When we look at this debate overall, what we are talking about is a lack of statutory guidance. I want to get on the record immediately that this is not a debate of “Forget net zero and forget about renewables.” That is not the debate, and we are not deniers along that road, but there are serious concerns. The leader of my party has raised those concerns and immediately been accused of being anti net zero. We have to take the concerns seriously, because, as the hon. Member for Horsham outlined, there are changes, slowly but surely, in the materials being used. Nickel manganese, for example, has a vaporisation point of 900°C. These fires can burn easily over 1,000°C. I want to focus my attention on the fallout.

I had a meeting with some soil scientists, among others, from the University of Leeds at a research facility in my constituency. They are involved in all aspects of farming. I asked about research into potential contamination and fallout and what it could mean for soils if there was a fire. They said no such research had really been done, and I think they had a couple of PhD ideas appear from that. It showed that that work has not been done.

Where have we got to on thermal runaway? As has been outlined, such fires need a huge quantity of water. It is not just about trying to do whatever we can to stop the fire spreading. I read in the *International Fire and Safety Journal* about using high-pressure water mist at the starting point, monitoring the potential for thermal runaway and trying to cool the batteries before they get to that stage. Equally, if that mist is high pressure enough, it can contain the contaminants around the fire. Again, the science around this issue has to be closely managed. As the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth has outlined, acids and other things can be created. We have to be careful about the chemistry, but we do not have any statutory guidance for planning authorities. We keep speaking about what we need to do with water, so surely it should be a condition of the planning process that there is a mains water supply to where such incidents are happening.

In my constituency, planning applications for solar farms and battery storage are pouring in. They are being approved and pushed on, but there is no demand for water supply. These applications are for developments in the middle of a rural area, on farmland. Farmers are being offered a golden egg and told, “Sell us your land, and we will develop solar farms and battery storage.” Let me give the example of a planning application for Wetherby services. There were not really any objections or concerns about batteries, but Leeds city council then approved the development of hundreds of houses 600 to 700 metres away. As has been outlined, no one knows how far contamination goes.

There must be a lot more statutory undertaking for planning authorities. I recommend a pause on approving planning applications until we fully understand what mitigation could be put in place for disasters, which unfortunately do happen.

3.56 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): As the MP for South Cotswolds and an environmental campaigner who has spent decades campaigning for climate action, I would like to raise serious concerns about the unchecked expansion of BESS facilities. Earlier this year, I brought the Climate and Nature Bill to the House because I believe in having a fast, fair and science-led transition away from fossil fuels, but I also believe in doing so properly—safely, transparently and with communities at the heart of the process. Unfortunately, that is not what we are seeing in the case of the proposed Lime Down solar farm in my constituency.

The Lime Down proposal would industrialise over 2,000 acres of rural farmland and introduce a 500 MW battery installation right next to the railway line from London Paddington to south Wales. That is not just a visual or environmental concern, but a serious safety issue. We have already heard a lot about the low risk, but very high consequence, of a fire at such a facility. If such a fire were to break out, the consequences would be devastating for both infrastructure and public safety.

Members have already referred to many examples of fires that have taken place, so I will not repeat them, but I want to emphasise that the location of battery storage facilities is absolutely crucial. Right now, there are no national safety regulations tailored to best technology. There is no requirement for thermal containment, no mandatory fire suppression and no clear guidance for local planners. Under the Government's new Planning and Infrastructure Bill, BESS projects would be removed from national oversight altogether, piling even more responsibility on to under-resourced local authorities. That does not look like thoughtful climate planning; it is a top-down proposal on a massive scale, with too many unanswered questions and too little engagement with the people who live nearby. Despite the obligatory consultations, residents close to Lime Down feel understandably overlooked in a process that should prioritise both safety and consent.

We should look closely at the companies behind Lime Down. The developer, Island Green Power, is now fully owned by Macquarie bank, a global investment firm with a track record that should give us all pause for thought. During its time leading the consortium that ran Thames Water, Macquarie extracted billions in dividends while letting infrastructure crumble and rivers fill with sewage. It is an asset management company. Its job is to make money, and it does it well. It is not a public utilities company. It is not interested in home-grown, community-led energy; it is interested in profit. It is not here to protect the beauty of the British countryside or to invest in long-term sustainability. Its business model is simple: build big, move fast and maximise returns, whatever the cost to people, nature or public trust.

We need a better alternative. Instead of handing vast developments to multinationals with sketchy records, we should be investing in community-owned energy projects—initiatives that are more resilient, more trusted and far better suited to rural areas such as South Cotswolds. Projects such as Westmill Solar and the Low Carbon Hub have shown how communities can lead the way on clean energy, cutting emissions while boosting local economies.

Let us not confuse scale with ambition. Our net zero future should be safe, smart and fair, not shaped by the profit margins of distant shareholders. We can and must do better if we are going to get to net zero without alienating the public and driving them into the arms of campaigners who would do away with the net zero enterprise altogether.

4.1 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on bringing forward this important debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in it, because this is a matter of considerable concern to the many rural communities in the Mid Buckinghamshire constituency, particularly given the safety risks posed by battery energy storage systems.

Let me be clear from the outset: this is a debate not about the principle of energy storage, although I am in principle opposed to such schemes taking agricultural land and challenging our food security, but about—and this is deeply concerning and the House must urgently address it—the real, growing and too often overlooked safety implications of these installations, particularly when placed in close proximity to villages and rural road networks that are ill-equipped to support them.

The most pressing risk, and one that has already led to devastation elsewhere, is the danger of thermal runaway, as others have said. These are not hypothetical risks; they are documented, real-world events. In Merseyside, a fire at a battery site in 2020 caused an explosion that shook nearby homes and required a major emergency services response. In Arizona, a BESS fire led to an explosion that seriously injured eight firefighters, and in Belgium, a BESS fire burned for over a week and forced the evacuation of nearby businesses.

These systems contain highly reactive lithium-ion batteries. When one cell fails—often due to manufacturing defects, overheating or damage—it can cause a chain reaction across the entire installation, releasing toxic gases, generating intense heat and creating a fire that cannot be extinguished with conventional methods. In rural areas, where response times may be slower and firefighting resources more limited, the consequences could be catastrophic.

In my constituency of Mid Buckinghamshire, we are increasingly seeing applications for these industrial-scale storage sites in rural settings near homes, farms, schools, conservation areas, watercourses and rivers. These are often justified in the name of green energy, but residents rightly ask: green for whom and safe for whom? It is not just the risk of fire; the cumulative impact of associated infrastructure—substations, cabling, transformer enclosures—often means miles of narrow rural roads being torn up by heavy goods vehicles, with lasting safety implications. Roads that were never designed for such weight and volume are left with potholes, uneven surfaces and subsidence. For local motorists, cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders, or schoolchildren walking along rural lanes, this poses a daily and wholly unnecessary danger. I have received multiple reports from parish councils, residents and emergency services who are concerned that the access routes used for construction and maintenance of these sites are not fit for purpose. My constituents in the Claydons and in Little Missenden are at risk from convoys of lorries, with junction visibility reduced, verges destroyed and road surfaces degraded if BESS projects planned for those areas go ahead.

Should an emergency arise at the site itself, one has to ask: would a fire engine or ambulance even be able to reach it safely and quickly? Could the fire service even attempt to deal with such a fire? That is why I am pleased that Buckinghamshire Council rejected a 500 MW site in the Claydons last year. I trust that other speculative developers, such as the one planning a site just outside Little Missenden, will take note and spare my constituents from these unacceptable fire risks and road safety risks.

We must take a more precautionary approach. At the very least, the Government should introduce clear national guidelines on the siting of BESS installations, including minimum separation distances from residential properties, fire resilience standards, mandatory site-specific risk assessments, and restrictions on placing these facilities on or near rural roads. I urge the Government and local planning authorities to take these concerns seriously. Safety must never be sacrificed on the altar of speed or ideology, or the first technology that happens to be on the shelf that day. Our rural communities in particular deserve better protection.

4.6 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this important debate. Some of the newer Members may not know quite how much I love the geeky possible debates. I have not had as much time since I became SNP Chief Whip, so I cannot reach the geeky heights managed by the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) in reading the *International Fire and Safety Journal*. I commend him on that, but I want to bring the debate to another geeky level and talk about the mechanisms by which the Government should take action.

There has been a lot of talk today about planning mechanisms and regulations, but I urge the Government to look at health and safety regulations. I am from Aberdeen and a number of years ago we had the Piper Alpha disaster. The Piper Alpha disaster and the Cullen report that came afterwards resulted in a massive step change in safety. It was a huge, drastic change in how those things worked, with health and safety regulations that apply across the whole of the United Kingdom. Planning, for example, is devolved to Scotland and a lot of environmental rules are the preserve of the Scottish Parliament.

Currently, there are no health and safety rules in this area. The House of Commons Library briefing for this debate states:

“There are no laws that specifically govern the fire safety of battery energy storage systems”.

It also states:

“There are no specific health and safety laws relating to BESSs.” I have written to the Health and Safety Executive, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks, the city council and the Scottish Government about this issue. I have done a lot around battery energy storage sites. The HSE wrote back to me saying that it is a member of the cross-Government group on battery energy storage, so it is working on that. It has a landing page on its website that brings together some of the regulations of battery energy storage, but most of them were written for the safety of individual batteries rather than for the safety of these storage sites. That, specifically, is what is missing: the health and safety guidance for battery energy storage sites.

A number of Members have spoken about local or UK-wide issues, but across the world there have been 85 fires at battery energy storage sites. That is not a small number or a small percentage. This is a risky business. I do not disagree with those who say that these sites are necessary. We absolutely need them for our energy systems in the future, but they need to be safe. We need regulations in place. We should bring them together, even if it is just the best practice from all different places, to ensure that there is one place where the health and safety guidance is held. I would be even more flexible than having it updated by Parliament. I would give the HSE a level of control over changing and flexing that guidance, should more best practice come through. Again, that would apply across the whole of these islands, and I think that would be the best way forward.

I want to mention two other things. First, an earlier speaker mentioned that we have extreme weather events—once-in-a-generation events—just about every week at the moment. It is really important that we look at both the extreme temperatures and the flooding events that may occur, as flooding events at battery energy storage sites are an issue; whether or not there has been a fire in advance of a water leakage, there could still be concerns.

Secondly, I want to talk about the money. A number of people are looking at these sites with dollar signs in their eyes, thinking, “We can build these things and make a whole lot of money.” Actually, we should be telling the organisations that are creating the battery energy storage sites that they will need to pay for the fire safety assessment, consult the local fire service, and pay for the training of the local fire teams on tackling fires at these sites. I think that would be the most reasonable way forward. We should ask them to pay for that training, because it is those organisations that will be making a huge profit from the sites. It should not just be the public services that have to train up and increase the number of hours that retained firefighters, perhaps, are working. I think that is really important.

I urge the Minister to look at HSE guidance as the method and mechanism for taking this on. I have pushed the Scottish Government to change some of their planning guidance already—particularly around notification of local community councils, for example—but that health and safety guidance is, I think, the key place to take action, make that change and bring it together in one place, so that all our constituents are safer as a result.

4.11 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing it, and for his comprehensive introduction.

I would like to talk about this issue in the context of rural constituencies such as mine, as many other hon. Members have this afternoon. First, farmland is not just another piece of land, but an irreplaceable national asset. The ability to produce food domestically is a fundamental pillar in our sovereignty and our national economic strength. In recent years, we have witnessed prime agricultural land being converted into sprawling arrays of energy installations with solar farms, and now we have the increasing prevalence of battery energy storage systems appearing in glorious countryside across the country. My right hon. Friend the Member for

[Bradley Thomas]

Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who is not present, has raised this point comprehensively in the past, as well as safety concerns around battery energy storage systems and the displacement of good agricultural land for energy production.

We are at real risk of displacing this good agricultural land and of energy production facilities becoming, in effect, a new cash crop. These facilities are incredibly lucrative for farmers who feel stretched—it is very difficult for them to make a living in this challenging economic climate. I am pleased to be supporting the new clause to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills to protect agricultural land in the long term.

There is another point I would like to highlight beyond those that have been made by many other Members today. We face the exposure of our energy supply chains to foreign countries—countries that may not share our values—and the long-term depletion of our energy resilience if they manage to embed their infrastructure within our national energy infrastructure in the UK.

In Weatheroak in my constituency, we have been battling an energy storage application bang in the heart of north Worcestershire's green belt. This glorious countryside will be fundamentally changed forever should the application go ahead. I am grateful to Tony Williams, the chairman of Weatheroak residents association, for having written to me on numerous occasions. I have engaged with many local residents who share the concerns that have been raised today, namely around the proximity of such sites to villages and the potential danger should there be an accident or incident whereby one of these sites catches fire and the sparsely dispersed rural fire services are unable to get there. We also have the impact on roads, which has been picked up by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith).

Rural communities across the country are facing a fundamental change in their identities, at the expense of industrial applications that are often granted at ease with little regard to the identity and character of those villages. I know that this is a concern that so many of my constituents share. If I had three asks of the Government, they would be: that they pause the granting of battery energy storage system applications in the first instance; that they consider a minimum radius for the proximity to settlements within which applications can be granted; and that they ensure that fire services across the country are statutory consultees in every case where there is an application for a battery energy storage system of any size.

4.15 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have come to the Chamber with a pre-prepared speech, but really everything has already been said. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing this debate. I also want to thank everyone who has contributed—this sounds like a winding-up speech, but it is not. Whereas normally I would email my speech to people who have approached me on an issue, in this case I will just email the whole debate as it is published in *Hansard*, because so many of the concerns have been addressed, fleshed out and aired.

There are proposals in my constituency, way up in the north of Scotland, to have power lines from Spittal in Caithness to Lochbuie and Beaully in Inverness—it is massive—and there are lots of applications for battery storage systems. It does feel as if the technology is racing way ahead of the statutory authorities of the Scottish and UK Governments and that we are playing catch up. We are being left behind in a cloud of dust, and that worries me enormously. We have heard about the dangers of a battery fire—of thermal runaway. In the north of Scotland, where I represent, we are no strangers to extremely cold weather. Alnaharra in my constituency is always the coldest place in the winter. Cold temperatures can affect the batteries; they can change their lifespan and their mix.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: There is a phenomenon called dendrite, which is a form of crystallisation—especially from lithium—with a tree-like structure. We do not fully understand where it comes from. Does that play into what the hon. Gentleman is saying about trying to understand the stability of battery storage?

Jamie Stone: I, like others, am left in awe by the diligence of the research that has been carried out by the right hon. Member. Yes, that is absolutely correct; we just do not quite know what happens. We have heard that if one battery catches fire, it can ignite fires in other batteries, but I will not go over that again. Where possibly high-risk infrastructure is proposed for a community, we must surely have mitigation. And yes, we should have a complete consultation with the authorities and those responsible. In Caithness, we have only five fire stations, and they do not have enough personnel, let alone faintly enough water, to tackle such a fire. The authorities want to build a battery near the Castle of Mey where the King sometimes stays, but they ain't got the troops to sort that one out, absolutely not.

I totally endorse what is being said about the Health and Safety Executive. In Scotland it should be HSE, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, and the Fire and Rescue Service. I take great heart from what the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) has been saying—thank goodness that this is being taken seriously.

In conclusion, we should not simply forge ahead with this sort of stuff until we know exactly what we are doing. To be helpful, I shall namecheck one person. She is a councillor in the highlands. She is not a member of my party—Members can google her later and find out of which party she is a member. She is called Helen Crawford. She has been bravely standing up saying, “I think we need to have a way of structuring this that takes the communities with us, that does not seem that we are imposing something from on high.” She is referring to batteries, grid improvements and so on. Nobody is saying that they do not believe in getting to net zero, but let us take people with us when we do it.

I drop a little hint to the Minister and the colleagues of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North in Edinburgh that there will be a meeting of a large group of community councils on 14 June in Inverness-shire. They are reasonable people, and under Scottish law, a community council is a statutory consultee on planning matters. I would be very grateful if the Minister would take a look at what comes out of that meeting, because I think it will be

helpful to both the UK Government and the Scottish Government. Let us have renewable energy, but let us get it right.

4.20 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I rise to speak on the looming crisis facing us in relation to battery energy storage sites. As Members have explained, the sites are beginning to play a larger and larger role in the transition to greener energy sources, but at the moment ideology is winning the day and pragmatism is disappearing.

There is over 78 GW of battery capacity that is either operational, awaiting construction having been approved or in the early stages of the planning process. For context, that is enough power to supply nearly 200 million homes at once, which is almost 10 times as many as we have in the UK.

One of the 1,100 installations that are proposed but not operational is a battery energy storage site just outside of Grendon in South Northamptonshire. It is part of the wider Green Hill solar farm proposal owned by Island Green Power, and I note the comments from the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on that. This proposal exposes how the Government are asleep at the wheel on this issue. The Green Hill BESS is a massive 500 MW site proposed for the edge of the town, just a few hundred metres from the centre and next to the beautiful Grendon lakes and the River Nene. On the border of a site of special scientific interest, the environmental importance and sensitivity of the site cannot be understated. The proposal is likely to come to the local planning authority eventually, which understandably has virtually zero experience in balancing the risks and benefits of a large-capacity BESS.

The Minister for Housing and Planning wrote to me this week after I raised with him several of the significant risks that the site poses to residents and the environment. He said that the current regulatory framework was “appropriate, robust and future-proofed”. The hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) has already alluded to this comment. I am sure all Members will agree that that sounds rather good, but the title of the framework that the Minister spoke so highly of was “Health and Safety Guidance: Guidance for Grid Scale Electrical Energy Storage Systems”. Unfortunately for the Minister, he has exposed exactly what is lacking in our approach to BESSs. Our framework for regulating the design, construction, running and decommissioning of these sites is simply guidance. We have not gripped the potential threats of these sites and attempted to mitigate them.

Thankfully, there are examples of where countries have faced up to the need to recognise the threats. The United States is further along the path of rolling out BESSs than the UK. As we have experienced here, they have faced large-scale fires, explosions, environmental concerns and, understandably, a gap in expertise when it comes to the emergency response to the unique challenges. In response, they realised that guidance did not suffice, so they passed, as the Housing and Planning Minister sort of alluded to, an “appropriate, robust and future-proofed” statutory framework that did simple things. It required co-ordination with local fire services during the planning process. It specified minimum distances from residential buildings. It mandated elevation in

flood-prone zones, and it enforced the training of the fire departments and first responders to give them the expertise that they need.

That framework is prescriptive, yes, but when it comes to the health of members of the public—health threatened by these sites in the ways that Members have articulated—we must be prescriptive. If we are not careful, much like a fire at a battery energy storage site, a fire will be lit that we cannot put out, and it will burn and burn. I ask that the Government immediately pause the roll-out of these sites until a proper regulatory framework is in place.

4.24 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): People in my constituency are worried. They are worried by the constant stream of applications for new battery energy storage systems in and around the villages across the constituency—from Kinver to Swindon, Hinksford, Wombourne, Lower Penn and the edge of Kingswinford. Their worries were not exactly alleviated by the response the Prime Minister gave to my question last month. He did not give the impression that the Government understand residents’ concerns and some of the reasons for those concerns.

Lower Penn in South Staffordshire is a lovely village with a population of just under 1,000, and it felt like pretty much all of them were in the village hall for the public meeting in February. At least seven battery sites have been either approved or proposed in or close to that small village. The same is happening in villages across South Staffordshire. As I have been sitting in the Chamber for this debate, I have received another email from the planning authority inviting me to speak on one these applications, which are coming through at such a rate. That reflects the position across the country.

There are 121 operational battery energy storage systems in the United Kingdom, but over 1,500 more are in the pipeline, so we really are at a tipping point, but the planning and regulatory systems have not yet caught up. That is why we need action.

As has been said, such batteries have a low failure rate, but sometimes they go wrong, just as they do in mobile phones and electric vehicles. That is why airlines tell us we cannot charge our mobile phone battery while we are on a flight, and it is why Parliament has decided that electric vehicles cannot be charged in the underground car park. It is not because the risk is high; it is because the consequences of things going wrong can be catastrophic. Whereas a mobile phone may have a capacity of 15 to 18 watt hours and an electric vehicle battery perhaps 80 to 100 kW hours, the site in Tilbury—the site of the fire earlier this year, which I think the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) referred to—when completed will have a capacity of about 600 MW hours. To put it another way, that site will be the equivalent of 33 million iPhone batteries.

As we see an increase in these sites, we know from basic statistics that there will be more fires on top of those we have already had this year in Tilbury, Cirencester and Aberdeenshire. We therefore need to ensure that our systems are properly adapted and modernised to reflect those risks. The risk of a fire is not only about the potential danger to human life—for both those who may be nearby and the firefighters who are sent to bring those fires under control over what may be 24 or 48 hours—but about our local natural environments.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the issues is that there is no statutory requirement on prevention methods that may stop us from getting to that disastrous situation in the first place?

Mike Wood: My right hon. Friend is completely right. Part of the problem is that the planning applications that come in are often very vague about exactly what lithium ion-type chemical and technology will be used, because they are often made years in advance, and therefore before the products that will be on a site have been acquired. In those circumstances, it is impossible to assess the risk properly.

When these fires run for 24 or 48 hours and millions of gallons of water are used to bring them under control, the chemical run-off has to go somewhere, and sadly many of these applications—including those in my constituency—are for sites near to our rivers and our canals. For example, in Wombourne and Lower Penn there are plans for two battery energy storage sites to be erected close to the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal and the South Staffordshire railway walk.

Not only is the canal a green corridor through our beautiful countryside—an area of outstanding local beauty—but it is close to the historical Bratch locks and Bratch pumping station. It is a popular site for canal users and anglers alike. The consequences of a major fire and the chemical run-off would be devastating for fish stock and other wildlife.

