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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 19 June 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Animal Disease Outbreaks

1. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What steps he is taking to help prevent animal disease outbreaks.
[904684]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): Good morning. Can I start by acknowledging the expertise that the hon. Gentleman brings to the House? We are investing in the Animal and Plant Health Agency, and have committed more than £200 million to the next stage of rebuilding our biosecurity facilities at Weybridge to enhance our ability to understand, detect, prevent, respond to and recover from outbreaks. That is in addition to supporting farmers through the animal health and welfare pathway, which includes veterinary visits to improve livestock health, welfare, biosecurity and productivity.

Dr Chambers: I thank the Minister for his comments. The recent National Audit Office report was hugely concerning, and it was clear that the UK is at high risk of, and unprepared for, a major animal disease outbreak. Post-Brexit checks mean that only 5% of animals are physically checked as they come into the UK. We know that a lot of illegal meat is coming in through the ports, and our farm animal veterinary workforce is overstretched. Also, climate change and antimicrobial resistance are putting us at a higher risk of disease outbreaks. If a disease such as foot and mouth hits again, it will devastate British agriculture and rural communities, and have an impact on our food security. Can the Minister assure us that the Government are treating the issues that the report raises as a strategic national threat, and that its warnings will not be ignored until it is too late?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We take this matter extremely seriously. Sadly, it is not a new problem. We have had similar reports in the past, and I can assure him that we are giving careful consideration to this report. We will develop a plan to address it. He will be aware that there are a range of threats, and it is important that we balance our work. We have taken strong measures to restrict personal imports, given the threats on the continent.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): As the House will know, sadly the epicentre of the UK bluetongue outbreak was in my South Norfolk constituency, so biosecurity is a huge issue for my farmers. Will we look to lower our biosecurity risks by returning to checking products at the Bastion Point inland border security centre at the White Cliffs business park, which is closer to the border point, instead of products having to travel nearly 17 miles before they are checked?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank my hon. Friend and relatively near neighbour. He is right to raise the bluetongue issues, which have been dealt with effectively by our officials. His points about border controls and checks are under close consideration, partly as a consequence of our new arrangements with the European Union.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Many Welsh farmers in mid-Wales depend on being able to move their livestock back and forth over the border with England. Indeed, 550 farms straddle the border. The imposition of a veterinary hard border between England and Wales will be damaging for the farming community in my constituency and the local economy that they support. Farmers simply cannot afford to pay £70 a beast for testing, and apparently there is not even enough testing capacity for all the livestock that cross the border anyway. What steps is the Minister taking to address the situation, and to prevent Welsh farmers from losing out?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to ask that question. As I just referenced, the bluetongue issue has been serious and difficult. We have made a sensible decision for England, and the approach we have taken has managed to control the spread. The decision in Wales is obviously a matter for the Welsh Government, and I am sure that he would understand that I respect that decision. We are talking about how we can resolve the difficult issues that he has raised.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am deeply distressed that the Government are planning to extend the badger cull, because the evidence shows that with good testing and biosecurity, we can bring down rates of tuberculosis. I heard what the representative from Gatcombe farm said when they visited Parliament just a couple of weeks ago. Will the Minister look at the evidence? Before moving forward with a badger cull, will he look at biosecurity measures that could ensure that we really get on top of bovine TB?

Daniel Zeichner: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are not extending the badger cull. We have a clear commitment to ending the badger cull in this Parliament, and I will visit Gatcombe with others in the weeks ahead. We are taking an evidence-based approach. We also have to make sure that we help farmers tackle a distressing and difficult disease.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): This month, the National Audit Office's "Resilience to animal diseases" report laid bare the startling reality about our biosecurity, stating:

“Defra and APHA would struggle to manage a more severe outbreak or concurrent serious outbreaks”,

and the risk of site failure at the APHA site at Weybridge is at its maximum rating. As I have raised 16 times in this Parliament, a fully funded and urgent rebuild of APHA in Weybridge is critical. It got no mention at all by the Chancellor in the spending review; it merely has repeated partial funding from the Department. When will the Government wake up, get a grip, and press on with this vital project as soon as possible, before disaster strikes?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman knows that I take this issue very seriously. I gently point out to him that this exact situation was pointed out by the National Audit Office during the last Parliament. The previous Government had 14 years to get the principles in place, so I will not take any lessons from the Conservatives. I can tell him that we have a £208 million investment this year; that is what was asked for. I can assure him that there will be funds in future, because we take biosecurity very seriously.

Chalk Streams

2. **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help restore chalk streams. [904685]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Chalk streams are not only a beautiful and iconic part of our precious natural landscape; they are symbols of our national heritage. The protection and restoration of our cherished chalk streams is a core ambition in our overall programme of reform to the water sector.

Luke Murphy: I am grateful to the Minister for her response. In Hampshire, we are blessed with several rare and irreplaceable chalk streams, including the River Loddon, the River Itchen and the River Test. The Minister will be aware of the campaigns to secure greater protection for these irreplaceable habitats, including during the passage of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, and I pay tribute to the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, Greener Basingstoke, and Natural Basingstoke for all their work. Can the Minister confirm that this Government are committed to the protection of chalk streams, and set out what further steps they will take to restore these precious habitats?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is quite right: chalk streams are a source of beauty and national pride. Just a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting a chalk stream restoration project with Charles Rangeley-Wilson, who is a passionate campaigner for chalk streams. Under this Labour Government, water companies will spend more than £2 billion to deliver over 1,000 actions for chalk stream restoration, and will reduce their abstraction from chalk streams by 126 million litres per day.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): The River Chess in Rickmansworth is one of the chalk streams that goes through my constituency. The volunteers at the Rickmansworth Waterways Trust are keeping our canal heritage alive, despite funding for the Canal & River Trust being cut. I believe the cut is short-sighted, because these waterways tackle water shortages, boost

biodiversity and protect 2,500 miles of national assets for a modest cost. Will the Minister rethink the funding cuts and back the Fund Britain's Waterways campaign, so that local champions like David Montague and his team at Batchworth lock are not left to sink or swim on their own?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say how important volunteers are in supporting our natural environment up and down the country. He will be aware that the decision to reduce the funding for the Canal & River Trust was taken by the previous Government, and that was extended under this Government. There will be a tapering off of some of the funding, but we continue to support water projects up and down the country. As I have already mentioned, the changes that we are introducing for water companies will help to protect not only our beautiful chalk streams, but all our rivers, lakes and seas.

Nature-friendly Farming

3. **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): What steps he is taking to ensure that nature-friendly farming funding schemes are accessible. [904687]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): On 11 June, we committed to the largest ever investment in nature. Funding for the environmental land management schemes will increase to £2 billion per annum by 2028-29, and we now have more farmers than ever in nature-friendly farming schemes, which we should all be pleased about. We are reforming the sustainable farming incentive to target funds fairly and effectively, and to ensure that, in those schemes, the user experience is absolutely prioritised.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): Farmers in my constituency of Frome and East Somerset have had to deal with constantly changing information regarding the sustainable farming incentive. We welcome the news that the Government have allowed those who started their application between January and March to submit it now, but when it comes to sustainable farming and nature recovery, what support is in place for those who have not submitted or started their application?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Lady will appreciate that we inherited a scheme that did not have proper budgetary controls. Once the money was spent, none was available to people who had yet to come into the scheme. We have dealt with the administrative problem of those who had expected to benefit when they applied. We are planning to make an announcement in the next few weeks, in which we will explain the future scheme for people who are interested. We very much want to get more people in.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Lord Don Curry's recent report on a sustainable farming model for the future was sent to the Secretary of State earlier this month. Have the Secretary of State and the Minister read it yet? Do they agree with me and Lord Curry that the UK is in a dangerously precarious position, given that we produce domestically only 55% of the food we need, and that we are therefore not food secure

and need an urgent plan for food security? Will he meet me and the noble Lord to examine this industry-wide report, and start the process of putting Britain on the path to food security?

Daniel Zeichner: I think the hon. Gentleman knows me well enough to know that when a report from Lord Curry arrives in my inbox, I read it. I did so, with great interest. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman that we are not food secure—the food security report produced at the end of last year explained this very carefully—but I am always willing and happy to discuss these issues with him and Lord Curry.

Fruit and Vegetables Aid Scheme

4. **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the closure of the fruit and vegetables aid scheme on fruit and vegetable growers. [904688]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The fruit and vegetables aid scheme is an EU legacy scheme, and it closes in England on 1 January 2026. It is available only via producer organisations—that was an EU requirement—and only 20% of growers are benefiting from it; 80% get no benefit. All growers will continue to benefit from the farming innovation programme's £63 million of grants, and the five-year extension to the seasonal workers visa scheme that we have announced.

Dr Evans: In my constituency, I have Busby, the biggest strawberry and raspberry farm in Leicestershire. It uses the fruit and vegetables aid scheme, which is due to run out at the end of 2025, in order to invest and innovate. The Government have been in power for one year; they wrote to me in May, saying they had “plans to simplify and rationalise agriculture grants”, but we have six months to go before the scheme ends, and Busby still does not know what its future funding will look like. What is replacing the scheme, so that Busby can carry on growing the finest strawberries and raspberries in Leicestershire?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to praise our fruit-growing sector. It has been known for a long time that this scheme is coming to an end, and I am afraid the truth is that it did not provide very good value for money. We will replace it as part of our new food strategy, and announcements on that will be coming down the line. However, I am slightly surprised to hear that he is so keen to preserve an EU-based scheme. Who knew that there were Opposition Members still hankering to be in the EU?

Water Company Fines: Water Restoration Fund

5. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): If he will make it his policy to redistribute fines levied against water companies since November 2023 to the water restoration fund. [904689]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): This Labour Government have launched the largest ever crackdown against poorly behaving water companies. As part of

this operation, Ofwat has hit Thames Water with a £100 million fine, which is the biggest in British history. I am delighted to confirm today that fines collected by regulators will be directly invested in projects, led by communities up and down the country, to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas.

Caroline Voaden: I thank the Minister for her answer on the water restoration fund, but it would be good to know when it will come back into action. A Liberal Democrat freedom of information request found that Ofwat has failed to force water companies to pay any fines for sewage discharge cases since 2021, despite sewage being pumped into waterways for over 3.6 million hours last year alone. Meanwhile, water company bosses earned a collective total of £20 million in the 2023-24 financial year. The water restoration fund provided valuable funds to local communities to improve water quality and river health. When will the Government stand up to the water companies, make them pay for the damage they are inflicting on our environment, and ringfence this money for communities, so that they can protect and improve their waterways?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Lady, but with respect, the response was in my original answer. As I confirmed, the water restoration fund is continuing as planned. Successful projects have been notified, and money has been announced and given. As I have stated, all the money collected from water fines will be diverted into nature projects to help clean up our rivers, lakes and seas across the country—and yes, that money will be ringfenced.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The interim Cunliffe report on the water sector has highlighted weak, disjointed and reactive regulation by various regulators. If the commission's final findings confirm the assessment of the regulators, can the Minister confirm that she will act swiftly and decisively to reform regulation of our water companies?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the important work that the commission has been doing. I do not want to get ahead of any announcements the commission may make—it is not long to wait now, Mr Speaker; it is only a few weeks—but clearly regulation has not been working, so action is needed.

Fly-tipping

6. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping. [904690]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Fly-tipping sky-rocketed under the Conservative Government. This Labour Government will crack down on the waste cowboys in order to clean up Britain's streets. We will support councils in seizing and crush their vehicles. We will use drones and CCTV to hunt down the fly-tippers, forcing them to clean up their mess, and we will bring in new prison sentences for those transporting waste illegally. I am delighted to tell the House that we are beginning the clean-up of the disgraceful fly-tipping in Hoads Wood site of special scientific interest, which happened under the previous Government. That work is ongoing.

Kevin Bonavia: I thank the Minister for her very strong answer. Recently, I have been made aware of a recurring incident of fly-tipping in Bedwell, in the heart of my constituency. The council is working very hard to clear up the mess and find those responsible, but the situation is being made worse by people picking up that rubbish and taking it to the nearby woods. Will the Minister offer extra support to councils like mine, so that together we can clean up our communities and crack down on criminals who think that they can dump their waste with impunity, wrecking the lives of constituent like mine, and making their lives a living hell?

Mary Creagh: I have the greatest sympathy for my hon. Friend's constituents. I encourage Stevenage borough council to work with our National Fly-tipping Prevention Group, which shares best practice on tackling fly-tipping. We are also taking direct action on some of the littered items, because once there is litter, people think that they can fly-tip, and then they think that they can dump. That is why we have banned the sale of single-use vapes from 1 June, and I stand ready to work with his council.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): When it comes to cracking down on litter and fly-tipping, I would welcome anything the Government do. However, during proceedings on the Crime and Policing Bill, which passed through this place this week, Government Members had ample opportunity to accept various new clauses and amendments that would ensure stricter tackling of littering and fly-tipping, but failed to do so. What message does that send to those who go around tossing litter and fly-tipping, and, importantly, to the many volunteers in constituencies like mine who work day in, day out, to clear up that litter?

Mary Creagh: We have said that we will use existing powers to create clean-up squads, which will force the waste criminals to clear up their mess. It is a little rich of the Conservative party, after 14 years of failure, to attack us after just 10 months in government. We have said that we are changing the carriers, brokers and dealers regime to tighten up arrangements relating to who can carry and transport waste, because the Conservatives left us a paper-based system that is open to fraud.

Access to Nature: Young People

7. **Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve young people's access to nature for outdoor activities. [904692]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I thank my hon. Friend, who is a distinguished mountaineer and mountain guide, for his personal courage and bravery in climbing various very tall mountains, and for championing access to the outdoors. The Government are introducing the national youth guarantee and investing £1.5 million in bursaries to help disadvantaged young people to access the great outdoors. We cannot love what we do not know, so we are delighted to be introducing the new natural history GCSE, in order to build on the UK's unrivalled history and research in this area.

Andy MacNae: I thank the Minister for acknowledging the power of the outdoors. I should say that I have failed to climb many more mountains than I ever actually got up. Many of the lessons I learned in the mountains are the reason why I am here today. The power of the outdoors in building confidence and resilience among young people is enormous. I am so pleased that 244 young people in Rossendale and Darwen are, right now, taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme; that is fantastic. For many, discovering the power of nature can be life-changing. Nationally, the evidence of the benefits of outdoor recreation is extensive and unarguable, yet for too many, access to the outdoors remains limited, and 20 million people do not live within 15 minutes of green and blue space. Do the Secretary of State and the Minister agree that a key ambition of access legislation must be access for all?

Mary Creagh: The Government are absolutely committed to extending access, which is why we have committed to creating nine new national river walks and three national forests, the first of which is the Western forest, which I had the pleasure of planting a tree in a couple of months ago. We are also designating Wainwright's coast-to-coast walk as a national trail. My hon. Friend is right about the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme, which my daughter will be taking part in this summer. We support the award, which aims to reach a quarter of a million more young people by next year.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The rivers and coastline in my constituency are treasured by local families and children, including my own, whether they are kayaking and paddleboarding on the Cuckmere and Ouse rivers or swimming off the beaches of Seaford bay, yet they are regularly blighted by sewage discharges courtesy of Southern Water. Will the Minister meet me to discuss our local campaign to secure bathing water status for the Cuckmere river and blue flag status for Seaford beach to reassure local families and visitors alike that we are taking water quality seriously, so that they can be confident that they can use these outdoor spaces safely?

Mary Creagh: I would be delighted to offer up the Water Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), to meet the hon. Gentleman on that issue. I would just say that the King Charles III coastal path will open up a quarter of a million hectares of open access land on the coast—I know that Lewes is very close to some of that spectacular scenery.

Public Bodies: British Produce

8. **Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to encourage public bodies to prioritise the purchase of British produce. [904693]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): We have a strong ambition that half of all food purchased across the public sector should be locally produced or certified to higher environmental standards. The new national procurement policy statement requires Government contracts to favour products that are certified to higher environmental standards, which we believe British producers, operating to higher standards, will be well placed to supply.

Rachel Hopkins: Both beef and crop farmers in my constituency tell me how important it is to produce high-quality food and contribute to UK food security. Can the Minister outline what conversations he has had with public bodies to encourage them to prioritise purchasing local British produce, and to maximise the social value of UK food production?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank my hon. Friend and relatively near neighbour for her question. We are in constant dialogue to achieve exactly that objective. She will have noticed last week's announcement on the extension of free school meals to everyone on universal credit, which is a key plank of our food strategy. It is exactly those kinds of initiatives that we think will benefit British producers.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Many GB-based horticultural companies, as well as other companies, want to supply British produce into Northern Ireland, but have difficulty with the bureaucracy and paperwork required by the procedures implemented some years ago. Will the Minister operate in concert with his colleagues in Cabinet and Government to eliminate the bureaucratic problems that are preventing those companies from supplying UK citizens in Northern Ireland?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is exactly why we wanted to improve our relationship with the European Union. We have negotiated and are undertaking further negotiations to improve those systems to very much help people to achieve that. We genuinely believe there are real opportunities here if we can eliminate some of the unnecessary bureaucracy.

River Pollution

9. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle river pollution. [904694]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): My hon. Friend will be aware that we inherited record levels of sewage pollution in our waterways from the previous Government. Since the election, we have launched the biggest crackdown on water pollution in history: unfair bonuses have been banned for water company executives, and water bosses who cover up pollution crimes now face up to two years in prison. We will also invest a record £104 billion of private funding to upgrade crumbling sewage pipes and reduce discharges by nearly 50% within five years.

Catherine Fookes: I remain extremely grateful for the £100 million of support the Government have given to the River Wye action plan—a pioneering joint effort between the UK and Welsh Governments—but we must do more, including using sustainable farming initiatives to support farmers to look at their stocking rates. I am concerned by reports of Thames Water seeking regulatory easements. Can the Secretary of State assure me that this Government will continue to crack down on water pollution from all sources, in the Wye, the Thames and all across the UK?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I understand her concerns. I reassure her that the Government will always act in the national interest on

these issues. Thames Water must meet its statutory and regulatory obligations to its customers and to the environment—it is only right that the company is subject to the same consequences as any other water company. The company remains financially stable, but we have stepped up our preparations and stand ready for all eventualities, as I have said before, including a special administration regime, if that were to become necessary.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): As the Secretary of State knows, my constituency of North Herefordshire is very seriously affected by water pollution in the Lugg and the Wye. I confess that I am disappointed that, in both his answers to the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes), he did not mention agricultural pollution at all. That is despite the fact that agriculture is the main source of water pollution in the country, as is shown in the report of the Independent Water Commission, which unfortunately was not allowed to look into it in any detail. I pay tribute to River Action, which this week won a court case forcing planning authorities to consider the cumulative impact of industrial agricultural development, and to Greenpeace, which last week pointed out the impact of toxic sewage sludge. Will he confirm whether he is updating the farming rules for water? Given that he has cut the budget of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we are over time as it is.

Steve Reed: The hon. Member will be aware that we are supporting work in the Wye catchment area to deal with those problems, but she is quite right in what she says. The environmental land management schemes support farmers to reduce agricultural run-off. We are making the announcement that she just mentioned today, and we are also supporting the ELM schemes, which help farmers to improve their soil quality so that the soil holds more water, and to use less fertiliser and pesticides, which reduces the amount of run-off. Therefore, we are taking action on agricultural pollution, and the announcement that she asked for is being made today.

Topical Questions

T1. [904717] **Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): Last week, the Minister for Water and Flooding and I attended the United Nations ocean conference in Nice. We announced that the Government will introduce a Bill by the end of the year to ratify the high seas treaty, delivering on our commitment to protect 30% of the ocean by 2030. This agreement will provide the first legal mechanism to create protected areas in international waters. The UK reiterated our commitment to agreeing an ambitious plastic pollution treaty in Geneva this coming August, and we have outlined our plans to ban bottom trawling across more of our English seas in marine protected areas. These measures will protect sensitive seabed habitats and important species from the destruction caused by this damaging practice.

Luke Taylor: The Beddington energy recovery facility has an outstanding request to increase its annual permit tonnage to 382,000 tonnes from the originally approved 300,000 tonnes when planning was approved. I know the Secretary of State is familiar with this, as the facility is a mere 100 metres from his constituency. May I ask him whether the Environment Agency will listen to local residents, including his own, and to councils across Sutton, Merton, Croydon and Kingston and refuse the permit expansion, as sufficient incinerator capacity already exists in London?

Steve Reed: As the hon. Member says, I do know of this situation because the facility is adjacent to my constituency as well. He will know that I cannot comment on what the Environment Agency is intending to do, because it is its decision. None the less, I certainly agree with him that the EA must listen to constituents and people living in the local area who will be affected by this decision.

T2. [904718] **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Whether it is cheap vapes littering our parks and town centres, or fly-tipping blocking country lanes in Norton Canes, my constituents are rightly fed up with waste crime. My local council has had to deal with 1,500 instances of fly-tipping in the past three years, and it is all too often paid for by taxpayers, not criminals. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to get tough on waste crime?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): We have announced plans to tighten up the regulation of those who transport and manage waste, moving them from a light-touch regime into a permitted system, which gives the Environment Agency a greater range of powers. It will also introduce the possibility of up to five years in prison for those who breach the new laws.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to cover for the shadow Secretary of State, who is speaking to farmers at the 140th Lincolnshire Agricultural Show. Having visited many such shows myself, including North Sheep 2025 and Cereals 2025 just last week, may I say how disappointed I am by the Secretary of State's lack of attendance at these crucial farming events?

At a time when our farmers are going through some of the most extraordinary pressures in a generation, we have now learned that this Government have chosen to slash the farming budget. To make matters worse, Ministers have spent the past week trying to sell cuts of more than £100 million a year in real terms as a historic deal for farmers. If the Secretary of State has secured such a historic deal for his Department, where does DEFRA rank compared with others in terms of cuts in the spending review?

Steve Reed: First, I remind the hon. Gentleman that I attended the Royal Cornwall Show with him just a few days ago. I am surprised he has forgotten that, because we sat together in the same tent and enjoyed a very pleasant lunch. I do not know what is wrong with his memory, but anyway.

The funding for ELM schemes paid to farmers will increase from £800 million in the last year of the Tory Government to £2 billion by 2028-29—that is a 150% increase under Labour compared with what the Tories were paying. No wonder the hon. Gentleman is so angry.

Robbie Moore: It is a shame that the Secretary of State did not do any media at the Royal Cornwall Show and pulled out of speaking events. I can tell him that DEFRA is ranked the third biggest loser of any Government Department in the spending review, and that is his failure. In reality, we are now looking at cuts to the farming budget of about 20% in real terms over the next three years, at a time when farmers need more support and certainty than ever. It gets worse: we now hear that the Government have issued further statutory guidance on farming rules for water, with more to follow, effectively aiming to ban—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have to try to get the other shadow Minister in. You went too low down the Order Paper—this is topical questions, not a full statement. I hope you are about to finish.

Robbie Moore: This is effectively going to ban the spraying of organic manures in the coming months. Is the Secretary of State categorically ruling that out?

Steve Reed: I am happy to send the shadow Minister the list of media coverage I got from the Royal Cornwall Show. He does not seem to be any better at googling than remembering who he sat down with at lunch. I am delighted that the spending review was welcomed by the environmental NGOs and the National Farmers Union as it funds activities that include the ones he referred to. It seems that everyone is delighted with the review apart from him.

T3. [904719] **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): Residents of Thornton-Cleveleys in my constituency are being warned not to eat food grown in their own gardens because a local site is being investigated after testing found high concentrations around it of a banned substance called perfluorooctanoic acid, which has proven to be carcinogenic, and there have been discharges into the protected River Wyre. This is affecting hundreds of residents in the area, and there are fears of contamination to water and locally grown food. What steps will the Minister take to address this problem under the current regulations to ensure that constituents like mine are protected?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. The Government are, of course, strongly committed to ensuring a high level of protection for human health and the environment. I am aware that the Environment Agency is investigating this matter, so I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it in detail.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): The National Audit Office report says that the Government really need to step up their border checks. As the Government have admitted in answers to me, 72,872 kg of illegal

meat imports were seized between January and April this year, close to the 92,000 kg seized in the whole of 2024. With foot and mouth disease and African swine fever on our doorstep in Europe, I shudder to think how much potentially infected meat is slipping in undetected. This is a catastrophe waiting to happen. Will the Government act urgently to strengthen our biosecurity and our border checks before it is too late?

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The hon. Gentleman will know that we have acted with speed and haste to make sure that we are protected. We have banned personal imports, and we are absolutely committed to giving the Weybridge facility the support that it requires—we have given it what it asked for. The question is why we were in that position in the first place when we came into Government. What were his Government doing for all those years? These are not new problems.

T5. [904724] **Chris Kane** (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): United Auctions in my constituency has recently become the UK's first employee-owned livestock auctioneer. Will the Secretary of State commit to doing more to encourage employee ownership models as a great option for rural businesses that want to thrive, attract new talent and remain rooted in the communities that they serve? Will he also congratulate the new owners?

Daniel Zeichner: I am delighted to hear that news. I assure my hon. Friend that we are looking very closely at how we can use the co-operative model to boost the rural economy, particularly in respect of farming profitability, as we know that access to new private market opportunities is not always straightforward.

T4. [904720] **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): The Minister previously stated that the extended producer responsibility was not retrospective. However, the industry understands that it is now DEFRA's position that it is a retrospective tax. Will the Minister confirm what industry engagement was undertaken to advise producers of the change to a retrospective tax?

Mary Creagh: I am happy to write to the hon. Lady in great detail and at great length, but it is not something I can explain in 20 seconds.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Following last month's Supreme Court ruling about wild camping on Dartmoor, will the Secretary of State confirm whether he believes that responsible wild camping should be permitted in the other national parks?

Mary Creagh: We were delighted by the Supreme Court judgment on Dartmoor wild camping and we understand the calls to expand it. However, we have no plans to extend it, as it does need to be balanced with landowner rights and habitat protection.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): The gamekeepers employed by the military shoots on Salisbury plain are an essential resource in preserving that rare and special habitat, but DEFRA has given the rights to award licences to the shoots to Natural England, a quango

that is ideologically opposed to shooting. Will the Minister take responsibility and ensure that the shoots on Salisbury plain get their licences this year?

Daniel Zeichner: I am very sorry to hear the hon. Gentleman criticising Natural England in that way. It is a very responsible agency that does very good work on behalf of us all. We made the decision not to issue a general licence for gamebird releases in special protection areas such as Salisbury plain. We think it is really important that we help protect our internationally important bird populations from avian influenza, and I am sure he would share that goal.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): UK flour millers, including ADM in my constituency, are already contributing to our food security. However, there are fears in the industry that trade deals could curtail that progress. Will the Minister outline the steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the welcome trade deals struck by the Government do not undermine our food security?

Daniel Zeichner: The UK flour sector is really important. I very much welcome the work that that sector does for us. It is right to raise the point about trade deals. We are determined to make sure that we do nothing to undermine a very successful sector that helps keep food security at high levels in this country.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): It was reported today that the Treasury may be planning to siphon money off from the water restoration fund for "unrelated purposes". What assurance can the Secretary of State provide that money in the restoration fund will be used to clean up our waterways, not to cover rising Government debt interest?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I do not recognise that report. The money from the restoration fund is being used now to fund projects up and down the country. As I have mentioned, the future money from fines will be ringfenced for environmental projects up and down the country as well.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Compensation has been given to Severn Trent customers in Norton and Packmoor who had suffered discoloured water supplies, and to another resident who had sewage flooding their garden. While I welcome recent investment to upgrade the pipes in Smallthorne, Burslem and Tunstall, will the Secretary of State please outline how he will hold water bosses to account, so that residents finally see real improvements?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is of course an outstanding champion for his constituents in Stoke-on-Trent North. During 2024-25, more than 800 compliance inspections were conducted at Severn Trent Water sites. The Environment Agency will be attending more minor pollution incidents and will continue to attend all serious pollution incidents. We have, of course, given Ofwat the power to ban the payment of bonuses to water bosses who damage the environment and let customers down. I congratulate my hon. Friend on supporting those tough new measures.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Solicitor General was asked—

Violence against Women and Girls: Prosecution

1. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases involving violence against women and girls. [904674]

7. **Katie White** (Leeds North West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases involving violence against women and girls. [R] [904682]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): This Government were elected with a landmark mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. Despite the challenges we inherited, we have recently secured a record funding settlement for the Crown Prosecution Service, which will allow it to hire more prosecutors and play its part in rebuilding a criminal justice system that truly delivers for victims.

Catherine Fookes: I was glad to hear, after I raised this matter for the first time in November, of the launch of the west midlands pilot of the victims' right to review scheme, which will give victims of rape and serious sexual violence an opportunity to challenge a prosecutor's decision to drop their case. However, too many victims have already waited a huge amount of time to get any opportunity for justice, including those in my constituency of Monmouthshire. After being reported to the police, adult rape cases take an average of two years to complete in court. What work are the Government doing to reduce those waiting times?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. I know from meeting rape charities, and indeed from meeting CPS units right across the country, how long waits for justice harm victims and sometimes mean that they drop out of cases altogether. The Government and the CPS are taking action to reduce delays, including by increasing the number of Crown court sitting days and the number of counsel available to prosecute rape and serious sexual assault cases.

Katie White: I declare that I am an ambassador for Leeds Women's Aid. I welcome, as do my constituents in Leeds North West, the proposed changes to the victims' right to review scheme that are being piloted, which will give victims a greater say in their cases. Will the Solicitor General outline the specific way in which those changes will help victims and what the impacts will be?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. The victims' right to review scheme is an important pillar of the criminal justice system. Through the CPS pilot scheme to offer victims a review prior to a decision to offer no evidence, victims will be empowered to challenge more decisions. That is likely to lead to better decision making, more victims staying in the system and, ultimately, more offenders being put behind bars.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Earlier this week, I was unsuccessful in trying to amend the Government's proposed new spiking law to ensure that reckless spiking is an offence. Will the Solicitor General meet me to discuss the challenges of prosecuting violent crime towards women and girls if the Government are unpersuaded to ensure that reckless spiking becomes illegal?

The Solicitor General: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss that issue. He will be pleased to know—indeed, he may well already know—that we introduced a new offence for spiking and that we have included new spiking training for up to 10,000 staff in the night-time economy to ensure they have the skills to support victims and prevent such incidents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Solicitor General outline what support there is for the families of domestic abuse victims—specifically children who have witnessed and been traumatised by that abuse and who need support, which would also enable their parents to feel more confident in continuing their legal cases?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member raises a very important issue. It is incredibly important that victims of abuse of any kind, and especially children, are supported through the criminal justice system, both by police and then by the CPS.

Hostile State Activity: Prosecution

2. **Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of offenders charged with hostile state activity. [904676]

The Solicitor General: This Government will always make the country's national security our No. 1 priority. That is why we take any attempted activity conducted by hostile states on British soil extremely seriously. The CPS's special counter-terrorism division works closely with police at the investigation stage to build very strong cases from the outset. That approach delivers results: last year, 98% of those tried for terrorism-related offences in this country were convicted.

Jon Pearce: Many of my constituents are concerned about state-backed terror, given the recent arrests in and around my constituency. Will the Solicitor General update the House on the implementation of Jonathan Hall's report on state-backed terrorism and how that may help us to improve conviction rates?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend rightly mentions Jonathan Hall KC's recommendations. As the Home Secretary announced, we are committed to taking forward the suite of recommendations made in Jonathan Hall's review to tackle state threats, including the creation of a new proscription-like power.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I recently met Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Chloe Cheung, who reported being followed by men here in London after a large bounty was placed on her head by the Chinese

Government. Despite providing copious evidence to the police, she received no follow-up at all. The lawyers of detained activist Jimmy Lai are also being harassed, while the plans for the new Chinese super-embassy, if built, could seriously increase China's capacity for surveillance, intimidation and transnational repression against Hong Kong activists here in London. Will the Solicitor General please commit to looking into this issue urgently so that we can all have confidence in the UK's ability to prosecute hostile state actors and protect those who live on UK soil?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member raises an important issue, and I will make sure that Home Office colleagues have heard the concerns he raises. Ministers have raised concerns of that nature with the authorities, including in Hong Kong and Beijing, and I want to be very clear: we will not tolerate any attempts by foreign Governments to harass or harm their critics on British soil.

Immigration: Government Legal Advice

3. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Whether the Attorney General has provided the Government with legal advice on immigration matters. [904677]

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member will be aware that the Law Officers' convention prevents me from disclosing whether advice has been sought from the Law Officers, whether advice has been given and, indeed, the content of any advice.

Blake Stephenson: The Attorney General has recently been forced to apologise for his comments about those who believe the European convention on human rights is impeding efforts to tackle illegal migration. Does that not call into question the credibility of any advice given by the Attorney General and whether we can take the Government's plans to stop the boats seriously?

The Solicitor General: As I said, the Law Officers' convention prevents me from disclosing whether Lord Hermer advised on this issue or indeed any other. It does not, however, prevent me from saying that I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman wants to talk about illegal migration, given the abject mess the Conservatives left the country in.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Counter-terrorism powers could optimise the effectiveness of the Border Security Command. Could the Solicitor General advise on how the Crown Prosecution Service is being empowered to tackle illegal migration and people smuggling?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises an important point and refers to a critical part of the Government's plan to secure our borders. The CPS has recently received new funding to step up surveillance and prosecutions, which will mean that those who commit horrible crimes in relation to people smuggling feel the full force of the law.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Solicitor General.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): Nine of our European allies have written to Strasbourg, requesting a reset of the European convention on human rights to allow national Parliaments to remove foreign offenders who threaten public safety. Britain's signature is missing. In fact, we were not even asked to join. Unfortunately, that says everything about the way in which this Government are viewed by others. Can the Solicitor General confirm whether the Government will now back that initiative, or will they leave it to others to defend the primacy of democratic lawmaking?

The Solicitor General: As the Lord Chancellor made very clear yesterday, the UK remains committed to the ECHR, but it is absolutely right that as the challenges facing modern democracies evolve, so must international law and, indeed, domestic interpretation of that law. This Government are taking a serious, considered and responsible approach, and we have a history of engaging constructively with the Court.

Helen Grant: According to press reports, Qari Abdul Rauf, a convicted ringleader of the Rochdale child rape gang, is still living in the town. That is nearly 10 years after a judge ordered his deportation. Repeated appeals under article 8 of the ECHR—the right to family life—have blocked his removal. What action are the Government taking to stop criminals abusing article 8 to defeat Parliament's clear intention to deport them?

The Solicitor General: If you come to this country, you play by our rules. That is why since we came into office, we have been taking action to ensure that foreign offenders can be deported at the earliest opportunity. In the period since we have been in office, we have deported nearly 30,000 foreign criminals and failed asylum seekers. That is the highest rate of returns for more than half a decade. It is the right thing to do, it will save prison capacity, and it will save taxpayers' money.

Non-violent Drug-related Offences: Prosecution

4. **Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): If she will take steps to reduce the number of prosecutions brought for non-violent drug-related offences. [904678]

The Solicitor General: In its recent report, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs highlighted the Government's safer streets mission as a key vehicle to address the connection between drug use and criminality. The Government's flagship Crime and Policing Bill will expand police powers to conduct more drug tests on more suspects upon arrest, which will help to direct more drug users into treatment and away from illegal drug use.

Siân Berry: As drug-related deaths are now at record levels, particularly because of the increase in synthetic opioids, I believe that we need to look again at supervised drug-consumption facilities, which are an evidence-based intervention that could save lives and public spending. Both the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and the Health and Social Care Committee support the idea. Will the Solicitor General consider facilitating a legal mechanism here, as in Scotland under the

Lord Advocate, to enable local health and police authorities that wish to pilot such facilities to establish their efficacy to do so?

The Solicitor General: It is absolutely right that we ensure that those who fall into drug addiction are able to access adequate support, services and routes to rehabilitation. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing said to the Scottish Affairs Committee recently, the Government do not have plans to amend the law to permit the introduction of drug-consumption facilities. We are clear, however, that drug deaths are avoidable, and we are committed to supporting more people into recovery so that they can live healthier and longer lives.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Given that the independent sentencing review suggests that more use could be made of community sentences in such cases, but courts seem reluctant to use them as an alternative to custody, what can the Law Officers do to ensure that sentencers have confidence in community sentences, which have better outcomes than imprisonment in reducing reoffending?

The Solicitor General: As my hon. Friend knows, David Gauke has conducted a sentencing review that covers a wide range of these issues. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to have public confidence in community sentencing—that is important.

People Smugglers: Prosecution

5. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of people smugglers. [904679]

The Solicitor General: The Government are taking the serious, robust and tough action needed to secure our borders. That is why we are giving the police counter-terror powers to deal with people-smuggling gangs. We have backed that with a funding boost to the CPS to enhance its capacity to prosecute cases involving these appalling cross-border smuggling networks.

Dave Robertson: People across Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages want the Government to get a grip on people-smuggling in the channel after the previous Government's dereliction of duty. Too many lives are at risk; too many people are making that dangerous crossing. Although it is great news that police are working hard, and have arrested dozens of people smugglers and seized almost half a million pounds of criminal cash, it is clear that we need to go further and faster. What steps is the Solicitor General taking to ensure that people smugglers face the hefty jail terms that they deserve?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is vital that police and prosecutors work together to bring people smugglers to justice, and that our criminal justice system sends a clear message that people smuggling will be met with hefty jail terms. I am pleased to tell him that an offender who played a leading role in an organised crime group that smuggled nearly 4,000 migrants was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment in May.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Solicitor General understand the frustration, annoyance and anger of many people in the United Kingdom about the fact that we are paying the French authorities many millions of pounds to do what appears—at the moment anyway—to be very little to smash the gangs that we keep being told will be smashed?

The Solicitor General: International partnerships are an incredibly important part of our plan to smash the gangs. Our recent work with the French Government in particular is bearing a great deal of fruit. In fact, we hope that the French will soon be able to address the situation that they currently cannot: when would-be migrants are in shallow water.

European Convention on Human Rights: UK Obligations

6. **Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): What steps she is taking to ensure the UK meets its legal obligations under the European convention on human rights. [904680]

The Solicitor General: This Government are fully committed to meeting our legal obligations. The rule of law is the bedrock of our parliamentary democracy. Not only does it underpin our legal and judicial systems; it provides the basis for the global success of our legal services sector.

Zöe Franklin: I thank the Solicitor General for her answer. In the light of the Supreme Court's judgment defining sex in the Equality Act 2010 as strictly biological, and public comments from the Equality and Human Rights Commission suggesting trans individuals may not be entitled to privacy protections under article 8, what steps are the Solicitor General and her office taking to ensure that domestic law remains fully aligned with the UK's obligations under the European convention on human rights, particularly articles 3, 8 and 14? Do the Government intend to clarify or consolidate domestic equality law and the ECHR obligations, to avoid growing legal divergence?

The Solicitor General: As to the steps that the Law Officers are taking, I am afraid that I have to refer to the Law Officers' convention. With regard to the hon. Member's wider point and the Supreme Court's ruling in the *For Women Scotland* case, the Government have been very clear that we will continue to support single-sex spaces, while also affirming the important rights that trans people have and continue to have under the Equality Act.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I want to ask about our compliance with article 14 with regard to the fast-track justice system. My constituent, a woman with schizophrenia, has been convicted of not paying her TV licence during mental health difficulties sparked by her mum's mental illness. Will the Solicitor General meet me to discuss the single justice procedure and the way it is used in cases such as that?

The Solicitor General: I will indeed meet my hon. Friend to discuss that issue. I believe that the Ministry of Justice has recently consulted on the single justice procedure, and I am more than happy to discuss it with him.

Business of the House

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

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 23 June includes:

MONDAY 23 JUNE—General debate on Pride Month.

TUESDAY 24 JUNE—Estimates day (2nd allotted day). There will be debates on estimates relating to the Department for Education; the Department of Health and Social Care; and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

WEDNESDAY 25 JUNE—Estimates day (3rd allotted day). There will be debates on estimates relating to the Ministry of Justice, in so far as it relates to criminal justice; the Ministry of Defence, in so far as it relates to the remit of the national armaments director; and the Department for Transport.

At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 26 JUNE—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 2) Bill, followed by a general debate on Armed Forces Day.

FRIDAY 27 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 30 June will include:

MONDAY 30 JUNE—Second Reading of the Deprivation of Citizenship Orders (Effect During Appeal) Bill.

TUESDAY 1 JULY—Second Reading of the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill.

WEDNESDAY 2 JULY—Consideration of Lords message to the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill, followed by motion to approve the draft Armed Forces Act 2006 (Continuation) Order 2025.

THURSDAY 3 JULY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 4 JULY—Private Members' Bills.

Joy Morrissey: I would like to start by congratulating the right hon. Lady. This is the third time I have had the pleasure of responding to her at business questions, and they have proved to be remarkably fruitful encounters. At our first encounter, I asked her to press the Chancellor to U-turn on winter fuel payments. The Leader of the House is clearly very influential, because the U-turn on that shameful attack on pensioners came just a few weeks later.

At our second encounter, I asked the right hon. Lady to get the Government to U-turn on a national inquiry for the victims of the rape gangs, and this week the Prime Minister finally did the right thing and delivered a U-turn on that as well. The Prime Minister may be getting dizzy from all his U-turning, but I congratulate the right hon. Lady on listening to the Opposition, using her influence and securing those U-turns.

Let me turn to one of the most important tasks of any Government: getting people into and keeping them in work. On the Conservative Benches, we know that economic growth comes from the success of businesses

and risk-taking entrepreneurs. The Labour party has never understood that, and we are now seeing it have disastrous consequences for our country.

Unemployment reached record lows under the Conservative Government. Labour Governments are always incredibly successful at driving unemployment higher. This Government seem determined to be the best ever at putting more and more people out of work. Last week, we saw the devastating impact of the Chancellor's reckless national insurance tax raid, which businesses warned her would cost jobs. They were right: the UK unemployment rate is now at its highest level since the pandemic. Job vacancies have collapsed. Last month, there were 109,000 fewer employees on payroll. These are the direct results of a Chancellor and a Government who do not understand business.

It is about to get a whole lot worse. Businesses are clear that the Employment Rights Bill will cost more jobs. The UK's leading business groups have collectively told the Government that the Bill will damage economic growth and jobs. The Government are giving people rights in jobs that they simply will not have. The truth is that this Government are beholden to their union paymasters and cannot listen to businesses. They are a Government who have taken a time machine back to the employment nightmare of the 1970s, when union barons gave Labour Ministers their marching orders.

While the Government and the unions try to refight the battles of the 1970s, the world of work is changing at a rapid rate because of artificial intelligence. AI brings many benefits, but it is also a clear and present risk to the stability of our labour markets and the livelihood of millions of people in this country. Despite their love of regulation in all other aspects of our life, this Labour Government have yet again delayed their Artificial Intelligence (Regulation) Bill, so AI is developing unchecked and changing jobs in ways that will have a long-term impact.

While businesses and workers grapple with the new reality of a 21st-century AI economy, the Government are determined to burden them with taxes and regulations from the last century, so will the Leader of the House use her considerable and proven influence to deliver a U-turn on the Employment Rights Bill before it is too late? If not, will she grant us a debate in Government time on the impact of their union-inspired tax and regulation policies on businesses? Will she bring her party back to the 21st century and grant us a debate in Government time on how we address the role of AI in the future of work?

The story of this Labour Government and their economic policies is now clear. If it moves, they tax it; if it does not move, they still tax it. If they can find a way, they send unemployment higher. If businesses warn them that things will get worse, they do not listen. If the unions want something, they give it to them. This is a Government fighting the battles of the 1970s and behaving like they are still student politicians. It is a Government making the people of this country poorer as each day passes.

Lucy Powell: I know the whole House will be following the unfolding events in the middle east carefully and with a great deal of concern. I assure the House that the Government are working with our partners to urge de-escalation and diplomacy, as well as continuing to engage very closely on the situation in Gaza, for aid to get in and for a sustainable ceasefire.

[Lucy Powell]

This week was the ninth anniversary of the murder of my and many other Members' dear friend Jo Cox. This week we remember everything that Jo stood for—her values, her passion, and her commitment to building bridges and resolving conflict, and to international development. I send my thoughts, and I am sure the thoughts of the whole House, to Brendan, Cuillin, Lejla, Jean and Gordon, and of course to Jo's dear younger sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), who I know Jo would have been incredibly proud of, especially in recent weeks.

It is a pleasure to be joined once again by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who I have a great deal of respect for and enjoy working with. I am sure that she and I are happy to take whatever plaudits we can for the exchanges that we have at business questions, because I know that the Prime Minister and many others follow them incredibly closely. Her contribution is certainly an improvement on the normal exchanges that I have with the shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who is not in his place today.

I accept the hon. Lady's invitation to say a little bit about child exploitation, but I do not accept her characterisation of there being any kind of U-turn. I thank her for her tone, which is really important in these debates, because in the midst of such unforgiveable injustices, it is essential that we come together across the House to lower the temperature, and to put victims and their experiences at the centre. As a Government, we have always said that we would leave no stone unturned to uncover the truth, get justice for victims and lock up the perpetrators, which is why the Prime Minister commissioned Baroness Casey's review in the first place.

We never ruled out returning to the issue of a national inquiry; we have always been guided by what would be the most effective way of getting the action, truth, justice and accountability in the most effective way possible. Some of those measures, including implementing the recommendations in the Jay inquiry around mandatory reporting and the introduction of new aggravated offences for grooming offenders, were included in the Crime and Policing Bill that we voted on last night. I was surprised to see Conservative Members voting against the Bill, which strengthens those measures, so perhaps they can reflect on that next time they criticise the Government.

The hon. Lady raises job creation and the economy—I am happy to debate that subject with her. She did not mention the three unprecedented trade deals that we have secured. The Conservatives were once the party of the trade deal and free trade, but they seem to have set themselves against the trade deals that are already securing jobs and investment. Since we came into government, economic activity has reached a record high; we have created half a million new jobs, moving people into employment; and real wages have grown more in the 10 months since last July than they did in the 10 years of the Conservative Government, so we are happy to stand by our record on job creation and the economy.

The hon. Lady talked about the Employment Rights Bill, which is absolutely not something that this Government will be U-turning on. We are incredibly proud of giving the biggest boost in a generation to workers in this country, and it is about time too. We are giving them

rights on sick pay, abolishing exploitative zero-hours contracts for the first time, as called for by many Members for a long time, and introducing fair pay agreements and many other things, in a Bill that we are incredibly proud to be delivering for this country.

Finally, in this week of all weeks, Parliament has found itself at the centre of the national debate—a place where we should always find ourselves. There are big issues at stake, globally and here at home, which Members of Parliament from all parties have been grappling with and taking decisions on to the best of their abilities, whether about the conflict in the middle east, the publication of the Casey audit, or votes on abortion and assisted dying, among many other issues. I put on record my thanks to all those across the House who have approached those issues with the respectful, non-partisan tone that they deserve.

We are all elected to this place to make hard decisions, to represent our constituents with integrity and to work in their best interests. I know that every single Member of this House takes that job incredibly seriously. However, we also have a duty not to slide into personalised, over-politicised, clickbait attacks on each other which, if we are not careful, undermine us all and democracy as a whole, and threaten the safety of individuals. I was disappointed to see that members of the shadow Cabinet were doing just that this week, and I hope they will reflect and withdraw some of the dangerous attacks that they launched, particularly as we remember Jo Cox. We have a responsibility to take the heat out of the political debate—[*Interruption.*] Personalised political attack lines—exactly. We have a responsibility to approach these difficult challenges with the thought, respect and humility that they deserve, and I think the whole House will want to do its job without fear or favour.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): When I visited my Ukrainian Saturday school in Welwyn Garden City, many of the parents impressed on me the importance of having the option for Ukrainian children to study a GCSE in the Ukrainian language. As it stands, somebody can study Russian, but not Ukrainian, and I have promised to take up the cause. I have written to all the national exam boards, with some mixed responses, but I am determined to stay on the case. Does the Leader of the House agree that that would be a fantastic subject for further debate in this place?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that with me. He will know that GCSE subject decisions are taken by the independent exam boards, but he may be interested to know that the Education Secretary has recently written to the exam boards asking them to consider introducing a GCSE in Ukrainian. I hope my hon. Friend will continue that campaign, and I am sure that it will get wide support from across the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): The outbreak of bluetongue and the subsequent announcement by the Welsh Government imposing a hard border for livestock between England and Wales leaves the livelihoods of many border farmers at risk. Their land often straddles the border, and farmers rely on moving livestock daily between both countries. According to the Farmers Union

of Wales, by introducing mandatory checks the Welsh Government are creating a “wholly impractical” policy. I am reliably informed by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) that a large majority of ewes are on one side of the border, while the tups are on the other, which will make breeding rather tricky. Will the Leader of the House ask Ministers to bring forward a statement about any work they are doing to create a more joined-up approach between England and Wales to protect farmers in these border counties? While she is doing so, can we have a statement on whether the Government will create a funded vaccination programme to protect livestock and livelihoods in the whole of the UK?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the serious issue of cross-border breeding and the difficulties that she outlines. I know this is a very worrying time for farmers. I am sure she will be aware that disease control is a devolved matter, but the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is working very closely with the devolved Governments on this particular matter. She is right to say that the restricted zone has been put in place, which is causing challenges for breeding, as she outlines. I understand that Ministers are in constant contact with their counterparts on this issue, and it was raised yesterday in Prime Minister’s questions. I know it is an issue of importance to the House, and I will ensure that the House is constantly updated.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): The UN ocean conference in Leeds last week marked a turning point, with countries coming together to accelerate action to protect and restore our seas, including the UK’s welcome commitment to end destructive bottom trawling in some of our most biodiverse waters. Will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating that progress and support those international efforts by providing parliamentary time to ratify the high seas treaty?

Lucy Powell: May I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for all her leadership on this issue, and for bringing representatives of both Houses together last week to watch the very moving documentary with David Attenborough? That has had a profound impact on many Members across this House. She is absolutely right that we have to take action to ratify the treaty, and we are committed to bringing forward legislation before the end of the year—I hope it will be sooner. I am really pleased that the British Government have taken steps to ban bottom trawling in our protected marine waters.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, including the estimates day debates. I hope she will use her good offices to ensure that there are no Government statements on that day and that you, Mr Speaker, will have a very high bar for urgent questions.

Mr Speaker: Let us see.

Bob Blackman: We have three debates on each day, and I hope that we will be able to get a good debate on each of those subjects. On Thursday 3 July, there will be

a debate on a motion on financial redress for 1950s women impacted by the Department for Work and Pensions’ maladministration of the state pension, followed by a debate on mobile phone theft, a subject that is raised frequently in this Chamber. On Thursday 10 July, there will be a debate on children’s health, and we are awaiting acceptance of the other debate.

I understand that the sponsor of the debate on Down syndrome that was due to take place this afternoon in Westminster Hall has withdrawn that application because no Minister was available to answer it, so there will be no debate. I hope that you, Mr Speaker, will use your good offices to make sure that that debate takes place, for the benefit of the sponsor and, indeed, the subject.

Next week in Westminster Hall, there will be a debate on Tuesday on the right to maintain contact in care settings. On Thursday, there will be a debate on the role of the RAF photographic reconnaissance unit during the second world war, followed by a debate on the BBC World Service. On Thursday 3 July, there will be a debate on the future of music education, followed by a debate on safeguarding children with allergies at school. The following week, on 8 July, there will be a debate on alcohol and cancer—which is a very topical subject during that week—and on Thursday, there will be a debate on state support for victims of terrorism, followed by a debate on London’s contribution to the national economy.

Not only is Saturday the longest day, but it is also International Yoga Day, and we are giving right hon. and hon. Members the opportunity to practise yoga this afternoon. Those Members who are not in the Chamber or Westminster Hall can come along to Committee Room 10. I guarantee to provide a place for every single Member who comes along, so that we can practise yoga, which is India’s gift to the world and is helpful when it comes to having a healthy and a long life.

Mr Speaker: Can I book Jim Shannon in? [*Laughter.*] The hon. Member mentioned the debate this afternoon. It is disappointing that there was no Minister available, which is why it was better to withdraw it on the Member’s behalf.

Lucy Powell: First, may I say namaste to the hon. Gentleman? I am a regular attendee at Iyengar yoga in Manchester. Were I not wearing high heels, I might show him my tree pose, but I will save that for another day, or perhaps at the session later on.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for announcing the forthcoming business—it sounds like there will be a number of debates on topics that regularly get raised with me during these sessions. I am really sorry, Mr Speaker, about the unavailability of Ministers for the debate that was due to take place in Westminster Hall today. As I understand it, given that the Backbench Business debate in this Chamber is a health debate, that is occupying one Minister, and another Minister is involved in a Public Bill Committee, which has limited the availability of Ministers. However, we will ensure that that debate is rearranged. I offer my full apology to the House for the Ministers’ unavailability.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): With the lighter nights comes fear for some as antisocial behaviour upticks, causing real misery in

[Emma Foody]

some communities. I recently joined the Killingworth neighbourhood police team on a walkabout to hear directly from them how they are working with North Tyneside council to tackle this issue and support local people. Can we have a debate on how this Government will give Northumbria police and other agencies the powers they need to support our communities?

Lucy Powell: Antisocial behaviour is a blight on all of our communities. We are taking big steps to strengthen police powers in that area and introduce respect orders, and the Crime and Policing Bill, which had its Third Reading last night, contains many measures that I hope will support my hon. Friend's police.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just to help the House, I aim to run this session for around an hour, so I am sure we can help each other by rushing through. Let us have a good example of that from Neil O'Brien.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Although they did not mention it before the election, Labour is committed to abolishing every district and borough council in Leicestershire. It has also invited proposals to expand the city's boundaries, and the Mayor of Leicester has put forward such a proposal. This is universally not wanted in Oadby, Wigston, Great Glen and the surrounding villages—in fact, thousands of people have signed a petition against it—so can we please at least have a debate in Government time on that proposal? Will the Leader of the House encourage the Local Government Minister not to allow this expansion of the city? It is not just the higher council tax; people want to keep their local identity. If the Government are going to go ahead with the proposal, will they at least allow people to vote in a referendum?

Lucy Powell: I know this issue is of great concern to many Members across the House and people have strongly held views on it. The hon. Gentleman is right that we set out a number of proposals in the White Paper. Those issues are being considered, and measures will be brought forward in an English devolution Bill shortly. Members will have ample time to consider them, but the proposals should be coming from local leaders—that is what devolution is about—not imposed by Government.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): Just this week, we have seen further media reports of dangerous and unregulated cosmetic procedures ending in tragedy. In July 2021, the beauty and wellbeing all-party parliamentary group, which I chair, presented a report to the Government recommending an evidence-based policy framework to prevent such incidents occurring. Will the Leader of the House encourage colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to do what the previous Government failed to do, and act now to take control of these dangerous practices?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for her campaigning on this issue. When she takes up campaigns, she normally gets results. I am sure that she will get results on this issue, too, because we need to regulate these practices.

We need to make sure that people are properly trained and accountable and that people can hold them to account when things go wrong. We are responding shortly to the consultation, and I will ensure the House is updated.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Elusive Brewing, a fantastic independent brewery in my constituency of Wokingham, brews Oregon Trail, which won best IPA at the Champion Beer of Britain awards. Can we have a debate in Government time on the steps that Ministers are taking to support the people of Wokingham in enjoying great local products, such as those from Elusive Brewing and Siren Craft Brew, in their local pubs? Perhaps the Leader of the House, and you, Mr Speaker, would like to join me for a pint from one of those excellent breweries.

Lucy Powell: I am always open to an invitation to have a pint, although I am perhaps less open to invitations to do a run. British beer, and our brewing industry, is one of the great prides of this country, and the Government have been taking steps to support our great brewing industry and cask ales and the like. I look forward to perhaps sampling the beer from the hon. Member's constituency soon. I do not know whether he has already done so, but the bar here in Parliament offers the opportunity for local brewers like his to share their wares with Members.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): First, can I welcome the huge investment that the Government are putting into social and affordable housing? As I have already raised in this House, residents in my constituency, particularly in the towns of Hexham and Haltwhistle, have seen a rise in the number of derelict buildings, such as the former workhouse on Corbridge Road and cottages near Hexham train station. Despite landlords purchasing those properties and substantial demand for affordable homes in the area, those buildings are often left to deteriorate. Can we have a further debate in Government time to discuss solutions for inactive landlords actively defacing beautiful towns such as Hexham and Haltwhistle due to lack of development?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue again. He does it week in, week out, and it is obviously an important issue for his constituency. The Government are looking at how we can strengthen community right to buy in these circumstances, because we want to make sure that town centres and villages, such as those in his constituency, can flourish into the future.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): A constituent of mine, Yvonne, has led a brilliant community blister pack recycling initiative in Tattenhall. Through her efforts, the project has picked up pace and is now expanding to other villages including Tarporley, Farndon and Malpas. Hopefully it will get to Chester in the near future. Blister packs made of plastic and aluminium contain valuable materials but are not routinely recycled. The project highlights what local action can achieve and where national systems fall short. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on improving recycling for hard-to-recycle items?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Lady in thanking Yvonne and all the volunteers for what sounds like a really good campaign. I did not realise that blister packs are so

recyclable, and it is so important that people do so. In bringing that to the House today, she has shared that with everybody else, and I am sure the campaign will go from strength to strength.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): In the UK, 2.9 million disabled women are of reproductive age. Tragically, disabled women are 44% more likely to have a stillbirth. As a disabled mother myself, I was devastated by the barriers that I faced at every point during my pregnancy. It was a pleasure to host Paralympians, disabled women and experts by experience at a summit here in Parliament to discuss what good, inclusive maternity care looks like. Can the Leader of the House advise on further opportunities to embed safer maternity care for disabled women in the Government's women's health strategy as part of the 10-year plan?

Lucy Powell: I have heard my hon. Friend speak very powerfully about these issues before, and we are always shocked at the stories that people such as her and others describe. The Government will be bringing forward a new maternity services strategy very shortly, and I will ensure that she has the opportunity to question Ministers.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): On 28 June 1986, my constituent developed symptoms of ME, and he has lived with those same symptoms for 40 years, and the NHS remains unable to offer any meaningful intervention. Those who have lived with ME for decades—some bed-bound and in darkness—feel that no one in authority notices or cares. In 2022, the then Health Secretary started work on a delivery plan for ME, which finally offered hope. This Government promised the final delivery plan at the end of March and then put it off until the end of June, which is only seven parliamentary days away. Can the Leader of the House reassure the 1.3 million people living with ME and ME-related symptoms that they will not have to wait longer than the end of June for the Government commitment to address this huge intergenerational injustice?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. I know that those who suffer with ME and their families feel incredibly strongly that not enough has been done over many years, and the Government will shortly be bringing forward our 10-year NHS plan. I will ensure that she and others get an update on that, which will contain information about ME care.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I declare an interest as a former miner and a current member of the National Union of Mineworkers.