The planning and regulatory systems must catch up with the realities before all the applications are approved and in use, by which time it may be too late. We need the National Fire Chiefs Council to update the guidelines, as well as their assessment of battery energy storage systems. Before that is done, however, we clearly need a minimum distance between battery sites and residential properties. We need the fire service to be made statutory consultees on planning applications for battery energy storage systems. Furthermore, the Government really must go back and make the changes needed to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to ensure that local authorities and communities have a real and meaningful say on where such systems are and are not installed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.30 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am an unpaid director for Reach Community Solar Farm. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this important debate, and on his strong and comprehensive speech supporting the need for regulation. I have been impressed by all the speeches from across the House, as well as by the fact that every single one supported the motion. I hope the Minister has heard that and will urgently take the actions required.

I am proud of the Liberal Democrats' consistent support for green energy and recognise the need for battery energy storage sites, so I am deeply worried that current practices cause concerns about safety, anger at lack of community involvement and little or no share of the profits coming back to the communities affected. A prime example of those problems is the vast Sunnica solar farm planned in my constituency, stretching through

into West Suffolk. Community groups and parish, district and county councils all opposed the development. Their evidence convinced the planning inspector to recommend refusal, but within two weeks of joining the Government, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero granted permission. Now it is down to the local authorities to decide on final details, including the battery energy storage sites for up to 500 MW.

The councils will have 14 working days from receiving details from the developer to consider whether they need further information, to share the application with consultees, to collate any requests for further information and then to return the questions to the developer. They must do that without any clear guidance or regulation on battery safety. They are advised to consult the fire service, and the fire service in turn has no battery safety regulations to refer to, just the guidance issued by the national fire chiefs. It will also be difficult, if not impossible, for meaningful public consultation to be fitted into that timetable.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for local fire services and the Environment Agency to be statutory consultees for BESSs so that they can advise on making the sites safe and on how to manage a fire should one break out. Local communities also need to be consulted, as they know best how the area is used, where the water courses run and what wildlife is present.

Fortunately, as we have heard, BESS fires are rare, but where they occur, they can last for several days. The water used by the firefighters in the Liverpool case combined with the chemicals given off by the batteries to create hydrofluoric acid. Ely and East Cambridgeshire has many interconnected water courses, from drainage ditches through to the River Great Ouse, as well as the internationally important Wicken Fen wetland site and other vital wetland sites. If those became contaminated with hydrofluoric acid, the damage to wildlife, especially in our rare chalk grasslands, would be enormous. We are also the breadbasket of England. Imagine the impact on our farmers and therefore our food supplies, not to mention the impact on the horse racing and horse breeding industries.

Our planning departments need clear regulation and relevant statutory consultees, so that they can ensure that BESSs are installed in the right locations and have the necessary boundaries, run-off catchments and so on to ensure that the fire risk is minimised and that, in the event of fire, people, crops, soils and nature are protected. DEFRA has stated that it will consult in June on integrating BESSs into existing environmental regulations. I would be grateful if the Minister could let us know when we can expect the consultation to open. Many BESSs are already operating, more have permission and yet more are applying for permission. Proper regulation and guidance are therefore urgent.

The Liberal Democrats want green energy to replace fossil fuels. Green energy reduces fuel poverty, gives the UK fuel security and is better for the environment. To be successful and reliable, green energy needs battery energy storage sites, but those storage sites must be safe, and that requires Government regulation and guidance and making local fire services and the Environment Agency statutory consultees.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

4.35 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, and I hope to give a voice to your constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker, given the interest in this important subject in Romsey and Southampton North. I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing the debate and making such a comprehensive speech. He was even wise enough to quote the fire experts from the county that matters most—by which I obviously mean Suffolk.

The fact that there were such clear themes from Members across the House and across the divides of the House—right and left, net zero enthusiasts and sceptics—shows that we are dealing with an undeniable problem that the Government have not yet gripped. There was a clear consensus across the House, from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), that there is a total absence of regulation with this risky technology. There was also agreement, from the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas), about the effects of the policy on the countryside, such as on the availability of good farmland and on rural roads, as well as the challenges of fire service response times in the country. The hon. Members for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) made the point that BESS fires can have serious effects on our precious rivers.

I also want to single out the speech by the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), who drew attention to the dodgy finances of a lot of the firms behind a lot of these applications. That is something we need to investigate further. There was broad agreement on the suggestion made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) that these battery sites should not be allowed to go ahead until a proper system of regulation is introduced.

I am afraid that I am going to breach the cross-party love-in by picking up on what my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) said about ideology. The Government are betting on battery energy storage systems thanks to their ideological aim to decarbonise the entire grid within five years, therefore choosing to depend on unreliable, intermittent and expensive renewables. That is the root cause of the dependence on the technologies we are debating. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) can intervene if he wishes.

It is the consequence of the zeal of the Energy Secretary that we are debating these subjects. Thanks to net zero policy costs, which are relevant more than wholesale gas prices, Britain already has the highest energy costs in Europe. Pushing policy to run faster than technology will allow risks a crisis in the grid and in our economy.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): As someone who worked in the energy industry for five years before coming to this place, I would appreciate some honesty in recognising that the applications the hon. Gentleman has just referenced have been in the pipeline for a lot longer than the Labour Government have been in power.

Nick Timothy: The hon. Member will note the enthusiasm and ideological zeal of the Energy Secretary, which began, I think, in his very first week when he came to this House and announced that he was imposing masses of solar farms on parts of the country and, in the case of the solar farm in my constituency, completely disregarding the independent expert examining authority. That is a clear difference between the two Governments we are discussing.

Mass solar is inefficient and produces less power even than wind, which has a higher load factor—between 10% and 11% for solar, between 22% and 28% for onshore wind, and between 30% and 38% for offshore wind. And that is wind, which is unreliable in itself. The comparison worsens next to nuclear, as it would take 8.5 million solar panels, taking up at least 10,000 acres of often top-quality farmland, to produce enough power to match an average reactor. To the surprise of no one, the World Bank says we are one of the countries with the “least generous conditions” for PV. Indeed, we rank higher only than Ireland.

Batteries and solar panels also expose us to dependence on China, which produces more than 80% of the world's solar panels. Many are made with slave labour, and perhaps all contain kill switches controlled by Beijing. While an amendment to the GB Energy Bill was passed to ban the Government's new quango from using slave-made imports, it does not apply to private sector purchases. So much for ending our dependence on foreign dictatorships and human rights abusers. So much for our energy security.

Giant solar fails even on its own terms, because it is four times more carbon-intensive than wind and nuclear. Apart from biomass, solar is the most polluting of all renewables.

As this debate has shown, there are very real safety concerns about the battery sites that we must address. These battery sites pose a public safety risk that the Government are simply ignoring. With 150 BESS sites already in operation, and with well over 1,000 planning applications in the pipeline, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) noted, this needs to be confronted as a matter of urgency. Building these sites and trying to deal with the safety questions later is reckless, expensive and dangerous.

When a fire starts at a BESS site, highly toxic emissions are released into the air. They include chemicals such as hydrogen fluoride, heavy metals and carcinogens, forcing people to stay indoors. These fires do not need oxygen to keep burning, so they can last for weeks. They can be reignited easily, and the health effects of exposure to these gases are a major concern.

Just look at the fire in Liverpool four years ago, which several Members cited. It took 59 hours to put out. In answer to my written questions, the Government have confirmed that no environmental impact assessment has been made of that incident, so no lessons are being learned. And this year we have seen fires at battery sites near Rothienorman in Aberdeenshire, and in East Tilbury in Essex.

I have repeatedly raised fire safety directly with Ministers, but no satisfactory answers have been given. The Government have made no assessment of the adequacy of fire services near battery sites. There is minimal oversight from the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency.

[Nick Timothy]

The National Fire Chiefs Council recommends a minimum distance of 25 metres between grid-scale batteries and occupied buildings, but it is only guidance and there is no statutory requirement to maintain this distance. As the Liverpool fire proves, a major blaze can affect people over a much wider area anyway.

We need clear involvement from the fire and rescue services in the planning application process for battery sites, looking at concerns around construction, fire safety and retrofitting. Henry Griffin from Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service has described battery sites as an “emerging risk”, saying:

“There can be complications with vapour clouds and fires will last a long time.”

Fire services have no legal power to enforce safety measures on battery sites. We need legislation and residents need a say.

Sunnica is one of the biggest solar and battery farms in the country, as mentioned by my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane), and it has been imposed on our constituents by the Energy Secretary. Three days after entering office, the Energy Secretary approved the application, overruling the advice of examining authorities and, quite clearly from his answer to my question, he had not read the evidence—breaching his quasi-judicial responsibility.

Sunnica will cover over 2,500 acres of prime agricultural land across West Suffolk and East Cambridgeshire. Three battery sites will be built, and the whole project will actually increase carbon emissions. Sunnica has treated residents with contempt and used consultants who specialise in questionable assessments of the quality of farmland. Sunnica is also located very close to the RAF bases at Mildenhall and Lakenheath, which host the US air force, and many service personnel live in the area. We believe Russia has already targeted those bases with drones recently, and the director general of MI5 says that arson and sabotage are part of the Russian *modus operandi* in European countries. To approve Sunnica without assessing this very serious danger is grossly negligent.

Rushing towards mass solar and battery farms like this is an act of ideological irresponsibility. It is bad energy policy, reducing our energy security while increasing the cost of energy for families and businesses.

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): It's exactly what you did!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Member for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) might like to read the handbook on how Parliamentary Private Secretaries should behave. It is not their job to be heard. If he wishes to contribute to a debate on a policy area, perhaps he should resign his position and return to the Back Benches.

Nick Timothy: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Member for Ipswich were more confident in his arguments, he might want to stand up and take part.

As I was saying, it is bad energy policy, reducing our energy security while increasing the cost of energy for families and businesses. It is bad farming policy because

it puts some of our best agricultural land beyond use, and as this debate has shown, it is bad for public safety, because the Government, in their haste and zeal, want to ignore the very serious dangers these batteries bring.

4.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this debate and on his thoughtful and informed speech. I thank all Members for raising this incredibly important issue. Let me reassure them and this House that the Government appreciate all the concerns that have been raised. There is no complacency, and we are taking a responsible approach to the deployment of grid-scale batteries, which are an essential part of delivering clean energy.

We are very clear that increasing the amount of clean, renewable electricity generated, stored and used in the UK will improve our energy security. It will bring down bills for consumers in the long term by reducing our reliance on fossil fuel markets, which are volatile. It will create jobs, and it will tackle the climate and nature crisis, which we must do for future generations. We are committed to delivering clean power by 2030, and it was reassuring to hear support for that ambition from Members across the House, with the disappointing exception of the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), who has adopted a pretty impressive skill of rewriting history and forgetting his own Government's shoddy legacy on this.

In the clean power action plan, the Government outlined that 23 GW to 27 GW of grid-scale battery storage could be required by 2030. I understand that many Members here today are concerned that this comes at the expense of health and safety, but let me reassure them that that is absolutely not the case. I acknowledge that there have been a number of incidents at battery sites, in 2025 in particular, and this has raised legitimate concerns. We hear those concerns and understand them, and Members are right to raise them with Government. However, it is incredibly important for me to stress—and reiterate a point that has been made by other Members—that the risks associated with grid-scale batteries are relatively small and well understood, that there are robust measures in place for managing those risks, and that Government are already taking further steps to address some of the issues that have been raised.

James Naish: The Minister knows that I am as passionate about clean, green energy as she is and that flexibility will be key to ensuring cheaper bills for customers, but that is why it is vital that we give the public confidence in systems like BESS. Will she reassure me that the Government recognise that we must give the public confidence, so that we can ramp up the energy infrastructure needed to achieve the targets she has outlined?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I will absolutely reassure my hon. Friend. We understand that we must maintain public confidence and that we need a robust framework in place.

Jamie Stone: Fire services are devolved to the Scottish Government. I do not think that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) would disagree that

co-ordination on this matter between the devolved Administrations and the UK Government, so that we are singing off the same hymn sheet, is crucial.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We recognise that there needs to be co-ordination, but first, let me take the framework that is in place. It is often claimed that there is no regulation in this sector because there is no specific law addressing battery safety. That is simply untrue. The safety and standards of batteries are assured throughout their life cycle. The Government are therefore confident that the safety risks posed by grid-scale batteries are relatively small and well managed.

I will take each aspect of this matter in turn, beginning with the planning regime. Planning practice guidance encourages battery storage developers to engage with local fire and rescue services before submitting a planning application, so that the issues relating to siting and location that hon. Members have raised are dealt with before an application is made. I think there is scope to strengthen the process and build on it in order to address some of the issues that have been raised.

Let me come to the crux of the regulatory regime for grid-scale batteries: the health and safety laws, overseen by the Health and Safety Executive. The fundamental principle of health and safety law is that those who create risk are best placed to control it. Operators of grid-scale battery sites are expected to assess the specific situation and implement the necessary control measures. Of particular relevance are the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the Dangerous Substances and Explosive Atmospheres Regulations 2002, the Electricity at Work Regulations 1989 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Together, that framework puts in place protections against some of the issues that have been raised, but I take the point that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) raised—that there is scope to think about how we bring this together in a way that is accessible and enforceable, and ensures that the underlying provision and protections that are baked into legislation are well understood by the sector.

To complement the existing health and safety framework, the Government will consult later this month, to answer the question on the timescale, on whether to include batteries in the environmental permitting regulations, to provide further safeguards and assurances. Environmental permitting will provide for the ongoing inspection of battery sites, giving additional assurance that appropriate mitigations are maintained throughout the project's life cycle. Critically, the environmental permitting regulations make it an offence to operate a regulated facility without a permit, or in breach of the conditions of that permit. We will consult on the principle and then work with industry, local government and key stakeholders in order to develop the detail. If we get it right, that should go a long way to addressing many of the concerns that have been raised.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: When the Government do the research on mitigation that the Minister talks about, I gently suggest that they lay down in statute the minimum mitigation facilities that will be expected to be satisfied in planning applications. At the moment, there is no statutory outline for what mitigation must be put in place. Inspections are great, but we are not actually

inspecting anything from a statutory point of view. I encourage her to ensure that the result of the research is that applicants have it laid out for them what mitigation needs to be in place.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We will consult, and work with a host of parties to ensure that we get this right. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) said, we have an interest in ensuring that the public feel complete confidence as we put forward this technology, and as we agree sites across the country.

Let me respond to the specific point that was raised by a number of hon. Members on the proximity to residential areas. It is true that there is no mandated minimum distance between BESS sites and occupied buildings, but the National Fire Chiefs Council guidance recommends a distance of at least 25 metres. We can look at how we can build on that going forward.

The one thing that I hope everyone takes away is that the Government understand the concerns that have been raised, and that Members' constituents are raising. We believe that there is a clear health and safety framework in place that we can build on, and we are intent on building on it. We will continue to work to strengthen the guidance and processes that are in place so that we can ensure that we have the confidence of the public. We believe that this is a crucial part of how we get to net zero, but as hon. Members have said, we must do it in a way that ensures the safety of the public. That is a priority for us, as it is for all Members of this House.

4.55 pm

John Milne: I thank the Minister for her response and all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. Wherever we stand on renewable energy, we can all agree that we must have the highest possible safety standards—that is an absolute given.

From the conversations I have had with industry, clear national guidance would be widely welcomed because what we have now is not felt to be sufficient. What industry most wants is clarity, so any rules can be integrated from the start, at the design stage, when the cost impact is minimal. Regulations are clearly a live issue in many constituencies with so many applications across the country, as Members have said. However, everything is progressing in a random and unco-ordinated way. The fact that the Government do not know which Department should answer questions on the subject is revealing.

I am concerned that Parliament does a weaker job of scrutiny on niche subjects like this one because they are so technical. We are currently placing part of that responsibility on the shoulders of local councillors and council officers, who cannot possibly have the relevant expertise. In her remarks, I noticed that the Minister was still using the term “encouraged” in relation to consulting with local fire officers. That is not enough as such consultation should be mandated and I am disappointed not to hear that there will be mandatory consultation, which is what we all want.

I stress again that incidents will be rare, but a single incident can bring down an industry. I hope that the Minister will not make the same mistake that was made over cladding regulations: let us make this a tragedy that never happens.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the unique challenges posed by lithium-ion fires in battery energy storage sites; and calls on the Government to bring forward enforceable national regulations for their design and construction.

PETITION

Reform of Planning System

4.56 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I rise to present a petition, alongside a corresponding online petition, signed by hundreds of my constituents in North East Hertfordshire, demanding a planning system that puts people and nature before profit.

The root cause of the housing crisis is the flawed developer-led model that fails to deliver affordable homes and manufactures a false conflict between housing and nature. The Government must put councils back in the driving seat, with the funding and tools to build genuinely affordable homes within sustainable communities. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Government to reform the Planning and Infrastructure Bill so it delivers for both workers and wildlife, redefining affordable housing based on local incomes, ensuring developers deliver on their housing promises, protects irreplaceable habitat like Chalk Streams and upholds local democracy in the planning system.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the planning system should put people and nature before profit.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reform the Planning and Infrastructure Bill so it delivers for both workers and wildlife, redefining affordable housing based on local incomes, ensuring developers deliver on their housing promises, protects irreplaceable habitat like Chalk Streams and upholds local democracy in the planning system.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003081]

Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Taiwo Owatemi.)

4.58 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a privilege to rise to move this Adjournment debate about applications to the Afghan relocations and assistance policy, which has come to be known as the ARAP scheme. I intend to raise a deeply troubling case that highlights serious and systemic failings in the operation of ARAP. Those failings have very real and potentially fatal consequences for real human beings who served us, and who are now in fear of their lives. Importantly, I will ask the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), to reconsider the whole process.

The individual to whom I am about to refer played a crucial role in saving British lives during our operations in Afghanistan. He supported our troops and our mission, often at immense personal risk to him and his family, yet it seems that he has been abandoned by us. When we consider that we have given so much to Afghanistan—building a new Government, a new freedom and some democracy—I think the west running away from Afghanistan is an act that shames us all deeply, as is the fact that those who served us and clearly put their lives at risk have been brushed aside. It does not matter who is in power or which Government it is: I say simply that that is—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Taiwo Owatemi.)

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Thank you for that, Madam Deputy Speaker—that has given me a few more minutes.

The ARAP scheme was introduced to provide a lifesaving path to safety for Afghan nationals who directly supported the UK's mission in Afghanistan. At its core, it is a moral and strategic obligation. These individuals risked their lives working for UK forces, and I believe the UK must duly protect them. The Government were right at the time to introduce the scheme, and it is important to acknowledge that it has achieved something. However, in practice, I believe the scheme has fallen dramatically short both morally and logistically. Many eligible Afghans are still stranded under Taliban rule and fearing for their lives, which highlights the failures in the scheme's execution.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for bringing forward this debate. Waiting for more than three years to hear about the outcome must be absolute torture for those who served in Afghanistan and supported us. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Afghan women and girls, I am emailed by people waiting for resettlement through ARAP and the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme who want updates that I cannot give them. Does he agree that the Minister needs to review the communications given to outstanding applicants to ensure that they are given updates in a timely manner?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Indeed. The hon. Lady is right in raising those points. The fact is that this scheme does not fit the requirement any longer, and I think it is, in many senses, quite brutal and inhumane.

I will deal with a couple of the problems here, then I will deal with a personal case. First, the scheme is utterly slow and bureaucratic. I will say to the Minister from the start that this debate is not party political; it is very much about a scheme that we brought in and that the Government have inherited, and I hope that it can be changed.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In the spirit of that remark, I do not wish to ambush the Minister when he speaks with a quote from the Defence Secretary when he was the shadow Defence Secretary, so may I put it on the record now? After a major inquiry by *The Independent*, Lighthouse Reports and Sky News in November 2023, he was quoted as saying:

“It is extremely worrying to hear that Afghan special forces who were trained and funded by the UK are being denied relocation and left in danger. These reports act as a painful reminder that the government’s failures towards Afghans not only leave families in limbo in Pakistan hotels, but also put Afghan lives at serious threat from the Taliban. Britain’s moral duty to assist these Afghans is felt most fiercely by the UK forces they served alongside. There can be no more excuses.”

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree with those words the Secretary of State for Defence said previously. I hope he was speaking to highlight problems with the Government, as those in opposition must do; I am afraid that my Government did not resolve that issue. At the end of my speech, as the Minister will know, I will pitch to him how things should be different.

The bureaucracy of the scheme is astonishing. Thousands of applications remain unresolved, some of which were submitted as far back as 2021. Many of these people have had to flee and hide with their families, because they risk death—I will come back to a particular case that highlights all that. The long lack of transparency and the long delays have left these individuals in personal and collective danger.

The scheme has narrow and inconsistent eligibility criteria. Individuals who have served alongside UK forces have been excluded due to narrow definitions and specific eligibility categories that rule them out. Others have been denied protection because they were employed by subcontractors rather than the Ministry of Defence, yet they carried out the same vital work and faced the same risks as others who were directly employed.

Then there are the broken promises. The UK Government assured those who served with the British forces that they would not be left behind, yet lives are still at risk. First-hand reports from Afghanistan show that former allies are now being targeted by the Taliban. I did not serve in Afghanistan—I did serve in the British military, a fact of which I was proud—but there are some in this Chamber today who did serve there and who know from first-hand experience what was going on.