Yesterday was the 41st anniversary of the Orgreave event. Page 73 of the Labour party's 2024 manifesto pledged an inquiry or investigation into what actually happened at Orgreave 41 years ago. I praise the Home Secretary for the consultation that she has had with the NUM, the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, lawyers and the Bishop of Sheffield, among many others, but can we please have a debate in Government time to try to push on with that pledge? People are getting older, and some are suffering from bad health. Can we please have a debate to discuss this very important issue?

Lucy Powell: I know that my hon. Friend has long campaigned on what happened at Orgreave, and that campaigners such as him and others want to see action,

accountability and justice. Every community should have confidence in their police, but what happened at Orgreave still casts a very long shadow over mining areas like his and in Yorkshire. As he says, the Home Secretary is committed to resolving this issue and has met campaigners many times. We are working on a response as a priority, and I will ensure that the House is updated.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Shocking new figures have come to light, showing that white working-class children are falling behind in all but 21 schools across England. In places like Romford, families who have worked for generations are watching their children slip through the cracks. I understand that the Education Secretary has launched an inquiry into why communities like mine are facing this problem, but surely equality should mean that every child counts, not just those who fit fashionable narratives. Will the Leader of the House provide time to debate why this group continues to be neglected and, in some instances, marginalised?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman will know that this Government are absolutely committed to reducing educational inequalities wherever they exist, which is why we have a mission to deliver opportunity for all. I do not know whether that means he now supports the education plans that we have set out—for example, reducing VAT on private schools in order to get more state school qualified teachers into the system. I know that the performance of white working-class pupils in our schools has been an issue for many years—in fact, it was an issue when I sat on the Education Committee when the hon. Gentleman's party was in government. I do not remember it ever being a priority for the previous Government, but we will reduce educational inequalities wherever they exist.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): Earlier this week, the Department for Transport increased the costs of using the Dartford crossing. That will impact Gravesham residents and businesses, which do not get the resident discount scheme. With the announcement this week of the funding for the lower Thames crossing, will the Leader of the House please schedule a debate on river crossings between Kent and Essex and their impact on Gravesham?

Lucy Powell: I know that this is an issue of great concern to Members with constituencies close to the Dartford crossing. My hon. Friend will be aware that, unfortunately, the last time the charges were increased was in 2014. Since then, demand has grown massively, which is why we had to introduce these small increases in the charges. I know that it is a concern for such Members, and I am sure that, were they to apply for a debate, they would get a popular response.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Electronic travel authorisations were first introduced in Northern Ireland just six months ago. Despite having put down several written parliamentary questions, I cannot seem to establish from the Home Office how many people have not had a valid ETA in the past six months. May we have a debate in Government time to establish the veracity of the numbers of ETAs that have been issued and of those who have not had them in the past six months?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry that the hon. Member has not had adequate responses from parliamentary questions, and I will ensure that they are forthcoming. I do not have the figures to hand, but I see that Northern Ireland questions are coming up soon, as are other opportunities. In the meantime, I will ensure that he gets a ministerial response.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): Yesterday I visited the Refugee Council, which is proudly headquartered in my constituency. From supporting those fleeing for their lives to finding employment for them, it is helping people rebuild and become part of the community in Stratford and Bow. The constituency is also home to other excellent organisations that support refugees, such as the Refugee and Migrant Forum of Essex and London, Praxis and the Magpie Project—to name but a few. Both Tower Hamlets and Newham are sanctuary boroughs, and Newham is home to London's largest Ukrainian population. Would the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Refugee Week and recognising the valuable contribution made by these groups and others across the UK in supporting refugees to integrate into communities and play their part in national life in Britain, which they can now proudly call home?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in acknowledging Refugee Week. This country will always play our part alongside others to help those fleeing persecution. We have a long-standing history of welcoming refugees, particularly those from Ukraine, as she says, and Hong Kong in recent years. When they are here, they make a valuable contribution to our community.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Daniel was a very happy and full-of-life 13-year-old boy in Fylde until, just over two years ago, he was diagnosed with a serious brain tumour. With multiple surgeries, a 70-week chemo treatment and, very sadly, a stroke while going through that treatment, Daniel has now been in hospital for over two years. He cannot move without assistance and requires assistance to breathe overnight. The local authority and the NHS have been working together with his family to help design how he can move home and live with his parents, but there is no funding available. He is falling through the cracks between different policies for the funding to pay for those changes, which the family simply cannot afford. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on how we can ensure that no family falls through the cracks in such a way and that children are not left inevitably in hospital, and on how to get Dan home?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about Daniel's situation, and my heart goes out to him and his family at this difficult time. I know from my experience of brain tumours in my own family that it is a very difficult disease from which many people do not recover. We need to go much further in the research and treatment of brain tumours, because too many people die too quickly of them. I am really sorry to hear that he is falling through the cracks between different policies, and I will raise that with Ministers. The hon. Member may want to know that we have the national cancer plan coming later this year, and we have relaunched the children and young people cancer taskforce to ensure that services are joined up in the way he describes.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning the appalling recent epidemic of antisocial behaviour in Spennymoor, which has seen shops attacked, playgrounds vandalised and public parks damaged? Does she agree with me that the measures we have been voting on this week, to introduce respect orders and put 13,000 police officers back on our streets, are desperately needed, because we must retake control of our streets and our town centres?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the antisocial behaviour in Spennymoor, which sounds really disruptive and unacceptable. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Crime and Policing Bill will do more to tackle this issue than anything that we as a country have done in a very long time, such as: introducing respect orders, getting more neighbourhood police on the streets, and giving the police the powers to seize and crush some of the off-road vehicles that are often involved in such antisocial behaviour.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): There are newspaper reports this morning that the Attorney General has provided the Government with legal advice against engaging in the war between Israel and Iran. I am sure the Leader of the House recalls that the last time a Labour Government were contemplating joining the Americans in a middle east war, the Attorney General's advice was key. Will the Government publish the advice so that the House can be clear on the legal basis for any future British involvement?

Lucy Powell: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is aware, but Governments have always had the policy that we do not comment on what advice the Attorney General has provided, or indeed whether he has provided any advice at all. That ensures Ministers can get the advice they need to carry out Government business and make decisions without fear or favour.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): Just 40% of MPs have been called to speak in this Chamber on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill ahead of Third Reading tomorrow. Many colleagues on both sides of the House have tabled amendments to the Bill, but have not had the opportunity to speak to them. The Bill is hugely significant and many vulnerable people are looking to us to give them the safeguards they need. Will the Government give more time to the Bill to ensure that the public have full confidence in the process?

Lucy Powell: I know there are very strong feelings about the Bill on both sides of the House. I am sure we can all agree that Parliament has shown itself at its best when discussing these issues in a thoughtful and considered way. As my hon. Friend will be aware, it is not a Government Bill. It is a matter of conscience. As a private Member's Bill, it is not given Government time because it is not a Government Bill. It will follow the usual process for a private Member's Bill. It is for the House to decide how long the Bill is debated. The House, through such things as closure motions, can decide to give the Bill longer to debate it, if it so wishes.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The 36th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster passed this year without the long-awaited Hillsborough Bill.

The lawyers working on the Bill have said that if it does not include the statutory duty of candour or legal parity for bereaved families, then it is not a Hillsborough law. Can the Leader of the House call on a Justice Minister to provide an update for the families, the bereaved and the survivors on whether those two aspects will be included in the Bill?

Lucy Powell: First of all, the Government remain absolutely committed to fulfilling our commitment to the Hillsborough families on bringing forward and enacting a Hillsborough law, which, as my hon. Friend says, includes a duty of candour. That is because the Hillsborough families have spent decades fighting for justice and we do not want to see that continue. It is important that the Bill reflects the range of views, concerns and experiences, and meets the expectations of families. That is why we are working at pace with the families on the Bill, and we will introduce it when it is ready.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is important to celebrate awards given to hon. colleagues, so will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating both the Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), and my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) on winning the award in their respective categories as Britain's sexiest politicians on that well-known website *illicitencounters.com*? Does she recommend that they have dinner together?

Lucy Powell: I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister has a very full diary; she will be washing her hair and the like, so it might not be possible for her to have dinner with the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage).

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): The battle of Bamber Bridge in my constituency, 82 years ago, was a powerful moment in history when local people stood in solidarity with black American soldiers against segregation. I am hugely grateful to councillors, like the wonderful Chris Lomax, who have worked so hard to keep the memory of this special moment in history alive. I know that the community will have a great time celebrating the anniversary this weekend with a proper American barbecue. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the Bamber Bridge community a wonderful celebration at the Ye Olde Hob Inn this weekend, and will she consider holding a debate on the long history of our British values of bravery and inclusion?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in wishing the Bamber Bridge community all the best with their barbecue this weekend, and their celebration of the stand that people took against racism all those years ago.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Last week, I was heartbroken to hear of the loss of Norma Burton, one half of the much-loved social media duo Jess and Norma. Norma captured the hearts of millions with her warmth and humour, and her amazing bond with her granddaughter, Jess. Can we have a debate on the vital role that grandparents play in educating the next generation, and will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Norma, who was a remarkable and inspiring woman?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join the hon. Gentleman in paying a warm tribute to Norma Burton, and I am sure the whole House will want to do so, too. Her partnership with her granddaughter Jess was great, as I am sure many would agree. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point to the importance of intergenerational relationships, and of always respecting our elders and doing exactly what they say.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): My constituent Owen Sutton is 26 and living with a rare brain tumour. He has undergone four major surgeries, had proton beam therapy, and suffers frequent seizures, but despite that, he has raised thousands of pounds, as well as awareness, as an incredible young ambassador for the Brain Tumour Charity. Owen and the charity are calling for a review of research funding, so could we have a statement from the Government on plans to better fund this vital, lifesaving research?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Owen Sutton for all his fundraising. As I said in response to the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), brain tumours really are the worst kind of diagnosis for anybody, as I know well from the devastating news in my family last year. The debate we had recently was well subscribed, and this Government are committed to ensuring that we have the very best research and treatment available for brain tumours. I am sure that if we had another such debate, it would also be very well subscribed.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is a complicated and difficult condition that currently has no agreed medical treatment pathway. Children with FASD are disproportionately represented in the care system. Tragically, since the covid lockdowns, the number of cases is on the rise across the country, but particularly in the south-west. Will the Leader of the House commit to a debate on this important issue in Government time?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the early years—from conception to the age of two; what is known as the first 1,001 days—are absolutely vital to child development, and development later in life. A disproportionate number of those experiencing the consequences of exposure to alcohol during pregnancy end up in the care system, and are affected in many other ways as well. That is why the Government are committed to preventive and community healthcare, especially in the early years, and to joining all these things up through our mission-led Government.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): The Queensway Gateway roadworks are causing chaos for my constituents. East Sussex county council and Southern Water have not answered my question of why the moving of a major water main was not planned for before these works began. The need to do so is delaying those roadworks indefinitely. As the Leader of the House knows, I raised this matter with her six months ago. With works still dragging on and causing chaos, will she join me in calling on Conservative-run East Sussex county council and Southern Water to get a grip and explain who is responsible for this chaos?

Lucy Powell: I am shocked that six months after my hon. Friend first raised this issue with me, the road to nowhere is still going nowhere fast. She is absolutely right to call out the inaction of the Conservative-run East Sussex county council and Southern Water, both of which I know she challenges day in, day out. I hope she gets some answers.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): The BBC reports that overnight, President Trump approved a plan to attack Iran. There is potentially a very small window of opportunity before he decides whether to escalate this war, so I was concerned yesterday when, in Prime Minister's questions, the Deputy Prime Minister did not give me a direct response when I asked her to confirm whether the Government would explicitly seek Parliament's consent for any military support for Israel in this war. Can we have assurances from the Leader of the House that there will be a debate and a free vote in those circumstances? Given the Attorney General's reported concerns about the legality of Britain's potential involvement in the crisis, it is critical that we get that opportunity, and I would be grateful for a clear yes/no answer on this issue.

Lucy Powell: The most important thing that the British Government are calling for in this situation is de-escalation and diplomacy; that is our first priority. Any other conversations do not meet those ends. As for the principle of the issue, we have been very clear about our position: where there is sustained military action in which our troops could be involved, that would of course be a matter for the House to consider.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): New Hope Care, a private company owned by Patrick Cheza, was operating in my constituency of Stockport. It failed its staff and exploited vulnerable workers, some of whom were migrant workers who feared speaking out about their mistreatment and neglect, worried that it could impact their visa status. Regardless of their immigration status, people should be compensated for their work. My office has more than 20 cases on this issue. I am told that the company has received payment on its contracts, including from Stockport council and customers, yet it is withholding vital wages from its staff. Many of them have not been paid for four or five months and are experiencing significant financial hardship. It is my understanding that the owners are based abroad. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on enforcing compliance from private social care providers, such as New Hope Care, that fail to pay wages?

Lucy Powell: This is a shocking case, and the Government are committed to tackling these issues. In November, we took the first steps to ban rogue employers from sponsoring overseas workers. The immigration White Paper sets out the next steps, including ending overseas recruitment for adult social care. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a ministerial response on this case.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Oswestry livestock market in my constituency serves not only North Shropshire, but Mid Wales, and its operations are under threat because of the hard border introduced as a result of the bluetongue protection zone. I echo the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford

(Marie Goldman) for a statement on how we can effectively manage this concerning situation. May I also ask the Leader of the House to consider whether 40 minutes for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions is sufficient, given that a fifth of the country live in rural areas, and there is very little time under the current allocation for those of us who represent those areas to question Ministers?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for mentioning that matter, which was raised earlier. I am sorry to hear of the impact on the Oswestry livestock market. As I said earlier, Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are working closely with devolved Ministers to try to resolve this issue. Obviously, people want to hear an update via a statement from Ministers, so I will look into that. She also mentioned the length of DEFRA questions, a matter that is raised with me and others regularly. We look at how many people apply to ask questions, especially on Thursday mornings, so if colleagues want that question time to be longer, they need to get more people to take part in the lottery to ask questions.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Mountain rescue teams are responding to an increased number of incidents, including fatalities. Emergency responders think that the massive increase in people coming to the mountains without sufficient preparation is due to people seeing beauty spots promoted on Instagram and TikTok. The ability of local agencies to do anything about this is limited, because people are coming from outside the area. I would be very grateful if the Leader of the House could advise me on whether this issue should be brought to the attention of a Science, Innovation and Technology Minister, and if so, could she assist me in raising it with them?

Lucy Powell: This matter has been raised with me before, and it is concerning. We want people to enjoy the countryside and, specifically, the great countryside in her constituency. It is great that people on social media are advertising it, but if they are not also telling people what steps they need to take to keep themselves safe on our mountains, then that is a challenge. I will certainly raise that point with Ministers for my hon. Friend.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): The Government's English devolution plans are intended to simplify local accountability. The reforms could be critical to improving democratic accountability for our integrated care boards and unlocking the delivery of much-needed healthcare facilities, such as a GP surgery in Wixams in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House make time for a Minister to update the House on why integrated care boards covering Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Milton Keynes, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are being merged, despite there being no plans at all for a mayor to cover the area and hold that body to account?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member raises a good point. We have been looking at the efficiency and effectiveness of ICBs; that is why some of those steps have been taken. He is right that we are strongly in favour of devolution, and of making sure that organisations such as ICBs are accountable to their communities. I will look into the specifics in his area and get back to him.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): For many people in Wirral West, their church is a hub where they can practise their faith and put their values into action. That was evident to me at a recent meeting with representatives of St Luke's church in Hoylake, West Kirby Methodist church, Wirral's Methodist churches, West Kirby United Reformed church and Saints Catherine and Martina Roman Catholic church. Can the Leader of the House set out when we might have a debate to celebrate the work of churches across our communities?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the valuable work that churches do as the centre of our communities, and particularly his in Wirral West. I know that there is sometimes a challenge in applying for debates about church matters and the Church of England. This has been raised with me, we are looking into it.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It was reported yesterday that two thirds of south Gloucestershire schools will be in the red next year, which will have a massive impact on our children's learning. As I have said to Ministers, under the current school funding formula, south Gloucestershire schools are the second lowest funded in the country. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State to make a statement to the House on how she will fix this funding unfairness?

Lucy Powell: We are boosting schools funding significantly, whether that is funding for special educational needs, or funding to support teachers in doing their work. I will ensure that the hon. Lady and the rest of the House are kept up to date on how that money is distributed.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I recently met the British Transport police, whose Scottish headquarters are in my constituency, to discuss their text service for confidential reporting of non-emergency incidents on the rail network. Earlier this year, I attended a Transport Salaried Staffs' Association event, at which the union was launching its "Keep transport workers safe" report, which highlights the abuse and harassment faced by staff across our transport systems. Given the vital role that transport workers play in keeping passengers and infrastructure safe, will the Leader of the House give us a debate in Government time on recognising their contribution, and on how best to protect them?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing us to put on record our thanks for all the work that our transport police do, day in, day out. He is right that it is completely unacceptable for them to face abuse and be unable to do their job properly, and I think that would make a very good topic for a debate.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The town of Camelford in my constituency has been left in limbo for decades over the future of the proposed Camelford bypass. I raised this with the Minister responsible for roads, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), in a meeting in March, and a follow-up letter was sent in April, but I am yet to receive a response. Will the Leader of the House please urge Transport Ministers to finally give Camelford's residents an answer on whether the bypass will ever get built?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Member has not had a response to his correspondence and questions. I do not have details about the Camelford bypass in my folder, but I will certainly take that up with Ministers and ensure that he gets a response.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday I had the pleasure of hosting people from York Foodbank, one of many food banks in my constituency. It told me that last year it handed out emergency food parcels to 8,700 people in my constituency. That number has doubled since covid, and numbers continue to rise, yet the food supply does not. The assessment is that as a result of the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill, about 400,000 adults will be pushed into further poverty, so will the Leader of the House ensure that food banks have the support that they need to support our communities?

Lucy Powell: We are all concerned about the rise in food poverty in recent years. It is a blight on our country and communities, and we want to put it right. This Government are committed to eradicating child poverty. That is why we have the child poverty taskforce, and we are looking at a range of measures. Just a couple of weeks ago, we introduced an extension of free school meals to all those in receipt of universal credit. That will transform the food poverty issues for young people across our country that my hon. Friend describes.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Last month, I met more than 20 business owners in the hospitality trade in Leicester city centre. They tell me that, due to the rise in national insurance and hikes in business costs, they are on their knees. That is compounded by antisocial behaviour, rising crime and a lack of parking. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the future of our city centres?

Lucy Powell: As the MP for a rival city centre in Manchester, I am well aware of concerns of the type raised by the hon. Gentleman. We do support our hospitality sector, and we are taking a number of steps to support growth in our economy and to support employment. We had to take tough decisions in the Budget to ensure that our NHS and other public services have the resources they need to ensure that we have a healthy workforce to work in that sector, and that has meant a national insurance rise for businesses.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I have raised concerns about the rise in the number of houses in multiple occupation in Portsmouth before. This week, the council confirmed that it would take 12 years to house all families currently on the four-bedroom home waiting list without adding a single new family, because we are not building enough homes. Meanwhile, family homes are being converted into HMOs to fill the gap—homes in Balfour road, Chichester road, Cardiff road and three on Laburnum—yet residents cannot get up-to-date information because the public HMO list has not been updated for 15 months due to technical difficulties. Can the Leader of the House advise me how I can get the council to publish that list, and will she make time for a debate on the national rise of HMOs?

Lucy Powell: I know that the issue of HMOs causes a lot of concern for communities and for Members across the House. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: local authorities must establish and maintain a register of licensed HMOs in their area. In the Renters' Rights Bill we are strengthening rights to ensure that HMOs are held to account by communities and local authorities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Can we increase the tempo to ensure that there are fewer disappointed colleagues?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wish to raise the urgent situation facing Christians in Nigeria, where militants recently carried out a co-ordinated attack, killing some 200 people and burning accommodation over three hours. That followed a surge of violence in a predominantly Catholic area, with over 100 killed and 5,000 displaced. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Office to update the House on its assessment of this violence, and ensure that the Foreign Secretary acts with Nigerian authorities and international partners to protect vulnerable communities, provide humanitarian aid and hold perpetrators to account?

Lucy Powell: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue. The UK Government continue to monitor events in Nigeria closely. We are working with Nigeria's security forces to tackle violence against civilian communities, especially where it is religiously based.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): The town of Barrhead in my constituency is full of extraordinary young people, which is why my Scottish Parliament colleague Paul O'Kane and I have reinstated the Barrhead Young Citizen of the Year award. However, after years of Tory and SNP neglect, Barrhead is also blighted by youth-led antisocial behaviour. Will the Leader of the House make time to debate that issue, so that we can put pressure on the SNP Government in Edinburgh to give the hard-pressed police in Barrhead the resources they need to tackle this problem, and so that those young people are not left behind and Barrhead is not left paying the price?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the antisocial behaviour in my hon. Friend's constituency. He is absolutely right to say that, as a result of decisions this Government have taken, the Scottish Government have one of the most generous budget settlements they have ever had. They now have the power to tackle these issues, and they really have no excuse not to do so.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): As the Leader of the House knows, I have consistently raised in this place the support that our ceramics industry needs. This week, however, I come bearing good news from Stoke-on-Trent. Our iconic Moorcroft Pottery, adored the world over, has been saved from liquidation following its acquisition by Will Moorcroft, the founder's grandson. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Will, and does she agree that support for the sector must feature in the upcoming industrial strategy?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is a real advocate and champion for ceramics in his constituency and beyond. I am delighted to hear that, after this issue has been raised with me a number of times, Moorcroft Pottery has been saved by Will Moorcroft. I thank him for doing that. My hon. Friend will not have to wait very long at all for the industrial strategy.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Sam is a trans man who has been out for eight years. He recently told me about his long-term avoidance of public bathrooms, and due to his lowly place on the gender recognition certificate waiting list, Sam could not marry his fiancée before her father passed away last year. We committed in the Labour manifesto last year to removing indignities for trans people by modernising the law. When do the Government intend to legislate to that effect?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of that story. Everyone deserves dignity and respect in our society. We committed in our manifesto to reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Our immediate priorities for the trans community are a trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices and strengthening the protections from hate crimes, which we discussed in the House yesterday.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is Care Home Open Week, and in the last few days I have had the pleasure of visiting Muscliff nursing home and Highview care home in Southbourne. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending our carers across Bournemouth East and Britain and the vibrant communities that they help to shape? Will she consider setting aside Government time for a debate on social care?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking our carers for all the work they do. This Government have taken a number of steps to support our carers, with the biggest increase in carer's allowance in generations and many other measures. I am sure that we will debate social care many times in this House in the coming months.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Earlier this month, Johnstone Burgh football club in my constituency brought home the Scottish junior cup, its first such win since 1968. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Johnstone Burgh football club, its manager Murdo MacKinnon, the players and everyone in our community who supports the club on their historic victory?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Johnstone Burgh football club on its historic win—the first in 57 years.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Last Saturday, I was at the first ever national care leavers' championship cup competition, which was held at Molineux, the home of Wolverhampton Wanderers football club in my constituency of Wolverhampton West. Care-experienced young people from all over the country came to play football. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating those young people, as well as EFL in the Community, City of Wolverhampton council, the Wolves Foundation and Spectra, a multidisciplinary social impact company in my constituency, all of which sponsored the event? Does she agree that recognising

and celebrating the potential of our young people in that way, many of whom got up at 4 o'clock in the morning to come to the event, can empower them to thrive for themselves and our communities?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those involved in that important event: EFL in the Community, the local authority, the Wolves Foundation and Spectra. We are proud as a Government to have brought forward the Football Governance Bill, which completed its passage in Committee just this week. It will ensure that football is on a sustainable footing and can therefore undertake more activities like the one he mentions.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): The evidence of the detrimental impact of smartphones on children's mental health and wellbeing is overwhelming. Will the Leader of the House therefore join me in praising the more than 30 Basingstoke primary schools, including St Mark's Church of England primary school and its headteacher Charles Applegate, for the smartphone-free Basingstoke initiative? They are taking action to ban smartphones from coming into schools and to help parents understand the impact of smartphones on their children. Will she allow a debate in Government time on smartphone-free childhood?

Lucy Powell: As the mother of a number of teenagers, I recognise the importance of schools being smartphone-free. I know that many are taking steps to achieve that and they have the powers to do so. I am therefore pleased to hear that schools in Basingstoke have prohibited the use of smartphones and are educating parents on their dangers.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Can we secure some time to discuss the emerging risks to the bioethanol sector, which faces job losses across the north? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) has been lobbying hard for Government support on that issue.

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issues facing the bioethanol industry. We are working closely with the industry to find a way forward and I will ensure that the House is updated.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): My constituent Lynne recently wrote to me about a new car purchase. She paid £190 for a full year's road tax, but then discovered that the tax expiry date was set for the first of the month, not the 29th—the date she bought and taxed the vehicle. When she queried that with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, she was advised that the tax was applied by calendar month, meaning that she effectively paid a full month of tax for just three days. As Lynne said to me, 12 months' tax should mean 12 valid months. This outdated system is clearly unfair. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on the need for a fairer vehicle excise duty system?

Lucy Powell: I know that road tax raises lots of issues with our constituents. I was not aware of the issue that my hon. Friend raises, but I will ensure that she gets a ministerial response.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Falmouth is a thriving town in my constituency, but it is struggling with a deployable neighbourhood policing team that is at only 44% of the minimum recommended capacity. Tregony has just had its police office shut—the only one in a large rural area. This Government have invested heavily in our neighbourhood policing guarantee, but I am concerned that that funding is not flowing through our police and crime commissioner to the places that need it. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the progress of the improvement in neighbourhood policing?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the crime and antisocial behaviour in Falmouth and across my hon. Friend's constituency. She is absolutely right that we are committed to our neighbourhood policing guarantee, which will put 13,000 more police officers into our neighbourhood policing areas. I am sorry to hear that the funding is not being directed in the way she would want, and I will ensure that the Minister gets back to her about it.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday was National Thank a Teacher Day—an opportunity to thank teachers across the country, including in my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking teachers across the country for all the work they do to give young people the best possible start in life?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking all teachers for the amazing work they do. I hope that I will still be saying the same after my daughter's year 10 parents' evening later today.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Last week, I marked Loneliness Awareness Week by holding a reception for community groups looking at different ways to tackle loneliness. We heard from multiple groups, ranging from Oaklands health centre to the WizeKap team. Tackling loneliness in the UK is vital in improving the mental health of many and fostering stronger communities. Will the Leader of the House set out what the Government are doing to address loneliness in society?

Lucy Powell: As we mark nine years since the murder of Jo Cox, I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of loneliness, which was an issue dear to her heart. She did much work to raise awareness of the issue. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw the link between loneliness and health and wellbeing, and that is why the Government will continue to support those who want to tackle loneliness.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Constituents, particularly those from Cutthorpe, Old Brampton and Ashover, have raised concerns about the behaviour of drivers passing horse riders on our roads. The guidance is to pass at least 2 metres wide and at speeds of no more than 10 mph. What more can we do to spread this message and ensure that our roads are safe for all users?

Lucy Powell: The Government continue to work with the British Horse Society to help deal with those issues. My hon. Friend will be aware that the highway code

[Lucy Powell]

was updated a few years ago to include the hierarchy of road users, but we will continue to work with the British Horse Society and others to tackle these issues.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I attended the New Park Village end-of-season football awards—a fantastic celebration of local talent with hundreds of girls, boys and young people. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Joe Jackson, who for over 28 years has led community football and truly transformed lives, and everyone who supports the NPV family? Will she make time for a debate on how the recent spending review will support community grassroots sports initiatives like this one?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Joe Jackson and all those involved in NPV football. We are committed to grassroots football and grassroots sport, and I am sure that the House will be updated soon on some of those issues.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): The very best thing about this job is the people we meet. Last Saturday, I met Lisa Fleming and her team at the opening of the House of Hope in Edinburgh South West. It is Scotland's first breast cancer wellbeing and support centre, and it is absolutely amazing. It is a sanctuary for people facing a diagnosis but also for their families, which is important. It is a place of community, healing and, most importantly, hope. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Lisa and the team on delivering on the scale of their ambition and wish them well for the future, and will she thank people right across the UK who are supporting people facing a diagnosis?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Lisa Fleming and all those involved in the House of Hope for supporting those with breast cancer at some of the most difficult times in their lives, providing support, hope and all that they need.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): The programme launch for this year's Bloody Scotland—the country's leading crime writing festival—took place at the Golden Lion hotel in Stirling. It is the 13th annual festival and this year includes events programmed by Scotland's king of crime writing, Sir Ian Rankin, and takes place on the weekend of 12 to 14 September. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the success of the UK's incredibly talented crime writers, many of whom will be in Stirling in September, and will she join me at one of the many excellent events? Tickets are on sale now!

Lucy Powell: It is really no mystery why the UK leads in the crime writing genre. Leaders like Sir Ian Rankin build on the legacy of many others, including Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. I will certainly join my hon. Friend in celebrating all our crime writers.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Almost 300 residents in West Lothian, which covers a large part of my constituency, and many others around the country will be affected by the shortage of galantamine

capsules, which are used to treat Alzheimer's. As a result of the shortage, local pharmacies are scrambling for provision, and some patients rely on twice-daily short shelf-life medication, which is more difficult to administer. Given the unique vulnerability of those with Alzheimer's, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the security of our medicine supply chains?

Lucy Powell: We are working hard with industry and health leaders to resolve issues with the supply of those capsules. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a full update.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Young people from the Citadel youth centre in my constituency have been shortlisted for an Into Film award for their animation "Can we talk about Mental Health?". The group will be here in London next week for the award ceremony, and I will be pleased to welcome them to Parliament. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the group good luck, and will she schedule a ministerial statement on supporting young people from across the UK to get involved in the creative industries?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in wishing the group good luck with the award ceremony and their visit to Parliament next week. We want to see many more young people enjoy the creative industries. That is why our curriculum review is happening at the moment: it is vital that young people get involved.

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): Across my constituency, grassroots sports clubs do an incredible job of promoting physical and mental wellbeing. Eccles RFC does wonderful work to deliver parity for its girls' team, ensuring that rugby is an open and inclusive sport, and Boothstown FC has done a fantastic to enable boys and girls to benefit from football. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending Eccles RFC and Boothstown FC for their efforts to promote women's and girls' sport, and will she consider a debate in Government time on the centrality of physical activity, both inside and outside school, to young people's wellbeing?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating those at Eccles RFC and Boothstown FC on all the great work that they do. Grassroots sport is often raised at business questions, so I am sure that it would make a popular topic for debate. We are committed to the "This Girl Can" campaign. I am sure that girls' grassroots sport would also be a popular topic for debate.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I want to thank a teacher called Chris—[Laughter.] No, not this one! Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Chris Leeding of Newhall primary academy in Harlow on achieving a Pearson teacher of the year silver award for his clear dedication and passion for supporting children in Harlow, both in classroom teaching and in encouraging them to write to their local MP?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Chris from Harlow—not him, but the teacher he mentions. As we have heard, teachers do amazing work for all our young people, and we send our gratitude to them daily.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): On Monday evening, two reckless individuals had their vehicles seized in Aylesbury town centre due to antisocial driving. I am really grateful to Thames Valley police, who acted quickly against them, and I am pleased that the Government's Crime and Policing Bill will give the police stronger powers in this area, removing the requirement to issue a warning before a vehicle can be seized. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the Thames Valley police officers for their dedicated work and join me in welcoming this Bill?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I have seen at first hand what a big difference it can make in reducing crime and antisocial behaviour when these powers are used to seize and crush vehicles that are being used for antisocial behaviour in our communities. I thank my hon. Friend for voting for that important Bill last night. We look forward to getting it on the statute book.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): As has already been said, this week the Minister for Future of Roads announced an increase in the Dart charge, which is the toll that all road users pay to use the Dartford crossing. Residents in Dartford are extremely disappointed and frustrated by this rise, and I aim to take the matter up with the Minister. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the use of tolls for infrastructure and how we can keep the costs down for users of infrastructure like the Dartford crossing?

Lucy Powell: As I said previously, I am sorry; I know that the small increase we have had to make to the Dart charge is of concern to people. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the last time the charges were increased was 2014, but he is right that the issue of toll bridges, toll tunnels and tolls for infrastructure is of great importance to this House and comes up many times. I am sure that if he were to apply for a debate, he would secure one.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Two of my constituents were recognised in His Majesty the King's birthday honours list at the weekend. Anne MacDougall, for services to volunteering in the community, and James McLaren of Golden Friendships, for services to people with disabilities and older people, received British Empire Medals. Does the Leader of the House agree that they both are very well deserved, given their dedication to improving lives in West Dunbartonshire, and showcase their remarkable service? Will she join me in congratulating Anne and Jim?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Anne MacDougall and James McLaren on their honours. I am sure the whole House would agree that our honours system is an opportunity for us to thank and reward all those in our communities who do the work that Anne, Jim and many others across the country do.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): In Colchester, we have been celebrating the 20th anniversary of the discovery by local archaeologists of Britain's only known Roman chariot racing track: the Colchester Roman circus. Dame Mary Beard, no less, recently visited the site with me and declared it to be absolutely amazing. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the anniversary

of the discovery of this nationally significant site and commending local residents who want to see more made of it in the light of future developments, and will she find time for a debate on scheduled ancient monuments?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in recognising this important Roman site in her constituency, which chariot racing took place on—how fantastic. I know that she and her constituents are proud of their rich heritage, and I am keen to see what the future holds for them.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): I was thrilled to see the Coo Shed in Parliament this week, getting special recognition for its farm-to-fork family-run coffee shop in my constituency, but poor local infrastructure has been a drain on its success. Road closures on the A77, which for years has been neglected by the Scottish Government, have cost it dearly. Will the Leader of the House agree to time in the House to debate the importance of well-funded infrastructure to help businesses, particularly in rural areas, thrive?

Lucy Powell: Road closures can be a blight on local businesses, local communities and footfall on the high street, and they are obviously affecting my hon. Friend's constituents. I am sorry to hear that the Scottish Government seem to have mismanaged these roadworks, and I hope they are listening today and get on with the job.

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): Arts and culture are booming in north Wales, and I am delighted to say that next month, we will see both the formal reopening of Theatr Clwyd in Mold and also Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in my constituency of Clwyd East. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the contribution of both to our economy and our arts sector, and will she make time for a debate in this House about how we can further grow opportunities for the arts and culture sector?

Lucy Powell: Arts and culture play a huge part in all our communities and can play a really important part in economic regeneration, as they are doing in my hon. Friend's constituency. I join her in celebrating the reopening of those facilities and look forward to visiting soon.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): Although many of us are enjoying the hot, dry weather, it does increase the risk of wildfires. In the past month alone, firefighters have been called to 20 wildfires in the Peak district. All too often, these fires are started by the irresponsible use of disposable barbecues. Locally, we are doing everything we can to prevent this. I have written to all local supermarkets asking them not to sell disposable barbecues. Will the Leader of the House hold a debate in Government time on how we reduce the risk of wildfires in our national parks?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that the irresponsible use of disposable barbecues can have devastating consequences like those he describes. Local authorities have existing powers to apply controls to restrict or ban the use of such barbecues in certain areas, but I will ensure that he gets an update on how we can take this further.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): The Rural Activities Garden Centre in my constituency is a vital resource for adults with learning difficulties, providing jobs, training, support and the ability to make lifelong friends. The service users and their families I met last week were horrified that, despite this, the council is proposing to close the service next Thursday. Will the Leader of the House join me in sending a message of support to the families affected, and make time for a debate in this House about the vital role that these services play for adults with learning difficulties?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his area, and I am incredibly sorry to hear that his Conservative local authority has decided to close this valuable local garden centre, which does so much for his community. We have given local authorities one of the biggest boosts in local funding that they have had for some time, so they really have no excuse.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Across the UK, volunteers give their time, energy and care to support our communities, and we could not do without them. One such champion is my constituent Doug Smith, who founded Volunteers Count, a campaign asking organisations to record volunteer hours so that we can finally put a number and a value on the enormous contribution of volunteers. Will the Leader of the House join me in supporting the Volunteers Count campaign, and make time for a debate on the value of volunteering to our country?

Lucy Powell: What a great initiative by Doug Smith to set up Volunteers Count; I am sure we all recognise that it is a really good and important way of collecting this data and information. The subject of volunteering gets raised with me every week, and I am sure that a debate, probably on the Floor of the House, to celebrate our volunteers would be very well attended.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of Unite. Will my right hon. Friend find an opportunity for the House to recognise the vital work of our elected trade union representatives across the country? In particular, following his funeral last week in Glenrothes, will she join me in paying tribute to John Gillespie, chair of Unite Scotland—a tireless and hugely respected campaigner for social justice who will be deeply missed, not only in Fife but throughout our labour and trade union movement?

Lucy Powell: I pay tribute to John Gillespie, the former chairman of Unite Scotland. He sounds like someone who did a great deal to fight for people's rights and for social justice, and a great, trusted leader for his union and the wider workforce.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): In Rossendale and Darwen we have real concerns about rural crime and its impact on our farms and village communities. We have excellent, hard-working rural crime teams, but they cover vast areas with limited resources. One team with a single vehicle between six officers covers three local authority areas. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the rural crime strategy, and the resources required to deliver it?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Our rural and wildlife crime strategy will be published in due course, and I will make sure that he and other colleagues have a chance to discuss it with Ministers.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): The Health Secretary has rightly described Norfolk as

“the Sahara of dental deserts”—[*Official Report*, 23 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 506.]

I very much welcome the 700,000 extra dentistry appointments since Labour took office, as well as the money for supervised toothbrushing, but East Anglia is the only region of England without a dental school, and consequently it struggles to recruit and retain dentists. Would the Leader of the House support a general debate on dental care so that we can discuss funding for dentistry schools, and what more can be done to improve access to dentistry across the UK?

Lucy Powell: We still have far too many dental deserts in this country, and I am sorry to hear of the situation in East Anglia. My hon. Friend is right that the Government are committed to creating more dental appointments, but it is also vital that we have dentistry schools to make sure that we can train and retain the dentists of the future.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Thanks to Government investment in Royal Shrewsbury hospital, we are doubling the size of our A&E and adding 120 extra beds to our wards. While the construction site is taking up space in the car park, my local trust has arranged a free park-and-ride bus for NHS staff. Does the Leader of the House agree that my trust's best practice example could lead the way for other hospitals to encourage modal shifts by providing free bus passes to NHS staff, leaving parking spaces for patients?

Lucy Powell: I am pleased to hear that Royal Shrewsbury hospital A&E is doubling in size and about the initiative that my hon. Friend describes to provide a park-and-ride scheme. The issue of hospital parking, particularly for staff, is vexed, and I am sure that we will continue to debate it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call John Slinger to ask the final question.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Some 96% of UK prisoners are men, most wars are started by men and most war criminals are men. As we work for a better future here and abroad, where conflicts and unilateral actions are sadly gaining the upper hand, does the Leader of the House agree that we must do more to bring the perspectives of women to the fore, as we did earlier this week? Does she further agree that while the majority of men are not the problem, some key problems are largely caused by men, so it is vital that we better educate boys and young people, and detoxify masculinity, so that over time we might reduce violence at home and abroad? Can time be found for a debate on this topic?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that important final question. I am strongly in favour of women being far more involved in decision making; when they are, those decisions are often better ones.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measures:

Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Act 2025
Data (Use and Access) Act 2025.

UK Infrastructure: 10-year Strategy

12.1 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): When this Government came to power, we were elected on a promise to deliver a decade of national renewal, and from day one, we have worked to fulfil that promise. Less than a year into the job, we have already started to see the results: the fastest growing economy in the G7 in the first quarter of the year; interest rates cut four times and real wages rising more in the first 10 months of our Government than they did in the first 10 years under the Conservatives.

However, we are under no illusions about the challenges ahead. We will be going further and faster to turn the page on 14 years of chaos and mismanagement from the Conservative party, and to deliver the decade of national renewal that we promised. That is the backdrop against which I present this strategy to the House today. I put on record my thanks to everyone whose input has helped to shape the document, including those involved in the review I led when in opposition, which resulted in this strategy and the creation of the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, about which I will say more shortly.

Infrastructure is key to unlocking growth across the country. Our roads, railways, airports and digital infrastructure connect people to businesses, public services and one another; our energy, water and housing infrastructures create and support communities; and our schools, hospitals, prisons and social infrastructure provide high-quality public services and help to keep us safe. But good infrastructure means improved productivity and efficiency in our economy too: increased resilience to shocks, stronger public services, more jobs and ultimately higher wages for working people.

From the development of the railways to the 2012 Olympic games, we have a proud history in Britain of innovating, developing and building high-quality infrastructure, but the reality is that we have now fallen behind many of our international competitors. Too many investors now question our intentions and our capabilities. When we say we will build something, they will often ask if we will and whether we can. That is because for too long the Conservatives cut capital investment, promised major projects one minute then abandoned them the next, and left the public estate to crumble for 14 long years, from the roads we drive on to the schools we send our children to. They wasted money, time and effort, saw a decline in productivity and wages, and there was stagnant growth and an increasing belief that politics cannot change things for the better. However, with this new Labour Government, we will prove once again that change is possible.

The spending review last week set out how our Government are investing in the renewal of Britain, allocating an additional £120 billion of capital investment over the course of this Parliament, with new road and rail projects to connect our towns and city regions. That includes £3.5 billion more for the trans-Pennine route upgrade to reduce journey times between Manchester and Leeds, benefiting communities along the train line. We are also investing in the next phase of the midlands rail hub to strengthen connections between Birmingham and the wider midlands to the south-west and Wales. In Wales, we are investing £445 million in new rail projects in

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north and south Wales over 10 years to connect cities, towns and manufacturing hubs, with two Labour Governments working together for the people of Wales. We will set out further details on our plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail in the coming weeks.

This is not just about transport. We are delivering the biggest roll-out of nuclear power for half a century, with a £30 billion commitment to our nuclear-powered future. We are providing £39 billion for the affordable homes programme over the next decade, which is the biggest cash injection into social and affordable housing in 50 years. We are backing British industry in its pioneering work in carbon capture, usage and storage, including with support for the Acorn project, with benefits felt right across Scotland.

The task before us now is to ensure that this investment is spent effectively and efficiently—a real change in approach from the Conservatives' time in government—and to plan for not only the next five years, but the long term. That is the driving force behind the 10-year infrastructure strategy. Crucially, it is our hope that this long-term approach will give investors and businesses the confidence to invest in skills and their workforce, hire more apprentices, create more jobs and improve wage rates in every part of the country.

The strategy is by its nature thorough and detailed, but I will draw the attention of the House to five key elements today. First, we will provide certainty and stability through increased capital investment. We are committing to funding at least £725 billion for infrastructure over the next decade, ensuring that infrastructure spending continues to grow in line with inflation after the current spending review period. At the spending review, we committed detailed capital spending plans for each Department until 2029-30. To provide further certainty and confidence in our plans, we are also confirming funding for the school rebuilding programme to 2035 and for the prison expansion programme to 2031. This long-term certainty needs to be translated into real jobs in every part of the country, so ahead of the summer recess we will publish a new online infrastructure pipeline. It will provide up-to-date information about what we will build and when, and where we will build it, giving industry and investors the confidence they need to invest in highly skilled jobs in every part of the country.

Secondly, for the first time we are bringing economic infrastructure such as transport, energy and waste together with housing and social infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and prisons, into one overarching Government strategy. In doing so, we will expect stakeholders to think more strategically about the communities they are creating, not just the specific piece of infrastructure they are building. For example, as part of our review of the Green Book, we have decided to pilot place-based business cases, which will ensure that there is proper co-ordination between Departments when bidding for funding from the Treasury. I know that will be a huge relief for communities across the country, which have relied too often on poor planning on infrastructure and community benefit. That is the difference it makes to have Labour MPs who show up and listen and a Labour Government who get it.

Thirdly, we are taking steps to address the soaring maintenance backlog in our public estate, which is estimated at more than £49 billion. I am today announcing

a new maintenance fund to provide at least £9 billion per year over the next decade to improve our public services and save money for the taxpayer. That includes at least £6 billion per year to maintain and repair our hospitals, so that our loved ones can get the best possible treatment when they need it; £600 million per year for our courts and prisons, so that justice can be served; and almost £3 billion for our schools and colleges per year by 2035, so that every young person gets the best start in life.

Fourthly, we will leverage the private capital needed to deliver this strategy. That means matching capital to individual projects and using Government debt and equity to invest alongside the private sector. We will also work with industry to explore the targeted use of new public-private partnerships where they can be shown to deliver value for money for the taxpayer. Any new model will learn lessons from the past to secure value for money into the future.

Lastly, we have established the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority. Based in the Treasury, NISTA brings oversight of infrastructure strategy and delivery together, and integrates assurance, design and delivery assessments into Treasury spending decisions. It will ensure that the strategy is implemented effectively across the whole country, including through formal reviews of progress every two years, aligned with the spending review cycle. It will also work across Government to provide expertise and support to delivery partners.

By design, this 10-year infrastructure strategy is a technical policy document, and we will continue to work with businesses, investors, workers and trade unions, and local leaders to drive up ambition and improve delivery. However, the strategy is much more than that. Alongside our modern industrial strategy, it will provide certainty and confidence in Britain as an investment destination, and will establish the framework needed to deliver the step change in infrastructure investment announced by the Chancellor in last week's spending review. Done properly, it will result in tangible improvements to the fabric of our country: our local roads and high streets renewed so that communities are even better places to live; our public transport more available and more reliable, making it easier for people to get around and access opportunities; our schools, hospitals and GP surgeries fit for the future, to deliver for generations to come; and a country that will be stronger and more resilient. Communities will see the difference as this Labour Government deliver on the promise of change and a decade of national renewal. On that basis, I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

12.11 pm

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for his statement, and for providing early sight of it.

Our ability to invest in public infrastructure is a positive for individuals, communities and the country as a whole, and it is right that the new Government set out their strategy. The last Government had to deal with a series of economic disruptions, including the impact of covid, the unwinding of quantitative easing across all advanced economies, and the consequences of

Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The global impact was disrupted supply chains, increased inflation and raised interest rates. Notwithstanding those shocks, under the last Government, public sector expenditure on capital increased in real terms, from £81.7 billion in 2019-20 to £117.8 billion in 2024-25—an increase of 44%. Today, the Chief Secretary has confirmed expenditure of £725 billion, but has provided very little detail. There is no project pipeline today; will he commit to coming back to this House when it is published?

In 2024, the last infrastructure pipeline analysis included an investment pipeline of 660 projects over a 10-year period, commencing from 2024-25. The Chief Secretary's last statement to the House was, in very large part, a restatement of the investments in local transportation projects that had already been announced by the previous Conservative Government. Will he confirm how many of the 660 projects in the previous pipeline will be retained? Will he advise the House which major projects are being abandoned, and give some insight into his reasoning for doing so?

Translating a pipeline into reality requires a labour force of sufficient size and with a range of skills—in construction, project management and engineering, for example. Again, the 2024 analysis by the Construction Industry Training Board indicated that that project pipeline would create labour pressures in many of those skills areas. Since coming to office, this Labour Government have increased national insurance and are proposing new regulations on employment, both of which will disproportionately affect the construction sector. Does the Chief Secretary have any concerns about the impact of those changes on the availability of labour? Will he advise the House what assessment he has made of skills pinch points and what steps the Government are taking to alleviate them? Fulfilling these plans will require investment by taxpayers and private capital. Will the Chief Secretary advise the House on whether there has been any significant change in the mix of private and public investments—within discrete sectors or overall—compared with the last pipeline analysis in 2024?

The Government created the National Wealth Fund, and said that it was their principal investor—a critical part of the Government's growth strategy for infrastructure. The Chief Secretary has given the National Wealth Fund £7 billion, but has made no mention of it today. Why has there been no mention of the National Wealth Fund?

We are moving through an era with a rapidly accelerating pace of change, in which the period from technological innovation to obsolescence can be vanishingly short. The risk that public investment in new technology solutions will become redundant is increasing. While being forward-looking, the Government should also be careful to nurture both existing technologies and new but proven ones, so what are the Government's priorities for technology choices in the energy sector, and what actions will he take to protect taxpayers from technology redundancy risk?

The Pension Schemes Bill, introduced by this Government, includes a reserved power for the Government to mandate the investments of pension schemes. Has the Chief Secretary had any discussions about—or had the Treasury do any analysis of—the use of mandation powers to provide financing to the capital investments he has announced today? Have the projects announced

today been assessed according to the revised Green Book rules? If not, will they be reassessed at some point on the revised basis, and what assurance can the Chief Secretary provide that these projects will give value for money to taxpayers? As this Government have stated, and as we acknowledge, when pressures on public expenditure increase, it is frequently capital expenditure that suffers. What actions is the Chief Secretary willing to take if finances are tight to protect the budgets for the projects he has announced today?

Investment in infrastructure benefits from a stable economic background, a clear set of priorities, efficient delivery, and optimal returns for taxpayers and investors. Madam Deputy Speaker, I miss the Chief Secretary in his old guise as Chairman of the Business Select Committee, when there was less of the rhetoric and the partisanship. These big decisions need open communication and critical analysis if we are to improve value for money and get projects delivered on time and on budget. In those endeavours, the Chief Secretary will always have our support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As Mr Fuller knows, there were three of us on that Committee back in those good old days.

Darren Jones: I remember them very fondly, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for your support, and for that of the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury in his statements today. He has asked me a number of questions, which I will take in turn.

The first question was about detailed spending allocations between Departments. Today, we are making a commitment to a minimum level of investment in infrastructure—£725 billion over 10 years, which is rising in line with inflation. The detailed spending plans per Department get allocated at the spending review. We have returned to longer-term, multi-year spending reviews, which are obviously different from the annual allocations done under the previous Government; capital is now allocated at a departmental level until 2029-30. We will do the subsequent five-year detailed allocations in 2027 at the next spending review.

The pipeline will be published in a couple of weeks, in mid-July. The reason for a small delay between the strategy and the pipeline is that we wanted to integrate the data from last week's spending review, and it takes a little time to do so. We have worked in partnership with industry, skills providers and others to develop the pipeline, which—as I say—will show on a map of the country which projects we are procuring, when, and where. That will give investors and businesses long-term confidence about the jobs that are going to be available, so that they can invest in their own workforce. The shadow Chief Secretary is right to highlight that skills is a constraining factor in the UK economy. We have the strategy and the money from the Chancellor; we now need to work through the industrial strategy with the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Transport and with private sector partners, to do all we can to create the great jobs in every part of the country that will enable us to build the infrastructure we have set out today.

The shadow Chief Secretary asked me about the role of private capital. The strategy set out today contains a whole chapter about the role of private capital and the

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different mechanisms that we use with private investors. There is a commitment to use private capital for economic infrastructure where there is a revenue stream, and some of the approved methodology for looking at those options. Further work will be done between now and the autumn Budget on some very targeted potential applications of private capital for social infrastructure but, crucially, only where that provides value for money compared with it being funded by the state.

The shadow Chief Secretary also asked me about the Green Book. The Green Book review was published last week as part of the spending review, and it will be applied on a business case basis as projects come through to the Treasury for spending approval. There is nothing in the strategy set out today that pre-approves a business case, so the new Green Book will be applied to business cases as they come through in the normal way.

At a couple of points, the shadow Chief Secretary asked me to explain the difference between this Government and the last Conservative Government. To put it simply, it is failed promises from the Conservatives, and promises delivered by the Labour Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call John Grady, a member of the Treasury Committee.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I welcome today's announcement and in particular the focus on housing and transport, because Glasgow has a real housing crisis. In my constituency, the busy Bridgeton train station does not even have lifts for disabled people. All taxpayers are concerned about value for money, particularly given the huge overspend and utter chaos of HS2 under the last Government. In Scotland, there is the absolute scandal of the Arran ferry. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me and set out the steps that the Government are taking to ensure value for money in this infrastructure spending? Will he commit to sharing the learnings with the Scottish Government, who desperately need help on that?

Darren Jones: The key thing I will point my hon. Friend to is the role of the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority sitting in the Treasury. The assessment on delivery, assurance, design and commercial capabilities for projects will be part of the advice now coming to me as Chief Secretary and to the Chancellor, and it will be aligned with spending decisions on budgets. That means that if a project is not delivering effectively or is not yet ready to start, we will not release the money for that project, and we will stop funding projects that are failing. That is a key difference from how decisions were processed previously, and we think it will lead to much better discipline in delivering big projects.

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

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Last week, the Liberal Democrats welcomed the announcement of investment in public infrastructure and transport projects, which we have long called for. We are glad that today the Government are setting out a 10-year infrastructure

plan to realise those projects, and the Liberal Democrats will be closely scrutinising it to ensure that it delivers for communities across the UK.

Boosting our infrastructure is vital, given the appalling mismanagement under the last Conservative Government that left our school and hospital buildings crumbling while neglecting critical infrastructure, from transport to renewable energy generation. Today's plan must draw a line under the disastrous mismanagement of projects such as HS2, which promised to connect our country and communities only to end up another hollow Conservative promise, long delayed and billions over budget. While we welcome the Government's intention to deliver productive investment, we will closely scrutinise its implementation.

I have been concerned that Ministers have been unable to answer questions regarding delegated funding from the structures fund, such as for Hammersmith bridge in my constituency. Will the Minister confirm that specific projects have been selected, and will he ensure that infrastructure funding is distributed fairly for the benefit of all regions? Will he set up a crumbling hospitals taskforce to identify creative funding ideas, speed up construction timelines and put an end to the vicious cycle and false economies of delayed rebuilds, which lead to rising repair costs?

As we look carefully at the implementation of these plans, the Government must ensure that we have a workforce equipped with the necessary skills to meet these commitments. Does the Minister therefore agree that it is time to replace the broken apprenticeship levy with a broader, more flexible skills and training levy? Will the Government fulfil their promise to make Skills England an independent body with employers at its heart?

Darren Jones: The hon. Lady is right to point to the fiasco of HS2, which my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary updated the House on yesterday. The complete and utter negligence in delivering on that project over many years has left us with the legacy of having to pay more for longer, which has implications for all the other things we would like to do in the country. We commissioned the James Stewart review, which was published yesterday. All its recommendations have been adopted, and lessons are already flowing through this infrastructure strategy, so that we never end up in that situation again.

The hon. Lady asked me about the structures fund, which was a particular fund that we prioritised because we know that in many constituencies, bridges in particular often miss out on funding and are in desperate need of it. She will have to speak with the Department for Transport about the allocations of that funding, but I will make sure that she gets an answer from my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary.

Several hon. Members rose—

Darren Jones: Lastly, the hon. Lady asked about hospital maintenance. There is a big commitment in the infrastructure strategy on maintenance. Maintenance is not sexy, and it is not good for election leaflets, but it is important. That is why we are committing so many billions today to it, because there is an enormous backlog. NISTA will be co-ordinating across Government and across all social infrastructure to make sure that we are

prioritising that going forward so that people can see quick, real, tangible improvements to their public infrastructure in their local communities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The Minister missed the Mexican wave that took place behind him. It was down to Chris Vince mostly, although probably it was also down to the length of the answers, which could be shorter.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I thank the Chief Secretary for his excellent work on this strategy, which will turbocharge confidence in the investment community while improving the lives, incomes and opportunities of my constituents in Darlington, which is exactly what I was elected to do. It will not surprise him to hear me ask politely for him to outline more detail on his ambition for the place-based approach, the Green Book reforms and the pilots that he has mentioned. Can we have one in Darlington, the home of many of his Treasury colleagues?

Darren Jones: I will give a shorter answer, given the time available. We will be setting out further detail shortly about where we will be piloting these place-based business cases. It is a new process for Whitehall. It requires a level of co-ordination that does not currently exist, but the outcome if we get it right will be people experiencing co-ordinated, thoughtful infrastructure spending in the places they live, in a way that makes sense for how they live in those areas. I am sure my hon. Friend will continue to bid for Darlington as we decide where to pilot those place-based business cases in due course.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): The Chief Secretary to the Treasury mentioned the midlands rail hub. He will know that the previous Government committed to the £1.75 billion project. There has been a pause, and paragraph 5.83 of the spending review states that the Government will fund its progression. In the spirit of short answers, can he tell me exactly how much money has been committed to it?

Darren Jones: The difference from the last Government is that they promised things with no money, and we are promising things with actual money. The hon. Member points to the midlands hub in the spending review document. That is about development funding. One of our different approaches under this infrastructure strategy is that, instead of just allocating the total estimated spend at the start of the project and letting the project get on without proper oversight, we are issuing development funding earlier and more often, so that we can have properly costed business cases with proper assurance. That means we can guarantee members of the public that we will deliver on our promises, unlike his party.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this investment strategy. Many of us have seen at first hand the broken infrastructure we are dealing with. The Chief Secretary will know my concern that many of the organisations we will be asking to tackle these problems are also dealing with the legacy of the private finance initiative, which saw buildings and projects cost three times more than the actual assets themselves. The pleas-

that many of us made to the previous Government to tackle these legal loan sharks of the public sector fell on deaf ears, and I know that this Chief Secretary will not make the same mistake. Would he be open to meeting those of us who are keen to learn the lessons of the private finance initiative? In particular, can we cap what private companies can make on military contracts, children's care homes and other social infrastructure projects, so that we do not see our public sector savaged by these companies in future?

Darren Jones: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend. I can confirm that in the design and funding of NISTA, I have funded a particular team to work on the management of disputes under the old PFI contract schemes to make sure that we are getting the best outcomes and best deal for the public sector.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I cannot believe it, but I agree with the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy). It is a shock to the system, but the Chief Secretary has announced the return of the public-private partnership. The last Labour Government were a byword for disastrous contractual negotiations, and that led to the infamous £1,000 lightbulb. Given that Labour was so bad at these contract negotiations last time around, what confidence does the Chief Secretary have that he will be any better this time around?

Darren Jones: I am usually confident in my abilities, to be frank. We will be consulting on some of the design details. We will be using private capital for social infrastructure only in particular potential use cases. We mention in the strategy today certain types of primary neighbourhood healthcare centres. We will be transparently consulting on that detail, and we will only allow such capital to be used in a way that is value for money. We will not be returning to the PFI contracts of the past.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the Chief Secretary's statement. As someone whose parents and grandparents grew up in and lived in council housing and benefited from that opportunity, I particularly welcome the record investment in social and affordable housing. Under the previous Government, the UK was 28th out of 31 OECD countries for business investment, and it was regularly at the bottom of the G7 for the combination of public and private investment. Will the Chief Secretary confirm that this strategy today will begin to turn that terrible legacy around?

Darren Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend on our extremely ambitious plans for council houses—or social and affordable houses, as we call them now. He will know that I, too, grew up in a council flat. I now represent the constituency of Bristol North West, and over 20,000 people in the city of Bristol are waiting for secure housing. I am very confident that our £39 billion commitment on building affordable and social housing will make a huge difference to the lives of people across the whole country.