Throughout all of this, as I lay out the individual case, there is a very simple theme: we must stand by those who stood by us, because if we do not, we are not worthy of being British or of the freedoms we uphold and fight for. Those who stood by us fought for those freedoms, too; they supported us in those fights, and we

cannot abandon them, given the threats they now face. The fact that they are in hiding, fearful for their lives, is an absolute travesty, and the idea that we could have forgotten them should be a badge of shame for any British Government and for the British establishment.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)
rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The right hon. Gentleman will know that he cannot intervene from the Front Bench in an Adjournment debate.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I hope I can give my right hon. Friend time to get to the Benches behind him, as he may wish to intervene on me. I am sure that he will not be noticed in that movement, swift and ghost-like as he.

I am not going to stretch this out any longer. The individual I will refer to today worked alongside British forces in Afghanistan, providing operational and intelligence support under direct threat from the Taliban. His family and his home were threatened. He served in the national security directorate in Kabul. His work involved sharing critical intelligence with the British special forces and intelligence services in Kabul and, of course, in the wider region. That intelligence undoubtedly saved lives and contributed to the success of key operations. His contributions are simply not in doubt or in question; they are evidenced extensively, including in a powerful testimony from the most senior commander of British forces in Kabul at the time, who is now a general. He personally worked with this individual and has testified to the crucial role he played.

I am not going to name the general at this point, but he says in his letter in support of this individual’s application:

“His daily security briefings covered possible threats and intelligence reports. These reports made a substantive and crucially life-saving contribution not only to the UK’s military and national security objectives with respect to operations in Afghanistan, but also to the day-to-day safety of British troops and civilian British Embassy staff”

and others. He also says that by the very nature of the daily intelligence that this individual was required to share within this high-level forum, the threat to his life and that of his family was unquestionably at an elevated risk from targeted attacks, including a high risk of death or serious injury by the Taliban regime. I would have thought that that alone was powerful enough evidence to say that this individual should be here now, as he is currently in fear for his life in another country nearby.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I did serve in Afghanistan, including with the young major who is now the general that my right hon. and gallant Friend is referring to. He is an outstanding officer with unimpeachable credentials.

My right hon. and gallant Friend is making a compelling moral case. I have seen at first hand the risks that those Afghans who supported us on operations faced alongside us, which only increased exponentially when the Taliban took over. We have a very moral case for doing whatever we have to do to fulfil our obligation, and if that means tearing up someone’s bureaucratic rulebook, so be it.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It is powerful that my hon. and gallant Friend is here today to support this debate, given his service in Afghanistan. He will understand more than most the threats that were received by these people and how their lives would have been more difficult. He will also know that many would have lost their lives had this sort of intelligence and support not been available from these brave individuals. I am grateful for his intervention.

Despite the overwhelming evidence presented—there was much of it—the application was rejected on all counts and the individual remains at risk. What we got back in the papers that I looked through, which came first to the Minister and then to me, was this:

“the decision maker was unable to satisfy themselves from the evidence provided or that held by the UK Government that his role with National Directorate of Security...was closely supporting or in partnership with a UK Government Department”.

Is that really the best we can do—some bureaucrat stuck away somewhere who does not care, who is not even in the Ministry of Defence and who has no real understanding of what it is like to put one's life on the line for other people's safety? All of that evidence is dismissed in the line

“unable to satisfy themselves from the evidence provided”.

I find that astonishing and appalling. I say that not to attack civil servants—many of them are brilliant and do a lot of work—but this process allows someone to make a decision about the life and death of a brave individual without even thinking about the consequences.

This is not just about a bureaucratic error. As I said, the situation is very human; it is literally life and death. We are making a decision today under this scheme to have this individual die. That is pretty much what they are saying. He is a man in hiding, in fear of his life and the lives of his family. I understand that even his closest relation has been arrested and has probably been tortured to find out where he is. We dismiss it with the words that those processing his application were “unable to satisfy themselves”.

By the very nature of the daily intelligence that this individual was required to share, there is a threat to his life and to his family. He has placed himself between us and the Taliban. Records of these meetings were kept and widely publicised, including in public relations-focused photographs showing the individual at meetings attended by the general. This evidence was recorded in Afghan Government systems and in offices now commandeered by the Taliban, who now know what he was doing. It is still easily searchable on the internet today, yet the decision maker was

“unable to satisfy themselves from the evidence provided”

that he was closely supporting or in partnership with the UK. Really?

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for giving way on that point. Is this not a case of the old adage that rules are for the guidance of wise men and the obedience of fools? Are we not seeing a punctilious following of rules here, when a man's life is at risk?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Indeed, we are. We are elected—that is what makes us different—to this Chamber to take that on and to change it. We are not bound by a

bureaucratic process. We have the power here to change anything, and I simply ask: why not do that, when human lives and those who served us are at risk? We must recognise and remember that we are not bureaucrats—we are politicians, and we must feel the pain of others and understand when we need to change. I was concerned that my own Government did not make that change before and, in a way, I am begging the Government to see it differently and to try to do something about it.

More and more ex-military and ex-security forces people are being targeted in Afghanistan. We know that; it is a fact. Executions are taking place all the time, but because we are not there and it is not on the television every day, we put it to one side. We forget that dead British servicemen were clapped through the towns because people recognised their bravery in being out there to help people and to support those who did not want that tyranny back in their country. We supported those servicemen, and we feel strongly for their bravery; why do we not feel the same for those who helped them and who helped many others to stay alive? Surely they are just as valuable to us as any British soldier who was saved by them. That is the cost, and that is the equation.

I simply say to the Minister that according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's quarterly human rights update, the Taliban detained at least 23 former Government officials and members of the Afghan national security forces during this period. At least five were subjected to torture or other forms of ill treatment. Many of the arrests took place in Panjshir and Kabul, and were reportedly tied to alleged links to the National Resistance Front.

As I said earlier, I do not believe that this individual case is isolated. It exposes deep systematic failures in the ARAP scheme. The excessive bureaucracy and eligibility criteria are remarkable. The system as it stands is clearly ill equipped to deal with exceptional cases—there are many—such as this one. Most importantly, it fails to offer the necessary protection to those who are now at risk because of their loyalty to the UK and the British forces. As I said earlier, I know there are colleagues on both sides of the House who behave bravely and serve their country, including the Minister's colleague who sits on the Front Bench.

I will finish my comments with this. Surely we must now change the scheme. We must be generous to those whose generosity with their lives has kept so many British lives safe. I know the restrictions of being at the Dispatch Box, and I know that civil servants will have said to the Minister, “Be very careful. You don't want to step across this one, and you mustn't make a pledge that we can't consider. Don't let that man put your career in danger.” I think putting our careers in danger is nothing compared with the actions of those who put their lives in danger for us.

I simply ask the Minister to pledge that he will do his utmost, that he will speak to the powers that be, and that he will bang on the door of No. 10 and demand that the Prime Minister take on this case and others personally. While we build up our armed forces, and look to have allies and people who will work with us, they will look back at how we treated those who came before and they will ask themselves, “Why do I serve with people who forget you when the deed is done?” I say to the Minister: let us not forget them. They are as

brave and as important to us as the soldiers who were directly employed by us, who served us and who made sure that many were saved as a result.

5.17 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for raising this issue, and for presenting his argument in the way that he did. We have spoken about this case on a number of occasions, so he will know that I take responsibility for making sure that we make the correct decisions on ARAP. When I was on the Opposition Front Bench, where the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is now sitting, I raised concerns about the functioning of the ARAP scheme. In office, we have made changes to the scheme to make sure that it functions better, which I will come to. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) mentioned communications, and I believe the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) quoted the Secretary of State's comments on the Triples review, but I will address the issues raised by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green in the first instance.

I very much appreciate the right hon. Member's advocacy for the individual involved, and his passion for Afghan resettlement in general. He is absolutely right to say that we owe an obligation to the people who served alongside UK forces. What we have done with the ARAP scheme is implement as a nation, under the last Government and this one, probably the most generous Afghan relocation scheme of any of the allies that served in Afghanistan, and we have drawn a set of eligibility criteria that—with the exception of the Triples, which I will come to in a moment—have broadly remained the same under this Government and the preceding Government.¹ I hear the right hon. Gentleman's concerns about elements of that, which I will seek to address.

As a former Minister, he will know that I will not be able to address the individual circumstances of the case without permission, so I will make some more general remarks in respect of that individual case. However, I hope the right hon. Gentleman will not mind my saying that we have met previously on this matter, and I very much understand and appreciate his ongoing engagement. I have to be honest with him and say that when he and I first spoke about this case and I was briefed on it, I too was surprised by the decision that was made. That is why I undertook to take it back to the Department and to check on the eligibility of the case, which I did. Having done that, I am confident that the officials have followed the published criteria and applied them correctly to the evidence provided. The decision is appropriate and should stand. I should also be clear that there are no plans to ask to expand the criteria, which were implemented by the previous Government.

I do, however, recognise the context of this particular matter, and I am happy to take up the right hon. Gentleman's challenge to see whether exceptional routes may be available. I do not want to give him false hope—I am not certain there will be such a route—but having spoken to him previously about this, I know the seriousness of the matter he raises, and I am happy to see whether we could look at additional opportunities to provide support in this case.

When it comes to the published criteria for ARAP, we must be absolutely clear about eligibility, and it is my job as the Minister responsible for Afghan resettlement to make sure that decisions are made correctly against the published eligibility criteria. Where decisions have been made, an individual has access to a review, and where there is a concern over an individual's security while that review is ongoing—especially circumstances in which the life and safety of that individual are threatened—there is the ability to request an expedited decision.

Lincoln Jopp: The Minister's civil servants will be proud of him. I think the point my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) was making was that when the computer says no and the Minister knows that the computer is wrong, does he not have an obligation simply to go away and change the system?

Luke Pollard: First, I put on record that we have exceptional civil servants working in this area who take the decisions very seriously and make those decisions in full consciousness of their consequences. I am absolutely convinced that we have a good team working on this.

On the point the hon. Member raises, we are making decisions against the published criteria, and it is right to do so. We know that amendments to the published criteria change the eligibility in respect of past cases. We also know that at the moment we have the most generous Afghan resettlement scheme. We have resettled 34,000 eligible persons in the United Kingdom under ARAP and the associated Afghan resettlement schemes, which is more than many of our allies. It is right that we make those decisions against the published criteria, and that we look carefully at them. That is why I undertook to do so in this case, and I have done so.

There is a real challenge, and I entirely understand it. As someone who has advocated for Afghans in my own Plymouth constituency who fell outside the published criteria, which were set in place by the last Government and that we have followed, I have often argued that we should look again at this obligation. I am entirely aware that the majority of my efforts on this have centred on the Triples, who I will come on to, and whether those decisions were made correctly. I will give the House an update on that in a moment.

I want to make sure that decisions are correct according to the published criteria. Those criteria are frequently challenged in the courts, and we have to uphold them to make sure that every decision is valid. Every case is assessed on a case-by-case basis, based on the information provided following a request for the information held not just by the Ministry of Defence but by other Government Departments and partners across Government, in order to make sure that the decision taken is as appropriate as possible. Individuals who get a decision that is not in their favour also have the ability to provide additional evidence and to have that decision reviewed.

Sir Julian Lewis: I know that the Minister sincerely cares about all of this, and I am sure that he really wants to do his best, however the key point being made by my hon. and right hon. and gallant Friends is that, if the criteria do not cater for a situation in which senior British military personnel give first-person testimony

1.[*Official Report*, 11 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 11WC.] (Correction)

[Sir Julian Lewis]

that somebody saved British lives by taking exceptionally courageous steps in our support, the criteria need to be adjusted. That is what should be done, as I hope he is going to tell us that it may have been adjusted for the Triples.

Luke Pollard: I entirely understand where the right hon. Gentleman is going with that argument. Under the criteria in the scheme we inherited from the previous Government, which we have continued, we have made the decision, with the exception of the Triples, to keep the eligibility decisions the same.¹

Let me turn to the Triples, which the right hon. Gentleman raised. I believe that the quote of the Secretary of State when in opposition was in relation to the very concerning situation—I believe it was a concern to him and to me when in opposition—that decisions were made in respect of the Afghan special forces, the Triples, that were inconsistent with the evidence that was being provided. We backed and called for the Triples review, which was initiated by my predecessor in the previous Government. Phase 1 of that review has now completed and we have achieved an overturn rate of around 30%. A written ministerial statement on that was published—I think last month—should the right hon. Gentleman want to refer to the full details.

In that work, we interrogated the data that was available. The record-keeping of that period was not good enough, as I have said from the Dispatch Box a number of times since taking office. As part of that trawl, we discovered information in relation to top-up payments, which previously had been excluded from the criteria because they did not constitute the relationship with the UK Government that would have created eligibility. Our belief is that the way those top-up payments were applied may now constitute a relationship that needs to be re-examined, so phase 2 of the Triples review, which will be the final phase of the review, is looking at top-up payments. It was right to do that, because there was a clear point.

In the case raised by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, I am very happy to try to see what is available to support it. I feel very deeply that we need to honour our obligations to those people who served alongside our forces, from the Afghan translators and interpreters who live in the constituency I represent, to the people who fought, and in some cases died, alongside our forces. The ARAP scheme is a generous scheme, but it was not intended, at its point of initiation or now, to cover all Afghans who fought in that conflict over 20 years. It was designed to support those who we can evidence had a close connection to UK forces, often defined by a contractual or payment relationship—in blunt plain-English terms—where a

sizeable commitment has been made. That draws a line for some individuals who were employed by the Afghan national army, the Afghan Government and elements of the security structures that the Afghan Government had at that time, for which eligibility is not created despite their role. The Taliban regime has created chaos, instability and terror through many communities in Afghanistan since our departure. That is why, as a Government, we are trying to accelerate and deliver the Afghan scheme.

The hon. Member for North East Fife mentioned communications. That is entirely right. It is something I have been raising since becoming a Minister. We will introduce, from the autumn, a new series of communications designed to help people understand where their application is in the process. The new performance indicators will kick in from September time—roughly in the autumn—and that will seek to help people to understand where they are in the process. There is concern around understanding for how long a case will be dealt with. I also hope the performance indicators will have time-bound targets to help people be able to rate the performance of the Ministry of Defence. Certainly, when the Defence Secretary published his statement on the Afghan resettlement scheme at the end of last year, he made the case that we need to complete our obligation and bring the schemes to a close, and it is our objective to do so.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith *rose—*

Wendy Chamberlain *rose—*

Luke Pollard: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman; I hope the hon. Lady does not mind.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: We are close to running out of time, I understand that. If I may, I just stress that the failing I am referring relates to the fact that the officer who commanded the garrison met this man regularly and had him at meetings in which they discussed future operations. He was trusted. He fed them intelligence. He helped support them, so that they did not go into areas where they should not have gone. The major who worked with this guy also made a statement about how important he was, even though, officially, there was not some kind of P45 that tied him to our pay structure. The reality is that he served us. All I ask is that the Minister recognises that, goes away and says, “This is not good enough. This individual needs to be saved very soon.” He may be dead. We do not have much time.

Luke Pollard: I am happy to continue the conversation with the right hon. Gentleman in the days ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

1.[Official Report, 11 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 12WC.] (Correction)

Westminster Hall

Thursday 5 June 2025

[GILL FURNISS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Police Presence on High Streets

1.30 pm

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered police presence on high streets.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss, for a debate on such an important issue. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this debate, and I thank the Members from all parties who supported my application.

My constituency, which covers Erdington, Kingstanding, Castle Vale and south Oscott, routinely suffers from one of the highest crime rates in Birmingham, but let me be clear: crime is not inevitable. It is the result of choices to cut policing and to neglect communities—choices made in the corridors of power. The previous Government made the choice to slash 21,000 officers, the choice to hollow out neighbourhood policing, and the choice to tell communities, “You’re on your own.” When crime tears through families and destroys lives, it is not just the victims who are affected but the entire community.

Our high streets are not immune; they become battlegrounds where livelihoods are stolen. We owe it to every parent, every shop worker and every pensioner who just wants to walk their high street without fear to end this blight. When I was elected in March 2022, Erdington High Street was a symbol of neglect—a place where crime had festered, where shopkeepers feared for their stock, and where families no longer felt safe to walk. The statistics were stark: antisocial behaviour, drug dealing and violent crime had cost our economy an estimated £7 million annually. Our high streets are the beating heart of our communities, yet for too long they have been treated as an afterthought, so I made it my mission—a promise to my community—that we would take back Erdington High Street from the crime and antisocial behaviour that had plagued it for too long.

Here is the truth: change is possible. It does not come easily, but it comes when good people stand up and fight for their community. As a nurse, I learned that prevention is always better than cure, and as an MP I have seen the cost of ignoring that lesson. We took action, working with residents, community groups and traders, and launched a relentless campaign to take the challenges of Erdington High Street head on. We organised, mobilised and made our voices impossible to ignore. In meeting after meeting, we stood shoulder to shoulder with local businesses, community groups and fed-up residents who delivered one clear message to those in power: Erdington deserves better.

And do you know what? They heard us. Working with West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner Simon Foster and Chief Constable Craig Guildford, we

secured £880,000 from the proceeds of crime fund, and in January this year Operation Fearless was launched under the incredible leadership of Detective Superintendent Jim Munro and Inspector Shameem Ahmed. The results speak for themselves: over 140 arrests, including drug dealers, violent offenders and those carrying zombie knives, and even a live firearm; 124 stop and searches in two months, with 45 positive outcomes, getting weapons off the streets; a 25-year-old jailed for four years for class A drug supply—proof that justice works when we fund it. Operation Fearless was not just about enforcement; it was about partnerships.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The hon. Member is making an important point about funding. The Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland wrote to the Prime Minister last August asking for more funding, because His Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services had recognised that our police service was 400 neighbourhood police officers short. Does she agree that such issues should not be shrugged off as operational matters but are the result of political decisions over the years that have resulted in less funding for our police service?

Paulette Hamilton: The hon. Member makes an absolutely brilliant point and hits the nail on the head. Funding is key and if it is not given, we cannot get the same results. We cannot get the same results if we do not have the resources to achieve them.

We worked with Birmingham city council, the Erdington business improvement district, trading standards and local businesses to remove graffiti, clean shutters and restore pride to our high street. I extend especial thanks to Caroline Anson Earp, the community safety partnership manager, for her incredible work on our high street. Today, traders report fewer thefts, shoppers feel safer and the buzz of community life has returned. Traders who once feared for their safety say that the difference is night and day.

As Operation Fearless takes its proven model to the next struggling community, a new era begins for Erdington High Street. Thanks to our new dedicated high street team, six officers and a sergeant maintain visible patrols. We are not just preserving progress; we are securing lasting change.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Did Operation Fearless include the use of live facial recognition, which the Metropolitan police used in Southwark recently to catch a previously convicted sex offender who was in breach of a court order and wandering around Denmark Hill with a six-year-old? He is now safely back in jail. Does she, like me, welcome the extension of the use of live facial recognition?

Paulette Hamilton: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and I absolutely agree with the use of facial recognition where we can get it. In Erdington, we did not have facial recognition, but I do think that it is a good thing.

We cannot stop here; although Labour’s pledge of 13,000 more police officers is welcome, we must go further. Every high street deserves a named and contactable police officer, so that communities know who is fighting

[*Paulette Hamilton*]

for them. We need to be bolder to establish partnerships with councils, communities, schools, youth services and those who serve them, because policing alone will not fix systemic failure.

I also pay tribute to our retail workers, such as the heroes of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers' Freedom From Fear campaign, who fought abuse for 20 years. These workers, who are often women and often young, should not have had to endure threats just for doing their job. Operation Fearless has shown that with the right resources, we can protect them.

The lesson of Operation Fearless is clear: when we invest, listen and act, change happens. But this is not just Erdington's fight. From Bristol to Bolton, high streets are crying out for the same type of hope. Erdington's story proves that change is possible. Let us be clear that this issue is not just about one high street. It is about every community fighting for safety and pride; it is about recognising that policing must be visible, proactive and rooted in partnership; and it is about whether we believe every community deserves safety, dignity and a future. I believe they do.

To the Minister I say, let us build on the success of actions like Operation Fearless. Let us make sure the 13,000 new officers actually reach the frontline and that every high street has a named, contactable officer. Let us fund real partnerships, not just patrols. Let us stand firmly with retail workers and let us never forget that safe high streets are the foundation of strong communities.

I end with the words of a shopkeeper in Erdington:

"For the first time in years, I feel hopeful."

That hope, that belief in better, is what we must deliver for every high street in Britain.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I will start by imposing an informal limit of four minutes on speeches. There are plenty of you here who can fill the time, so we are keen for you to get on with it. I call Sir Iain Duncan Smith.

1.40 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a privilege to be here with you in the Chair, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) on securing the debate. Some people might look at this debate and think that this is not really the most important thing in life, but our constituents want to be able to go down their shopping streets without the fear of any threats. They want to shop calmly without seeing the shelves stripped of goods, being threatened and watching shopkeepers pinned against walls. What they want is policing, which is their right.

With the time limit there will not be enough time to cover everything. Police numbers are always the issue, but we should look at what took place in New York at one particular point. The key rule is not just more police, but more effective police. It is the effectiveness that I want to dwell on. Even when we have the police numbers, effectiveness is often not the priority. I have had a series of issues over the high streets in my constituency. One is in the Broadway in Woodford and the other one is in Station Road. A key element in a lot of these shopping areas is the position of the larger shops such as Boots, the Co-op or Tesco—the shops that bring

people on to local shopping streets to get things. But then people go off to the smaller shops, so it is important for trade to get the balance right.