My hon. Friend asks about unlocking private capital. The good news is that plenty of investors want to invest private capital in the UK, but they have told us through the British infrastructure taskforce and other vehicles that they did not invest for many years because they thought

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that we had lost the plot in this country, whereas we now have a clear strategy. We have stability both politically and economically, and we will now work with those investors to provide opportunities across the country to bring money to communities that have missed out for too long.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I welcome the Chief Secretary's comments on maintenance. He may be aware that a huge maintenance project is about to begin on the most beautiful stretch of motorway in the country, the M6 at Lune Gorge. Eight bridges under and over that motorway will need replacing in the coming years. Will he have a look at the resource that is being made available to mitigate the impact on the local community? The plan is to close the northbound exit and the southbound exit consecutively for three years, and to close the A685 bridge connecting Kendal to Tebay. Will he make sure that there is resource to ensure that there are temporary slip roads, so that local communities are not cut off?

Darren Jones: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman makes a very good case, which Ministers in the Department for Transport will need to answer, but I am pleased to know that the Liberal Democrats think maintenance is sexy after all.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Through my work on the Public Accounts Committee, I have seen just how severe the public estate maintenance backlog has become. In fact, the Conservatives had their heads so deep in the sand on building maintenance that I am surprised they did not apply for planning permission. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that York's public buildings will benefit from the £9 billion maintenance fund that he has announced?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the challenges that I learned on coming into government is that the last Government did not even ask what the maintenance backlog was in certain Departments. There was not a clear set of data that told us which assets the Government own and the quality or state of them, so we have some pretty basic work to be getting on with through NISTA as we allocate the money, which will go directly to the schools, hospitals and other public sector buildings that have been ignored for many, many years.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The creation of another new authority will be met with an eye-rolling sigh in Scotland, because although it is called the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority—a very shiny title—the reality is that it will have little oversight in Scotland. The plan announced today will generate Barnett formula money, which will go to Holyrood and disappear—it will go into ferries that do not float and things like that. In my constituency the A75 road is a piece of critical national infrastructure. It services the ferry ports to Northern Ireland, and it is vital for all the countries that make up the United Kingdom. Will we see any money coming for that road through today's innovation, or will the money once again disappear into the coffers in Holyrood?

Darren Jones: I politely point the hon. Member to the fact that previously there were two functions in Government, and I have closed both of them and created one, so we are actually down by one. He asks about the devolved Governments, which have devolved responsibilities. We will not interfere with the devolution settlement, but I think that he and I agree that Scotland needs a new direction, and I hope the people of Scotland will vote for Anas Sarwar and Labour at the election next May.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): I welcome the UK Government's bold 10-year infrastructure plan, and the swift action they have already taken to green-light projects such as the third runway at Heathrow. However, sadly for my constituents, infrastructure policy and delivery in Scotland is in the hands of the failing SNP Government—a Government who cannot dual a road or build a ferry. We are in the grips of a housing emergency in West Lothian, and they are not building the homes that we need. Does the Minister agree that there is much that the SNP Scottish Government can learn from the UK Government about getting the country building again?

Darren Jones: I agree very much with my hon. Friend. Next week I will be meeting finance Ministers from the devolved Governments in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. We will put forward today's update on our infrastructure strategy and seek to partner with them as best we can to deliver for people and places across the whole of Scotland. But given the track record of the SNP Government, I am afraid that I do not have a huge amount of confidence.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The denial in this statement is truly breathtaking. This UK Government could not come up with a 10-year strategy that would survive first contact with reality on anything, and the statement comes against a backdrop of challenging cuts off the backs of the poorest while we are fitting £10 million new doors to the House of Lords and providing £100 billion for a not-very-fast railway that will not be finished for some time.

There was nothing for Scotland in the Chancellor's spending review, there is nothing for Scotland in this statement, and there is nothing for Scotland in the UK's 10-year infrastructure working paper. On that latter document, it is interesting to note that it does not mention devolution, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland once. Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury think that simply mentioning Acorn will make private capital hang around and wait for the Government to put a number on it? How much of this will be a rerun of Labour's disastrous private finance initiative projects, which Scottish councils are still haemorrhaging money on, and why is he heralding working with the Welsh Government but not the SNP Scottish Government? Is he a democrat or not?

Darren Jones: That was a stream of slightly incoherent questions, if I may say so. I point the hon. Gentleman to the document that we have published today, which does mention Scotland quite a few times. He says that this Labour Government have not delivered anything for Scotland. I will just point him to the largest real-terms increase in funding since devolution began—his SNP

colleagues might want to think about how they could spend that more wisely for the people of Scotland. That is in addition to the supercomputer in Edinburgh; the development funding for Acorn, and for carbon capture, usage and storage; and our defence spending, including on the Clyde—I could go on and on. The only people in denial are those in the SNP.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I warmly welcome this statement. After years of neglect, it is quite clear that our infrastructure has been creaking and that opportunities have been missed. That is particularly the case in the east of England, where the Government inherited a per head of population spend that is £1,000 less than the UK average. May I ask the Chief Secretary please to look at the Ely junction project, where for every £1 invested there would be a £5 return? The project would help not only my constituency but dozens in the east of England, and help drive economic growth in our part of the world.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the Ely junction. The great thing about the multi-year spending review in the 10-year strategy is that the Department for Transport and its partners are now able to plan ahead, so I encourage him to talk to Transport Ministers about that particular project. He is right to say that we are absolutely in the business for high value-for-money cases that unlock growth and opportunity in every part of the country.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): A long-term approach to spending is really sensible and I, as a northern MP, particularly welcome the Treasury reviewing the Green Book to make sure that regional inequalities are not further entrenched by future spending. Stepping Hill hospital in my patch has a reported repairs backlog of £138 million, so I was really interested to hear the Chief Secretary talk about the pilot of place-based business cases. Can he say a bit more about how the Treasury will review those pilots, and does it mean that Stepping Hill is more likely to get the funding it needs so that my constituents get the hospital they deserve?

Darren Jones: I hope that Stepping Hill will be able to bid into the new, longer-term maintenance fund so that we can get work done more quickly than it has been done in the past. On the place-based business case pilots under the Green Book review, we have not yet made any decisions about where we will pilot them or how, so we now have to do that work. As I said in my statement to the House, the intention behind them is to look across different types of spending to make sure that we are creating functioning places that have the relevant public service infrastructure, transport infrastructure and house building in one place. We will be able to come to the House with more detail on that in due course.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I know that my constituents in North East Derbyshire will warmly welcome the infrastructure strategy, because we have been on the sharp end of Government Departments failing to co-ordinate when building infrastructure. Can I make a bid for a place-based business case pilot in North East Derbyshire? Our unique mix of urban, rural and semi-rural communities, as well as the fact

that we are in the east midlands and close to South Yorkshire and Sheffield, makes us an ideal area for a pilot.

Darren Jones: It seems that I have a list of bids for place-based business case pilots, which we will take away and consider. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight why this issue is important. When the Government are spending a lot of money on a particular thing, including through industrial policy or defence spending, we need to ensure that that translates into good jobs and good pay, with housing and good public infrastructure, so that people can access those opportunities and help drive the economy forward.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): As one of my constituency neighbours, the Chief Secretary will be aware of our local infrastructure needs, such as upgrading junctions 16 and 17 on the M5, fixing the original Severn bridge and upgrading Westerleigh rail junction. The West of England has often been overlooked in the past, so how will he ensure that the funding is distributed fairly and for the benefit of all regions?

Darren Jones: Noting that I need to manage carefully my conflicts of interest as a Minister and a constituency MP, I would just point the hon. Lady to the announcement made the other week—I thought it was very good—about nearly £800 million of devolved funding going to the Mayor of the West of England, Helen Godwin, allowing her to get on with lots of the transport upgrades that in the past we waited many years to get funded.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): I am encouraged by the Minister's statement, which is a plan to rebuild Britain from the mess left by the Conservatives. Can he inform the House how constituencies such as mine can take advantage of the new place-based business case as part of the Government's Green Book strategy?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a champion for securing investment in her constituency. The approach with the Green Book has been changed to make sure that we are investing in the places that have been left behind for too long. It will be for local leaders to work together to bid for the type of funding that will enable them to deliver on the Government's missions, whether that is house building, economic growth or helping public services get back on their feet. We will certainly be open to bids from her constituency and region in due course.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I welcome this announcement, and while there are aspects that I do not support, I particularly welcome the Government's investment in vital flood defences. As the Minister knows, these are critical in ensuring that we are better protected against the impacts of climate breakdown. With the Met Office warning this week that we could reach 45° temperatures in the current climate, clearly the effects of climate breakdown are already here. Does he agree that protection needs to be fully integrated into every aspect of our economy—from housing to transport and farming—and does he also agree that it is a good idea to put climate resilience and preparedness on a

[Adrian Ramsay]

statutory footing by requiring all major infrastructure providers to carry out climate risk assessments in order to make us all safer?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for raising those important points. Adaptation and sustainable development are at the heart of this infrastructure strategy, and they have to be for all the obvious reasons. He may like to know that, as part of our new approach to spatial strategies in Government, we are already integrating data from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on flood risk, heat risk and water availability with data from other Departments—for example, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—to ensure that we are planning properly for the future.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I welcome the Green Book review of the co-ordination of joined-up infrastructure thinking—thank you so much. Promises have previously been made to local places affected by major infrastructure projects that they would see some local benefits. With that in mind, and with the lower Thames crossing coming to Gravesham, will he meet me to see how Gravesham could be a pilot for this place-based study and to really help with the affordable homes that are also desperately needed?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I am always delighted to meet her, and we should meet colleagues from the Department for Transport to make sure that, where we are investing billions of pounds—whether that is public or private capital—in important infrastructure such as the lower Thames crossing, people benefit from the wider effects of that investment.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Last week something amazing happened: I actually found myself in agreement with the Labour Mayor for York and North Yorkshire, when he said that spending review

“announcements fall well short”,

and that this

“government had a real chance to show it was serious about rural...areas—but it missed it.”

Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree with me that one of the best ways to invest in new infrastructure would be by dualling and electrifying the line between Leeds and York via Harrogate in order to unlock growth in our part of Yorkshire?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his question. As he will have seen from the Chancellor’s previous statements, we are increasing investment in transport—whether rail, road or buses—specifically in the north and the midlands, so there is plenty of opportunity to bid for the project he mentions, and I am sure he will talk to Transport Ministers to make that case.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for his statement and for the national infrastructure strategy. It is particularly welcome that, after the dither and delay of the last Government—who failed to get important projects such as the lower

Thames crossing, which has been mentioned, over the line—this Government are finally setting out a plan to do so. Does he agree with me that investing in infrastructure sets the foundation for growth across the whole country, so that there will be not only jobs in north Kent, a reduction in congestion and opportunities for small businesses, but majorly enhanced connectivity for businesses in the midlands and the north with our channel ports?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he will see in due course, when the industrial strategy is published, that we have been thinking across Government about the role of infrastructure as an enabling investment to unlock other types of investment, and to create great opportunities for people and economies where they can afford to live and are able to get around to access those opportunities.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): The Chief Secretary’s statement made no mention of rural areas. When it comes to infrastructure, Welsh rural communities have for decades lost out, with a lack of investment in both our physical and digital infrastructure. Unfortunately, the £445 million on rail does not come anywhere near rural Wales. What are the Government doing to prioritise investment in disadvantaged rural areas in Wales?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for her question. Without wanting to go through the entire infrastructure strategy or spending review, there is significant money coming to all parts of the country. The Chancellor has increased day-to-day spending by £190 billion and capital spending by £120 billion, so I am confident that the hon. Member’s constituents will benefit from an improved national health service, improved road maintenance and improved digital infrastructure. There is a very long list of things people will be able to experience, and they will see the difference made by a Labour Government as we deliver on our promise of change.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am hoping that the next question will be as entertaining as his constant chuntering. I call Alan Gemmell.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is very nice to finally be recognised by the Chair.

Does the Minister agree that this approach to investment is fundamentally different from the Conservative chaos that led to crumbling schools, hospitals and roads, and light-years away from that of the SNP Government, whose profligate waste of public money has led to a £1 billion ferry fiasco in Ayrshire?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the failure of other Governments—both the previous Government at Westminster and the current Government in Scotland. When preparing this work in opposition, I was very taken by investors saying, “When I can invest anywhere in the world, if the UK says it is going to do something and Germany says it is going to do something, I am probably going to bet on Germany over the UK.” That has to change because Britain is a brilliant country with lots of opportunity. The long-term stability we are setting out in our strategy, our long-term

spending plans and our commitment to stability are unlocking that investment to create great opportunities for people across the whole country, including in Scotland.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I hope the Minister appreciates just how insulting it is to Welsh ears for us to be told that we are getting a fair deal on railway funding, when we know that we have been cheated out of billions of pounds due to the classification of several projects as England and Wales projects. Wales is getting only five railway stations between Newport and Cardiff. That is hardly national renewal, is it? Will he bet on Wales and commit to projects outside that belt, such as projects across mid-Wales and west Wales or the electrification of the north and south lines?

Darren Jones: There is a key difference: under the last Government, Wales did not get a penny, but under this Labour Government, working with the Labour Government in Wales, it has had not only the largest real-terms increase in spending since devolution began, but £455 million for rail infrastructure, nearly £130 million for coal tip safety and many other things. That is the benefit of two Labour Governments working together to deliver for the people of Wales, and the hon. Gentleman may want to be a little bit more grateful in future.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for his very welcome statement. In my constituency of Bathgate and Linlithgow, we have the Avon gorge, which is unsuitable for the volume of heavy goods vehicles that traverse it every day; a motorway junction at Burghmuir only for traffic going east, not west; and, of course, the long-awaited Winchburgh train station that has never been delivered, despite years of promises from elected SNP Members. As well as being in my constituency, they are in the constituency of the SNP Cabinet Secretary for Transport. Can I urge my right hon. Friend to encourage his counterparts in the Scottish Government to take a leaf out of this Government's book, and invest in infrastructure to support our businesses and local communities?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, who knows that this Labour Government at Westminster have given the Scottish Government the money to get on with the job. They have no excuses left for not delivering for the people of Scotland. We will continue to partner with and support the Scottish Government as best we can, but ultimately the SNP-led Government in Scotland have to change their ways, and if they cannot, the people's only choice will be to vote for a new direction under Labour next May.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers. He is always incredibly pleasant, and we appreciate that. Can he confirm that the 10-year strategy incorporates the need to enhance connectivity throughout the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? In particular, may I ask him about flights between Belfast and other major UK cities, which are becoming more costly by the day?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his question. He will know that the Government have renewed our commitment to regional airport capacity, with plans for a national policy statement to be published in due

course. I am sure the Transport Secretary and her team are listening to him on the increasing costs for his constituents of those flights, which we would of course like to reduce, if we can.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): As a civil engineer, I absolutely welcome the Minister's statement, but I want to respond to it within the context of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. If he does not mind, I will start by giving him some advice. If he is going to meet his counterpart in the Scottish Government, do not mention Sheriffhall roundabout on the Edinburgh city bypass. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) is laughing. Over the past eight years, there have been lots of reports but no delivery and the price has moved from £120 million to, I think, £300 million now—quite incredible.

On to my point, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the long-term plan. There are kids at school today who will be involved in delivering it. I welcome the connection with schools and colleges, but my right hon. Friend will know that universities in England are under huge pressure and universities in Scotland are in crisis. What part will they play in developing the skills we need to deliver these projects?

Darren Jones: Our universities play a crucial part in our education and skills landscape. They are, of course, privately-owned organisations and so are funded separately from the departmental budgets we have allocated in the spending review. The money announced last week and in the infrastructure strategy today is for schools and further education colleges. Any further changes to help universities with their estates will be announced in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Please keep questions short.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I spent a week in Leeds at the UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum, banging the drum for Bournemouth and the south-west to say that we are open for business with this Labour Government. Investors and builders are responding. They are encouraged by the pension, regulatory and planning reforms and by this infrastructure approach, but we need more investment. We have £1.6 million going into Bournemouth and Poole college, £500 million into two new NHS buildings and £230 million into water upgrades, but we need more. Will the Chief Secretary meet me and Dorset MPs to consider how we will take forward this place-based approach towards investment, so that Dorset can benefit?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That was not a short question.

Darren Jones: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for championing not just his own constituency, but the region in which it sits. He is right to raise the fact that many communities have lost out on funding over many, many years because of the chaotic approach under the previous Government. Our approach to this long-term strategy, with long-term funding and partnering with private capital, is essentially set up to try to drive investment in the places that have missed out. I would be delighted to work with him to try to unlock those opportunities.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Don't let me down, Chris Vince.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for his statement and in particular for the funding for the maintenance of hospitals. I will be lobbying the Health Secretary in due course, but first will my right hon. Friend let me once again advocate for Harlow in respect of the future of the UK Health Security Agency? It is shovel-ready, well located and cost-effective.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for continuing to make the case for that investment in his constituency. Now that the spending review has concluded, it will be for the Department of Health and Social Care to make decisions on the allocation of its spending. I am sure that he will continue to lobby the Health Secretary in the normal way.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I welcome the statement. Does the Minister agree that our investment plans are a world away from the chronic under-investment of the previous Government, with their lack of investment in public services, housing, people and an ambition for Britain. That included the previous Government decimating shipbuilding in my city, snatching it away and not replacing the economy and jobs, leaving a hole for 14 years. How will this Government's plans deliver for Portsmouth? Will he meet me to see how we can finally open up place-based investment for Portsmouth and wider Hampshire?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have long-term budgets, a long-term strategy and a long-term commitment to places across the country, in particular to Portsmouth where, working with our friends in the Ministry of Defence, we are spending an increased amount of money to ensure we have wider benefits for communities and for workers in that sector.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): Milton Keynes is proud to be a growing city, but too often under the previous Government new homes did not come with the infrastructure required for the new communities. Will the Minister please set out how the new strategy will help to support the infrastructure, in particular GP surgeries and hospitals, that will be needed to support those new homes? More specifically, will he please let us know how it will help to support the building of new towns when we hear back from Sir Michael Lyons in his report shortly?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the legacy issue of poor planning. NISTA, our new centre of expertise in the Treasury that is implementing the strategy, has been given the authority by Cabinet to co-ordinate spatial strategies across Government. That means that Departments will have to think between themselves about making sure that they put things like GP surgeries and hospitals in the right places when they are building significant numbers of new homes.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): Our long-term plan is having an immediate effect in South Norfolk: over £200 million for the Thickthorn junction, £8.9 million for the Norfolk and Norwich hospital, and upgrades to four GP practices—[*Interruption.*] All of which will support the constituency of the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) as well. I would not be doing a good job as the MP for South Norfolk if I did not flag the amazing work of the Norwich Research Park and advocate for future investment in it.

Darren Jones: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being so successful in securing so much investment in his constituency. I am sure his constituents will be deeply indebted to him now and in future elections. I know he will continue to make the case for investment for his constituents.

Warm Home Discount

12.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): With permission, I wish to make a statement on the action we are taking to cut energy bills for working families.

Three years on from the Russian invasion of Ukraine which sent prices soaring, people up and down the country are still feeling the impacts. Everywhere I go in this job and from every person I speak to, I hear how the wages that used to support families are being swallowed up by sky-high energy bills month after month after month. The truth is that for as long as we remain dependent on gas and volatile global markets, British people will continue to pay the price and we will continue to be held back as a country. That is why we are finally ending our exposure and our vulnerability by sprinting to clean, affordable energy that is controlled by us.

We know that in the meantime, we must do everything we can to support families who are under huge amounts of pressure with their energy bills. Today, we are setting out how we will help millions more households with their bills this winter by expanding the warm home discount. Previously, around 3 million people received the £150 rebate off their energy bills, but millions of people living in homes not classified as “hard to heat” were excluded as a result of criteria introduced by the previous Government in 2022. We believe those criteria were unnecessary and unreliable. We believe that it cannot be fair to have two families in almost exactly the same circumstances, with one receiving help and one not. That has been raised repeatedly by consumers and their advocates since the changes were made in 2022, and I absolutely understand their concerns. That is why we are abolishing this restriction.

This winter, every single household where the bill payer receives a means-tested benefit will be eligible for the warm home discount, which means a further 2.7 million low-income households will get that vital support. In total, more than 6 million households—one in five families in Britain—will get the help they need this winter. This expansion will help us meet our goal of tackling fuel poverty, which is critical to the work of my Department. It will increase the number of fuel-poor households that receive support, with coverage improving from 30% under the current scheme to around 45%. In total, 1.6 million fuel-poor households will receive support. I have met people on the frontline of the energy bills crisis up and down the country, so I know for a fact that there are families out there right now breathing a sigh of relief because this measure will ease the huge amount of pressure they are under with the cost of living.

One issue that is often raised with me is that families can miss out on the warm home discount because the person who receives the means-tested benefit is not named on the energy bill. To be eligible, the means-tested benefit recipient, their partner or their legal appointee needs to be named on the energy bill. I encourage all families who receive a means-tested benefit to check that and, if necessary, to contact their supplier. People need to ensure that the benefit recipient, their partner or their appointee is named on the bill before the warm home discount qualifying date, which is 24 August.

At the same time, we are going further to put the energy market back in the service of working people, taking steps to restore confidence and faith in the energy market, which has been shaken. As it stands, too many complaints against energy companies go unresolved or take too long to fix—whether it is suppliers not responding quickly enough or failing to adjust direct debits when families use less energy—which leads to a situation where consumers often do not access the compensation they are entitled to due to an overly complex complaints system.

This Government are absolutely committed to standing up for consumers who have had a bad experience of the energy system, and we are working hard to ensure that the system works in the interests of consumers. We have already made real strides in improving conditions for customers. Following the Secretary of State’s intervention and months of Government work with the sector, Ofgem announced £18.6 million of compensation for victims of forced prepayment meters in May, and we will continue to go further.

This is a Government willing to use every tool in our arsenal to fight for working people. By moving at speed to deliver clean power, and with the spending review setting out the biggest investment in the domestic clean energy industry in history, we will take back control of our energy system and do the job of protecting consumers. That is why we have wasted absolutely no time in driving forward our clean energy mission in our first year, ending the onshore wind ban, consenting more than 4 GW of renewable energy, launching Great British Energy, funding a new golden era for nuclear, kick-starting carbon capture and hydrogen industries, and investing £1 billion already to upgrade up to 300,000 homes, with £13.2 billion committed in the spending review to upgrade millions more.

This is how we will rebuild our energy network and protect families across the country: by supporting more people who need our help this winter; by restoring confidence in a reformed energy market; and by bringing bills down for good with secure, reliable, clean energy. We will ensure that every family in this country has the security of a home they can afford to heat now and in the future. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

1.1 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement—what a delight it was to receive an update on the warm home discount on this, the warmest day of the year. I know that the Minister is a tireless champion for the people of Peckham and for the most vulnerable, and I thank her for all the work that she does behind the scenes for those causes.

Exactly one year ago today, the Chancellor said:

“Great British Energy, a publicly owned energy company, will cut energy bills by up to £300.”

What has happened since? Bills have not fallen by £300, as was promised so many times by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Energy Secretary and Labour MPs. In fact, bills have gone up by almost £300—the opposite of what they all promised just a year ago. On top of that, this Government took the winter fuel payment away from millions of pensioners through a cold winter.

[Joy Morrissey]

This announcement will provide support for some, but it is nothing more than a sticking plaster—the fact is, this Government's energy policy is making people colder and poorer.

The Minister has not said a single word about how this expansion will be paid for. It is a £400 million commitment, but there was no detail in either the Government's press release or the Minister's statement about how it will be funded. Will the warm home discount still be funded by levies on everyone's energy bills? If so, this policy means that energy bills will increase for the majority of bill payers, yet the Minister did not say so in her statement. Will she therefore inform the House whether she has asked her Department to calculate by how much levies on everyone's bills will increase to pay for the £400 million of extra spending? If so, will she inform the House so that our constituents know how much their bills will increase by under this Labour Government?

The Government's press release said that the expansion of the scheme will be offset by efficiency savings across the energy system, but we have no detail about what those efficiencies are, or how much money will be saved. In fact, the system is becoming less efficient. The National Energy System Operator recently said that the cost of balancing the grid by paying wind farms to switch off when it is too windy increased by 10% to £2.7 billion a year, warning that this will triple to £8 billion a year by 2030 as this Government rush to build more wind farms and solar farms on agricultural land than ever before. That is what this Government are delivering: more subsidies, more levies, more payments for wind farms to switch off, more tech imported from China, and more costs added to everyone's bills.

Will the Minister share some proper detail with the House on exactly how much this will cost the British people? I suspect the answer will be a resounding no. This is a statement devoid of detail because it is designed simply to distract from the fact that this Government's energy policy is in chaos and driving bills higher and higher. This is a Government driven by the ideology of net zero, not by making energy bills lower for families across Britain. It is a Government of broken promises.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I think the hon. Lady has some cheek, given the previous Government's record on energy bills. When, under their watch, families across the country were paying sky-high energy bills—with people still paying the price of that today—the idea that the Conservatives would try to lecture us on energy bills is pretty rich.

Let me take the hon. Lady's questions directly. Yes, we are committed to reducing energy bills by £300. We have passed the legislation on Great British Energy and the institution is up and running. We are doing the job of driving down bills—we stand by that commitment, and the way we will deliver it is through investment in clean power. It is very clear that our reliance and dependence on global fossil fuel markets under the Conservatives' watch was ultimately what led to bills rising. Labour will not make that mistake, which is why we are investing record levels in renewables. That is the way we will drive down costs in the system and drive down bills.

This policy is not about ideology; it is about families across the country. The status quo is not tenable. We do not think it is acceptable to have bills at the current levels and to leave families exposed, which is why we are taking action.

The hon. Lady asked specifically how this policy will be paid for. The warm home discount is paid for under the price cap. We are very clear that we do not want other families' bills to increase in order to pay for this change. We have worked with Ofgem to look for savings within supplier operating costs, for instance. Given that debt spiked under the energy crisis, meaning that all households are currently paying a bit on the debt allowance, we are also working with Ofgem to get that debt burden down. We will use the savings there to cover the cost of this policy. We are very clear: support for those who need it; protection for all households.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. I think the shadow Minister was right to highlight this statement being made on the warmest day of the year—this is a Government announcing a warm home plan to literally fix the roof while the sun shines, which the Conservatives failed to do. This announcement will benefit nearly 3 million families, no doubt helping thousands in Hampshire, including many in my constituency.

First, on data sharing, one reason it is tough for many families and households to access these benefits is the inability to access data between the suppliers and the Government. Secondly, given that the legacy of the previous Government was to leave us with the highest electricity prices in Europe, can the Minister confirm that the Government are continuing to look at ways to bring down electricity costs for both consumers and businesses?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: As always, my hon. Friend puts it perfectly. I will pick up his point on data sharing, which is critical. My Department and the Department for Work and Pensions have been working over the past few months on the sharing of means-tested benefit data so that this will be automatic; come this winter, all eligible consumers will receive a letter informing them that they will be getting the warm home discount. It will be transferred on to energy bills as a credit—a direct payment for consumers—because we have done the groundwork to put that in place.

On my hon. Friend's critical second point, the relative cost of gas and electricity is incredibly high, and we know that is a problem for both households and businesses, particularly as we try to make that transition to clean energy. We are continuing to do that work. I am very clear that we need to deal with that question in order, for example, for our plans to upgrade homes to have the bite and traction they need, and we are absolutely committed to doing so.

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

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): We welcome investment in warm homes following a winter in which millions of households were living in fuel poverty. The crisis was exacerbated by the Government's cut to winter fuel payments—and we welcome the U-turn on that,

too. The former Conservative Government's stop-starts on home insulation policies left thousands of vulnerable people in damp, cold and unsafe homes, with lower energy-efficiency standards and higher bills during an energy crisis.

Given that homes in this country are among the oldest and least energy-efficient in Europe, will the Government commit to an ambitious 10-year plan for home insulation, for which the Liberal Democrats have long called? Will they ensure that households on lower incomes will be eligible for free insulation as part of that plan? And, following the Government accepting the campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for solar panels to be mandated for all new homes, will they now look to introduce a full zero carbon standard for all new homes and solar for car parks, as put forward by the Liberal Democrats in amendments to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I could not agree more. The record of stops and starts on home upgrades and home insulation is one reason that we failed to insulate as many households as we should have done from the energy price spike. We are committed to a long-term plan to upgrade millions of homes across the country. That is what the warm homes plan will do. We are delighted that this has been backed by the Chancellor with £13.2 billion of investment, and we are now working on how we draw that out across the country. We will make sure that we have the right solution for every household, using a combination of insulation, solar, and heat pumps. We want every household that gets an upgrade to have a home that is warm and much, much cheaper to run. That is our absolute focus and priority.

On the future homes standard, we have been working very closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and consulting with developers. We are absolutely committed to driving forward standards. We have set out our ambition to make sure that future homes are fit for the future, using solar and clean heat solutions. We cannot have the situation that we have had in the past, where we built homes that needed retrofitting a few years later. We are committed to our ambition and we will be setting out more details in the warm homes plan.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's announcement, which will mean that 240,000 people in Scotland will benefit to the tune of £150 directly from the UK Government. I know that she will be having conversations with our Scottish counterparts—and I am sure that if SNP Members were here today, they would also welcome this announcement. As she is having those conversations, may I encourage her to talk about what she is doing and how it differs from the SNP's approach, which involves independence thermometers and housing dashboards? What this Labour Government are doing down here is a practical, tangible example of how we can directly impact the lives of working people.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are engaging with the Scottish Government. Today's expansion creates more resources for the Scottish Government to ensure that direct bill support is provided

to more households. Alongside that, there has to be a plan to upgrade homes and to make sure that we are delivering homes that are warmer and cheaper to run. We will have a plan here, and we expect that, with the additional funding and the example that we have set, the Scottish Government will follow suit, but we are long past the stage of warm words and light action. We need to get on with it, because there are people across the country, including in Scotland, who are struggling. It is the responsibility of Government to get a grip and start to act.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Yesterday, as the Minister probably knows, food bank groups associated with the Trussell Trust lobbied—very effectively—Members on both sides of the House. My local group, the Waterside food bank, impressed on me the gap between the £92, which the Government believe a single person is estimated to need to survive, and the £120 that the food bank believes is necessary for a single person to be able to survive alone. Can the Minister give an indication as to what extent the gap between those two figures will be closed as a result of this initiative?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank the right hon. Member for a very good question. We know that families are struggling with the cost of living. We know that families are in poverty, and that many are having to make the choice between heating and eating. We are trying to put in place a range of measures, and the warm home discount—this £150—is part of it. We have extended free school meals to families on means-tested benefits. We are rolling out breakfast clubs. There is a range of things that we are trying to do as a Government to ensure that people who are struggling and who have been struggling for a long time are lifted out of poverty. We are very clear about our ambition. Every time Labour comes to power, our record is that we lift people out of poverty, and we will continue to do that.