The problem is that there are gangs now on the street sending people in—they walk in; they do not run. I have seen them strip between £3,000, £5,000 and £10,000 of goods off the shelves in Boots, or the Co-op. They go into all the big shops and they are photographed, but we discovered the other day that the shops had given up on sending that data to the police. As a result, the police said they did not think that this was a priority area because they did not get a full record of the crime. If the shops do not go to the police, the police do not record the crime and do not put police on the street. Without police on the street, crime increases and the likelihood of it being reported gets less and less. That is not down to the small shops, because they are the ones that bear the brunt of the violence. It is the big shops and the chains.

We held a meeting the other day with three or four of the big shops in Station Road. When I say "big", they are small, local versions of Amazon and other shops, such as Boots and so on. We discovered that not one of them was bothering to record any of the crime or to get it to the police. When we spoke to the police, they said, "We have had no record of this." That is not to say they do not know that crime is taking place—they do—but the reality is they work on the statistics. We asked the shops, "Why are you not reporting the crime?", and a manager said, "We are not rewarded for it by the big shops. The truth at the end of it all is that we do not see any return."

We have now instigated a system where we have set up a WhatsApp group for shopkeepers on the street so they can report the crime in the small shops. They say they will report the crime, provided the police actually react to it, come on to the street and make arrests. There is a third element to this. The police often get disenchanted about it, because when they arrest these people and take them away, they get released pretty quickly as there is no space for their case—they are often back on the streets the same day as they were arrested. The issue is more effective policing. We asked them to go on to the street in civilian clothes, because the offenders just move around when the police are there in uniform. The police did that and they made a series of arrests, which sent a shockwave through the gangs.

The point that I will end with is that there is a huge amount to be done, but antisocial behaviour—of which shoplifting is a critical component—is arguably the most dangerous element on our streets. As the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington said, if we lose control of that, drug dealing and gangs take over. Shoplifting should be the priority. Make our streets safe and there is fair chance we will be able to catch the big criminals later on.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I will be putting in a formal four-minute limit, which means that Members will be cut off after four minutes. Can Members try to get their speeches in within that time, so we can ensure everyone gets to speak?

1.46 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington

(Paulette Hamilton) for securing this important debate. I remember campaigning alongside her in her by-election, and this issue being raised by constituents, who, in her, are now fortunate to have such a steadfast advocate.

Over the past decade, too many of our town centres and high streets have been gripped by antisocial behaviour, theft and shoplifting. It was often dismissed by the previous Government as merely low-level crime, but there is nothing low-level about the impact these crimes have on the communities left to deal with the consequences, often alone. My constituency of Cannock Chase is home to people who care deeply about their community, but too many of them now tell me they feel unsafe on our high streets. When people no longer feel safe where they live, work or shop, we risk losing more than just footfall: we risk losing our sense of identity altogether.

People are not asking for the world; they are asking for the basics: to feel safe walking home, to be secure at work, and to let their children go out with their friends without fear. A recurring issue is shoplifting, especially in Cannock town centre. In the two years prior to the general election, shoplifting rose by more than 60%, leaving retail workers feeling frightened and unprotected. Cannock's shoplifting rate currently stands at nearly three times the national average. Shopkeepers and store managers have told my team that they feel intimidated when large groups of young people gather and go into shops all at once. Some talked about how helpless they felt in the face of shoplifting, which has got to the point where it is actually endangering the future of their business.

The British Retail Consortium's 2023-24 annual crime survey laid bare the scale of the crisis. Retail workers endured 124 incidents of violence or abuse every single day, yet only 32% of those incidents were reported, and only 10% led to police attendance. That is simply unacceptable. I welcome the measures in the new Crime and Policing Bill, including the long overdue creation of a stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker. I particularly pay tribute to USDAW and the Co-operative party, of which I am a member, for their long years of unwavering campaigning for this vital change to the law.

In Hednesford, two young men recently stopped me to raise their concerns about gangs loitering in town centres and parks. They told me how intimidating it felt to walk past all of these groups. Between September 2023 and 2024, there were 587 recorded incidents of antisocial behaviour across my constituency. These are not just statistics—they are the lived experiences of people who have been driven away from our high streets. We will never be able to rebuild our communities when people feel that way.

Recognising the scale of the problem, a new public spaces protection order has come into force, and I commend the Government for taking steps through the Crime and Policing Bill, including targeted provisions to restore safety and confidence in our communities. But let me be clear: these are more than just headlines. In February, a group of teenagers were robbed in Cannock town centre. One of them—a 15-year-old boy—had his phone, watch, bank card and coat taken. Three of his friends also had their phones stolen. No young person should have to go through that.

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of welcoming pupils from Kingsmead school into Parliament. They did not just bring enthusiasm—sadly, they also brought

concerns. Many of them shared their worries about a rise in phone thefts by people riding e-scooters. This is not unique to Cannock; it is happening in town centres across the country. Elderly residents have told me how frightening it is to be approached by fast-moving, illegally ridden scooters, especially when they cannot move out of the way in time. Crimes like this may seem minor on paper, but their cumulative effect is devastating. They create an atmosphere where people feel unsafe, uncared for and overlooked.

Cuts to neighbourhood policing have taken a heavy toll. Trust in the police has plummeted. We hear time and again that when something goes wrong, people feel that nobody will come. I welcome the steps the Government are taking, and I will continue pushing for safer high streets for my constituents, because they have the right to feel secure where they live, work and shop. Our message is clear: we need visible policing and real opportunity for young people, to draw them into jobs, not gangs. This is not just about being tough on crime; it is about being strong on community, on prevention and on justice.

1.50 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss.

I have never seen so many police officers in Huntingdon high street as were on patrol the afternoon that the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary came to my constituency to announce the neighbourhood policing plan. Due to the police allocation formula, Cambridgeshire's entire allocation of the 13,000 officers is just 30 new warranted officers over the remaining four years of this Parliament. Across eight constituencies, that is fewer than four officers each—one officer per constituency per year.

Presumably, the starting state for the 13,000 is the number of police officers in 2023, when the pledge was made. That was 141,760. In the year to March 2023, we recruited 16,300 officers; in the year to March 2024, we recruited 9,479 officers, a fluctuation of nearly 7,000. What are the intra-year recruitment figures, and how will recruitment targets fluctuate with natural churn?

In March, the Home Secretary stated to me that the redeployment of 3,000 officers from other duties would involve

"redeploying existing police officers and backfilling by recruiting other officers to take their posts."—[*Official Report*, 10 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 678.]

The Home Secretary does not have operational control of police officers, so when will she outline how that will work in practice? Which police forces will be forced to redeploy officers, and how many will each need to redeploy? What other services will suffer while new officers are recruited to take the place of more experienced officers?

In April, the Metropolitan police announced swingeing cuts as a result of pressures from the Chancellor's Budget. The Royal Parks police is being disbanded, as are officers in schools; the dogs unit is being slashed by 7% and the mounted branch by 25%; the MO7 taskforce, which tackles moped and e-bike robbers as well as gang-related crime, is being reduced by 55%; and cold case investigations are to be cut by 11%. The Met is also cutting 20% of the flying squad and potentially removing its firearms capability.

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

Even after a £1 billion cash injection by the Mayor of London, the Met still has a £260 million shortfall and will cut 1,700 officers, staff and police community support officers. In December, Sir Mark Rowley suggested that it might have to cut 2,300 officers. The Mayor claims that his cash injection has saved 935 of those roles, so presumably the remaining 1,350-odd are frontline officers.

Last Friday, six police chiefs went over the head of the Home Secretary and appealed directly to the Prime Minister. They stated:

“A settlement that fails to address our inflation and pay pressures flat would entail stark choices about which crimes we no longer prioritise. The policing and NCA workforce would also shrink each year.”

Neil Coyle: I will start with a cheeky one: does the hon. Gentleman welcome the recruitment of PC Coyle to Durham constabulary? One of the new recruits under this Government is a family member—my brother—of whom I am very proud. Does he also welcome the combined £300 million of support from central Government and the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, to the Met to try to address some of the challenges he is outlining?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I absolutely welcome that additional funding, but the point that I would most like to make—I have made it previously—is that the police allocation formula, which determines how much funding each of our police forces receives, is grossly unfair. Constituencies like mine in Cambridgeshire do not receive a fair allocation of the overall pot. I will press the Policing Minister: as she well knows, because we have had a lot of conversations about this, I encourage her to revise that next year.

Neil Coyle: This Government inherited that formula from the Conservative Government. Does the hon. Gentleman think it is a bit naive to suggest that there is a fair balance in policing responsibilities when the capital's police force runs counter-terrorism operations for the whole country?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I believe that it is remunerated budgetarily in order to cover that.

Neil Coyle: Not enough.

Ben Obese-Jecty: But, I agree, not enough, and the police allocation formula would do well to look at policing as a whole so that every constituency gets its fair share of police funding. As we all know, the population has grown, and the police allocation formula is from 2014. I met the last Government when I was still a candidate to ask them to review the formula, and I press the new Government to do the same.

Neil Coyle: How did that go?

Ben Obese-Jecty: They did as much work on it as the hon. Gentleman's Government have.

That reduction in police strength comes before we consider the fact that the numbers that the Home Secretary based her calculations on were completely wrong in the first place, as the Government announced, very quietly, on 19 March. Of the 43 forces in England and Wales, 29 advised that their published combined

neighbourhood officer and PCSO numbers should be revised down. That resulted in an overall downwards revision of 2,611 compared with the figures published last year. In total, that, plus the 1,350 from the Met and the 7,000 annual fluctuation, means that the 13,000 figure looks a lot more like 24,000. Can the Minister outline why the baseline figure of 13,000 has not been revised since it was first announced in February 2023—even to account for the shortfall caused by miscounting?

The general public deserve to have police that are resourced to protect the communities they serve. My constituents deserve to have their fair share of police officers, not a token amount based on a police allocation formula that is years out of date.

1.55 pm

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for securing a debate on something that is clearly so important to so many of our constituents. Like other Members here, among the top issues in my inbox, and that were raised with me during my campaign, are how safe people feel on our high streets and the impact that crime has on our community. In Kettering, our high streets are the beating hearts of our neighbourhoods, where people should feel safe walking to school, going to work, doing their weekly shopping and investing in our local economy. However, for too long our town centres have been blighted by crime such as antisocial behaviour and shoplifting, leaving members of the public feeling intimidated and unsafe in town centres, local parks and neighbourhoods.

My constituents have contacted me to say that they have seen people trashing shops, stealing and being abusive to staff on our high streets. They worry that when crimes like that are reported, too often there is no follow-up, no investigation and no deterrent. Unfortunately, the previous Government considered that low-level behaviour and cut neighbourhood policing. We felt that in Kettering, as what was once a police station in the heart of our high street turned into a derelict building.

Police forces across the country have faced financial and operational challenges in recent years. I want to take a moment to pay tribute to the hard work of local police officers in Kettering. I know that officers are working hard on Operation Napery and hope to see the positive outcomes of that work.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Shipley Market Square in my constituency is having a major facelift, but to attract shoppers back into the town centre we know that we need to make it safe. I commend my local officers, Inspector Tany Ditta and his team, for the amazing work they do. Will my hon. Friend join me in recognising that the Labour Government's commitment to increase neighbourhood policing will allow more patrols on streets in Shipley and in places that she represents?

Rosie Wrighting: Yes, absolutely. I will say more about that in my speech.

We cannot have a conversation about policing on our high streets without talking about retail crime. In March, when Geek Retreat in Kettering was targeted, a brick was thrown through the window and eggs were smashed

on the shop front. Retailers up and down the high street spoke of similar experiences of shoplifting and antisocial behaviour and the lengths to which they have to go to mitigate it. One shop reallocated shifts to prevent more vulnerable members of staff being intimidated at closing time.

It is unacceptable that over 2,000 incidents of violence or abuse towards retail workers are reported every single day. As someone who started their career in retail working on a shop floor in Kettering, I know the impact of intimidation and what it can do to someone who is just trying to do their job.

Retailers have spent a record £1.8 billion on crime prevention measures in just one year in the UK. Local businesses in Kettering, which are the backbone of our economy, should not have to invest in private security, additional shutters or panic buttons just to stay afloat. We need to create high streets where people, their families and their businesses can thrive. I know that my constituents will be glad to hear the Minister reaffirm the Government's commitment to our high streets today.

I stood on a manifesto that included a five-point plan for high streets, pledging to tackle antisocial behaviour with 13,000 more neighbourhood police and PCSOs by 2029. Those manifesto pledges have become the Government's Crime and Policing Bill, which introduces the biggest package of measures on crime and policing in decades, with 50 new laws, including giving police and others stronger powers by introducing respect orders to stamp out antisocial behaviour.

This debate is about not just crime statistics or police funding, but how we can protect what we value most in our communities: the right of everyone in Kettering and all our constituencies to feel safe where they live and work.

1.59 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) on securing the debate and on her excellent speech. I once lived in Erdington, and her constituents have a wonderful advocate in her. I hope I can call her a friend.

As all hon. Members agree, a visible police presence is essential to tackling crime on our streets and high streets. That is why I took the Mayor of London to court and stopped him from closing my local police station in the heart of Wimbledon, and why my constituents are still concerned about its long-term future. After a recent stabbing near a Co-op in Wimbledon, I received a letter from Jack, a pupil at Holy Trinity primary, who wrote:

"The relationship between local police officers and the community they serve is built on proximity and familiarity, and losing this presence could erode the sense of security we currently enjoy."

When a young person feels the need to write to their MP about such matters, we should all take notice.

Years of cuts have eroded the link between the police and the public. Despite an increase in Government funding in the current police grant, it still falls short of the minimum that chief constables said they needed. For example, the Met, which serves Wimbledon, faces a £130 million shortfall. Just this week, Sir Mark Rowley and other police chiefs wrote to the Prime Minister to warn that, without proper funding, there will be

"far-reaching consequences". In short, these funding shortfalls risk undermining public confidence and the police's ability to deter everyday crime.

Admittedly, the Home Secretary tried to reassure the Home Affairs Committee, on which I sit, two days ago that neighbourhood policing in London was safe, but sadly we have heard such reassurances before. It has now emerged that neighbourhood policing figures were artificially inflated under the Tories, with the Home Office now admitting that it over-reported numbers. In fact, England and Wales have more than 6,000 fewer neighbourhood officers than the Home Office previously claimed. Our communities were told they were better protected, but they knew that they were not. Nowhere is that more visible than on our high streets. In Wimbledon, there is now no dedicated town centre team, only a neighbourhood team stretched across a larger area. Without visible and trusted neighbourhood policing, crime flourishes and communities are left exposed.

We know that the demands of a busy town centre, retail crime, antisocial behaviour and the night-time economy exceed those of a residential neighbourhood, yet under the Met's new ward shake up, there is still no confirmed timescale for when police teams will be redeployed, and there is no guarantee that high streets like Wimbledon's will have dedicated officers. That is why the Liberal Democrat councillors in my area are campaigning for a dedicated town centre policing team in Wimbledon and a local policing hub in Old Malden, along with initiatives such as a town centre pop-up on Friday and Saturday nights and a night-time safety street stall. Those practical steps would restore safety, visibility and trust, but so far nothing has been done by the Labour-run Merton council to address Wimbledon's policing needs.

I hope that Jack's words ring loudly in the ears of the Government. If a child is asking who will protect them on their local high street and we cannot give them a clear answer, the system is broken and we must fix it together.

2.3 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for securing this important debate.

Our high streets are key hubs in our communities, and it matters that people feel safe there, but unfortunately, during 14 years of Conservative austerity, we saw catastrophic cuts to the police service and the demise of neighbourhood policing. As that police presence on our high streets dwindled, we saw a significant increase in crime and a skyrocketing of antisocial behaviour statistics. To name just a few examples, that includes street drinking and drug use, retail theft and the abuse of shop workers.

Almost 444,000 shoplifting offences were recorded by the police in England and Wales in 2023-24, which is a record high, and the number of shop workers facing abuse and violence is ever increasing. As others have referenced, USDAW's most recent survey of its members in 2024 indicated that violence against shop workers nearly doubled from the previous year, with 10% of respondents stating that they had been assaulted, 77% stating that they had experienced verbal abuse and 53% stating that they had been threatened by a customer.

[*Rachel Hopkins*]

I spoke to managers and workers from the Co-op in Caddington in my constituency, who told me about their experience of being subject to awful violence. I fully support USDAW's Freedom From Fear campaign for shop workers, because everyone has the right to feel safe at work. That is why, among 50 new measures in our flagship Crime and Policing Bill, I am proud that we will protect our high streets and the people who work and shop there by ending the effective immunity for anyone caught shoplifting goods below £200, and by introducing a new criminal offence to better protect retail workers from assault.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Does the hon. Lady recognise that if we make that a criminal offence, those cases will go to the Crown courts, which are all completely blocked? That allows people more time and is more likely to incentivise them to plead not guilty, because they know that buys them time. With shoplifting, we want to get them in quickly and ensure that they are prosecuted immediately, which I worry will not be the case unless we find another way—perhaps upping the magistrates courts.

Rachel Hopkins: The right hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point. The measure will act as a deterrent, but I am sure the Minister has heard his well-made point.

Our safer streets mission is at the heart of this Government, and our neighbourhood policing guarantee will ensure that each neighbourhood has a named, contactable officer, which will help to restore trust. It will also include guaranteed police patrols in town centres and hotspots at peak times, as well as a dedicated antisocial behaviour lead in every force.

Great work is already being done in my constituency of Luton South and South Bedfordshire to restore faith in neighbourhood policing and increase the presence on our high streets through the Luton town centre taskforce, whereby Bedfordshire police works in collaboration with the Labour-led Luton borough council, the Luton BID, Luton Point and the Culture Trust, holding frequent patrols in an effort to make our town centre a safe and welcoming place for all. In the last two weeks alone, those efforts have been extremely successful, with the arrest of five suspected drug dealers in and around the town centre and over £4,000 in cash seized, as well as class A and class B drugs and knives. I take this opportunity to thank all those working on the frontline.

Town centre patrols will be ramped up further over the summer months, with Bedfordshire police expanding its team to combat drug offences, serious violence, thefts, begging, street drinking, noise nuisance, male violence against women and girls and exploitation via its Operation Foresight. I pay tribute to the work of our Labour police and crime commissioner in Bedfordshire, John Tizard. With his police and crime strategy for 2025-28, he committed to reinvigorating and strengthening local policing and police presence, with a particular emphasis on officers being visible and accessible to the public specifically in hotspot areas and on town centre patrols.

Like other hon. Members, I cannot talk about police presence without talking about police funding, and I am very grateful to the Minister for our previous conversations. All our efforts to make streets safer

cannot be achieved without more funding for our police forces to ensure that they have the necessary resources. I campaigned for many years on that issue, and the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) also spoke about funding earlier. I am pleased that this Labour Government have demonstrated a commitment to safer streets and more police in our communities as part of our core funding settlement. Bedfordshire police has been awarded £67.8 million, an increase of 6.6%, as well as £1.8 million in the neighbourhood policing guarantee funding for 2025-26.

Ben Obese-Jecty: As a Bedfordshire MP, does the hon. Lady agree that the south-east allowance that both Bedfordshire police and Hertfordshire police receive should be extended to Cambridgeshire police as part of the tri-force area, so that all three branches are paid equally for their work in that area, given that my officers serve in Bedfordshire as well?

Rachel Hopkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, and I will take the opportunity to reference the tri-force initiative that was brought about by a previous Labour police and crime commissioner, Olly Martins. I know that his initiative to get the three forces working together, particularly on specialist crime, has been instrumental in the point that I am about to move on to.

Our Labour Government have provided an additional £7.3 million in special grant funding. That will ensure continued support for key frontline operations, including Operation Costello, which aims to tackle serious and organised crime, and Boson, which targets guns, gun crime and youth violence in hotspot areas, including in Cambridgeshire through the tri-force initiative.

For too long, people have felt unsafe on their high streets. I support our Labour Government's determination to tackle these issues head on, so that people in Luton South and South Bedfordshire and across the country see law and order restored and feel all the better for it.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes. If people want to intervene, I ask them to be very brief so that we can get everyone in.

2.9 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for securing this important debate. She is a doughty champion for her constituents, who are lucky to have her. Whoever we are in this room, as MPs, we have probably at some point had an email from constituents asking about increased police presence on our high streets.

I am very lucky. I have Kilburn High Road in my constituency, which I share half and half with my hon. Friend the Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould). Ms Furniss, if you have not been to Kilburn High Road, you are missing out. It is affectionately called County Kilburn because of the thriving Irish community; we have a thriving Somali community on the other side as well. We serve Afghan food from Ariana and we have the award winning Kiln theatre. We have community festivals at Kilburn Grange Park, which hon. Members are also very welcome to attend.

But last month, we had six stabbings on Kilburn High Road and the community is shaken. I spoke to one of my residents, who says she never wanted to see what she saw—her neighbour being stabbed outside his corner shop, just because he tried to confront a shoplifter who was stealing food from the shop that he owns. One of the businessmen who I spoke to said, “It doesn’t feel like Kilburn any more.” A young mother who I spoke to said, “After 4 pm, I am scared to walk across and fetch my child from nursery because of the recent stabbings.”

The truth is that stabbings are not just a physical thing. They undermine community spirit and community resilience, and have a huge impact on the mental health of our community. Yesterday, my hon. Friend for Queen’s Park and Maida Vale and I went to the One Kilburn meeting. The community has come together under the leadership of Ajay, Stephane, Alan and Josie to reassure the community that we are here for them. There is an increase in community police officers on the high street—they do a fantastic job—but that cannot be a temporary measure. We have to make the community in Kilburn feel safe all the time.

I welcome the Government’s neighbourhood policing guarantee, because it could not come sooner for our constituents. I say to the Minister, who I know is excellent at her job, that we have to have a guarantee that the scheme’s funding will be protected not just for all hon. Members in this room, but for all my constituents in Hampstead and Highgate, especially on Kilburn High Road.