Pamela Nash (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, as will nearly a quarter of a million people across Scotland who will benefit from this £150 warm home discount for the first time. We always appreciate these measures a little bit more in Scotland, because our weather is a bit colder. We have to keep reminding people of that, even today. Does the Minister share my pride in this Government expanding support for more people who need it most because we are turning the tide on failure and building a strong economy on the back of clean energy?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The legacy—the inheritance—was woeful. I do not need to say that, because people feel it across the country. We, as the incoming Government, have a responsibility to ensure that we are doing everything that we can to lift living standards—everything that we can to support families who we know are struggling. I share my hon. Friend's pride in our being able to expand the support, because we know just how much it is needed. None the less, there is more that we need to do. We will not stop here. If we get the roll-out of the warm homes plan right, and if we are upgrading homes, we will be taking up to £600 off bills. The bigger plan that we must take forward will help us to deliver clean power, so that we can reduce bills for everyone. This

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

Government are clear about the task of improving living standards. It is core to what we need to do and to what we need to achieve as a Government, and we are getting on and delivering it.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that park home residents in North West Norfolk and across the country, who pay their bills directly to the site owner, will also benefit from the extended £150 discount, and that when they apply, funding will not be limited, so that everyone who is entitled to this payment will receive it?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank the hon. Member for a really good question. Park homes are currently supported through industry initiatives and the warm home discount. We will continue to make sure that park homes are supported. There is obviously work that we need to do, because we are conscious that there are some customers who are not receiving the discount, and we are working with industry to resolve that.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's statement today on the expansion of the warm home discount. It will mean that 240,000 people across Scotland, including many thousands in Paisley and Renfrewshire South, will receive £150 directly off their energy bills from this UK Government. Will my hon. Friend say a little more about the work being done to accelerate proposals to introduce a debt relief scheme, which would target unsustainable debt built up during the energy crisis?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is right to mention debt relief and the huge burden of debt that we have seen. Over the course of the energy crisis, we saw debt increase to more than £3 billion. For many of those households in debt, there is no route to paying it off. We have been working with Ofgem to put in place a debt relief scheme, using a combination of write-offs of debt and repayment plans, so that we can ensure that more people are lifted out of energy debt and are in a position to afford their energy.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The Minister knows that I have a lot of time for her, and I welcome her announcement today, but it will be of little relief to those who are living with spray-foam insulation that was inadequately installed, and there has been no support from the Government to fix that. Putting that aside, I wondered what Government support is available for off-grid households in rural areas, to ensure that they do not miss out and are included in these plans?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Rural consumers who are on means-tested benefits and linked to an energy supplier should be supported in the right way. We know that there are some off-grid rural households that are not with a particular energy supplier and that that is more difficult. This is why we are working with industry. There is a discretionary amount within the warm home discount that allows industry to find and target those people to provide support.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): I think all Labour Members warmly welcome today's statement, particularly those in Scotland, where 240,000 families will benefit from £150 off their bills this winter. That includes thousands of working families across my constituency. Does the Minister agree that this is another case of the UK Labour Government making a manifesto commitment and delivering on it?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is completely right—a promise made, a promise delivered. That is what a Labour Government do. We are very clear about the change we need to deliver in the country. Unlike the Conservatives and the Scottish Government, there are no warm words or faffing around; we are getting on with the job of delivering change.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Today's announcement of the expansion of the warm home discount is extremely welcome and will benefit many people across west Cumbria. One of the first meetings I had with Ministers after the election was with my hon. Friend. Could she set out more detail about how the really welcome warm homes plan will build on this discount to create a permanent, lasting solution for families in my constituency, who face some of the draughtiest homes in the country, to give them real financial benefit?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Fuel poverty is an absolute scourge that we must work hard to eliminate. There are two things we must do to achieve that. On the one hand, we must deliver bills support. The expansion of the warm home discount is so important, because more households in fuel poverty will receive it. On the other hand, we must make sure that we are doing the job of upgrading homes. This year we have invested £1 billion to deliver 300,000 upgrades, but that is not enough. We have to massively increase the number of upgrades so that we are delivering millions over the course of this Parliament. We have committed to £13.2 billion, and we are now doing the work of setting out how we will drive the shift and change that we need to see across the country. We must ensure that the households that need it have insulation, solar panels, batteries and heat pumps so that their homes are warmer, and ultimately so that we can lower bills by up to £600.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Today's announcement is very welcome and will make a real difference to many of our constituents. I am glad to hear the Minister reaffirm today that in addition to support with bills, the Government recognise the urgent need to ensure that every home is well-insulated and affordable to heat—a genuinely warm home—and are doing that through both hugely increasing standards for new homes and insulating existing homes. She has referenced the £13.2 billion Government commitment to the warm homes plan, which is welcome, though not enough, but why do the spending review documents show that more than a third of that money—£5 billion of the £13.2 billion—is money that the Government expect to get back, presumably to be repaid by households?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I think the hon. Member is referring to some of the financial transaction mechanisms. We will deliver the warm homes strand through Government

support to some households as well as by working with energy companies, whether it be suppliers or distribution network operators, in order to ensure that we are driving upgrades. Part of that will involve the Government providing loans to suppliers, which they will pay back over time. I think that is what the hon. Member is referring to. We are very clear that we need up-front investment as a catalyst, and we are clear that we need to upgrade millions of homes and crack on with the job.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. This announcement will mean that over half a million more Londoners will benefit from a £150 discount on their energy bills this winter. Does she agree that along with our free breakfast clubs, the £1,400 per year increase in the minimum wage and free childcare in schools, today's announcement shows that Labour is putting money back into the pockets of working people in Ealing Southall and across the country?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is spot on. Members on the Conservative Front Bench are chuckling away in front of me, but it is no joke. We inherited an absolutely atrocious set of circumstances. Families across the country are paying for their failure, with the cost of living at a record high level. I go across the country to speak to people, and I see the impact of the Conservatives' failure on people's lives. We were not willing to accept that what we inherited was the status quo. That is why we are taking decisive action. Whether it is the expansions to the warm home discount and free school meals, the increase in the national minimum wage or our record investment in social housing, this Government are getting on with the job of lifting living standards in order to fix the mess we inherited from that lot.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers. In the short time she has been in her role, she has always delivered good news, and that is quite a talent, so I say well done and I thank the Government for that. Double the number of households in the United Kingdom will get £150 off their energy bills, and that is very welcome for those on means-tested benefits. However, with one in four children living in poverty in Northern Ireland, it is essential that this announcement applies in Northern Ireland too. Will the Minister confirm that Northern Ireland is included in this help for the vulnerable and those in poverty? Will it come through Barnett consequentials or another way?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Northern Ireland runs its own separate scheme. We are in very close contact with the Northern Irish Government—in fact, I was in Northern Ireland yesterday. We are making sure that our work to deliver clean power, which is our route to lowering bills, and, critically, our work through the warm homes plan is co-ordinated. The hon. Member is right that there are people across the country who are struggling at the moment, and it is absolutely our responsibility to take action to support them.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank the Minister for this announcement. As she will recall, we met back in September to discuss my concerns about fuel poverty in my constituency, including the number of children living in cold homes. We specifically talked

about this measure. She has taken it away, done the hard graft and delivered, so I thank her for that. As she said in her statement, there are people who may not get the discount because they do not know that they are entitled to it. The Government will know which people are receiving the warm home discount and which people are on a means-tested benefit and are not receiving it. Will she consider writing to those families to make sure that everybody knows the good news that this Government are putting more money into their pockets?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he has been doing to champion this agenda. I can confirm that we will be writing to all households in receipt of means-tested benefits to let them know that they are eligible for the discount. For the vast majority, it will be automatic; they will not have to do anything, and the discount will turn up as a credit on their bills. There is a bit of action to take for people who are not the bill payer. We will get the message out that they must ensure that they are included as the bill payer in order to get the automatic support.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): Thousands more of my constituents in Glasgow will have money off their energy bills this winter as a result of this Labour Government's decision. I welcome the Minister's statement and ask her to assure me that the Government will continue to work hard to deliver lower energy bills for families in Glasgow.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I can commit to that. The Conservatives tell us that our fight to deliver clean power and our work to upgrade people's homes is ideological. It is not ideological; it is down to bread and butter issues. We know that there are families struggling across the country. We were not willing to accept what we inherited as the status quo, so we are getting on with the job of reducing energy bills, because improving living standards and delivering the change we were elected to deliver is a core priority for this Government.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The Minister is right that because the Conservatives left our country exposed to fossil fuel prices, people's wages are being swallowed up by energy costs. It is right that we are sprinting towards clean, home-grown energy as a long-term solution, and the tensions in the middle east demonstrate why that is so important. We must also get support to people right now in Bournemouth East. I welcome the fact that 220,000 families across the south-west, including my constituents, will benefit from help this winter, but my constituents want to feel a bit of breathing room—to live, not merely survive. Will the Minister confirm that tackling the cost of living is our No. 1 priority as a Government, and set out the ways in which the Government are targeting the cost of living crisis?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the cost of living. He is also right to point out that we have huge exposure to global fossil fuel markets, and at a point where we are seeing tensions and conflict in the middle east, energy security becomes so critical. So we will continue, despite the naysayers on the Opposition Benches, to sprint to deliver clean power, but while we do that we are taking action to reduce the cost of living. So, whether it is the expansion of the

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

warm home discount, or the expansion of free school meals, or increasing the national living wage, or the action that we are taking to roll out breakfast clubs, or the action that we are taking to build record amounts of social housing, the Labour Government are committed to bettering living standards—not talking about it, but getting on and delivering the change that we were elected to deliver.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Many families in Portsmouth North continue to face pressure from energy bills and the cost of living, so I congratulate my hon. Friend and the Government on supporting those on the lowest incomes this winter, particularly through the change in the warm home discount, the £150 credit, the warm homes plan and the additional funds that we have given to the household support fund, helping people like Portsmouth North resident Ameer, who I met yesterday and who lost out under the last Government's unnecessary, unreliable and unfair criteria. Will the Minister join me in urging that—alongside our Government—energy providers and councils, including Portsmouth city council, do more to promote and advertise what residents must do to access these vital supports to raise their living standards, so that families who are entitled to it get the help that they need?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a clear obligation on energy suppliers to do everything that they can to support vulnerable households. I meet with suppliers regularly to emphasise that people are under pressure and that they absolutely must discharge their obligations. My hon. Friend is also right to point out that we have to work with local government, regional government and partners on the ground to ensure that the support that is available—we will continue building on that support—gets to the people that absolutely need it.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her statement, which will help a quarter of a million households in the east of England. May I say, from a personal point of view, it is so encouraging to hear a Government focused on green energy solutions? Believe it or not, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is over 30 years since I was at school, learning about the importance of green energy—[*Interruption.*] I know. Will she reflect on the decisions that this Government are making,

including removing the ban on onshore wind, and how they will continue to benefit residents in my constituency of Harlow?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I cannot believe it was 30 years ago that my hon. Friend was learning about green energy. We have been sprinting to deliver clean power. When we came into government we set a mission to do it by 2030. There were naysayers, and there continues to be naysayers, but we were not deterred by that. So whether it is removing the ban on onshore wind, whether it is record investment in nuclear, or whether it is a record renewables auction, we are very clear that we are putting in the investment—we are putting in the hard yards, the hard graft—to deliver clean power. Why are we doing that? Not because of ideology, but because we recognise that we inherited an energy system that was not working on behalf of consumers. We recognise that people were under huge pressure—a status quo that we were not willing to accept. We will deliver clean power, so that we can bear down on bills and ensure that we drive down energy bills for good.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That is the end of the statement, so I will allow the Front Benches a few moments to shuffle over as we continue the business for the rest of the afternoon.

BILL PRESENTED

DEPRIVATION OF CITIZENSHIP ORDERS (EFFECT DURING APPEAL) BILL

Secretary Yvette Cooper, supported by the Prime Minister, Pat McFadden, Secretary Shabana Mahmood, Secretary Hilary Benn, Secretary Ian Murray, Lucy Powell, Secretary Jo Stevens and Dan Jarvis, presented a Bill to make provision about the effect, during an appeal, of an order under section 40 of the British Nationality Act 1981.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 268) with explanatory notes (Bill 268-EN).

Deputy Speakers

Ordered,

That, for the period up to and including Tuesday 22 July 2025, Sir Roger Gale shall act as Deputy Speaker and shall exercise all the powers vested in the Chairman of Ways and Means as Deputy Speaker.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

Licences and Licensing

1.34 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): I beg to move,

That the draft Licensing Act 2003 (UEFA Women's European Football Championship Licensing Hours) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 15 May, be approved.

This summer, the UEFA women's European football championship, commonly referred to as the Women's Euro 2025, will be hosted in Switzerland. I am pleased to report that both the England and Wales women's national teams have qualified to participate in that prestigious tournament. The draft contingent order before the House today proposes a temporary extension of licensing hours across England and Wales, should either England or Wales—or both—progress to the semi-finals or the final of the competition. Specifically, if either team reaches these stages—I have to say, from my limited following of football, that it seems the women's teams have a reputation for doing far better than our male teams—the order would extend licensing hours from 11 pm to 1 am on the evenings of the semi-finals, which are scheduled for 22 and 23 July, and the final, which is due to take place on 27 July.

As Members will be aware, section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 empowers the Secretary of State to make such an order in recognition of events of “exceptional national significance.” The decision to lay this draft order follows a public consultation conducted by the Home Office earlier this year. A significant majority—87% of respondents—supported the proposed extension of licensing hours for the semi-final and 84% for the final, should the home nations qualify. Respondents also agreed with the proposed duration of the extension—until 1 am—and supported its application to both England and Wales. There was also consensus that the extension should apply only to the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises. The order will therefore allow licensed premises to remain open until 1 am without the need to submit a temporary event notice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As a Northern Ireland MP, I wish to convey my best to the English and the Welsh ladies' teams. Although the order will not apply to Northern Ireland, that will not stop us cheering on the English and the Welsh teams on a different timescale in our pubs, our restaurants and our cafés.

Dame Diana Johnson: It is always good to see solidarity between the four nations. I thank the hon. Member for displaying his usual courtesy in expressing his good wishes to the two women's teams.

I was just about to explain that the reason we are taking this order forward is to reduce the administrative burden on both businesses and local authorities, saving time and resources for all involved.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): As a Leeds United supporter, I felt the need to ask what a semi-final or a final was, but—[*Laughter.*] I welcome the order. Does my right hon. Friend recognise the benefits that the increased opening hours will bring to the pub and entertainment industry, and hopefully—if we get that far—the impact that will have on the communities that support them?

Dame Diana Johnson: I was just about to say that businesses in the hospitality sector, particularly pubs and bars, stand to benefit from this modest extension, which would allow them to accommodate increased demand during these high-profile fixtures. I fully accept that the hospitality sector has had a difficult time over the past few years, and that this is a helpful measure.

It is right to acknowledge that police representatives have expressed some concerns regarding the potential for increased crime and disorder. While operational decisions on deployment and resourcing are a matter for individual forces, I am confident that appropriate measures will be taken to mitigate any risks, as has happened in similar cases.

Notably, there have been no significant incidents of large-scale disorder linked to previous licensing extensions, which is testament to the professionalism of our police service, to which we owe our thanks. I also emphasise that this is a limited and proportionate two-hour extension. It applies solely to the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises after 11 pm and does not extend to off licences, supermarkets or other premises licensed only for off-sales.

To clarify one final point, if neither England nor Wales reach the semi-finals, the proposed extension will not apply on 22 or 23 July. Similarly, if one or both teams reach the semi-finals but do not progress to the final, normal licensing hours will apply on 27 July.

I also make Members aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) is sponsoring a private Member's Bill, supported by the Government, which seeks to make such orders subject to the negative resolution procedure in future. That means that less time will be spent, particularly on the Floor of the House, having to agree such measures. The Bill has completed its Committee stage in the House but will not be enacted in time to apply to this summer's tournament, hence the need for this order to be brought before the House today. Should this order receive the support of the House, as I hope and expect it will, it will reinforce the argument that debating such measures may not represent the most effective use of parliamentary time.

In conclusion, this order has been brought forward in recognition of the significant public interest in the forthcoming tournament and, in particular, the hopes and expectations surrounding the England and Wales teams. On that note, I take the opportunity to wish the players of both teams the very best of luck. I am sure they will do themselves, their fans and their nations proud, and I commend the order to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

1.41 pm

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): We are delighted to support the temporary licence changes, as I am sure are Members on all sides—although, to be fair, I do not think I would have much choice on the matter, for if I ever stood at this Dispatch Box and opposed more time in the pub to watch football, my dad would probably disown me. The changes, as the Minister has outlined, will extend licences by two hours for venues that already have licences until 11 pm and apply if England or Wales, the two qualifying teams in the UEFA women's

[Mr Andrew Snowden]

Euro, reaches a semi-final on 22 or 23 July, or the final on 27 July. There is no reason we should doubt that they will reach that threshold because we are the defending champions, after England's magnificent performance at the 2022 tournament, hosted in the UK at Wembley. The final saw a 2-1 victory and, of course, it was made all the sweeter by beating the Germans.

This is a fantastic time to support our local as well as our national teams. It is also worth taking the time, however, to note that since the autumn Budget, the hospitality sector is sadly reporting a spike in the number of pub closures. That is no surprise, as the Chancellor's raid on pubs has cost them at least £2,500 per full-time employee. Sixty per cent of pubs say they have cut jobs and three quarters say they have increased their prices as a direct result. Therefore, even though the licensing changes mean we might all be able to go to the pub for a little longer, it will cost us a bit more for a pint—and sadly, for many, the local might not even be in business any more.

Now, more than ever, we need to support our locals, such as the 63 pubs that were nominated in my Fylde pub of the year competition, which was won by the Coach & Horses in Freckleton. I am sure that the two Grahams who run that cracking establishment will be delighted with a shout-out from this Dispatch Box, but they will be even more delighted with the Minister for having a bit of extra time to sell some more pints of Ponkys ale.

That just leaves me to finish by wishing the England and Wales teams good luck—though, of course, I am biased and hope to be raising a glass to England, once again, thrashing Germany.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Just before I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, it would be remiss of me not to mention my local football club, Crowborough, and that we are a family of Gooners.

1.44 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): England's Lionesses have a brilliant track record, and not just on the pitch; they have continued to win hearts, change attitudes and redefine what women's sport looks like in this country. From their historic Euro 2022 win to

reaching the world cup final last year, they have sparked a cultural shift that has touched every community, including mine in North Cornwall.

In towns and villages across Cornwall, we find women lacing up their boots, taking to the pitch and building the next chapter of the game. Teams such as Bodmin Women, Bude Town Ladies, Kilkhampton Ladies and countless others are part of a growing movement to put women's sport on an equal footing with men's. I cannot stress how vital our national team and local grassroots sides are to inspiring young girls to dream big. When girls in places such as Bude or Padstow see the Lionesses celebrated on the same scale as the men's team, it sends a clear message: this game is for you, too, and you belong here.

That is why this licensing change really matters. It might seem technical, but it carries symbolic weight. It will also have a really positive impact on our hospitality industry, at a time when it is struggling with increased national insurance and business property relief changes. It tells the country that women's football deserves the same celebration, the same energy and the same place in our national life as the men's game.

Visibility alone is not enough, however. At school level, where a lot of the passions start and a lifelong love of the beautiful game is ignited, only around two thirds of girls are getting the chance to play football during physical education lessons. That is unacceptable. We Liberal Democrats believe that every young person should get at least two hours of quality physical education a week, backed by proper facilities and the right funding.

We also need to ensure that grassroots clubs, such as those in North Cornwall and across the country, have the coaching, resources and safe spaces they need to thrive. I have seen the appetite in our local communities at first hand; we just need to match it with the support. The Karen Carney review in 2023 offered a road map for long-term progress, but progress must also mean equity and treating women's sport not just as an add-on, but as an essential part of this country's culture.

Collectively, I am sure that all Members of this House will join me in getting behind the teams in our villages, towns, cities and schools, encouraging the future of women's football to be written on school fields and local pitches by the next generation. I take this opportunity to wish both Wales and England the very best of luck for the tournament.

Question put and agreed to.

Backbench Business

Incontinence

1.47 pm

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of incontinence.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who helped secure this debate. I am delighted that we are debating this vital but often ignored issue during World Continence Week.

The definition of a taboo is a subject so difficult, repulsive or offensive that it cannot be mentioned in polite conversation and can be articulated only in hushed, embarrassed tones. Once, menstruation was a taboo and we were not supposed to talk about it. Once, cancer was a taboo, and in some communities it still is. Once, mental health was a taboo and people covered it up. We can now discuss those things more openly without embarrassment, we can seek the right medical advice and treatment, and we can offer support to one another and fight for decent healthcare for every aspect of the human body.

How did I get here, in this Chamber, talking about human bodily functions? This has been a journey for me. I spoke in the Westminster Hall debate on women's health in February. As a physiotherapist, I talked about pelvic health and the importance of rehabilitation and pelvic floor exercises. My words seemed to have struck a chord. Colleagues, residents and professionals all emailed me to thank me for speaking out and to share their experiences. It started to snowball, and I asked myself, "Why aren't we talking about this more?" I am advised that this is the first ever general debate on this topic in the Chamber, so I congratulate the House.

What are we actually talking about? We are talking about the involuntary loss of faeces and urine, which can be caused by pregnancy, neurological conditions, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord surgery, musculoskeletal conditions, disabilities, menopause, prostrate-related conditions and many more reasons. The crippling fear for patients is that it might happen at work, in public or in social settings. Patients have told me that they feel like a prisoner in their own homes, caught by a condition that means people avoid others, do not go out, cannot go to work, do not have relationships and feel a crushing sense of shame. People's mental health suffers to the point of serious illness.

Our language reflects society's attitudes: "wetting your knickers", "peeing your pants", or ruder variants that I will not say. Yet we are talking about a range of conditions that affect millions of our residents. Did you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that bladder and bowel incontinence is more common than hay fever? The NHS estimates that 14 million people live with bladder problems—one in five of the population—and it is men as well as women. The NHS says that 2 million men experience involuntary loss of urine. A third of women live with these conditions right now—that's right: a third. Yet this is another aspect of health that is woefully unsupported and pushed off the agenda. It affects 1.5 million children and young people. One in 12 children across the UK battle these debilitating symptoms, including

bed wetting, chronic constipation and soiling. Half a million adults have bowel conditions that lead to the involuntary loss of faeces.

We have a population that is getting older and surviving complex conditions, such as cancer, and that will increase the prevalence of bladder and bowel dysfunction. When it comes to bowel conditions, we are talking about the involuntary loss of faecal matter, which can be because of irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease or other conditions, such as bowel cancer. I have not even touched on what people suffer when they are doubly incontinent. Our NHS collects data on anything and everything. The number of patients with continence care needs to be routinely published, and it is not. My first ask of the Minister—and I have several—is, why not?

The House will note—notwithstanding the title of the debate—that I avoid the terms "incontinence" and "continence". I have spoken to so many people with bladder and bowel conditions, and my feeling is they are the wrong words to use and they carry too much stigma.

To give justice to the debate, I have conducted roundtables with experts and patients and have shared anonymous surveys. Dawn shared her story with me. She noticed some urinary leakage 10 years ago, when she was 50. Now, at the age of 60, she spoke to me about her journey. She did not go to the GP because she felt ashamed. It got worse and she began to see the gynaecologist. She got the strength to speak to the GP, who gave her tablets. Three rounds of tablets did not work. Her symptoms got worse, and she was unable to leave the House. The gynaecologist referred her to a physiotherapist and specialist nurses. I asked what went wrong here: it was the lack of prevention.

Prevention, prevention, prevention is key. Physiotherapy is recommended as an integral part of women's health, especially with pelvic floor dysfunction. According to the 2019 NHS long-term plan,

"Physiotherapy is by far the most cost-effective intervention for preventing and treating mild to moderate incontinence and prolapse".

Insufficient physiotherapist numbers mean that women who experience pelvic floor dysfunction or prolapse wait months or years, or miss out on treatment entirely. Women often end up needing surgery that could have been avoided with earlier intervention. Dawn eventually received specialist care, and her symptoms have vastly improved. She only gets the odd leakage here and there. Her advice to others is

"see your GP... don't leave it and ask for a referral to see a specialist".

I had the privilege of seeing one such specialist service in my constituency—Dudley adult bladder and bowel service, known as DABBS—where I met patients and practitioners like Ola Rawlins, team lead and clinical pelvic health physiotherapist, who shared her story, which was eye-opening. Patients told me how GPs ask about bowels but seldom bladders. A patient—Leanne—said she felt ignored, fobbed off and misdirected. One felt like a "prisoner". Ola's patients felt like a ball bouncing around different parts of the system. Men, especially those with prostate cancer, were reluctant to take part in self-help groups, and many men did not even know they had a pelvic floor and thought only women did.

Yet symptoms can be easily treated with the right interventions, treatments and course of rehabilitation. Research shows that for every £1 spent on women's health services, there is a return of £13, thanks to a reduction

[Sonia Kumar]

in emergency admissions, fewer missed days at work and better long-term health outcomes. I know the Department of Health and Social Care is consulting on the men's health strategy, and I trust that the Minister will ensure that this aspect of men's health is front and centre.

The DABB service calls itself a “Cinderella service”. The testimonies of patients and professionals is humbling to hear, but it makes me so angry. We are letting too many people down. So what must change? We need to talk about the taboo, and we need action. We need a renaissance of public toilets: to maintain the ones we have, open the ones that are closed and build new ones. I want to see bins in both men's and women's toilets, so people can throw these products in the bin. I support the Boys Need Bins campaign by Prostate Cancer UK, and I congratulate the all-party parliamentary group for bladder and bowel continence care for its work. I ask that this place be a pioneer in this space by placing bins in all men's toilets.

We also need better food labelling, so that fibre is listed on products and people can understand how they can get better bowel health. We need to ensure that the AI and robotics revolution in healthcare does not miss bladder and bowel care. We need a joined-up service between GPs, hospitals, clinics and patient groups. Perhaps we could have more sympathetic and subtle signage in healthcare settings. Products provided outside healthcare settings could have simple labels on shelves, such as “body care” instead of “incontinence products”. That tackles the embarrassment of being seen by a friend or neighbour buying them in the shops.

I urge the Minister, as the 10-year plan nears publication, to ensure that bladder and bowel care is included. Much needs to change, but today I have five concrete asks for the Minister. First, we need a public information campaign to raise awareness and smash the stigma, as recommended by Dr Sara Webb of the Royal College of Midwives. The NHS rightly spends millions on campaigns, such as cancer screenings, the use of 111 and sepsis awareness. Will the Minister commit to a campaign on bladder and bowel care?

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Many years ago, when I worked in the NHS, the board tried to save money by changing the incontinence products that people used. The products were not quite the same, which caused a lot of distress for the people who used them, as well as a lot of inconvenience for the health professionals working with patients, particularly the district nurse team. In the end, it did not really save any money. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that people get access to the products that work for them?

Sonia Kumar: I agree that products need to be readily available, and that is one of my recommendations.

Secondly, beyond awareness is prevention. We need real understanding, and I want bladder and bowel health to form part of the school syllabus, enmeshed into the curriculum. That is a recommendation from surgeon Dr Robinson from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Let us give teachers the tools to teach it. I want this to form part of the training of all healthcare professionals, so that medical professions understand bladder and bowel care from

their earliest time in the job. We need a specialist workforce that includes physiotherapists, nurses, surgeons and many others. Can the Minister commit to placing this issue high on the agenda for schools, and to building a specialist multidisciplinary workforce who have the relevant skills and knowledge?

Thirdly, we need enhanced research and development on bladder and bowel conditions and their treatment. That does not necessarily mean vastly increasing spending; it could mean looking at how resources could be better prioritised. We cannot diagnose, treat and rehabilitate, or look into future medical interventions, if there is limited research.

Fourthly—this recommendation is from Dr Ashish Pradhan, chair of the British Society of Urogynaecology—can the Minister commit to banning misleading advertisements that send the wrong message? Products subject to no regulation are advertised, and patients are told to live with their symptoms.

Fifthly, I have a recommendation from a patient I met, Leanne. Could we have a one-stop shop in which all services are under one roof, care that is closer to home, and cheaper incontinence products? They are exempt from VAT if they are purchased for personal use, or use by a registered charity, but what if they are purchased by care homes?

Those are my five demands, backed by experts—five things that will ensure real progress. I look forward to the Minister's response. Lastly, let me say this to men, women, young people and children listening to this debate: you are not alone, and there is no shame. This subject is often surrounded by silence. It is a subject that people do not want to talk about, or do not know about, and that the NHS does not do enough about. That ends now, and it ends here.