2.12 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for securing the debate.

It is a great honour for me to represent Bexleyheath and Crayford in Parliament. I was a councillor in the last Labour cabinet in Bexley, 20 years ago, when Ken Livingstone and Tony Blair launched neighbourhood policing in our borough. We saw the great impact that had on communities on the ground in the area I represent.

It is also a great honour for me because my first job during my 11 years in frontline retail was in the Marks and Spencer branch in Bexleyheath in my constituency. In my latter days in Marks and Sparks as a store manager, believe me, I saw and experienced many of the things that we have heard about today at first hand, including wrestling shoplifters to the ground.

When cuts to public services are made, as they were under the Tory Government when I first started at M&S in the early ’90s, and when there is rising poverty, that is when shoplifting and those frontline issues increase. It is an absolute mission of this Labour Government to restore neighbourhood policing, and we have been elected on a manifesto commitment to do so.

My constituency has two main town centres in Bexleyheath and Crayford, and a smaller neighbourhood centre in Northumberland Heath. In Crayford and Northumberland Heath, we now rely on smaller ward teams, of course, due to the cuts of the previous Mayor of London, who reduced the size of our teams. In Bexleyheath, I am lucky still to have a town centre team because of the size of shops, the night-time economy and the four secondary schools located in the town centre. I was pleased that we secured two more PCSOs for that team last November.

Our teams have had a number of recent successes. Live facial recognition saw three arrests in Bexleyheath town centre last week. Also last week, our team worked with the local authority on a closure order for a shop in Bexleyheath town centre that was selling illegal tobacco and vapes. Unlike the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), they have had great success in making shops report shoplifting again, and have managed to secure action against a number of individuals. In Crayford, they have taken action against drivers, predominantly from the large retail takeaways, which has led to 10 vehicles being seized and five arrests—two for shoplifting and three for immigration offences.

I pay tribute to the work of my police on the ground in Bexleyheath and Crayford. There is clearly pressure on funding, but we made a commitment to introduce extra police officers on the ground. We did that when Labour controlled Bexley council 20 years ago, and I am sure the Government will work with our Mayor of London to restore those numbers, because they are absolutely crucial for retailers in my constituency.

2.15 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for securing this important debate.

We have heard countless times today that, in 14 years of Conservative government, neighbourhood policing was decimated to the detriment of our town centres and high streets, which are now gripped by an epidemic of antisocial behaviour, theft and shoplifting. Let me be frank: too often, the last Government wrote off those crimes as low level and left communities to pick up the pieces.

There are few places more visible in our communities than our high streets and town centres, which are vital for social and economic needs. National data suggests that police visibility in those spaces has reduced from 27% to 12% in the last decade. PCSOs are often on the frontline in those places, but they too have been cut to the bone: their numbers are down 56% since 2010.

In Uxbridge and South Ruislip, like many constituencies we have heard about today, shops are being ransacked multiple times a day, often by the same people, with little consequence. Supermarket staff in Uxbridge, Yiewsley and Ruislip Manor all tell me the same story. Whether it is men and boys on bikes grabbing phones, taking money from children, openly dealing drugs or engaging in shoplifting or theft, it is bad for business. It leads to more victims of crime and erodes trust and pride in our high streets.

I welcome the steps that the Government have taken to turn the situation around. The significant increase in real-terms funding for neighbourhood police officers nationally and in London is welcome. I also welcome the Crime and Policing Bill, which will lead to tougher action on theft and shoplifting, and will deal with the terrible crime of assaulting shop workers.

Anna Dixon: I recognise this issue, because many of my local independent shops in Bingley have been victims of crime, particularly by aggressive scammers demanding money. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that

[Anna Dixon]

independent shops not only feel confident about reporting the crime, but know that the police will respond and that there will be prosecutions?

Danny Beales: I wholeheartedly agree. We need action: those individuals must be punished quickly, and the court backlogs must be dealt with. The whole process must incentivise action and deterrence.

When I met the couple who run the local post office in South Ruislip, they told me a heart-wrenching story of the change over the past 10 years. They have worked there for decades, and now they are threatened and abused almost weekly. Enough is enough.

I am pleased that the Government are taking action, but more can and, I am sure, will be done. I would like neighbourhood policing to continue to be prioritised, in order to deal with the capital policing challenges in London. Neighbourhood policing should be properly funded, as colleagues have said. I would like the police to regain a footprint in neighbourhoods. Lots of spaces where the police would base themselves closed down under the previous Conservative Mayor of London and Conservative Government. We have a fantastic neighbourhood town centre team in Uxbridge high street, which is doing great work, but we also need a town centre team in Yiewsley and West Drayton high street.

I hope the Government also consider providing support for the development of business crime prevention networks where there are not business improvement districts and more formal structures. Often, shops on smaller high streets are disparate and do not share information. They do not have the funding to focus on training, advice and crime prevention, so there is room for improvement in that space.

I would like to see the rapid deployment of the 13,000 new neighbourhood officers, with particular priority for our town centres and high streets. I hope that, under this Government, we will see a complete shift from the situation under the last Government. We must value our high streets and community policing, and not leave our communities alone. We need sustained, long-term investment to rebuild what the Conservatives destroyed so that we can once again be proud and safe on our high streets.

2.19 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton), whose tenacity in tackling this issue—with the ear of Simon Foster, our police and crime commissioner, and of the chief constable, Craig Guildford—has been outstanding. I have been watching the progress of Operation Fearless, and I thank and congratulate her for the work that she is doing.

I will take any opportunity to champion my local shops in Wednesfield high street—the village. It is a real source of pride, really community spirited and a welcoming place, but, like on high streets across the country, we have seen an alarming rise in shoplifting and antisocial behaviour. After more than a decade of police cuts, all this has become too common and far too normalised. From larger chain stores to the small, often family-run businesses across Wolverhampton North East, the message

is the same: shopkeepers are fed up with thieves who show no respect for them or the law and who steal in broad daylight, sometimes swiping shelves clean to make a quick buck. Time and again, residents ask, “Why has this been allowed to spiral?” Well, after 14 years of cuts, our brilliant local officers and PCSOs—I would love to name them individually but I do not have the time—have been overstretched and under-resourced.

People want and deserve to feel safe. They need someone to finally listen to them, and under this Labour Government, that is exactly what is happening. I will continue to use my voice to speak for my community. A year ago, at the general election, we had 700 fewer officers and 500 fewer PCSOs in the west midlands than in 2010. That is being turned around thanks to the Home Secretary and the Government, with 150 new neighbourhood officers and 20 additional PCSOs. Much more needs to be done, but it has started.

After meeting Chief Superintendent Jenny Skyrme, I am pleased to announce that each of our eight wards in Wolverhampton North East will have a dedicated neighbourhood officer—a named officer, contactable by residents and ringfenced for that ward alone—with an additional role for Wednesfield high street. That will not solve everything overnight, but it is a start to restoring the bobby on the beat and a better focus on crime prevention.

2.22 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) on securing this important debate. We know that visible local policing is key to building trust between communities and the police service. It acts as a deterrent to crime, reassures the public, and enables officers to gather intelligence and respond quickly to incidents before they escalate.

Just this weekend, I knocked on the door of Rob in Kinson, who said he was delighted to see two police officers walking down his high street and could not remember the last time he had seen that. I must admit to feeling the same sort of flutter of delight when I saw two officers walking down my high street in Winton, which is a big change. Significant cuts to police numbers over the past decade have hampered the forces’ ability to maintain that visible presence.

Residents in Bournemouth West have told me repeatedly that they want to see more officers walking the beat and engaging with local businesses, young people and vulnerable groups, rather than arriving only after emergencies occur. Improving Bournemouth town centre has been a key campaign pledge of mine, and tackling crime and antisocial behaviour is absolutely a part of that. At recent residents’ meetings that we hosted, it was the No. 1 issue that residents told me they wanted us to tackle.

It is important to recognise the positives—the successes and the progress. Violent crime is down 21% on last year in Bournemouth. That is because of hotspot policing, for which Dorset police has just received more funding, and innovative collaboration between businesses, the police and our council. My office is in the town centre, so I see this every day. However, perception remains a major challenge, and the successes in the town centre often come at the expense of some of our other district centres.

Police presence is essential to changing that, but so is a joined-up strategy that includes investment in social services, youth provision and community support. Can the Minister therefore assure me that any new recruits will be properly trained and deployed in ways that maximise visibility in our high streets and community hubs, and that the Government will support forces in building stronger community relationships, especially in areas that have historically had mistrust as a result of under-policing?

The Minister knows that I have raised this issue before, but I want to highlight the challenge of seasonality. Many of my colleagues in coastal constituencies will recognise that Bournemouth, like other places, experiences a huge surge in population over the summer months, with millions of people visiting our beaches and town centres, yet Dorset police receives no extra funding to cope with the seasonal increase in demand. What work is being done to adjust the police funding formula to reflect those seasonal pressures, which place significant strain on policing in my constituency? Only by working together—Government, police and communities—will we restore confidence in our high streets as safe and welcoming places for all.

2.25 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for securing this important debate.

The saying goes, “Money isn’t everything,” but it is when you have not got it, and in London, the Metropolitan police certainly has not got it. Having been forced to make £1.2 billion-worth of cuts over the last 14 years, the Metropolitan police has been stripped to its bones. We look forward, hopefully, to better days.

Police presence is about more than simply putting more uniformed officers on our streets or reopening police stations closed by years of Conservative budget cuts. It is about having officers on our streets that people can trust—officers that women and girls can trust to believe them and support them when they need it; officers that all communities can trust and will not unfairly target or profile some. It is about trusting that officers generally understand the neighbourhoods they serve. We need the right kind of police presence on our streets—one that is locally rooted, competent and visibly engaged. We need a force that understands the area, knows the crime hotspots and earns the trust of every resident, regardless of gender, race or background.

As council leader, I knew we could not accept the status quo that Conservative cuts were delivering. We needed to act locally to maintain meaningful police engagement with residents. In Redbridge, we implemented innovative enforcement and engagement hubs across the borough, including one mobile enforcement hub. Those low-cost alternatives to traditional stations are vital access points for our communities. They provide a place for residents to speak to officers, share concerns and build relationships, and, in turn, for officers to learn directly from the people they serve.

Neil Coyle: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that Southwark borough senior officers have closed the Seven Islands base and moved the local safer neighbourhood team to Borough station, which is, by

their own account, more than 25 minutes’ drive away, in contradiction of the Metropolitan police’s 2017 public access strategy?

Jas Athwal: Absolutely. In Redbridge, we had to turn that around. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) will certainly agree with me, because we put a police hub in his constituency, which saved 4.5 full-time police officers’ time over the course of a year. We also introduced specific engagements, such as police walk and talks, which offer devoted time for officers to engage with those most underserved by police. Even amid devastating cuts, we showed that meaningful police presence is possible and necessary to keep our communities safe.

I welcome the Government’s steps to restoring meaningful police presence, including the £204 million in additional funding to the Metropolitan police laid out in the police grant report and the £22.8 million allocated for neighbourhood policing in the police funding settlement. However, reversing over a decade of damage is not simple. It requires more than just money. It requires bold reform that makes our police truly accountable and genuinely connected to our communities.

As we look ahead to the spending review, I urge the Government to not merely sustain, but substantially increase funding for the Metropolitan police. Police presence is not about visibility; it is about trust. It is about residents recognising their local officers and having the confidence that when they speak up about crime or harassment, they will be heard, believed and protected.

2.29 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss—for the first time, in my case. I pay sincere and warm tribute to the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for her passionate speech and her huge dedication to the great work that has gone on in her constituency to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour on our high streets. In particular, she highlighted the great work done by local police officers on Operation Fearless, in conjunction with the local community. A key theme we have heard in this debate is the critical importance of not just looking to the police to sort these issues out, but working in partnership with retailers, communities and all people affected by crime.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) about his young constituent Jack, who represents that extremely important demographic of young people affected by crime, who will be left fearful for the future if we do not get a grip of it. The hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) rightly alluded to the underlying economic causes of crime. Perhaps this is a good opportunity for us to remember the words of a former Labour Prime Minister about being tough on not just crime, but the causes of crime. It is important that we take note of those underlying social and economic causes.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) mentioned the experience of New York. Some would argue that Rudy Giuliani has gone in a somewhat different direction since the height of his powers in the 1990s. In those days his “broken windows” theory of crime held that, as a number of Members have alluded to, if we do not

[*Olly Glover*]

tackle graffiti and other supposedly low-level manifestations of crime, we open the door—or indeed the broken window—for far more serious types of crime. That underlines another key theme we have heard: the role of prevention and taking preventive steps, rather than hoping to deal with the symptoms and consequences.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) also talked about the role of prevention and the importance of community services. She talked about the role of seasonality in crime, which is clearly important in many constituencies with major events, with summer traffic, or sometimes with worse weather leading to less crime because people are outdoors less. It is important that we recognise the trends in the data on what causes crime and what levels of intervention are needed.

The key theme discussed by nearly all Members was police numbers and funding. That includes the hon. Members for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting), for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins), for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq), for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge), for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) and for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury). In that regard, we heard a lot of criticism of the previous Conservative Government.

However, we also heard some important points from the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) and the hon. Member for Bournemouth West about the regionality of the police funding formula. We often face the key question of how to take account of different regional funding requirements in this country, so it would be interesting to see what the Minister has to say about that. We also heard about the impact of antisocial behaviour and crime on people, its economic impact on retailers and its impact on their mental health and feelings of safety and security in their role. All that contributes to the wider sense of our high streets being in decline; if people do not feel that they are safe places, they will not go and shop there. We must be careful not to end up in vicious circle.

We heard from hon. Members about the importance of having named and contactable police officers. It is not just about having visible police officers in the streets; it is important, as the hon. Member for Ilford South said with particular eloquence, that those police officers are embedded within their community and really understand its diversity and differing requirements. Many hon. Members paid tribute to the shop owners affected by crime and the police officers who work so hard to try to keep our streets safe. It is important that we support them, both with more resources and with public displays of support.

Many of the same issues are manifested in my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage, where communities are concerned about increased antisocial behaviour in the town centres of Wallingford, Wantage and Didcot—particularly increased pickpocketing and shoplifting. Last year, reports of antisocial behaviour at a local event in Didcot meant that the police had to authorise a section 34 dispersal order, empowering officers to issue section 35 orders to remove individuals suspected of being involved in antisocial behaviour. Of course such events are not representative of our high street, but the fact that they are becoming more of a concern to people means that we must take action.

I have met business owners on Didcot Broadway—an older part of my town, from before the town of Didcot and large retail centres arose—who feel that the combination of antisocial behaviour and larger retail developments are placing their businesses at risk. That problem is shared by the Orchard centre, the large shopping centre in Didcot, where there is also widespread concern about antisocial behaviour and that there is not enough for young people to do.

I have also heard high street businesses complain about drug dealing, street drinking and bicycle theft. As we heard in this debate, ambitions on law and order are good—but ambitious plans need to be supported by ambitious funding. Many hon. Members have paid tribute to the early work that the Government have done on this, and we look forward to hearing more from the Minister.

Everyone deserves to feel safe in their own home and when walking down their streets; that is important not just for their safety, but for their feelings of economic confidence, so that we can address the decline in our high streets. The previous Conservative Government failed to keep our communities safe from crime, and unnecessary cuts left our police forces overstretched, under-resourced and unable to focus on the crimes that affect our communities most.

Every day, 6,000 cases are closed by the police across England and Wales without a suspect even being identified, according to Home Office figures. Meanwhile, just 6% of crimes reported to the police result in a suspect being charged. Three in four burglaries and car thefts also go unsolved, and the Conservatives slashed the number of police community support officers by more than 4,500 since 2015. The Government must continue their efforts to restore the proper community policing that local people deserve.

To do that, we must get more police officers out on the streets, embedded in and understanding their communities. We Liberal Democrats feel that that could partly be funded by scrapping the expensive police and crime commissioner experiment and investing those savings in frontline policing instead, including addressing the dramatic cuts to PCSO numbers.

At the same time, we would free up existing officers' time to focus on local policing by creating a new national online crime agency that would take over issues such as online fraud and abuse, leaving more time for local forces to tackle burglaries and other neighbourhood crimes. As we have heard, prevention and early intervention are key, not just visible crime.

Neil Coyle: Can the hon. Gentleman clarify whether the Lib Dem position has changed since they introduced police and crime commissioners? Did he describe the cuts in officers as unnecessary, and is he putting on record an apology from the Liberal Democrats for cutting police officers in constituencies such as mine, where we still have fewer police officers in 2025 than we did in 2010, thanks to the coalition Government that the Liberal Democrats were fully embedded in?

Olly Glover: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—[*Interruption.*] Well, I will answer in good time. Of course it would not be a debate in this place without him having a pop at the Liberal Democrats in Government. As he will appreciate from the many councils where Labour is in coalition with the Liberal

Democrats and other parties, when a party does not win a majority, it has to work in partnership with others. I would also remind him to have a read of his own party's 2010 manifesto, which proposed cuts just as harsh as the Conservatives'.

But let us look to the future, not the past. In terms of retail crime, there are significant concerns over the increase in shoplifting. Official statistics from the crime survey for England and Wales showed more than half a million shoplifting offences recorded by police forces in the year ending 2024, an 18% increase on the previous year and the highest figure since current recording practices began.

Surveys of retailers indicate a high prevalence of shoplifting and violence towards shop workers, as we have heard, and there have been concerns about how the police respond to shoplifting. For example, the 2025 British Retail Consortium's Retail Crime survey found that 61% of retailers considered the police response to incidents of retail crime to be poor or very poor. Retailers said that their lack of confidence in the police response to reports of shoplifting contributed to their decision not to report some incidents.

As we have heard, antisocial behaviour can encompass a wide range of actions that cause nuisance and harm to others, such as vandalism, noise nuisance, threatening behaviour, use of off-road bikes, drug use and harassment. The 2024 crime survey for England and Wales suggested that 36% of people had experienced or witnessed antisocial behaviour, and around 1 million incidents are reported to the police each year. However, YouGov research suggests that there is significant under-reporting, with 57% of victims or witnesses not reporting ASB at all. The Victims' Commissioner has long raised concerns that the police and other agencies are not able to respond effectively to such reports or to provide support to victims.

In conclusion, while we all agree that money and police resources are important, they will only get us so far. We also need prevention and early intervention, intelligence, partnerships and community action.

2.39 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for securing this important debate and for her passionate work on this subject. In fact, I thank all hon. Members for their insightful contributions to this debate. I welcome the news that the brother of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) has joined up to the police force, particularly as he has done so in Durham—on my streets, no less. We all know the brilliant work that our hard-working police officers, PCSOs and civil enforcement officers do to protect our high streets and local communities. The police put themselves in dangerous situations to stop the criminals who blight our communities and undermine the social fabric that binds them together. Although it is welcome that headline figures from the crime survey for England and Wales show that crime fell by more than 50% between 2010 and 2024, there is still much more to be done, and protecting our high streets is an integral part of that mission.

I have the honour of representing Stockton, whose high street is a great place and home to some incredible businesses. I will always encourage people to support

them, but I would fail in my duty if I did not acknowledge or try to tackle the many challenges they face. If my grandparents were alive today, they would be devastated to see what has become of our high street. Over decades, Stockton's Labour council has allowed it to decline and to become home to unacceptable levels of crime and antisocial behaviour. Instead of employing more civil enforcement officers and street wardens, the council chooses to employ a huge number of managers on £100k-plus salaries—it recently came to light that it had spent £15.8 million on recruitment consultants in the last three years.

Daniel Francis: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the cuts from the previous Government have resulted in my local authority, the London borough of Bexley, having to make every one of its CCTV staff redundant, so that the council is no longer able to assist the police in fighting crime?

Matt Vickers: It is incredibly important that whatever money councils have is put to good use. In Stockton, we have terrible examples: people being flown abroad to watch shows to scout for festival appearances, and the CEO of the council recruiting a chum of his on £900 a day, without it ever being seen and considered by the council. Councils have a responsibility to spend properly the money that is given to them, and in Stockton there are too many examples where that is not the case.

Instead of the council using all the powers available through public spaces protection orders to clamp down on antisocial behaviour, its soft approach means that lots of antisocial behaviour has gone unchallenged. Moreover, Stockton's Labour council volunteered as a dispersal authority, taking a completely disproportionate number of asylum seekers. For many years it has had one of the highest asylum seeker-to-resident ratios of any local authority across the entire country. Those asylum seekers are all housed near the town centre, creating challenges in accommodation, public services, and integration, and leaving huge numbers of lone men hanging around the town centre. The situation is made worse by the council's approach to housing, which allows huge amounts of houses in multiple occupation, bedsits and bail accommodation to emerge around the town centre.

I will continue to push the council and local police for more action to support Stockton's fantastic high street and the incredible businesses therein. Before addressing the police's specific role in protecting the great British high street, we must acknowledge the challenges facing our high streets as a result of this Labour Government's actions. The Government's jobs tax and the slashing of small businesses—well, of small business rate relief, though actually they are slashing small businesses—is putting the survival of many of our high street businesses at risk. Confidence has been sapped, and in April business confidence once again turned negative.

The Government will always have the support of the Conservative party in backing our hard-working police officers. We need more officers than ever. It was interesting to hear, during Home Office questions, the Minister and the Home Secretary reading with some excitement a table listing the number of neighbourhood policing officers in each area. How many more police officers—those who can arrest the most serious criminals in our society—does the Minister expect to be in place by the end of the year? Will that number exceed the March 2024 figure?