2 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Incontinence is no respecter of person, and no respecter of sex, and it is male incontinence that I rise to speak about. The wry old joke is that men do not know they have a prostate until their other half reads about it in the *Daily Mail*. Campaigning newspapers, such as the *Daily Mail*, and charity groups like Prostate Buddies in my Dumfries and Galloway constituency have done a power of work to make men aware of prostate disease and prostate cancer—just as well, given that prostate cancer is the most common cancer among men. One in eight of us will be diagnosed with it, and that figure rises to one in four for black men. It is well recognised that early diagnosis is key, but it is less well known that as many as 60% of those treated with surgery will face urinary incontinence, outwith surgical intervention.

Prostate Cancer UK says that one in 25 men aged over 40 will experience some form of urinary leakage every year. The scale of the issue, and the number of people facing the problem who report feeling shame, embarrassment and isolation, is greater than many suppose. The guardedly good news is that far from being alone, people suffering incontinence are a very large portion of society. It has been another silent epidemic, and people have been left to suffer in obscurity. Today is part of the solution to that. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) on securing the debate. Given her medical background, I defer to her for advice on what can be done to relieve the physical symptoms of

incontinence—and much can be done. According to the American Urological Association, better prostate treatment is cutting the number of men who suffer incontinence after prostate treatment. Pelvic floor exercises can help both men and women, as can bladder training.

But what can Government do, aside from making health policy decisions on treatment for incontinence in all its forms, be it suffered by men or women, and be it post-op, prostate-related or childbirth-related? Small steps can help. When the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) asked whether there had been discussions about providing bins in men's toilets for disposal of sanitaryware made necessary by incontinence, a Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs gave a rather technocratic answer, promising a Health and Safety Executive review of workplace regulations dating back to 1992 on the provision of disposal facilities in workplace toilets “in due course”. I hope the Minister can today confirm that the consultation can be fast-tracked.

I hope that we have taken a giant stride in this place today by stripping away some of the stigma merely by giving an airing to the issue of incontinence. There has been much talk recently about Parliament at its best, but surely this is Parliament at its best, considering unfashionable yet critical issues. Today we bury the myth that this condition is somehow shameful. With this first ever debate on the subject, we take a modest but significant step towards improving the life of those who struggle with the burden of incontinence.

2.4 pm

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): A big thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for securing this extremely important debate. I was fascinated and not a little shocked to hear that this is the first full debate in the Chamber on this subject, and it is absolutely tremendous that we are talking about it, because we need to. As everyone has recognised, it is a subject that people rarely talk about, despite the fact that millions of people are affected by bladder and bowel control issues—I will try to use that phrase instead of the term “incontinence”, after hearing the point that my hon. Friend rightly raised; I was scribbling away when she said that.

For much too long, this issue has been treated as a private embarrassment—something to whisper about, not act on. I was struck by what she said about the number of people who got in touch with her, crying out for this subject to be discussed, and for us to take action. We need to take action, because as well as being a very important health issue, it is almost a social justice issue, and an issue of dignity. Far too many people and families face a daily struggle that has been quietly ignored.

As was said, it is estimated that one in three women in the UK experiences urinary control issues, but the issue affects men, too. It is important that men speak in this debate, and I am very pleased that the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) did. As for my city, London, a recent survey for Prostate Cancer UK found that 54% of all male Londoners had experienced urinary control problems. More than one in four men—28%—experienced symptoms as early as between the ages of 18 and 25. That contradicts the widely held view that bladder conditions affect only older adults. Then,

of course, we come to bowel incontinence, which is more closely associated with age: 15% of those aged over 85 and living at home are affected, and the figure is even higher for men and women living in residential and nursing homes.

Of course, we also have to think about bladder and bowel conditions affecting children and young people, and especially those with disabilities, whose voices are often the last to be heard anyway, and particularly the last to be heard on this subject. Disabled and other children with these conditions can miss out on education, friendships and an ordinary life because of a lack of basic provision. Families feel ashamed when they ask for help, because they think that no one else is facing the same thing. That brings us back to the importance of us discussing this matter in the House today. Many families face this issue; we need to make it safe to talk about it, and safe to ask for support.

As I say, bladder and bowel conditions are not only a health issue, but a social justice issue, and it is time we treated them as such, because that is not what happens now. Despite the evident human cost, and the prevalence of these conditions across society, support and services remain inadequate, and those affected and their families are left to scramble for help. They face stigma. They too often endure isolation, yet as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley set out, there are simple, straightforward solutions that would make a huge difference to those who live with bladder and bowel control issues. We can start by destigmatising the issue; that is what we are doing today, as has been said.

At a national level, we need a public health campaign, led by the Department of Health and Social Care, that makes it clear that these conditions are normal, treatable and nothing to be ashamed of. Let me tell Members about one of the very few people in either House that I have heard talk about these conditions. I went to a meeting on assisted dying—one of many such meetings, which colleagues of all parties have been to—at which I heard from a disabled Member of the House of Lords, and other people who are disabled and wheelchair users. They spoke in a very matter-of-fact way about being incontinent—that was the word they used. They made it quite clear that it was perfectly possible to lead a normal and fulfilling life with that condition. When I was growing up, older people would say to me, “The one thing I dread above all is being incontinent—I think I’d take my life if that happened.” It was very inspiring for me to hear a Member of the other place talking about their situation, and talking about it released all of us from a particular challenge when it came to reflecting on assisted dying.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley mentioned Prostate Cancer UK’s Boys Need Bins campaign. There are others, including the End Bladder Shame campaign by TENA, the maker of incontinence products. These things show what is possible if people feel heard—but they need more support. Alongside a public health campaign, let us have more investment in infrastructure. That means more modern, accessible public toilets with clean, safe disposal facilities for men as well as women, which has been a long-standing request from charities like Age UK.

We need to make sure that every school—mainstream schools as well as specialist schools—has trained staff who can support children with bladder and bowel

[Ben Coleman]

conditions, not as an afterthought but as part of their core pastoral care. We have a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care on the Front Bench, but I hope she can pass on the message to her colleagues in the Department for Education that they should make sure school toilets are accessible, hygienic and inclusive, with disposal bins, locks and space—with dignity built in.

Finally, I would like to see us integrate bladder and bowel care into national health strategies. They should be a core part of NHS England's work on long-term conditions, ageing and preventive care, not an afterthought. I look forward to that being reflected in the 10-year plan and, I hope, in the forthcoming men's health strategy.

Better bladder and bowel care will save men, women and their families from stress, it will save children from shame and the feeling of being left behind, and, wonderfully, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley said, it will save public money. It is a public good, and if we take this seriously, it will make a huge difference to a lot of people's lives. Let us give this issue the attention it deserves and do right by every person who has been living with these conditions in silence for too long.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. A significant number of Members want to take part in the following debate, so we are playing “beat the clock”. I will not introduce a rigid time limit at this stage, but if Members could confine their speeches to no more than six minutes, we should get everybody in, get the Front Benchers in and give adequate time for the next debate.

2.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome you to your place, Sir Roger; it is a pleasure to see you there again. It is a pleasure to speak on this issue as my party's health spokesperson. I thank the hon. Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for setting the scene so incredibly well.

The Patient and Client Council's 2020 report “Accessibility and Quality of Continence Services in Northern Ireland”—I always give a perspective from Northern Ireland—estimated that some half a million people in Northern Ireland live with bladder control problems and some quarter of a million with bowel control problems, with many experiencing both. When we remember that Northern Ireland's population is 1.95 million, it puts that figure into perspective. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence estimates that 61% of men in the general population experience lower urinary tract symptoms and some 34% of women live with urinary incontinence.

I commend the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for focusing on prostate cancer. It is one of those things that us menfolk do not wish to think or talk about. He is right: it is probably the wife who says to us when we have a pain somewhere, “Did you go and see the doctor about it?” We most definitely should go and see someone about it.

This debate is about raising awareness. It is not a topic that is openly discussed, as the hon. Member for Dudley referred to, because people often feel uncomfortable discussing their symptoms and problems given the personal nature of the issue—I have to say that I feel a tad

uncomfortable as well. As a result, many suffer in silence or wait a long time before discussing their incontinence issues with a healthcare professional. Only 20% of those affected go on to seek treatment, with many maybe not recognising their issues at first.

Continence issues can be a significant contributing factor to social isolation. Whether we like it or not, many people will feel uneasy about these issues, so they will withdraw into themselves and seek to deal with their problems alone, which can prevent them from having a normal life. It is clear that we need to do more to remove any feelings of shame from continence issues, including by having a public conversation.

I am very thankful that my local council, Ards and North Down borough council—I served on Ards council at one time—provides sanitary bins in accessible toilets across the borough, including some male toilets. These bins are part of a wider initiative to make public toilets more inclusive, particularly for individuals experiencing incontinence or with stoma needs. This debate is also about those with stoma needs. I am surprised by how many people I meet who carry a stoma bag. They have managed to deal with that, but it is not easy—it scares the wits out of me, I have to say.

Ards and North Down borough council has upgraded 44 of its accessible toilets with features such as shelves, hooks, mirrors and bins to accommodate stoma care. My council has taken that action already. Additionally, the council is working to address the need for sanitary bins in all public toilets, including male toilets, where they are not currently a legal requirement. Ards and North Down borough council has already done that because it recognises that that is the right thing to do. The council did this at its own cost and on its own initiative—not because it legally had to but because it recognised the need. This helps to address the stigma, but it must be a UK-wide approach and not simply the decision of individual councils. We commend Ards and North Down borough council: it did that because it was the right thing to do, not because it had to do so.

One in five people are affected by these issues, and yet it is a silent topic, so it is good that we are speaking about it today with the compassion, the understanding and the carefulness that it requires. Inadequate management of incontinence can lead to escalating costs due to morbidity and unnecessary hospitalisation; those are the side effects. It is good to see the Minister for Secondary Care in her place, because she always responds helpfully to the questions we ask.

Some 6.5 million adults in the UK suffer with some form of bowel problem, so it is imperative that we do things better. One in 10 children will suffer from continence difficulties, whether it be bed-wetting, daytime wetting, constipation, soiling or difficulties with toilet training. The hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) referred to that issue, and it cannot be ignored.

Improving catheter care in the community would reduce A&E attendance and hospital admissions, which fits well with two of the Secretary of State's three shifts: hospital to community and sickness to prevention. Can the Government commit to implementing that in a co-ordinated strategy?

Colleagues have flagged the many changes that are needed, and I know these cannot be made immediately, but it is important that we move forward, that we have

this discourse and that we dispel the darkness of shame and shine a light for those who feel isolated in the shadows. Today is the first step in this journey, and I look forward to participating in further journeys.

2.17 pm

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for bringing this issue to the House for debate. Unlike her, I am not an experienced health professional, so I will narrow my contribution to the issue of public toilets, their availability and their importance to those with incontinence.

There are people who did not go out last week and who may not go out today or next week. They are those whose trips are always challenged by the lack of, or uncertainty about the availability of, public toilets—not just those who are incontinent, but those who experience any sort of urgency: those with irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis; those who need to use the toilet more frequently because of age or pregnancy or because they are menstruating, have had prostate cancer, have stomas or other disabilities; and those who are caring for those with disabilities. Very few of us will not be affected by these vulnerabilities at some point during our lives, and we want our country to be one in which we are able to ensure dignity and the ability for those visiting public spaces to have access to public toilets.

Local authorities have powers to provide public toilets but no statutory duty to do so, and this lack of compulsion has contributed to the decline in the number of public conveniences. As a former local councillor, I know how stretched local authority budgets are, decimated through a long decade of austerity and the political decision to centralise funding. In my constituency, which encompasses the Lake District national park, we are very aware of the importance of good-quality public toilets to support tourism, and yet even there, at prime visitor sites such as the start of the Keswick to Threlkeld railway path—a fantastic facility for those with disabilities to enjoy the Lake district—there is insufficient money to provide public toilets.

Just two years ago, this House considered appointing a commissioner for public conveniences and making it a statutory duty for local authorities to have public convenience plans. I am not sure why something so simple would require the creation of a commissioner, but like so many plans under the last Government, it never came to pass. I ask the new Government to look again at establishing a statutory requirement on local authorities. In the meantime, I invite hon. Members across the House to lobby their own local authorities to ensure that they create, review and scrutinise public convenience plans, and make public spaces accessible to those for whom quality public toilets are the difference between inclusion and exclusion.

A recent survey by the Association for Public Service Excellence found that over a third of local authorities had reduced their provision of public toilets over the past decade. We know that provision had been declining even before then, but it is not all bad news. Half of the councils that responded in the 2024 survey did provide Changing Places toilets. I congratulate the campaigning organisation Changing Places, which has lobbied so long and so hard to seek provision for the quarter of a

million people in the UK, and their families and carers, who have for so long been condemned to loneliness at home by the lack of accessible public toilet facilities.

The latest count of Changing Places toilets in the UK is 2,607. The campaign will have been instrumental in the 2021 building regulations requiring all new public buildings to put in large and well-equipped toilet facilities. Many local authorities have ensured provision in creative and economical ways, through community toilet schemes and payments or rates reductions for businesses that open their toilet facilities to the public. Local authorities can make planning permission, leases and premises licences subject to the provision of public toilets, and they can hand facilities over to community operators. These are not always suitable or appropriate substitutes for standard public toilets provided and maintained by the local authority, but as part of a portfolio of provision they help to increase access and often help to circumnavigate some of the issues of graffiti and inappropriate use that present problems for some communities.

I urge all hon. Members to engage with our local authorities and impress upon them how important it is for the public to be adequately provided with high-quality, well-maintained facilities. I look to Members participating in today's debate to join me in calling upon this Government to draw up statutory measures. Providing public toilets that support the most vulnerable people in our communities should be a duty, not an option.

2.22 pm

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) on securing today's important debate. I have recently become the chair of the APPG for bladder and bowel continence care, and there is much to be done. As someone with a background in early years, I am sure that any parent of a young child will confirm that we are probably the people who talk about wee and poo the most in this world. They tell us vital health information—from the earliest days of having a baby, it is crucial. Bladder function is one of the signs of good health, and maintaining that through adulthood leads to the prevention of incontinence.

The importance of talking about wee and poo cannot be overstated. As any three-year-old will tell you, that is because it is funny. Wee and poo is the funniest topic in nursery classrooms up and down the country—and it is funny, right up until the point that it is not. When wee and poo stop being funny, it is devastating. It impacts on people's mental and physical health, their dignity and their very independence. In some cases, it can prove fatal. It is also entirely preventable.

Sadly, poo and wee is not funny for around 14 million people who have continence and incontinence issues. That figure alone hides some of the issues of dealing with the enormous range of health conditions in the field of continence. The figure of 14 million is based on data gathered in 2018, and no recent data is available. Continence status data is not recorded as standard on entering the NHS. The scale of the problem is simply unquantifiable. The NICE guidelines have not been reviewed, and the findings of the 2017 report "Excellence in Continence Care" have not been fully implemented. We need a stronger mandate and a greater focus on training for incontinence needs across midwifery, dementia, cancer care and health visiting teams—literally from

[Jodie Gosling]

cradle to grave—and we need to provide that care in our communities to avoid the need for crisis interventions in A&E.

Today, I will highlight just a couple of the complications from failing to provide a robust continence service. Despite spending a large amount of my time surrounded by, and occasionally covered in, poo and wee, I did not arrive in Parliament intending to take on this role. I have been made aware for many years of the woeful lack of help for those with continence issues, the poverty caused by buying continence products, and the rationing of four pads a day. I have faced the frustration of parents who had no continence service in Warwickshire at all until May 2024. I have been aware of the trauma faced by parents, especially those whose children have special educational needs and disabilities, attending A&E with their child's constipation, which had reached agonising and dangerous levels.

It was, however, Elissa and Ivan's story that motivated me to take on my role, and campaign for more humane, systemic changes to prevent the worst impact of continence issues. So many simple things can be done to protect the dignity and independence, and improve the quality of life, of these 14 million people. When Ivan arrived at A&E, he was screaming and in pain. His stomach was distended and he was severely underweight for his age. He had spent months in pain, attending A&E around four times a week. He was discharged without treatment, but Elissa did not leave. She did not accept the shocking assessment from consultants that disabled children just scream. She pushed back and, with sheer luck, one of Ivan's other consultants happened to see them and gave instructions for an X-ray. On the final day, they evacuated nearly 2 kg of stool from a 10 kg three-year-old child.

Elissa believes that that day saved Ivan's life. Others have not been so lucky. In 2019, 19 people with learning difficulties died from constipation when under continence care. Out of all the deaths of people with learning difficulties, more than a quarter were also suffering from constipation and bowel issues that would be worthy of note. Unsurprisingly, we do not even hold the data for the wider population on these issues.

Continence and constipation issues are increasing in our younger population at a worrying rate, with a strong correlation between constipation, continence issues and neurodiversity. One in four of our children who start school is not yet ready to use a toilet independently, and on average, 2.4 hours of learning time is lost every day in supporting children going to the toilet. Toileting issues, even in nursery, cause embarrassment and anxiety, which often leads to functional constipation, damaging the bowel and causing lifelong continence issues.

Getting it right from the start is hugely important. Children with continence issues are often excluded from school activities and parents are required to take time off work. Consequently, ERIC, a charity that specialises in supporting children with continence issues, whose representatives are, coincidentally, here today to celebrate and draw attention to World Continence Week, note that in the 1980s, 83% of babies were out of nappies by 18 months. New research identifies the benefits of children who start potty training earlier and are out of nappies by 30 months, but the health visiting team numbers are at a disgraceful all-time low. That is a national shame, as are the outdated NICE guidelines.

The message is not getting through, and parents simply do not know where to turn for the right support, especially in places like Warwickshire where continence care was simply unavailable. Hospital admissions for childhood continence issues and constipation have increased by 60% in over a decade, with 44,000 children admitted this year alone. The decimation of health visitor numbers and school nurses, and the demolition of institutions such as Sure Start, leave carers and families without the infrastructure and support needed to train children to toilet independently, and for constipation to be recognised before it becomes life-threatening.

Increased data collection is essential, and the NICE guidelines need to be heavily reviewed and mandated in healthcare so that we can make savings in crisis teams. If we intend to move care to the community, and move from crisis to prevention, continence care has to be a central focus of that mission.

2.29 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank my constituency neighbour, hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), for securing this important debate, and for attempting to remove the stigma and silence that too often surrounds this key area of healthcare.

As has been mentioned, in the UK over 14 million people experience bladder leakage and more than 6.5 million people—around one in 10—struggle with bowel control. However, those figures are probably not a true reflection of the reality, as many individuals choose not to disclose their symptoms, often because of embarrassment or in the mistaken belief that incontinence is simply an inevitable part of ageing.

I want to talk about how women suffering from incontinence have been treated in the past, because we need to focus on the availability of proper treatment options for the future. For far too long, vaginal mesh surgery was widely accepted as the so-called gold standard to treat stress urinary incontinence in women. Between its introduction in 2008 and when its use was paused in 2018, it is believed that over 100,000 women in the UK underwent mesh implant procedures. Sadly, many of them were not properly advised about the alternative options available to treat stress urinary incontinence, such as the physiotherapist-supervised pelvic floor exercises that my hon. Friend mentioned, nor about the risks associated with using vaginal mesh, and some of them sustained life-changing injuries.

Before I became an MP, I worked as a solicitor specialising in representing women who had been affected by vaginal mesh implants and pursuing claims for compensation for them based on clinical negligence. I came across women who were left in constant pain, unable to work or participate in daily aspects of life. Their personal relationships were affected and their lives were changed forever by a treatment that was supposed to help them.

I commend the work of Baroness Cumberlege in her landmark July 2020 report “First Do No Harm”, which recommended that the Government should immediately issue a full apology on behalf of the healthcare system to the families affected by mesh. She also proposed setting up a scheme to meet the cost of providing additional care and support to those who experienced avoidable harm, and networks of specialist centres to provide comprehensive treatment, care and advice for

those affected by mesh implants. A subsequent report by Dr Henrietta Hughes, released in February 2024 through the patient safety commissioner, recommended a Government financial and non-financial redress scheme for all those affected by mesh.

Looking ahead, it is critical that current recommended treatments for incontinence are subject to the highest clinical scrutiny and that we take steps to ensure that no more patients are harmed in the pursuit of quick fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions. At the heart of every treatment plan must be the dignity, safety and informed choice of the patient. Treatment must be tailored to the type and severity of each individual's condition, not determined by cost effectiveness alone. Patient outcomes, not just financial metrics, must be central to how we define value in care for incontinence patients.

We must break the stigma surrounding the issue. A recent study found that around 40% of women had experienced urinary incontinence, yet only 17% of them had sought professional help. Poor continence care, as has already been mentioned, can lead to complications such as infections, social isolation and, in some cases, hospital admissions. Each of those outcomes is completely avoidable with early intervention and treatment, which is something that we must aim for in our healthcare system. Only by tackling the taboo, investing in better treatment pathways and listening to the voices of those affected can we ensure that people living with incontinence are able to access the support they need, and to do so with the dignity that they deserve.

2.34 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) on securing this important debate. It is great to have her experience of having worked as an NHS physio in the Chamber and she brings a unique perspective to the issue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) for mentioning the pelvic mesh scandal. Soon after my election as MP for Harlow, a number of women who are victims of the pelvic mesh scandal came to see me. Now, over a dozen women have approached me about it, and that is just in the Harlow constituency, so that gives us an idea about the huge number of women who have been affected by this terrible scandal.

I do not want to focus on the pelvic mesh scandal alone, not least because my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West did it far more justice than I would. Whether people are the victim of a national scandal or they have bladder and bowel issues for any of the other reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley mentioned, nobody should be made to feel embarrassed. Talking to the women who were victims of the pelvic mesh scandal, I was struck by the journey they went on. When they initially had bladder and bowel problems, they felt really embarrassed, and it was only when they got to the point where they were in almost constant pain did they feel that they could come forward. What a terrible situation for people to be so embarrassed that they feel that they cannot come forward to the GP. We have to end that stigma.

I was not going to do so, but as we are in a safe space, I have decided to mention my own experience of suffering from IBS as a young person. It was almost a joke when we went on holiday—"We must make sure we are near a

toilet so that Chris can go." Actually, that should not be a stigma; it is a medical condition and people should understand it, support it and give others the support to deal with it.

To show solidarity with those who suffer from bladder and bowel issues, urinary incontinence impacts an estimated 14 million in the UK. As many Members have said already, if people suffer from such issues, they should not think that they are the only person to be suffering from them. A quick maths calculation tells me that that equates to roughly 20,000 people per constituency, so a significant number of our constituents will suffer from those issues. The cost to the NHS to deal with these issues is roughly £5 billion a year, and I wonder whether that bill would come down if we gave confidence to people who suffer from them to come forward sooner.

I have alluded to some of the symptoms, but there is a loss of dignity and independence, and a sense of social isolation. My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) mentioned people who no longer go out because they are embarrassed—what a terrible situation for them to be in, and one that is entirely avoidable, if we could help to reduce the embarrassment and stigma that people feel.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley in asking the Minister about the collection of data on those impacted by the issue and supporting the need for a public health campaign. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for mentioning stomas. A young friend has a stoma and, having spoken to her about it, I am sure she would welcome ending the stigma associated with that.

I want to briefly mention women's health. I recognise the vital contribution made by the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) about the impact on men, but I welcome the fact that Health Ministers in this Government have championed the importance of health equality. I hear a number of stories from women in Harlow who feel that they are not taken seriously, and I hope that we can address that and that the Minister will respond to that in her summing up.

Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley for bringing this hugely important debate to the House. I agree with sentiments raised by Members from across the House that this is the first step in ending the stigma. I hope we can work together to end the stigma and embarrassment; I know that this is just the start.

2.39 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for bringing this debate—I cannot quite believe it is the first time that the House has debated this issue. I also fully endorse her suggested recommendations to improve bladder and bowel care, and I hope that the Minister will also endorse them.

As we have heard today, incontinence affects people of all ages across all communities. It is still shrouded in stigma and embarrassment, and it disrupts so many people's daily activities, such as going to school, going to work, going out for the day, going out for the night and going on holiday. It really needs to be tackled at so many levels.

To echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours), one way in which we need to address this issue is by

[Pam Cox]

ensuring that we have enough accessible toilets in public places, workplaces and schools with the necessary facilities, including sanitary bins for incontinence products for all users. In my constituency, we have just restored one of the sets of toilets in our main public park, Castle Park, after a justified outcry at their closure.

Adequate public toilet provision is just one response to this complex crisis but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley said, other measures are needed to tackle it. I again congratulate her on being the first person to bring this issue to public attention in the House, and I look forward to working with her on it.

2.40 pm

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for securing this incredibly important debate; it has been absolutely wonderful listening to how it has been conducted. As has been said, this debate is often overlooked, and it is occurring in World Continence Week.

Bladder and bowel control issues are taboo and embarrassing, so I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for sharing his experience. He will not be alone, and I am sure there are many in this Chamber who have suffered the same thing, as have our constituents. We need to talk openly about this issue. We cannot hide it in silence as it affects so many people. One in three women in the UK have a urinary incontinence issue, and half of those are likely to suffer from it due to pregnancy, childbirth or hormonal changes linked to the menopause—another taboo topic.

Let us go through the stages and where some issues still remain. How are bladder and bowel control issues detected and diagnosed? I refer to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley for her expertise, but the University of Aberdeen has found that invasive bladder pressure tests, which are often painful and incredibly uncomfortable, are not necessarily necessary. Researchers have found that non-invasive testing, including the things that my hon. Friend has described, such as pelvic floor exercises, should be made more available to patients. That is just one of the issues.

Another issue is surgical implants. I refer to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) for his incredible expertise on this topic, and I thank him for the work he does to help to protect women. The complications that have affected hundreds if not thousands of women, who are rightly outraged, have been described as barbaric. We must do more to see that those women are compensated, but no amount of compensation will ever make up for the years of pain and physical and emotional damage. This issue needs to be treated with respect and care, and the treatment options need to be empowered, so that people feel they can be empowered to prevent these things from occurring. I pay tribute to the Boys Need Bins campaign, which I have spoken with—it has been absolutely incredible—because men too suffer from incontinence. We need bins in public spaces.

How can we help people to live their lives to the full? My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours), who is no longer in his place, made the point that austerity and cuts to local government mean that many public toilets have been

closed. Thankfully, in my area of Gravesham, the local council has increased the number of public toilets, including by opening one by the bus hub, so that people know about them and can plan regular breaks if they are needed. We need to ensure that there are spaces so that people feel empowered and confident to leave their homes, because we cannot have more people who stand alone.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for raising this very important subject. My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) and others mentioned the importance of greater and better provision of public conveniences. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to encourage cafés and other organisations in town centres to make better provision for people suffering from these issues? Perhaps some of the campaigns that have been alluded to can help to make those spaces available. They should by no means replace what public conveniences should do, but having such places in town centres can assist vulnerable people.

Dr Sullivan: I agree. The community toilet scheme in Gravesham has been a good success. However, the issue of course comes down to vandalism. Councils cannot see this as an easy way to cut money. It needs to be a statutory duty, so I support the bid of my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway to make it a statutory duty to provide public toilets in those spaces.

No one deserves to be lonely or locked in at home, so I hope that this debate is the first step to opening the door. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley for bringing this issue to the attention of the world.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.45 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for securing this important debate and for outlining the issues so well in her opening speech, particularly the importance of breaking down the taboos surrounding incontinence and the social isolation that can result from it. I have carefully scribbled out the term “incontinence” all the way through my speech and hopefully replaced it with “bladder and bowel control issues”—forgive me if I have missed one.

I recognise the importance of prevention and specialist treatment. The hon. Member for Dudley highlighted the benefit to both individuals and taxpayers from investing in women’s health up front, and I echo that call. There have been lots of excellent contributions, but I thank the hon. Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) for raising the scandal of pelvic mesh implants. I thank him for highlighting that issue and the need for redress there.

Incontinence, or bladder and bowel control issues, can have a hugely detrimental impact on a person’s wellbeing and sense of dignity, as we have heard. Despite affecting millions of people across the UK, it is the subject of stigma, and the needs of those with bladder and bowel control issues are not properly considered in

many aspects of life. All too often, people suffering from these issues are left without the right support, whether that is the uncomfortable bladder pressure tests that the hon. Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) referred to, or the lack of access to sanitary bins in public and workplace toilets.

It has been widely assumed for many years that sanitary bins for men are not required in public toilet facilities. As we have heard, many millions of men are affected by bladder and bowel control issues. The absence of sanitary bins has a wholly unnecessary and damaging impact on their self-esteem, causing embarrassment and stress and, as we have heard, withdrawal from public places and the workplace. The cost is tiny but the benefits for those affected can be significant.

There has been progress in this area, thanks to the work of campaigns such as Boys Need Bins by Prostate Cancer UK, but there is much further to go. That is why it is crucial that we support all individuals with the condition by ensuring access to services such as public toilets and sanitary bins, as unfortunately that is not the case. Under the last Government, 19% of public toilet facilities—nearly 600—lost their local authority maintenance and funding between 2015 and 2021 alone. Liberal Democrat research from 45 councils found that the number of public toilets had fallen by 14% from 2018-19 to 2023.

Many local authorities are on the verge of bankruptcy and do not have the spare capacity for these vital services. Proper funding of local authorities to provide services such as public toilets and sanitary bins could make a truly meaningful difference for people with bladder and bowel control issues, and I hope the whole House will agree that these individuals deserve access to basic facilities.