[*Matt Vickers*]

This discussion comes against the backdrop of six of Britain's most senior police chiefs warning that important and laudable ambitions to tackle knife crime, violence against women and girls, and neighbourhood policing are all at risk because of funding shortfalls. The Government's decision to let criminals out of prison early, many of whom will inevitably commit more crime, will put more pressure on our police.

The proposed settlement for policing in 2025-26 is insufficient and risks causing job losses. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, has said that his force is facing the potential loss of 1,700 officers, PCSOs and other staff. I am keen to hear from the Minister whether she thinks that Sir Mark's figures are correct.

Special constables are invaluable, but we also need full-time officers to investigate serious crimes and secure convictions against the worst offenders on our high streets. That is critical; the public expect not only a police presence, but effective action. Although we were pleased to agree on stronger laws in the Crime and Policing Bill to address offences on our high streets, such laws are meaningless without proper enforcement and punishment. Having spent a long time campaigning alongside the likes of the Co-op, the BRC and USDAW, I am delighted to see the stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker on the statute book.

On policing our high streets. I would be grateful if the Minister could comment on recent remarks made by the Mayor of London and his Drugs Commission. Within the mayor's expression of support for the proposal to decriminalise possession of small amounts of cannabis, there were concerning references to police stop-and-search powers, in which he questioned the scope of their application. Frankly, that is extraordinary, reflecting a worrying disregard for public spaces such as our high streets, where all of us should expect to feel safe. I hope that the Minister will condemn those comments in the strongest possible terms and send a message to our hard-working police officers that stop and search is a vital tool in their armour, and that we entirely support them in using it.

This week, I met representatives of the Federation of Independent Retailers, who shared their experiences of retail crime and the way that the use of in-store facial recognition and AI technology is making a real difference. They suggested that a grant scheme could help them to take the fight to criminals; I would be delighted to hear whether the Minister has given any consideration to introducing such a scheme.

In conclusion, we should celebrate the work of the hard-working police on our streets and of the retail workers in our stores, but we must remember the challenges that they face because of the decisions of this Government. High streets are at the heart of our local communities. The Government must do much more to ensure that they are safe and thriving places that people want to visit.

2.47 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Ms Furniss.

I start, of course, by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for making such a passionate and eloquent speech on behalf of her constituents, and for what she said about her fight—indeed, her mission—to take back Erdington High Street. I think she said that she wanted to make her voice and her community's voice heard; she has certainly done that this afternoon. It was clear that Erdington deserved better than it was getting and she has delivered that improvement, so she should be very proud of that.

It has been a really wide-ranging debate with lots of local and national flavour. Many different areas and constituencies have been referred to, and I am grateful to all the Members who have spoken today. The fact that it has been such a comprehensive debate reflects the significance that is attached to these issues by us as parliamentarians and by our constituents.

Before I respond to some of the specific points that were raised, I will be really clear about this Government's position. We believe wholeheartedly and unreservedly in the value of a visible and responsive police presence in our communities. As we have heard, that is especially important on high streets and in town centres.

It is very encouraging indeed to hear about initiatives that have made a real difference, such as Operation Fearless in Erdington, in Birmingham. As I have already said, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington for her work. I also commend the police and crime commissioner, Simon Foster, the chief constable of West Midlands police, Craig Guildford, and the assistant chief constable, Jen Mattinson, for driving this initiative forward for the community.

Across the country, however, far more needs to be done, and we need to build on the work of Operation Fearless and similar operations around the country. In recent years, too many neighbourhoods have been plagued by antisocial behaviour and crime, with shoplifting and street theft in particular surging. As those offences have shot up, we all know the reality—neighbourhood policing was eroded under previous Governments. Actually, let us be clear: it was slashed by previous Governments.

The impact of that is very well documented. Across the country, the belief set in among local businesses and residents that police were not on the streets. Antisocial behaviour and shop theft were treated as low level, and if people called the police, nobody came and nothing was done.

I think we all agree now that that is totally unacceptable and needs to be fixed. That is why this Government have made rebuilding neighbourhood policing a focus of our safer streets mission, which is central to the Prime Minister's plan for change. Under the mission, we are aiming to halve violence against women and girls and knife crime in a decade, tackle shop theft, street crime and antisocial behaviour, and improve trust in the criminal justice system. All those aims are tied in some way to another of the mission's core strands: rebuilding the neighbourhood policing model. Without a strong local police footprint, our communities are left exposed and people suffer. Put simply, neighbourhood policing is the beating heart of our law enforcement system. After years of neglect, this Government will restore it to full health.

I also want to make a comment about police funding and resources, because a number of hon. Members have talked about that this afternoon. Clearly, the funding formula is the one we inherited. We have been in power for 11 months, but we have been clear that we will embark on police reform, and there is a White Paper coming in the next few months. I want to make clear to hon. Members this afternoon that, within that, there will undoubtedly have to be a discussion about finances and resources for policing.

Let me turn to the points that have been raised. We have already made £200 million available to forces to kick-start year one of our programme, which will support the first step of delivering 13,000 additional officers into neighbourhood policing roles. Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), I welcome PC Coyle to his new role in Durham. I also pay tribute to all our police officers, who work for us day in, day out, particularly the neighbourhood police officers I met this morning in Milton Keynes, who were doing a fantastic job for their community. Our approach to delivering on the 13,000 in 2025-26 has been designed to deliver an initial increase to the neighbourhood policing workforce in a manner that is flexible and can be adapted to the local context and the varied crime demands in certain neighbourhoods. Police forces have embraced that and want to make a positive start towards achieving the goal of 13,000 additional neighbourhood officers by the end of this Parliament.

The neighbourhood policing guarantee was announced by the Prime Minister on 10 April. He said that, along with the Home Secretary, he had written to all chief constables and police and crime commissioners, setting out key objectives. The guarantee aims to reverse the decline in visible policing through clear commitments, designed with the support of policing, to be achieved throughout the course of this Parliament. By July, every neighbourhood throughout England and Wales will have named contactable officers. These officers will know their areas and build relationships with residents and businesses, and they will understand local concerns. In too many instances in the past, residents felt they had no one to go to. By July, there will be a guaranteed response time to local neighbourhood police queries from members of the public and businesses of 72 hours.

Having committed to these steps, it is now down to Government and policing to deliver on them. We expect that by July, all police forces will be able to demonstrate that that commitment to the guarantee has been achieved. Additionally, the College of Policing will begin the national roll-out of its neighbourhood policing training programme during the neighbourhood policing week of action in June. The training will equip officers with essential skills, such as problem solving, relationship building and crime prevention, to effectively tackle local issues and enhance community engagement. This dedicated training aims to transform neighbourhood policing services, ensuring trusted and effective policing that cuts crime and keeps people safe. There is also the hotspot action programme, which focuses on particular hotspots and really putting in the resources—it sounds very similar to what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington referred to.

I want to make some comments about retail crime. It has been very helpful to hear from Members today who have experience of the retail sector. We know that in the

last two years of the previous Government, shop theft soared by 70%. There is an epidemic in shop theft, and we need to do something about it. As has been said, in the Crime and Policing Bill we have brought forward a new offence of assaulting a retail worker to protect the hard-working and dedicated staff who work in stores, after years of campaigning by USDAW and the Co-op, among others.

Also included as part of the Bill is the removal of the legislation that makes shop theft of and below £200 a summary-only offence, which meant that it could only be tried in the magistrates court. This sends a clear message that any level of shop theft is illegal and will be taken seriously. I noted what the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said about that, but there is a deterrent in this, as was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins). It is about saying that shop theft of any value is theft, and action will be taken. We still expect that the vast majority of cases will be heard in the magistrates court—*[Interruption.]* I do not have time for an intervention, but I am happy to discuss it with Members after the debate.

There is also additional funding going into the National Police Chiefs' Council to give further training to police and retailers on preventive tactics. We are putting £5 million into the specialist analyst team within Opal, which is the national policing intelligence unit dealing with the serious organised criminal gangs that are now getting involved in shop theft. There will also be £2 million over the next three years for the National Business Crime Centre, which provides a resource for both police and businesses to learn, share and support each other to prevent and combat crime. We also have the retail crime forum with representatives from major businesses, which I chair.

We are determined that this summer, for the next three months starting at the end of this month, we will put increasing the safety of our town centres and high streets under the microscope, in partnership with PCCs, councils, schools, health services, businesses, transport and community organisations. I am aware that tackling criminality and antisocial behaviour in town centres is already a focus for many police forces, but we need to do more and go quicker. We have to take that action, and I look forward to the plans that PCCs have been drawing up and will be providing to the Home Office in the next few days. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington for calling this debate, as it is an issue that every Member of this House cares passionately about.

2.57 pm

Paulette Hamilton: Your chairing today has been excellent, Ms Furniss, and I hope to take part in many more debates with you in the Chair. I thank all the hon. and right hon. Members for taking part in this debate. I also thank the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), and give thanks to the Minister, who I felt gave a strong response.

The clear message highlighted today is that high streets are the beating hearts of our communities, and that constituents want to feel safe on them. It is also key that the police are funded to do the job. I join Members in paying tribute to the police and their partners, who work so tirelessly to keep our high streets clean and safe.

[*Paulette Hamilton*]

Finally, this is a very special debate because it is about people's lives. Members have to work together—hon. Members, right hon. Members, the Opposition and Ministers—to ensure that our residents feel that we not only care but are listening and will answer the cry for help.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered police presence on high streets.

Maths: Contribution to the UK

[*MARTIN VICKERS in the Chair*]

3 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of maths to the UK.

It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate, the Members who put their names to the application and those present today. I look forward to hearing their contributions.

A mathematician often begins with a conjecture—a statement that they believe to be true, a theory that is perhaps well informed by evidence but has yet to be widely accepted, thoroughly proven and fully implemented. If I had a blackboard, this is the theory that I would write up: that a thriving maths ecosystem is fundamental to the Government's growth ambitions.

I have a deep affection for mathematics, and that may have led me to prepare rather more material than is customary for a Westminster Hall debate, but given the numbers in attendance I hope that Members will indulge me. There is something profoundly satisfying—to me, at least—about how mathematical problems yield to patient reasoning and how seemingly unrelated concepts can connect in unexpected ways. While my days of wrestling with differential equations are largely behind me, the habits of mind that mathematics taught me—breaking down complex problems, testing assumptions and seeking elegant solutions—remain with me in every aspect of my work, including in Parliament.

There is compelling evidence for my opening conjecture. In 2023, mathematical sciences contributed £495 billion to our economy: that is 20% of the UK's total gross value added. To put that in context, mathematical sciences contribute more to our economy than the entire manufacturing sector. That figure is almost certainly an underestimate, as it does not capture the many downstream benefits of mathematics. The algorithms and encryption that empower and enable safe access to the internet, which are so fundamental to nearly every business across the country, are all built from mathematical foundations.

The impact is accelerating. According to research from the Campaign for Mathematical Sciences, between 2019 and 2023 there was a 6.2% increase in the proportion of jobs requiring undergraduate-level mathematics skills across all sectors, and 94% of employers anticipate placing at least as much emphasis on these skills, if not more, when hiring in the next couple of years. Whether it is the artificial intelligence revolution that will have an impact on healthcare, the quantum computing that will transform cybersecurity or the climate models guiding our path to net zero, mathematics is not just contributing to our present economy—it is building our future.

There is every reason to be optimistic about the next generation. Mathematics remains the most popular A-level subject, with over 100,000 students choosing it last year. That is more than ever before. Those young people clearly see mathematics as part of the future, and rightly so.

Britain has always been a mathematical powerhouse. We may be small by population on the global stage, but we are mighty—particularly in our research activity. The UK is home to 4% of the world’s mathematical sciences researchers, but their output represents 14% of highly cited articles. We are a global centre of excellence for mathematical sciences research, with top-ranked universities and research institutes, and some of the fastest-growing tech companies. In fact, according to the global innovation index, the UK is home to the world’s No. 1 science and technology cluster by intensity, in relation to its size: Cambridge. It is a privilege to represent part of that cluster.

From Newton’s laws to Turing’s machines, from Bayes’s theorem—a personal favourite to mine—to Hawking’s insights into black holes, which are possibly a personal favourite of the Chancellor’s, British mathematicians have repeatedly changed how we understand and interact with our world. Today, that tradition continues. Our cryptographers protect national security: GCHQ remains one of the UK’s largest recruiters of pure mathematicians. Our financial modellers help manage trillions in global assets, and our data scientists are revolutionising everything from drug discovery to climate science.

However, despite that remarkable heritage and current strength, we risk undermining our mathematical future through policies that, I accept, reflect difficult choices but seem to work against our mathematical advantages on the global stage. In their plan for change, the Government promised growth. They promised to raise living standards, revive our NHS, drive research and innovation, and deliver economic stability. Yet if mathematics underlies so much of the innovation that will be key to delivering those aims, some of the recent policy decisions represent what Marcus du Sautoy, Simonyi professor for the public understanding of science at the University of Oxford, has called a “national miscalculation”.

The cuts to the advanced mathematics support programme, universities across the country shrinking and closing mathematics departments, the cancellation of the exascale supercomputer in Edinburgh and real-terms cuts to the UK Research and Innovation budget for 2025-26 are just some of the concerning decisions. I acknowledge that they span multiple Governments, but cumulatively they risk creating a mathematical recession just when the global economy is becoming increasingly mathematical.

My asks for our mathematical future break down into three strands: research funding, higher education and mathematics in schools. The Government have ambitious and admirable aims, but real growth is simply not possible without an adequate pipeline of mathematicians and advanced mathematical skills. Continuing to attract the extremely productive researchers who bring so much economic benefit and soft power to our country should be a national priority. To that end, in 2020 the previous Government announced a welcome additional £300 million in Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council funding for the mathematical sciences to be deployed over five years, but only about 40% of that total was ultimately allocated.

At a glance, to the casual observer, it may not be obvious what £300 million of funding for PhD and postdoctoral study in such seemingly abstract disciplines as geometry, topology, algebra, combinatorics and number theory might mean for our country, but the impact of

those studies is often much more long-term than successive Governments seem to realise. Once-abstract domains often become integral to new technologies in ways that have not been predicted. To name just one crucial example, computer scientists are increasingly looking to pure mathematicians to help them understand their own machine learning models.

Despite the Government’s determination that AI is vital to turbocharge every mission in its plan for change, from driving down NHS waiting lists to speeding up cancer diagnoses and saving time across the civil service, there appears to be a disconnect between that ambition and the long-term investment needed in the mathematical sciences to achieve those goals. The number of UK centres for doctoral training in the mathematical sciences has fallen from 11 to five, and the latest allocation of UKRI funding represents a real-terms funding cut, which will constrain the UK’s research output. Rather than continuing to pull the rug from under those who are constructing the backbone of our future technologies, would the Government consider exploring a new funding settlement that better reflects the value of the mathematical sciences and what they bring to the UK? Investment in mathematical sciences to fuel the UK’s growth needs to be far longer term than simply increasing postgraduate research funding contracts in the near term. That leads me to the second strand that I want to pick up: higher and post-16 education.

Ensuring the best possible mathematics education for students post 16 is crucial to strengthening the wider graduate pipeline. Boosting progression to mathematics degrees should be a key part of the Government’s growth strategy, I would suggest. With a sharp drop in UK mathematics undergraduate entrants expected over the next 10 years, from just under 7,100 to just over 5,600 by 2035—that is the forecast difference between 2030 and 2035—we seem to face a crisis in the mathematical pipeline, and that trend particularly affects mid and lower tariff institutions, where it is over three times more likely that students will go on to become teachers post-graduation.

When universities close maths departments, we do not just lose degree places; we lose the next generation of mathematics teachers. Specialist post-16 institutions, such as the Cambridge maths school, which serves many young people in my constituency, are fighting to increase access to science, technology, engineering and maths degrees. They recognise that investment in STEM education is vital to the UK’s future workforce. Through nurturing ambition, particularly among students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds, they are seeing impressive results, and I would like to share some of those: students with special educational needs and disabilities at the school represent double the national proportion of A-level further mathematics students; 8% of students have an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis compared with around 1% nationally, and those students are predicted to achieve an average grade of A*; and 46% of current year 12 students are female, which is remarkable given the national underrepresentation of women in advanced mathematics.

It is through not just excellent teaching that these young people are excelling, but targeted initiatives for inclusion. Cambridge maths school runs an access and application support programme that funds travel bursaries, test preparation support and interview coaching to

[*Ian Sollom*]

remove barriers for disadvantaged students from across the east of England, but that support is precarious without solid Government backing. The disappearance of the pupil premium post 16, the school reports, is a significant oversight at a critical stage of education, particularly in specialist settings. On that basis, might the Government consider the merits of providing some ringfenced funding for access and outreach initiatives to recognise and protect the role of specialist post-16 institutions in driving social mobility and mathematical excellence?

The Campaign for Mathematical Sciences is also working to boost uptake of university mathematics courses through its maths degrees for the future scheme, which is rewarding universities that show genuine commitment to increasing the accessibility of their mathematics courses and those that commit to equipping undergraduates with the flexibility and foundational skills to move into a wide range of future careers. There are grants of up to £500,000, but that on its own will not be enough to support the sector. I hope that the Government will show the same commitment to the future of mathematical sciences that the universities winning those grants are demonstrating.

To move further back in the pipeline, to mathematics in schools, the Government have significantly scaled back the advanced mathematics support programme. In response to my written question, the Minister confirmed that with reduced funding of £8.2 million for 2025-26, the programme must now focus on narrower areas:

“supporting schools with low girls’ progression to level 3 mathematics”,

helping “disadvantaged students” and artificial intelligence-related skills. Although those priorities are extremely important, that nevertheless represents a fundamental reduction from the comprehensive programme that, since 2009, has increased A-level mathematics entries by nearly 40,000. The programme can no longer provide the broad-based support that it once did, and with funding beyond 2026 subject to spending review, there is ongoing uncertainty about its future. Although I understand that it makes the best of difficult circumstances, will the Minister acknowledge that that refocusing represents a significant reduction in our national commitment to mathematics education at precisely the time that we need to be expanding it?

Mathematics teaching is another pressing concern and the forecast decline in undergraduate numbers that I mentioned is even more rapid at mid and lower-tariff institutions. As I have said, those are the ones where it is far more likely that their students will become teachers post-graduation. I declare an interest as a governor of the Cambridge Maths Hub, a group that fosters professional dialogue about mathematics teaching between schools in Cambridgeshire, Peterborough, Norfolk and Suffolk. To quote the hub

“quality teaching is led by expert questioning, predicting, exposing and correcting misconceptions, and designing work that challenges students so they experience success when they apply their knowledge and think mathematically.”

To me and many others, that could be reframed by saying that mathematics teaching is best performed by mathematics graduates.

How will the Government work with universities to ensure that strong mathematics provision continues in every region? Could the Minister outline how mathematics teachers might be prioritised in the strategy to recruit 6,500 new teachers? Beyond that, I hope that the Government will examine what is being studied, as well as schools’ capacity to deliver the education. The current pass rate for GCSE mathematics retakes is one area of concern, with only just over 17% of nearly 200,000 post-16 entrants achieving grade 4 or above.

The Maths Horizons project recently found that 82% of polled teachers think that there is too much content on the national curriculum, and that that is impeding the success of many students. It argues the national curriculum still does not appropriately prioritise “teaching for mastery” and rigour, despite the efforts of the 2014 reforms to key stage 4 mathematics. On that basis, I hope that the Government will consider taking on board the findings of that Maths Horizons project research in its curriculum and assessment review and to find ways to rebalance—not cut down—the mathematics curriculum in schools.

If the UK is to remain a world-beating hub for research, innovation and growth, we must nurture mathematical excellence right from the beginning. The skills of logical reasoning, problem solving and analytical thinking that mathematics develops are not just useful for future mathematicians, but essential for all citizens in an increasingly complex world.

Mathematics is too important to be left to chance or to be treated piecemeal. We need a national strategy for mathematics with a comprehensive approach that recognises the fundamental role of mathematical thinking in everything from personal finance right through to national security, and from healthcare innovation to other areas of science. Such a strategy would co-ordinate efforts across the three areas I have outlined. It would ensure that our research base remains world leading, support our universities to maintain and expand mathematics provision, and give every child the mathematical foundation they need to thrive. It would recognise that mathematical skills are not just about producing more mathematicians, though we do desperately need them, but about maintaining our competitive edge in an increasingly quantitative world.

My asks have been multiple, from strengthening foundational mathematical knowledge in primary and secondary schools and widening access to mathematical sciences courses in universities to funding our research sector for the years to come. The Government must urgently examine every stage of the mathematical skills pipeline in detail and introduce a national strategy for mathematics to secure our future.

The Government have set out ambitious goals for growth, innovation and improved living standards. Mathematics is not just relevant to these aims; it is absolutely integral to them, as I have argued. To achieve growth, we need mathematicians, and for the UK to develop the best mathematicians, the sector needs strategy, investment and sustained attention. That is my conjecture on my imaginary blackboard. I hope I have gone some way to providing the supporting evidence for it, and I hope the Government will take up the challenge of providing the proof.

3.22 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) for bringing this debate to the House. There may be plenty of things we disagree on, but when it comes to maths, I am $\sin^2\theta$ and he is $\cos^2\theta$, and together we are at one. There are a lot more of those jokes to come, Mr Vickers.

I am a former maths teacher, I am married to a maths teacher and I am looking forward to the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) commenting on how good the maths teachers are in her constituency. In fact, when I first met my wife—this is a little bit raunchy—I told her she was $1/\cos C$. Only the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire and I will get these jokes, unfortunately; I apologise that my speech is not going to be at the same intellectual level as that of the hon. Gentleman.

I taught secondary school maths in schools across Essex, and the two things students most often asked were a) “When are we going to use this in real life?”, and b) “Will this be on the exam?”. I am genuinely passionate about maths, not because it is on the exam or because there is a problem to be solved, but because maths in itself is a beautiful thing and something that we should enjoy. Those questions were therefore incredibly frustrating.

After part a), they would sometimes add another line: “When will we use this in real life? And don’t say engineering.” I have to say to the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire that I was not a maths graduate—I was actually an engineering graduate, but I think he will understand. There is a lot of maths in engineering, and I was wholly qualified to teach it. I genuinely believe that we should love maths and not see it as a challenge to overcome but a tool to help us. I do not want to write a shopping list that says I am buying six apples and five bananas if I can use a and b instead. That is really important.

On part b), one of my favourite things to teach, which is not on the curriculum, is the Fibonacci sequence. When I teach the Fibonacci sequence, I show pupils how that leads on to the golden ratio and how the golden ratio applies in real life to the shape of leaves or seashells, or to the amount of bees that live in a hive. In fact, Liz Hurley can be compared to the golden ratio. On literature, paper sizes are based around the golden ratio. When we read a book, we are likely to find that something significant happens around 61.8% of the way through, because this is a really important ratio. It is not just mathematical—it occurs in real life. I genuinely think that is interesting. I want to emphasise that we have a habit of talking about maths as a kind of challenge—almost a monster in the room—but it is not. It should be seen as our friend.

The question of the role of maths in the UK is substantial, so I have thought about it a little more at the local level as being about the use of maths in Harlow. Hon. Members will be aware that Harlow is the home of Hannah Fry, who shares my passion for mathematics. It is also where George Hockham and Charles Kao invented the fibre-optic cable. It is fair to say that such an invention could not have happened without the use of applied mathematics. In fact, any

business, school or organisation in Harlow will rely on maths, whether that is to fill out tax returns or produce wage slips. Maths is absolutely everywhere.

I find that one of the biggest frustrations with maths is that it seems to be acceptable for adults to say, “I’m not very good at maths.” When I was a teacher, some colleagues and senior colleagues said it. In one of the schools I worked at—I will not name which—one of the deputy heads, a fantastic English teacher, proudly said on stage in front of students, “I was never very good at maths.” Imagine the impact that had on young people, who were perhaps already struggling with maths, about the importance of learning it.

I am not saying it is right to criticise people who struggle to read or spell, but I am pretty confident that someone would not say that in the same way they are happy to say that they are not very good at maths. I appreciate I am talking in jest a little, but I hope the Minister will take from my speech the hope that we can challenge that misconception and say that it is important to be able to do maths, as the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire mentioned.

I was not going to be too political, but in preparation for hearing the shadow spokesman claim that we have never had it so good on maths teaching as we did under his Government, I say to him that that is as imaginary as the square root of minus one. I respectfully point out that the number of qualified maths teachers—yes, I am one of them—went down under his Administration. More and more, schools were forced to rely on non-specialists to teach maths. Some did so very successfully, but clearly when it comes to higher-level maths—A-level maths and A-level further maths—we want specialist teachers, even if they are engineering graduates, to tackle that.

I welcome the fact that the Government have started to bring confidence back into the teaching profession and, dare I say, that with today’s announcement, they will also ensure that the young people we teach have full bellies and are able to learn. I will finish on a positive note. As a sci-fi fan, I welcome the fact that, if we ever meet alien life forms, it will be mathematics that serves as our common language.

3.28 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) on securing this debate. It is heartening to hear about his love of maths as well as the enthusiasm of my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince).

I have to confess that was not my experience of school. I was at a school which had a quirk: we had to sit maths GCSE twice—once in year 10 and in year 11. Although I can report to the House that I achieved a good grade in both exams, there was a clear narrative: that maths was a difficult subject, and definitely not for everyone. A lack of enthusiasm for the subject certainly pervaded among many of my peers and was allowed to go unchecked within the education system at large. I do not blame only my school for that; I think it was a common thing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow said, we need to challenge that. I have done the best to challenge it with my daughters, the youngest of whom sat her maths GCSE paper yesterday, so we will see whether I have been successful.

[Helen Hayes]

We must have an approach that emphasises the critical importance of maths in our primary and secondary education systems and its foundational nature for so many aspects of education and life, and that also encourages a love of maths as part of a love of learning. Maths is key to problem solving and supports logistical reasoning and analytical thinking. It develops flexible thinking and creativity. Mathematical problems often require trying different approaches and tackling a question from multiple angles. Those skills equally apply in arts and the humanities subjects as they do in the maths and sciences. Maths is therefore foundational in building those essential critical skills.

The practical applications of maths matter too. Financial literacy is important for us all. The Education Committee undertook an inquiry into financial literacy in May last year, in the previous Parliament, and recommended expanding financial education at primary level, the appointment of financial education co-ordinators in secondary schools and the provision of high-quality independently provided learning materials in all schools. Budgeting and saving, planning finances for the future, understanding how loans and interest work, and contributing to a pension pot are all skills that every young person should have when they leave school.

Maths is a specialist subject, and we need skilled teachers to deliver interesting and inspiring lessons from reception all the way through to A-levels and on to higher education. There have been real challenges with the recruitment of new maths teachers for a number of years, with just under three quarters of the target of 3,000 teachers recruited for the current academic year. There are so many career opportunities open to graduates with degrees with a strong mathematical component, so it is important that the Department for Education offers strong incentives to train, recruit and retain maths teachers. I welcome the Government's commitment to delivering an extra 6,500 teachers in England. It is critical that that target includes a good level of new maths teachers, appropriately supported to be recruited and retained within our education system.

I turn briefly to the question of attainment in mathematics. Last year, 65% of pupils achieved a standard pass at grade 4 or above at GCSE in English and maths, but disadvantaged pupils were less likely to meet the expected standard—only 59% of them did so, compared with non-disadvantaged pupils. That means that 35% of young people are routinely not getting a qualification in maths while they are school. That should be a concern to us all. We want every young person to fulfil their potential in maths.

Currently, those who do not achieve a grade 4 or above are expected to resit GCSE maths during their post-16 education. For some students, that means multiple resits of a subject that they have already found challenging for several years at school, and it traps them in a cycle of failure, just at the point where they should be discovering a love of learning and finding their vocation. The Education Committee has been looking at this policy as part of our inquiry on further education and skills, and asking whether that really is the best approach for all young people who do not achieve a grade 4 or above.

For some students who achieve grade 3, the extra work in a new environment that is different from school may help them to successfully resit their maths GCSE, but for others repeated, unsuccessful resits can be demoralising and counterproductive. We have yet to report, so I cannot draw conclusions on behalf of the whole Committee, but we have received quite compelling evidence that embedding practical maths content into the curriculum for the particular subjects needed for the student's chosen course of study may be a better way to support students on vocational pathways to achieve the level of both English and maths that they will need to apply later on in life, rather than the endless cycle of GCSE maths resits.

Moving beyond GCSEs, it is good to see that maths is the most popular A-level subject, with more than 100,000 entries for A-level maths last year, as well more than 17,000 for further maths. But within those statistics, more work is needed to tackle the gender gap, because just 37% of last year's maths A-levels were taken by young women, and a mere 27% of last year's further maths A-levels.

Increasing the number of girls taking maths will help to tackle the gender gap in science, engineering and maths at university and beyond. Having positive role models, and improving understanding of just how many well-paid and rewarding careers are out there, for which maths can help, are definitely two important approaches, but we need to do more. There should be more practical support available in our schools to overcome that gender gap in maths.

Maths is an important component of many STEM degrees and myriad careers. To underpin a high-skill, high-wage economy, we need more young people with a good training in maths. I will end there, but I will just say that the Education Committee looks forward to scrutinising the curriculum and assessment review, and to scrutinising the Government's recruitment of teachers, and we hope to see good progress in improving maths education and attainment for all pupils, across all our demographics, in every part of the country.

3.36 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) for securing this debate. Like him, I have a deep affection for maths. In fact, I would probably go further and say that I am a maths nerd. And, like him, I believe that it still influences my thinking now, including here in Parliament. I love maths for its own sake. I was inspired as a child by watching shows such as Johnny Ball's "Think of a Number", I was only too happy to get a scientific calculator for my 11th birthday—I am not sure many 11-year-olds would be—and I went on to study maths at university, so I could not pass up the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Having said that I love maths for its own sake, though, I want to make the case that mathematics does not just contribute to our country in the headline-grabbing ways highlighted by my hon. Friend, such as AI innovation, although those are obviously very important. I believe that having a mathematically literate population can contribute to our society in myriad smaller ways, too,

by ensuring that we can all think critically about what we are told, and make better decisions about our own lives.

There is a somewhat old-fashioned idea that, as long as people can work out their change when shopping, that is all the maths they need. It is true that basic numeracy is important, even in a world where we are more likely to wave our cards at a machine than to pay with cash, and where, contrary to teachers' expectations in the 1980s, most of us do carry calculators around with us. From working out how long it is until the train or bus, or measuring whether that flat-pack furniture will fit in our living rooms before we buy it, to scaling up a cake recipe, there are plenty of ways in which basic arithmetic matters, but I think the importance of mathematics to every one of us goes way beyond that.

In a world where we are bombarded with information and misinformation daily, mathematics is vital to the critical thinking that stops us getting scammed and helps us to make truly informed decisions on matters such as healthcare and our personal finances. I will illustrate that with an example from a few years ago, when the BBC reported:

"Teenagers whose parents smoke are four times more likely to take it up themselves, experts have warned."

There was an absolute bombardment of people saying that that was rubbish because their parents smoked and they did not, but let us look at the figures. What the article said was that

"4.9% of teenagers whose parents smoke have taken it up too. By contrast, only 1.2% of teenagers whose parents do not smoke begin to do so."

It was absolutely right to say "four times more likely" but, even with parents who smoke, the vast majority—more than 95%—will not go on to smoke themselves. Those misunderstandings reoccur across many examples of scientific and medical stories in our mainstream press.

If we do not understand numbers, how can we make truly informed decisions about medical treatment? Do we really understand what a one-in-a-thousand risk of a side effect is? What does it mean if a contraceptive is 95% effective? What does it mean, in absolute numbers, for a treatment to carry a 10% increased risk of a type of cancer if the original risk was extremely low, and how does that compare with the risks of not having the treatment?

I think it became evident during the pandemic that people—including some at the highest levels of Government, apparently—did not understand the concept of exponential growth. We heard from Lord Vallance in the covid inquiry that the Prime Minister at the time had been "bamboozled" by graphs. He apparently wrote in his diary:

"Watching the PM get his head round stats is awful. He finds relative and absolute risk almost impossible to understand."

Most of us will not have to lead the country through a pandemic, thank goodness, but we do need to make decisions about our own lives.

When it comes to school education, I can understand the sentiment of those who wanted to extend maths, but doing another two years of what has already not been working does not make any sense. I would rather see a focus on rebalancing the curriculum to 16, and ensuring that we have specialist maths teachers to deliver that and inspire our young people today.

I often speak on the subject of special educational needs, so before I finish, I will briefly say something about dyscalculia. Schools in England have a responsibility to identify and support students with special educational needs arising from specific learning difficulties, and that includes dyscalculia. But there is no requirement for teachers to learn about it; it is poorly understood and awareness is very low among both professionals and parents. Given that maths is so important to our lives and that dyscalculia is about having difficulty with understanding number-based information, I make a plea that it should be taken more seriously.

3.40 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) for securing this debate and for the passionate speeches from across the Chamber, which highlighted that maths is not just an academic subject but a fundamental gateway to prosperity, opportunity, and innovation for individuals across the UK.

As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for science, innovation and technology, as the MP for Harpenden and Berkhamsted, I am proud to speak in this debate. I am someone who personally owes a lot to maths: I studied maths at A-level and went on to do a master's in economic policy. At school, I was proudly somehow the school's maths champion for two years in a row, but sadly did not quite make the cut for the maths Olympics—*[Interruption.]* I know.

Maths gave me much more than equations and graphs; it gave me the confidence to tackle problems, persevere through setbacks, and think logically under pressure. My hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) beautifully explained how it is really about thinking and how it can help us to logically go through problems. Those skills have stayed with me, from working in the private sector to running my own business, and now in my role in Parliament. Maths has opened doors for me, and such opportunity should be a national priority.

For the Liberal Democrats, ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality maths education is essential for fairness and innovation and for securing our country's future. It has been a real pleasure to hear from the hon. Members for Harlow (Chris Vince) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) about the importance of that and about upskilling our next generation. I particularly love how the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood talked about encouraging the love of maths and of learning, and about embedding maths into vocational subjects. It is important to look at the Finnish model, which asks how we can apply maths, because there are many ways to learn maths that are important to our everyday lives.

The Liberal Democrats also believe that every young person deserves the opportunity to develop strong maths skills regardless of their background. Maths skills are critical not just for economic growth, but for critical thinking, problem-solving skills and social mobility more broadly. We will champion proper funding for maths education and research as essential pillars of a forward-looking knowledge-based economy.

[Victoria Collins]

In my constituency, I see the best of the UK's maths ecosystem at work. Alongside Rothamsted Research, our globally recognised research hub, are fast-growing local tech businesses. Our schools are working hard to ensure that maths is not just a subject learned in the classroom but a skill that inspires, empowers and prepares young people for life. My hon. Friend the Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire talked about the importance of the tech sector, and how Cambridge is No. 1 for science and technology in terms of intensity, as well as the data science that comes out of that.

Coming back to the schools in my constituency, Tring Park school for the performing arts is a vocational school for future performers, but maths is celebrated there as a creative and intellectual pursuit. Pupils compete in math competitions—one may become a future maths champion—and are encouraged to see mathematics as a tool that complements their artistry, as has been mentioned. From subdividing music and choreographing patterns, to developing algorithms in digital art, students are not just taught to do maths; they are taught to be mathematicians.

At Roundwood Park school in Harpenden, maths is one of the most popular A-level subjects, with a thriving enrichment programme that includes university taster days, United Kingdom Mathematics Trust challenges and presentations linking maths to real-world issues such as AI, oncology and environmental economics. Its pupils go on to study maths, economics and engineering at competitive universities, and the curriculum explicitly links abstract thinking to practical application.

Alongside those successes, schools in my constituency tell me that they are struggling to recruit the teachers they need—an issue reflected across the country, as Members on both sides of the Chamber mentioned. For example, St John Lawes school in Harpenden, a high-performing comprehensive, has a fully staffed maths department today, but its headteacher warns that recruiting high-quality staff is becoming harder. To manage, it has invested in platforms such as Dr Frost Maths and Sparx to help to consolidate maths learning, but it knows that that is not a suitable alternative to great teachers. As the hon. Member for Harlow mentioned, there are fantastic maths teachers across Harpenden, so it is vital that we get recruitment right. Those new teachers are the maths teachers of tomorrow.

Nationally, the situation is much more concerning. Although maths remains the most popular A-level, undergraduate numbers are predicted to drop by 20% by 2035, with departments across the country at risk of closure, particularly at lower-tariff universities. Meanwhile, teacher recruitment in maths reached only 63% of its target in 2023-24, and schools nationwide are increasingly reliant on non-specialist teachers. That directly impacts students' engagement and confidence, and is especially worrying for girls. Despite outperforming boys at GCSE, girls are far less likely to continue maths post 16. According to a 2024 survey from Teach First, more than half of girls lack confidence in maths, compared with 40% of boys. We are losing that diverse talent where we need it most. We urgently need to dismantle those barriers by promoting role models, tackling bias and ensuring that inspiring, qualified teachers are available to every student.

As the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology spokesperson for the Lib Dems, I see the fast-paced change in science and technology, and I believe it is vital that women play a leading role in that future. For many, that will start with maths and science, as the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood highlighted. That is why programmes such as the advanced mathematics support programme are so important, as they have boosted A-level and further maths participation rates, nearly doubling core maths qualifications since 2018. Recent cuts threaten their continued success, however, which is why we want to hear the Minister's response on those schemes. We should expand them, not scale them back.

The funding shortfalls have broader implications for science and innovation. The UK's domestic computing capacity has slipped from third to 10th globally, and the Government's independent review warns that that undermines our global position in science and technology. The decision to shelve the £800 million exascale computer at the University of Edinburgh, crucial for breakthroughs in drug development and clean energy, highlights that worrying trend. I echo the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire about the implications of the real-term cuts to UKRI on the future of maths.

To lead in innovation, green technology and AI, Britain must invest in mathematical sciences. That is why the Liberal Democrats would champion proper funding for maths education and research as an essential pillar of a forward-looking, knowledge-based economy. In 2023 alone, mathematical sciences contributed £495 billion to the UK's economy. I would love the Minister to outline the funding that is going into supporting maths education and research.

The Liberal Democrats would ensure that maths and STEM teaching reflects the skills children need, including statistics, coding and data science, taught through creativity and critical thinking. We would embed digital and data literacy across the curriculum. We believe in preparing students for a future shaped by AI and new technologies.

Maths is more than just numbers; it underpins critical thinking, innovation and our ability to solve global challenges. Our economic strength, national security and capability to tackle climate change, disease and technological breakthroughs all depend on robust mathematical sciences. Maths also helps to develop the future of each individual.

I wholeheartedly support this debate from my hon. Friend the Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire. If we get this right, maths will not just be our national strength but secure our national future.

3.49 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) on securing this important debate. We have had some fantastic speeches, and any debate in which Johnny Ball gets a shout-out is a good debate in my view.

Our profession, politics, is awash with mathematical metaphors. Lyndon Johnson famously said that the first rule of democracy is that you have to be able to count. In Westminster, the Treasury is always insisting on making the numbers add up. Lots of junior Ministers

who interact with the Treasury and try to get money out of it discover that they get the square root of naff all from those discussions. Occasionally, when I listen to hon. Members who are less concise—they are not in this debate—trouting on in the main Chamber, I am reminded of the space-filling Hilbert curve, which is repetitious and capable of filling an infinite amount of space if left unchecked.

One of my greatest beliefs is in the non-linear nature of innovation. As hon. Members have already alluded to, mathematics is a brilliant example of that. It was never obvious, when the obscure philosophers who became logicians were faffing around with strange upside down a's and backwards e's, that they would lay the foundations for the computation that defines our world today.

I read in *Quanta* magazine that in the '60s we discovered something that seemed perfectly useless: Penrose tiling—infinately non-repeating patterns, which are very pretty and obviously totally useless, right? No: they are now used in quantum encryption. We have found a use for that seemingly useless thing.

The same is true of one of the UK's greatest industrial successes: Arm, which does obscure-seeming work on reduced instruction set computing. What use is that? Why would anyone need a really tiny thing that does not use much power? But we all have mobile phones, and the intellectual property from that bit of Britain's industrial policy is now in everyone's pocket, all over the world. Mathematics is hugely important. I completely agree with all hon. Members who have said that.

I have been goaded by the brilliant speech of the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince), who said that I would talk about the last Government, and of course I will. It would be inappropriate not to add some numbers to a debate on maths, so what happened to mathematics under the last Government? Let us look at some international comparisons.

In the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study—TIMSS—between 2011 and 2023, England went from 10th in the world to sixth in the world for maths, and from ninth to fifth for science. That is remarkable progress that puts us top in the western world. We are not quite at the level of the Asian people who dominate the table, but we are the best in the west.

I cannot tell hon. Members how Scotland and Wales are doing on that metric because their Governments chose to withdraw from those competitions as they did not like the scrutiny. However, I can give a comparison by stating where those devolved Governments are in the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment. Between 2009 and 2022, England went from 21st to seventh in the world for maths in PISA results, and from 11th to ninth for science. Whereas Wales—where a lot of the reforms that we had in England were avoided for ideological reasons—went from 29th to 27th for maths, and slumped from 21st to 29th for science.

That is part of a wider picture. I encourage everyone to read the brilliant report “Major challenges for education in Wales” by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which points out that the average deprived child in England is now doing as well or better than the average child in Wales. The gap is so big, and the deprivation progress

has been so great in England, that the deprived child in England is now in a better position than the average child in Wales. That is an incredible situation.

Looking at the improvement in school attainment by IDACI—income deprivation affecting children index—decile, we see improvement across the income distribution under the last Government, but the biggest improvement in England was in the bottom half of the income distribution. That is true for maths throughout the educational life cycle. Today, 90,000 more children at key stage 2—the end of junior school—meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths than in 2015-16.

That progress was driven by a number of measures, including our putting in 27,000 extra teachers over our time in government. Over the last Parliament, we increased real-terms per pupil funding by 11%. We brought in things such as maths schools and maths hubs, lots more low-stakes testing—my daughter is about to do the year 4 times tables test—and the key stage 2 tests. All those things, by the way, are still opposed by some people in the trade unions even though the evidence for the effectiveness of low-stakes testing, for example, is so strong. The National Education Union still opposes all forms of testing in primary school—a crazy position that we were right to reject in England.

There has been real progress as a result of those reforms. Although everything in England is far from perfect—there is loads of room for progress and lots of problems to fix—we can see what the alternative is. Where those reforms were not made for ideological reasons because the unions said no to academisation, school choice and school accountability, things got worse. The people who suffered from that ideology were not the rich and those who could afford to go private, but the poorest.

Some of the things being done now in schools are a mistake, such as hammering the budget for the advanced mathematics support programme. As has already been touched on in this debate, and as quite a lot of the people who care most about maths have pointed out, that is a big mistake. Jens Marklof, president of the London Mathematical Society, said that it will harm the chances of children from poorer areas. He said:

“There's no AI without maths and if the government is really serious about its AI strategy they have to significantly scale up the support for maths education at all levels...The big success of AMSP was to enable kids who went to schools that didn't offer further maths to give them this opportunity”.

Likewise, Adrian Smith, the Royal Society president, said it is

“spectacularly short-sighted to pull funding from programmes designed to support teachers and schools to deliver better maths provision.”

He also said:

“Our maths education is not up to scratch—too many young people are leaving school without the skills they need for life or the well-paid jobs that will drive economic growth”.

Dan Abramson, the chief executive of U-Maths, the umbrella organisation for university maths schools in England, and a professor of maths at King's College London, said:

“For the UK to be at the forefront of AI and the data-driven modern economy, we need excellent mathematicians from all backgrounds, and we need more of them—that means more investment, not less”.

[Neil O'Brien]

We set up the advanced mathematics support programme in 2018 to provide extra maths help to schools, and the Government have now cut it. I think that it is a mistake and I hope that they will look at it again. Unfortunately, that is part of a pattern. The Government have cut support not just for maths, but for physics, computing, Latin, cadets and behaviour hubs. A lot of the things that were doing a lot of good, including for maths, have been axed even though they are very small in the grand scheme of the Department for Education's £100 billion budget. I hope that the Government will rethink those cuts.

The hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire also wanted to talk about the higher education part of the piece. It is very striking that although 50% more people are now doing A-level maths—a great success—and the number of people doing double or triple science at GCSE has more or less doubled, which is great progress, that has not always translated into increases in the number of people doing maths at university. In fact, while there has been about a 20% increase in the total numbers entering HE courses at university since 2018-19, the number going into maths, while marginally up, is broadly flat.

Why is the improvement we are seeing in schools not leading to larger numbers doing maths at university? I am afraid that goes to the heart of the issues with our higher education system more broadly. I understand the logic of why tuition fees were brought in and I accept up to a point the idea of a market in higher education, but it seems to us that that market has gone too far. It is really a pseudo-market, because we rely entirely on young people aged 16 and 17 to drive the allocation of resources into our enormous higher education system.

The gradual move from teaching, or T, grants to a highly fees-based system gives Ministers far less control than they previously had. The Government's decision last week to further reduce high-cost subject grants—T grants, as they used to be called—by a further 10% in real terms is a mistake in its own right because it hits the subjects such as engineering and science that we need for the future, and gives Ministers less control over what is going on in higher education.

The incentives set up by the pseudo-market in education have led to a great growth in courses that are cheap to provide but do not necessarily give great value to either the student or the taxpayer. We know from the leading work of the Institute for Fiscal Studies that, when we look at the combined perspective of the taxpayer and the student themselves, higher education is not worth it, at least from an economic point of view, for around 30% of those who go into it at the moment.

Since the work that the IFS did, which is based on those who graduated during the mid-noughties, we have seen the graduate premium decline even further. The marginal students who we have been adding have even lower earnings, so those figures could easily be worse if we were to rerun that analysis now. That needs to be addressed.

There is absolutely sometimes a case for higher education to be simply beautiful—to do theology, art or whatever—and for it not to be of economic value, but we should be clear about when we choose to subsidise that. We should also be clear that things that are highly economically useful,

such as mathematics and science, also have intrinsic value. They are also beautiful and there is an intrinsic value to studying them—that is not just the case for some of those things, particularly the creative arts, where we see the great concentration of those who end up with very low earnings and negative returns from an economic point of view.

We need to rethink. We need not just to patch up and mend the existing system, but to fundamentally rethink the incentives that it has set up. We should give ourselves the ability to make sure that we are investing in and driving up the growth of subjects such as mathematics, which are so critical to our future economy and security as a country. I will not go further into it than that, but the issues facing mathematics are, in a sense, part of the wider issues facing higher education. I hope that the Government will move from a patching up and mending attitude to a reformist and overhauling one.

The one thing I want discourage Ministers from doing is something that I am worried will come out of the Government's curriculum and assessment review. Although I have lots of respect for Becky Francis, who is leading the review, one of the things that Ministers have been very keen to do is say that we need to have lots more time for arts subjects—for fun subjects such as music, drama and dance. That is fine in a sense, but Ministers have to be super clear about how they will find that time, and whether they are going to find it by funding some extra hours in the school day or something, because otherwise it inescapably means less time on other things. One of the good things that has happened, and one of the reasons standards have gone up, is that schools now spend about 13% more time teaching maths than they used to in 2010, so more time is going into this critical subject than was before. If we say that we want to have more time for something else, let us be honest about the trade-offs and what we are going to not do and let us also be honest about the consequences of that.

Chris Vince: This does not have to be a political point, but to answer the question that the hon. Gentleman just posed about where schools find the time: my argument is that maths does not need to be taught in a silo. Many subjects—even creative subjects such as art and music, and certainly design and technology—would include an aspect of maths. For many young people, being able to apply maths in those particular subjects would actually be really useful. Would the hon. Gentleman concede that point at least?

Neil O'Brien: I am happy to agree that we can bring maths into many other things, and that is also a fun way of teaching maths. In return, I put back to the hon. Gentleman that there are limits to that. If we want to have more time for something else, we have to say where it is coming from. The improvement in those international league table rankings that I mentioned has not come about as a result of some sort of magic. It has come about by us spending more time on that, putting more resources into it and making it a priority. Unfortunately, not everything can be a priority. If everything is a priority, then nothing is. The last Government chose to prioritise maths and STEM. I think it was the right decision. One can argue that we should go for a different course, but if we are going to do that, people should be explicit about it and honest about what they are actually going to do.

Let me not turn into the thing that I have already criticised—the space-filling Hilbert curve—and take up endless time in this debate. It has been a hugely important debate with brilliant speeches from lots of Members from across the House. I hope that the Ministers will act on some of the brilliant suggestions that have been made, and that we can further improve math education in this country.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): It is a real pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank the many hon. Members for participating in this debate on an important subject. I am sure that you would agree with me, Mr Vickers, that their enthusiasm and passion means we can rest assured that this all adds up and that there is a level of agreement.

I thank the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) for securing this important debate and for his optimistic thoughts on mathematics and its being a significant part of our present and future society, especially for our young people, teachers and institutions, as well as economically.

I want to acknowledge what my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) said about maths being a beautiful thing—it is indeed. I enjoyed maths when I was at school and I still do it with my children, helping them through their own education; it is with us everywhere.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for her contribution and wish her daughter every success with her results. I agree that we need to celebrate, encourage and have a love for learning maths.

I will of course attempt to respond to the many areas of the subject that Members have mentioned so far. I thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for speaking so eloquently about the significance of number-based information and how relevant that is for our life in general and for life skills. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) on being a maths champion and on the many points that she raised. I thank all those involved in maths and the teachers in our schools, colleges and universities for doing such an excellent job in teaching our children, our young people and adults about this most important subject.

I do not perceive the debate as contentious. Nobody here today would say that maths is not important, because it absolutely is. We all agree on that. I loved maths when I was at school. It was one of my favourite subjects and it remains so. But why is it so important? It has a critical role to play in the future of the UK economy. Higher levels of achievement are usually associated with higher earnings and productivity, which are a key determining factor of economic growth. There is a strong demand for mathematical skills in the labour market. Such skills can increase individual productivity, earnings and employment opportunities and are important in everyday life and activities.

Many careers require maths skills, which change over time. I think it is safe to say that for most of us in this Chamber, the need for maths when we were starting out was different to the needs for maths today. We only need

to mention the words artificial intelligence—it has already been mentioned—to recognise that. Excellence in maths is one of the many skills needed to drive growth in the AI industry, and we want to ensure that all children and young people have the foundational maths knowledge and equal opportunities to progress in their careers. Advanced mathematics underpins the development of cutting edge AI, which the Prime Minister has set out as a key driver in the plan for change, helping to turbocharge growth and boost living standards.

In schools, all key stages play an essential part in maths knowledge. Under the current curriculum, in key stage 1 pupils are taught a basic underpinning of mathematics, ensuring they develop confidence and mental fluency with whole numbers, counting and place value. The principal focus of mathematics teaching in key stage 2 is to ensure that pupils become increasingly fluent with whole numbers and the four operations, including number facts. The percentage of pupils meeting the key stage 2 expected standards in maths in the 2023-24 academic year was 73%.

The programme of study for key stage 3 is organised into apparently distinct domains, but pupils should build on key stage 2 and connections across mathematical ideas to develop fluency, mathematical reasoning and competency in solving increasingly sophisticated problems. The mathematical content set out in the key stage 3 and key stage 4 programmes of study covers a full range of material contained in the GCSE mathematics qualifications. In 2024, 72% of pupils achieved a GCSE grade 9 to 4 in mathematics by the end of key stage 4. I should point out that that is based on the current national curriculum, but there is an ongoing independent curriculum assessment review, as has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. I welcome the Education Committee's keen interest in this topic, and I am sure there are many other views as well.

Maths does not stop when someone leaves school. The study of maths post-16 is important to ensure the future workforce is skilled, competitive and productive. Skills developed while studying maths help adults with everyday life. There is an expectation that students will continue to study maths if they need to and, of course, if they choose to. From what I have heard from Members in this room, I am sure we all encourage those students who have an aptitude for maths to continue at A-level and Higher maths.

It is good to know that last year almost 100,000 students took A-level maths, and there was a 20% increase in students of A-level further maths. A-level maths remains the most popular A-level subject, as it has been since 2014. But there will also be those young people who did not get the grades they needed at school. Any young person who has not yet attained GCSE grade 4 in maths must continue to study maths under the maths and English condition of funding.

We support young people who are aged 16 to 18 at the start of their apprenticeships to continue to develop vital maths and English skills during their apprenticeships, either through GCSE or functional skills qualifications. Gaining level 2 skills in these areas is important, giving young people the opportunity to progress in life, in learning and in work.

[Janet Daby]

We do not stop with young people either. There are many adults who missed out earlier in life for whatever reason and need the right maths skills or qualifications to get on. Unfortunately, the numbers do not make good reading. Some 8.5 million adults have low maths or English skills, or both. That is why we fund adults aged 19 and above to study maths for free through our essential skills legal entitlements. This allows adults without level 2 maths skills to study high-quality qualifications such as GCSEs and functional skills qualifications and to gain the skills they need to succeed in life.

In 2023-24, we funded more than 100,000 adults to study maths through the legal entitlement. However, the number of adults studying maths has declined in recent years, so it is important to turn that around. Adults undertaking apprenticeships continue to benefit from the job-specific maths and English skills they need to do the job.

Although A-level maths is the single most popular A-level, we are not taking that for granted in our plan for change. We are investing £8.2 million to improve participation in and the teaching of advanced maths. The funding for the advanced maths support programme will support teacher career progression development and student enrichment, with a focus on girls and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, breaking down the barriers to success, so that all young people have the chance to progress to STEM and AI careers in the future.

The hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire spoke about long-term investment in mathematics and mathematical science. I would like to talk briefly about the importance of undergraduate-level maths and the significant growth in demand for jobs requiring undergraduate maths skills. We fully recognise the critical importance of sustaining a strong pipeline of mathematics graduates to meet the evolving need of the economy, research and innovation sectors. Maths underpins a wide range of disciplines and industries. Ensuring a steady flow of skilled graduates is essential to maintaining the UK's global competitiveness, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien).

It is encouraging to see that in 2023-24, 9,105 undergraduates qualified in maths, which is up 2.2% from the previous year, despite that figure being lower than in earlier years. It is also good to note that in 2024 there were more than 55,000 applications to main scheme full-time undergraduate courses in mathematics, an increase of 5.5% from 2023 and 10% from 2019.

Internationally, England has performed well in recent studies. However, there is still work to do and there is a significant difference in performance between different pupil groups, including a gap associated with disadvantage. In 2022, pupils in England achieved a mean PISA mathematics score of 492, which is significantly higher than the OECD average of 472. In 2023, pupils in England performed on average significantly above the TIMSS centre point in mathematics and science in both year 5 and year 9. They also performed significantly above the 2023 international mean in both subjects and in both year groups.

Many Members have talked today about teaching, teaching recruitment and our focus on that area. I will just reassure Members that we remain extremely focused on recruiting teachers, including maths teachers. We have a series of bursaries and scholarships, and we are also focusing on how we retain teachers. We will continue to focus on that, because we recognise that we need to meet that target of 6,500 teachers. I also reassure Members that we have had an increase in the number of teachers of maths at secondary schools and in SEND.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire for securing the debate and for speaking about the importance of maths. I am also grateful to all the other Members who participated in the debate for the significant points that they made. Everyone has made very valuable points about the importance of maths, so I hope that Members are happy that the Government share their views and the concerns they have raised. It is always good to find common ground and consensus across the House on important matters. The steps we have taken underline the importance of maths to individuals, to employers and indeed to the country.

4.16 pm

Ian Sollom: I thank the Minister for the Government's response to this debate and I also thank all the Members who contributed.

The hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) rightly pulled me up on engineering, which I will squeeze into the mathematical sciences, and I apologise. He also shared his love of teaching maths. It was so wonderful to hear his excitement, for example, about communicating the idea of the golden ratio, the beauty of which is everywhere to be seen.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) touched on an aspect of financial education that I did not get to, although I would have liked to. She also spoke about those who do not achieve grade 4 and have to go through endless rounds of resits. I could not agree more that getting the teaching of mathematics skills into vocational training will be a much better way forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) spoke eloquently about how we are bombarded with information in the modern world. Understanding numbers is critical for decision making and understanding the world around us. She also touched on dyscalculia, which requires specialist understanding in schools. I look forward to hearing more about the Government's plans for SEND in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) responded for the Lib Dems today. I, too, congratulate her on being a maths champion. I was not—I never achieved that particular accolade—but I hope that we are all maths champions today.

The spokesperson for the official Opposition, the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), shared possibly the most obscure mathematics joke that the House has ever heard. However, his description of Hilbert space was totally apt.

I will wrap up my comments now, so as not to go on infinitely. We have had a really good debate today. It reflects the importance of mathematics to the UK,

and long may that contribution continue. I am reassured by some of what the Minister said, but we will continue to scrutinise the Government's plans as we see them being put into action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contribution of maths to the UK.

4.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 5 June 2025

EDUCATION

School Food

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): This Government are today taking another step to delivering our plan for change as we announce that all children in households in receipt of universal credit will be eligible for free school meals from September 2026. This unprecedented step will put £500 back into families' pockets and lift 100,000 children across England out of poverty, to break down barriers to opportunity and tackle the scar of child poverty across our country.

Giving children access to a nutritious meal during the school day also leads to higher attainment, improved behaviour and better outcomes—meaning they get the best possible education and chance to succeed in work and life.

This new entitlement will apply for children in all settings where free school meals are provided, including schools, school-based nurseries and further education settings. We expect the majority of schools will allow parents to apply before the start of the school year September 2026, by providing their national insurance number to check their eligibility.

Since 2018, children have only been eligible for free school meals if their household income is less than £7,400 per year, meaning hundreds of thousands of children living in poverty have been unable to access free school meals.

The Government's historic new expansion to those in receipt of universal credit will change this and comes ahead of the child poverty taskforce publishing its 10-year strategy to drive sustainable change later this year.

Families struggling with the cost of living are also benefiting from the significant steps the Government are taking to raise the national minimum wage, uprate benefits and support 700,000 families through the fair repayment rate on universal credit deductions.

To ensure quality and nutrition in meals for the future, the Government are also acting quickly with experts across the sector to revise the school food standards, so every school is supported with the latest nutrition guidance.

The Government are also offering more than £13 million in funding to 12 food charities across England to redistribute thousands of tonnes of fresh produce directly from farms to fight food poverty in communities.

The tackling food surplus at the farm gate scheme is helping farms and organisations to work collaboratively to ensure edible food that might have been left in fields instead ends up on the plates of those who need it, including schoolchildren. Schools and local authorities will continue to receive pupil premium and home-to-school transport extended rights funding based on the existing free school meals threshold.

This is the latest step in the Government's plan for change to break the unfair link between background and opportunity, including rolling out free breakfast clubs to every primary school, expanding Government-funded childcare to 30 hours a week for working parents and legislating to cap the number of branded school uniform items.

From April 2026 until the end of Parliament, millions of households are set to receive a permanent yearly above inflation boost to universal credit. The increase, a key element of the Government's welfare reforms to be laid before Parliament, will tackle the destitution caused by years of inaction that has left the value of the standard allowance at a 40-year low by the early 2020s.

[HCWS682]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Supply Chains: Eradicating Modern Slavery

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Modern slavery includes forced labour, human trafficking and exploitative labour conditions and it remains a significant global rights violation, with an estimated 50 million individuals affected worldwide. The UK Government are committed to eradicating the presence of this heinous crime in its supply chains, including those within the health sector.

The NHS is one of the UK's largest procurers of goods and services, and as such has a significant role to play in combating modern slavery. The Government, supported by NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care, will send a clear signal that there is no place for goods and services linked to modern slavery in our healthcare system. I am pleased to announce that we are taking decisive action to eliminate modern slavery in NHS supply chains in England by proceeding to introduce robust regulations.

In my statement published on 21 November 2024, I confirmed DHSC's pledge to create regulations to eradicate from the NHS goods and services tainted by slavery and human trafficking, as required by the National Health Service Act 2006. The Department has worked hard to ensure that regulations are fit for purpose and interact with the current legislation and updated policies.

The review of modern slavery risk in NHS supply chains published on 14 December 2023 found that 21% of suppliers are at high risk of slavery and human trafficking. The review recognised the need to improve and standardise the approach to modern slavery risk management. It recommended that DHSC proceed to introduce regulations to enforce and enable a consistent approach to risk management across the NHS.

Modern slavery is a complex issue that cannot be tackled through a singular legislative measure. There are existing measures in place to tackle modern slavery both in terms of criminalising it and addressing it through commercial levers. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides a legal framework for punishing those committing modern slavery offences. These provisions do not regulate public bodies or provide a framework for public bodies to address modern slavery in their supply chains.

The Procurement Act 2023 provides a single framework for the rules and procedures that public procurement bodies must follow. It includes grounds for the mandatory or discretionary exclusion of suppliers from a tender process where modern slavery offences have been committed. Procurement of healthcare services for the NHS in England—approximately £60 billion—are not in scope of the Procurement Act 2023. They are covered by the Health Care Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023, which give NHS decision-makers flexibility to arrange services in the best interests of patients, the taxpayer and the population. We aim to introduce a single, enforceable approach to modern slavery that sets a standardised risk management approach across the NHS, covering all the supply chains for goods and services provided to the NHS.

These regulations will require all public bodies to assess modern slavery risks in their supply chains when procuring goods and services for our health service in England. We are then asking public bodies to take reasonable steps to address and, where possible, eliminate the modern slavery risks when designing procurement procedures, when awarding and managing contracts, and when setting up frameworks or dynamic markets.

Reasonable steps may include: ensuring robust conditions of participation and assessment criteria are built into procurement processes; using specific contract terms to monitor and require mitigation where instances of modern slavery are discovered; and monitoring suppliers' compliance and reassessing risk throughout the life of the contract.

We invited views and contributions from a wide range of stakeholders through extensive engagement and public consultation. We sought and considered input from public bodies, suppliers, trade associations, interest groups and the public. This has been a valuable step in the development of our regulations, which we intend to lay before Parliament soon.

The public consultation ran from 21 November 2024 to 13 February 2025. We are pleased to announce that the Government's response to feedback received has now been published.

This is a step towards strengthening the Department's leadership role in championing ethical procurement, setting a benchmark for other sectors beyond health. Modern slavery is an abhorrent crime that exists everywhere, not just the UK or within supply chains of the health sector. It demands a collective international response. DHSC has a duty to eradicate the use of goods and services tainted by modern slavery in NHS supply chains. We have a continued commitment to work across Government and sectors to ensure our efforts align with these priorities and uphold the responsibilities of public bodies within our jurisdiction.

[HCWS683]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Remote Attendance and Proxy Voting

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Today we have published the Government's response to our recent consultation on remote attendance and proxy voting in local authorities. The Government have previously set out our intention to reset the relationship between central and local government, and to establish a partnership that delivers better outcomes for the communities we represent. Key to this partnership is providing the sector with support and tools to modernise democratic engagement and make elected roles more accessible for more people.

In-person debate, discussion and the opportunity for residents to engage with their representatives are core aspects of local democracy. At the same time, we know that it is not always possible for elected members to attend local authority meetings in person. The Government response sets out our intention to permit local authorities to meet remotely, and to require them to develop their own remote attendance policies if they do. Local authorities vary in size, location, responsibility and make-up, and we want to ensure that they can develop appropriately responsive policies.

On proxy voting, we plan to require all principal—unitary, upper and second-tier—councils in England to implement proxy voting schemes to provide consistency for members who are absent when they become a new parent, or for serious or long-term illness. We plan for this requirement to apply to meetings of full council. For all other meetings, proxy voting may be used but will not be required, and substitute or pairing schemes may be more appropriate. We plan for other local authorities not listed above to be enabled, but not required, to implement proxy voting schemes for any of their meetings, in the context of member absences for serious or long-term illness or becoming a new parent.

We are keen to reflect feedback from the current make-up of councils, and the demands and requirements we have heard in that process, and to lead the way in opening up elected office for a broader range of candidates, including those of working age, those with caring responsibilities, and those with disabilities or other personal circumstances who would benefit from modernised democratic practices.

We plan to collaboratively develop guidance with the sector on both policies to ensure that they are supportive of members and officers.

We believe that these reforms will improve the experience of elected members serving their communities and encourage more people to consider locally-elected office.

[HCWS684]

Written Correction

Thursday 5 June 2025

Ministerial Correction

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The following extract is from Prime Minister's questions on 4 June 2025.

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.

[*Official Report*, 4 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 304.]

Written correction submitted by the Prime Minister:

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 year**.

ORAL ANSWERS

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