There is also a clear need for more research into developing better treatments and mitigations for people suffering from bladder and bowel control issues. Crucially, these should avoid unnecessary discomfort or invasive procedures. As such, I support what the hon. Member for Gravesham has said. The University of Aberdeen has found that women with ongoing urinary incontinence can avoid invasive bladder pressure tests, and that non-invasive assessments work just as well in guiding treatment. An emphasis on respecting people's dignity and reducing discomfort should be at the heart of how we approach the testing, treatment and mitigation of these issues.

We also know that these issues—particularly bowel incontinence—can place a significant strain on family carers carrying out personal care, who are often unsupported and suffer from ill health themselves. Many care requests go unmet; last year, the King's Fund estimated that nearly a third of requests for local government funding result in no support for care at home. This means that there are many thousands of families struggling with the realities of caring for a loved one with bladder and bowel control issues, which can include not only feelings of shame and embarrassment—both for them and for their loved one—but difficulty with lifting and moving a family member to clean them, and in accessing the equipment necessary to cope. That is why dealing with the crisis in social care should be a top priority for the Government.

When the Secretary of State phoned me—and, presumably, the other national party health spokespeople—over the Christmas break to let me know that he was

instigating the Casey review and cross-party talks to find a long-term solution to that crisis, I was hugely encouraged. Since then, the Casey review has been delayed, and the cross-party talks have apparently been cancelled. I must stress that each party giving its view to Baroness Casey is not the same as sitting in the same room and agreeing a long-term funding plan. The review's terms of reference will not deliver meaningful reform until the next Parliament, and there is a huge risk that, again, nothing will be done by the Government of the day—in this case, despite them having a huge majority to achieve whatever they want. Meanwhile, the number of people needing care increases every year, and the step change required to transform the sector becomes larger and less politically palatable. As such, I urge the Minister to speak to the Secretary of State and help him to recover the enthusiasm for change that he showed over Christmas, because he will have my full support.

However, there are simple steps that can make a difference now, such as hospitals working with family carers ahead of discharge to ensure that they are equipped to carry out heightened personal care needs. In many places, that support is not delivered, let alone ongoing support and meaningful respite care. Wait times for a continence assessment vary across the country—it can take weeks and weeks. Improving those wait times would ensure that the right care and equipment is available much sooner. There is also a chronic shortage of speech and language therapists, who can make a real difference in helping people with limited or no speech to more easily communicate when they need the toilet or want to be changed or washed. That is particularly essential in cases in which those people suffer from bladder and bowel control issues.

Incontinence is not properly reflected in how we organise paid social care. For instance, too often the pay for domiciliary carers and the time they are expected to care for any one person do not reflect the fact that someone's need for care might vary hugely from day to day. Any embarrassment, frustration and discomfort for the person being cared for will only be made worse if their carers are rushed, stressed and overworked, and if spending longer at one house could mean that those carers are effectively having to work for free.

I also want to highlight the importance of good care in hospital settings. NHS England's 2018 "Excellence in Continence Care" guidance states that

"pathways of care should be commissioned that ensure early assessment, effective management of incontinence, along with other bladder and bowel problems such as constipation and urinary tract infections and their impact on social, physical and mental well-being".

I highlight this because my constituent Trevor Collins died on 21 May 2022 as a result of aspiration pneumonia and small bowel ileus, due to a small bowel obstruction caused by constipation. The coroner concluded that neglect at Royal Shrewsbury hospital and a failure to manage Mr Collins' constipation contributed to his avoidable death. It is essential that healthcare settings follow the NICE guidelines that are in place, not only to preserve dignity but to prevent serious harm and—in the worst cases—even death.

Liberal Democrats recognise the seriousness of the issues surrounding all types of incontinence and bladder and bowel control issues, and the critical importance of ensuring that people with those conditions can live in

[Helen Morgan]

dignity. The Minister will have heard the calls in my speech. I hope she will commit to repairing our broken social care system, reinstating cross-party talks and wrapping up the Casey review this year, so that we can make the reforms that are necessary for long-term stability in the sector and the dignity of all those receiving and providing care.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front Bencher.

2.53 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome you to your place today.

It is an honour to speak in this debate on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for securing it. Her speech included the wealth of experience that she brings to the topic, and I especially congratulate her on putting this issue so clearly on the agenda today in the House. It was a powerful and wide-ranging speech that demonstrated the wide range of issues and conditions that can lead to incontinence.

As the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) told us earlier, incontinence is a condition that affects around 14 million people across the UK, yet too often it remains misunderstood, under-discussed and—worse still—dismissed. One in three women experience urinary incontinence, and half a million adults live with bowel incontinence. Incontinence does not discriminate; whether bladder or bowel, temporary or chronic, or mild or severe, it touches people of all ages, backgrounds and walks of life. It affects new mothers, people recovering from surgery, those with neurological conditions, the elderly, and even children. However, too many suffer in silence, held back by stigma, isolation, or the belief that nothing can be done.

Like other Members, I received some heartbreaking stories from my constituents in Farnham, Bordon, Haslemere, Liphook and the surrounding villages. Incontinence is a medical issue, not a personal failing. It is not something to be ashamed of; it is something to be addressed through compassion, awareness and proper care. The impact of incontinence can be profound. It affects people's confidence, their work, their relationships and their mental health. That is why Continence Week, which we are currently marking, matters. We cannot expect people to reach out for help unless we first create a culture where they feel safe and supported in doing so. We also need to ensure that services are in place to respond when they do seek help. That means better access to continence nurses, urologists, and physiotherapists, such as the hon. Member for Dudley. It means investing in community support, and in research and innovation, and recognising that continence care is a core part of our health system, not an afterthought.

I therefore welcome the Government's stated ambition to tackle inequalities in women's health and to address conditions such as incontinence more seriously, but warm words and long-term ambitions are not enough when so many continue to struggle. For example, the "Excellence in Continence Care" guidance, first published in 2018, was a groundbreaking piece of work, but we

now need clear next steps, funding and measurable outcomes. We must not allow this to drift for another seven years while millions suffer in silence.

Under the previous Conservative Government, we delivered real and lasting progress in this area. In 2022, we published England's first ever women's health strategy, a genuine turning point shaped by listening to more than 100,000 women's voices. That strategy committed to trauma-informed care, expanded research and, crucially, improved the quality and accessibility of information on the NHS website so that women could make informed choices about their own health.

Under our leadership, women's health hubs were launched with a clear mandate to exist in every integrated care system, bringing services closer to communities and breaking down barriers to care. We also ensured the creation of specialist mesh centres across England, delivering multidisciplinary, regionally-based care for women facing the severe consequences of surgical complications. At a recent roundtable I attended with lecturers from Bath University on mesh, Primodos and valproate, it was clear that there is still more work to do to support these women and to learn from the past. I thank the hon. Members for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) and for Harlow (Chris Vince) for raising the mesh scandal so passionately earlier.

On incontinence, the Conservative Government backed National Institute for Health and Care Research funding for vital research into patient-reported outcome measures, empowering patients, improving clinical care and ensuring that the lived experience is properly reflected in decision making. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) so powerfully elucidated earlier, men are often forgotten in this area. On the Opposition Benches, we support any culture and any steps that will help men with incontinence. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, we men are pretty poor at going for diagnosis and treatment, and that needs to change.

The scale of the issue remains significant. Nearly half of women experience incontinence after childbirth and one in 10 experience faecal incontinence, yet only 17% seek help. That is often because they are told subtly or directly that it is simply part of ageing or the price of motherhood. That attitude was unacceptable then and must not be tolerated now. When a third of women suffer pelvic floor disorders after giving birth and still face barriers to care, when men living with incontinence are afraid to leave their homes, and when people are forced to depend on charities for access to basic hygiene products, it is clear that we have a public health problem that transcends mere inconvenience.

Will the Department commit to publishing an updated "Excellence in Continence Care" strategy this year, with clear timelines and accountability? Will we see dedicated funding to expand women's health hubs further, so that continence care is a core service, not a bolt-on? Will the Minister also bring forward a plan for better health services for male incontinence? Will NHS England guarantee national consistency of access to continence services and products, ending the unacceptable postcode lottery? Will the Government protect and grow funding for continence research to improve treatments for men and women?

Finally, I pay tribute to the organisations, including Bladder and Bowel UK, Prostate Cancer UK and the Urology Foundation, that are breaking taboos and

supporting patients so tirelessly, but it is not their responsibility alone; the Government must lead. We Conservatives made a start, and we now need the current Government to have the same urgency, ambition and delivery to ensure that these hard-won improvements are built upon so that no one is left to struggle in silence.

2.59 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker; you have done an excellent job of making sure that all Back Benchers get to contribute to this afternoon's important debate. I will have to cut some of my comments, but hopefully I will get to address everybody's points. We are having this debate during World Continence Week, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) on securing it. There could not be a more appropriate time to raise awareness of this issue.

Millions of men, women, young people and children are living with bowel and bladder problems. Incontinence is an issue that robs people of their dignity, as we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) and for Harlow (Chris Vince), and too many suffer in silence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley rightly says, this subject is taboo, and I congratulate her on securing her first debate in the Chamber. It is great to have her expertise in this area.

All continence problems can be debilitating and life-changing. They affect a wide range of care groups, and can be a particular concern for older people. In recent years, public discussion and awareness has opened up. The advertising of products has become slightly more commonplace, helping people to normalise these issues, with which so many people live from day to day. However, we are still a very long way from being a society that supports people with incontinence to live without stigma.

As these issues affect people of all ages, we need to recognise that different approaches are required. We heard an excellent contribution from the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), who raised that point, as did the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford). The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about children, and my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) talked passionately about people with learning disabilities.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing incontinence, but dignity and compassion must be at the heart of the care provided. That is why we are introducing reforms to put the patient at the heart of the care pathway and the decision-making process around it. The 10-year health plan, and its focus on the three shifts needed to deliver a modern NHS—moving from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention—will benefit people at risk of developing incontinence and those already living with it. For example, preventing type 2 diabetes or helping people into remission will help to reduce the number of people who develop continence problems as they go through life.

We have heard many contributions about women's health. NHS England has established a perinatal pelvic health service, which focuses on the prevention, identification and timely treatment of a range of issues antenatally and for at least 12 months after birth. The initiative aims to support women who experienced trauma during childbirth, including conditions such as urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse, as noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan).

In addition to perinatal pelvic health services, continence services are provided more widely via women's health hubs, and the core specification outlines that incontinence care is a key consideration for local organisations when establishing hubs. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) for bringing his expertise and experience to this debate, and for supporting so many women. I know that in the last Parliament many Members of this House supported women through the horrors of mesh implants, and we are moving that issue forward.

By moving from sickness to prevention, the Government want to shorten the amount of time people spend in ill health and to prevent illnesses before they happen. Although prevention is extremely important, we must also ensure that those living with incontinence receive the best possible care, wherever they live. A key part of that involves the NHS providing high-quality guidance on how to care for people living with incontinence. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has published five guidelines on the management of urinary and faecal incontinence, which cover the management of urinary incontinence in people with neurological disease, the prevention and management of pelvic floor dysfunction, and pelvic organ prolapse in women. NICE has also published advice on a further 14 products for urinary incontinence, and on 12 products for faecal incontinence.

My Department has commissioned NICE to produce late-stage assessment guidance on one-piece closed bags for colostomies, and on intermittent urethral catheters for chronic incomplete bladder emptying in adults. These late-stage assessments will gather the views of clinical experts and patients to help NICE assess and compare the value of products in widespread use across the NHS. In addition to NICE's guidance, the NHS must have regard to the "Excellence in Continence Care" guidance, published in 2018.

NHS England has also produced guidance on safer bowel care for patients at risk of autonomic dysreflexia, a serious medical condition that can affect people with spinal cord injuries. The guidance offers resources to support safer bowel care practice, and highlights the importance of implementing the excellent incontinence framework. In addition, the Nursing and Midwifery Council has professional standards relating to bladder and bowel nursing care. Its code places a strong emphasis on the principle of prioritising people, setting out the expectation that registrants should always respond to individual patient needs. NHS England is also developing a best practice catheter care pathway across all settings, which is to be completed by the end of this year.

The provision of suitable care, with the products necessary to deliver that care, is essential for minimising the physical harm related to complications and treatments for continence problems, which can lead to admission to hospital for extended lengths of stay. The NHS will commission pathways of care that ensure early assessment and effective management of incontinence, along with other bladder and bowel problems. These pathways will take account of the impact of urinary tract infections on social, physical and mental wellbeing to reduce expensive pad usage, high-cost complications, and unnecessary hospital and care home admissions.

As we have heard, our focus on the shift from hospital to community will drive more joint working in neighbourhoods between primary care, pharmacies,

[Karin Smyth]

community healthcare and social care to help people manage incontinence at home. This will help them to access the right self-care and the right professional support so they are not passed from service provider to service provider. It will also reduce their need for emergency hospital admissions, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) made some excellent points about access to facilities, and I know he will keep pressing my hon. Friends in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about that issue. His points were echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Pam Cox).

As I stated at the outset, shifting care into community settings is one of our three shifts, and we will shortly be publishing the 10-year plan. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley for bringing forward this debate to raise awareness of this important but often overlooked issue.

3.5 pm

Sonia Kumar: I thank the Minister for her response, and I hope she takes forward my five recommendations. I also thank all the Members who have contributed to this debate; I hope they continue this conversation in their constituencies.

The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) spoke about men's health and smashing the stigma. My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) talked about her work on the all-party parliamentary group for bladder and bowel continence care, and she shared information about paediatric care and the lack of provision. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of the costs to the NHS of neglecting bladder and bowel conditions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) talked passionately about the high quality of care needed for patients and about the pelvic mesh scandal; my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) spoke powerfully about dealing with bladder and bowel conditions at an early stage, and about prevention; my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) mentioned health inequalities and shared his personal experience; and my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Pam Cox) and for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) discussed the availability of public toilets.

Lastly, I thank everybody again, and I say this once more to those men, women, children and young people who are listening to the debate: you are not alone, and there is absolutely no shame.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of incontinence.

Water Safety Education

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call Darren Paffey to move the motion.

3.7 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered water safety education.

May I begin by welcoming you to your place, Mr Deputy Speaker? I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me the opportunity to secure this debate and all hon. Members who supported the application for it. The debate is particularly poignant because this week we mark the Royal Life Saving Society's national Drowning Prevention Week. It is a timely moment to speak not just of tragedy, but of our responsibility and of opportunity.

Every year, over 300 people in this country drown, many of them just metres from safety. In the last three years alone, almost 150 children have lost their lives by drowning. That is the equivalent of five full classrooms of young people, their futures snatched away by accidents that in so many cases were preventable. As an island nation with coastlines, rivers, lakes and canals, we are surrounded by water. It is my privilege to represent the people of Southampton Itchen, a coastal constituency where we live alongside the River Itchen, Weston shore and Ocean Village marina, and the major port alongside Southampton water. The water makes our city what it is, but with that comes risk. So today I ask this House: are we doing enough to prepare our children for the island nation they are growing up in? The problem is clear and stark. Since 2020, over 1,700 people have drowned in the UK. Disturbingly, during that same period, the number of drowning deaths has doubled, with more than half these tragedies occurring in open water.

The national curriculum does currently require some practical training. Primary-age children should be able to swim 25 metres, use a range of strokes and demonstrate self-rescue techniques. But if that alone were enough, we would not be here today debating this issue under the shadow of so many lost lives. The policy on the national curriculum is, of course, welcome, but a policy is only as good as the difference it makes—so how effective is it? A Sport England report estimates that just 74% of children now leave school able to swim 25 metres. That is down since before the pandemic. The gap is one not just of ability either, but of social class. Only 35% of children from low-income families can swim 25 metres; compare that to 76% of children from more affluent backgrounds. The result is that children from the most deprived areas are twice as likely to drown.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for raising the important issue of teaching children to swim. Like me, he represents a coastal community. Two years ago in Hastings and Rye, the Silverdale primary school pool closed. Many children and parents miss that facility, and hundreds of parents have joined me in supporting the campaign to get the school pool at Silverdale back open. Does he agree that we need an increase in school swimming lessons and facilities, not their rolling back?

Darren Paffey: I thank my hon. Friend for making that salient point. I have no doubt that occurrences like the one we have heard about in her constituency are part of the reason why fewer children are now able to swim. I wish her every success in her campaign.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way. I want to make a similar point to the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore). A number of schools in my constituency have closed their pools over the past 20 years. When I grew up in Lewisham, I had access to a school pool. Does he agree that we need to work together on national policy to ensure that, although some school pools will still close, our young people can access their local leisure facilities at a discounted rate, through local government?

Darren Paffey: I thank my constituency neighbour for making that point. There is a great need to work in partnership. We simply do not have as many pools as we used to, be they local authority-run or within schools themselves, but we should be working towards either increasing the number where possible or sharing these vital resources in our communities.

Added to those inequalities, there are ethnic inequalities. Statistically, black children are three times more likely to drown than white children. Water safety education cannot be left to chance or to postcode. It is a vital provision for every part of an island nation such as ours and should not depend on the lottery of family income, school funding or private access to lessons.

Let me tell the House about Joe Abbess. Joe, from Sholing in Southampton, was a bright, responsible and fit 17-year-old young man. He was an ambitious trainee chef at the local college and worked part-time at Southampton football club. He was the kind of teenager that any parent would be proud of—someone who followed the rules and led by example. He was a caring and loyal friend, who was well known in his friendship group as the “dad” figure. On 31 May 2023, Joe and his friends went for a day at Bournemouth beach. They were swimming waist high in the sea as Joe, who was a strong swimmer, had done many, many times before. They were between the safety flags, in full view of lifeguards. But in an instant, a rip current turned their fun into tragedy. The water was very suddenly over their heads. Joe got into difficulty and was pulled further out into the water before disappearing beneath it. Eleven people were rescued from the water that day because of that rip current, and I commend the emergency services for their actions. However, tragically, Joe and 12-year-old Sunnah Khan did not survive.

The coroner reported that it was an accident—a devastating and fatal act of nature. However, the coroner also reported that rip currents can occur anywhere along the UK coastline at any time. How many people, especially children, know that? How many Members in this Chamber would understand, recognise and rightly respond to a rip current? On sunny days such as those we are enjoying at the moment, many will rightly want to enjoy our rivers and beaches. We must do everything we can to ensure that they can do so safely.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is right to bring up the issue of water safety education. Sometimes,

even strong swimmers can unfortunately get into difficulties. Does he feel there is a role for Education Ministers and local councils to identify where the problems are, whether they are in the seas surrounding the United Kingdom or in our lakes? Unfortunately, some people have jumped into the lakes in my constituency without knowing there were obstructions in the water, to give one example. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that there should be greater partnership work between the Department and councils to identify those problems, so that those who go swimming know exactly what to watch out for?

Darren Paffey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the very relevant point he makes. I will come on to the issue of how we can ensure that education is locally targeted. Each of the situations we face in our constituencies will be that little bit different, so it is important that on top of a compulsory expectation there are locally targeted campaigns.

We would not let someone drive a car without first passing their theory test, so why do not we comprehensively and consistently teach our children about water safety before they enter the water to have fun? This is not about taking away that fun; it is about being aware of the hidden threats, and therefore having the power to do something about it.

I pay tribute to Joe’s mother, Vanessa Abbess, who I am pleased is present in the Gallery today. Ness has become a tireless campaigner, sending hundreds of letters to local schools, working with the Royal Life Saving Society and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and pushing for improved signage in Bournemouth. She brought her powerful story to Parliament earlier this week, when we established the all-party parliamentary group on water safety education. Ness has done all that in the hope that no other family should suffer as the Abbess family has.

The coroner’s report was submitted to the Secretary of State in October last year. The coroner said:

“An ideal opportunity to warn and inform all members of the public would be through educating children of the risks. The lack of providing education to children around these risks through the national classroom curriculum could lead to future deaths.”

The report also stated that

“urgent action should be taken to prevent future deaths”

and that the Department for Education has

“the power to take such action.”

I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s response to the coroner’s report, in which she committed to

“look carefully at what more can be done to support schools to provide water safety education to all pupils,”

and to

“give full consideration to including a requirement that all pupils should be taught about water safety, including the water safety code.”

I urge the Government today to uphold that commitment and to go further.

As has become clear, we need to do more than just teach swimming. As hon. Members have highlighted, access to pools is uneven, lessons vary in quality and duration, and too many children—especially in deprived or minority communities—are being left behind. The Department for Education states:

“All pupils should be taught to swim and how to be safe in and around water”.

[Darren Paffey]

Well, yes, they should, but is saying they “should” really enough? At this point, I do not believe so—we can and we must go further. We need to mandate classroom-based water safety education in every school.

I pay tribute to many people who have campaigned on this before, including Rebecca Ramsay from Chorley, who secured some concessions under the previous Government. However, she has recently said that changes are not coming quickly enough. For her son, Dylan, for Joe, for Sunnah and for too many others, I ask the Government to tackle this issue with the urgency that it deserves. The Royal Life Saving Society has already created high-quality classroom resources that are cost-effective and proven to improve children’s understanding and confidence around water. It reaches everyone—through its Water Smart Schools’ campaign, its Splash Safety at Your Pad campaign, and its lifesaving training, accreditation and awards—regardless of background or access to swimming pools. These resources offer a lesson for life. Let us not leave it to chance; let us bring those resources into the heart of our curriculum.

I look forward to the Minister’s response. Although I recognise that her responsibilities lie within education, included in the recommendations are some wider points that I ask her to convey back to Government. First, there is currently no Minister for water safety or drowning prevention in the UK despite having Ministers for fire safety, road safety and other preventable public dangers, and despite Scotland and Wales having dedicated water safety ministerial roles. Why does England not have such a role? The National Water Safety Forum and the World Health Organisation have both urged the UK Government to appoint such Ministers, and I echo that call today. The coroner noted that one in four children still does not receive any swimming education, and that number has almost certainly worsened since the pandemic.

Secondly, I ask the Government to commit to a national swimming and water safety strategy, based on up-to-date evidence about children’s access across this country to swimming lessons and water safety education. Thirdly, my major request is that when the national curriculum is updated, following the current review, and is then taught in every school as mandated in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, will the Government use that opportunity to enshrine water safety as a core, compulsory part of every child’s education? The point of the curriculum is not just to pass exams; it is to prepare our young people for life. If Labour’s mission is to break down barriers to opportunity, here is just about the greatest opportunity that we can offer them: the opportunity to learn and to live.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that there is more to this than just teaching children to swim? Hope Cove Life Boat in my constituency saves about 60 people from drowning every year, and many of them have been swept out to sea because of wind and tides. Understanding the nature of the sea and how dangerous it can be is crucial. It is not just about knowing how to swim, but about knowing how to survive at sea.

Darren Paffey: I fully agree with the hon. Lady. As I commended the emergency services that rushed to the scene on that fateful day in Bournemouth, I commend the project that she has mentioned in her constituency.

In closing, no child should drown simply because they were not taught how to recognise the dangers. It is essential to teach children how to swim, yes, but it is not enough; we must teach them how to survive in different contexts. The coroner’s warning was chilling in its clarity:

“Further deaths will occur unless action is taken.”

So today I ask the Government please to act now and make classroom-based water safety education a compulsory part of the national curriculum, not an optional extra, not a postcode lottery, but a guaranteed lifesaving entitlement for every child in every school, in every constituency, in every part of the country. The time to act is now, before any more lives are lost.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. This is a very important subject. There are some 14 Members at least who wish to contribute to the debate. Allowing eight minutes each for the wind-ups and a couple of minutes for the hon. Gentleman who has just spoken, I think we are looking at a time limit of about five minutes each. I will not set a formal time limit at the moment, but if hon. Members try to stick to that, we should get everybody in.

3.24 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I take your steer on that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing this debate, and I declare an interest as a new vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on water safety.

Members will know that there will always be moments in our careers that will forever be etched in our memories. We can only hope that they are moments of joy, but sadly I am here to talk about a moment of tragedy. That moment was on 11 December 2022, which I will always remember. This moment of great tragedy impacted my constituents in Meriden and Solihull East. On that day, four young boys were playing near Babbs Mill Lake, which had been iced over. They were: Finlay Butler, eight years old; Samuel Butler, his brother, six years old; Thomas Stewart, 11 years old; and Jack Johnson, 10 years old. They were playing near the ice, feeding ducks. As the coroner later reported, Jack was with one group, and Finlay, Sam and Thomas were playing together with another group.

One of the boys decided to go on to the ice. It was Finlay who fell in first, and then Thomas and Jack tried to help. Sadly, nobody saw Samuel fall in. The boys were shouting for help, but the witnesses could not reach them in time. I pay tribute to the emergency services, who reached the location within 11 minutes. They ignored their own safety advice, taking off their body armour and taking out their batons, and they used their fists to try to break through the ice. One officer who jumped in was neck-deep in the water and had to be treated for cold water shock. As the coroner and the police reported, any moment longer and we could have had another tragedy on our hands.

The water was too deep, and sadly none of the boys survived. What strikes me is the suddenness of this tragedy. That is why I am talking about it today. I suppose all tragedies are sudden, but this was 11 December, two weeks before Christmas. I am not sure any of us can

fathom what the parents of the two brothers or the families of the others went through, and I do not know whether they will ever be able to come to terms with it.

What happened is particularly important to my communities in north Solihull, because in Kingshurst, Fordbridge and Smith's Wood, which used to be in my constituency, the community came together. I remember going to the vigils and tributes in the week after. These boys were massively central to their school communities and the wider community, and I could see how much pain and hurt they were going through. Everyone came together, and the collective grief, pain and sadness has stayed with me. I am reminded of it every year, because sadly every Christmas I still hear of children playing on the lake when it is iced over. As the coroner reported, the temperature that day was around 5°C. I remember where I was, and it felt a lot colder. The water was a lot colder than 5°C.

The hon. Member for Southampton Itchen talked about education being key, and I agree with all the requests he made. I want to put on record that I will work very closely with him on this, because I believe it to be a cross-party issue—it is certainly not a partisan issue. Cold water shock is something that I knew very little about. The coroner said that within minutes the boys would have suffered fatal brain damage, which is what happened.

When the tragedy happened, I remember coming to the House having done lots of media interviews. I remember after one interview, when the story broke that one of the children had just perished, Members across the House came to pay tribute to the communities in north Solihull. That included the Prime Minister, who within minutes of the story breaking had called me to find out whether there was anything that could be done. He also paid tribute to the communities at Prime Minister's questions.

For me this is a really personal debate, because I see the pain when people in Solihull talk about this incident. There is not anyone in the midlands, or across the country, who when I talk to them about the four children does not remember what happened. When I was talking to Members about why I would be speaking today and about those four lads who passed away in Solihull, it was clear that everyone remembers what happened.

Ultimately, this issue comes down to education. I wrote to Sir Nick Gibb in the previous Government and spoke to him about trying to update the curriculum, but sadly we were not able to get that done. I wrote to the Education Secretary a few months ago and did not get a response, so I hope the Minister can give me some indication of action in this area—or perhaps the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen when he winds up can do so. This issue is so important, and I know that the Minister agrees. I am really keen to ensure that we get the curriculum changed, so on behalf of my families in north Solihull and the families of Finlay, Sam, Jack and Thomas, will the Minister please work to ensure that we avoid these tragedies in future?

3.29 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome you to your place, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing this debate.

Water safety education is particularly important for my constituency of Oxford East, for several reasons. We have many bodies of water in Oxford, which can be very

cold, as in many other constituencies, because of hidden depths; we also have, in many cases, poor access for rescue vehicles; and many of those bodies of water contain submerged obstacles. We also have in Oxford a young population that is exuberant and fun-loving. Of course that is a wonderful thing, but celebrations in my city too often turn to tragedy, as we saw most recently with promising student Wesley Akum-Ojong. I regrettably cannot mention every tragic case from Oxford, but I mention him because I understand that he had aspired to become Britain's youngest Prime Minister, and I have to say that, judging by his many achievements, I do not think it would have been long before he would have been elbowing us out of the way. He was an incredible young man. I pay tribute to him, and to his friends and family, and to all those who have lost loved ones in my city from drowning.

Oxford is also highly prone to flooding, and it is often difficult for people to assess how deep floodwater is and where obstacles are submerged. Better education about the potential dangers of the water is imperative. It needs to be part of a broader suite of initiatives, from effective signage to access to supervised swimming, like Oxford city council's free swimming programme for under-16s, and—where required and feasible—physical restrictions.

There is in my city—I am sure this applies in other constituencies represented here—a vigorous debate over the rights of wild swimmers to access waterways that have been deemed to be unsafe. I understand wild swimmers' contention that they will often be swimming together, that they do not tend to dive into the water, and that they are experienced swimmers; but they are, of course, still at risk, including from effluent discharges and algal blooms. In any case, I would urge anyone considering wild swimming to consult the Environment Agency's information on water quality, and above all, to educate themselves about the dangers of the water, even if they think they are experienced. Because no matter how experienced a swimmer is, if they are in unsupervised waterways with the water temperature below 16° they could experience cold water shock, or the other hazards I mentioned.

The chair of the National Water Safety Forum has said that

“drowning can occur anywhere and to anyone”.

So far, in Oxford, we have seen particular efforts from the Oxfordshire fire and rescue service to educate people about the dangers of the water. That has been really positive, along with the water safety code, and simplified messages such as, “Call, tell, throw” and “Float to Live”. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen spoke passionately about ensuring that our schools are always reinforcing that message. As he said, water safety and swimming are mandatory within PE in primary school, but that is subject to problems of access and disparities related to social class and ethnicity.

Becky Francis's curriculum and assessment review for the Government has shown that it is difficult for many schools to prioritise PE because of the accumulated challenges that they face; there is a particular issue at key stage 4. I hope that, as she works towards the full review, she can look at the specific issue of water safety in more detail. I also hope that the Government will consider it carefully—I know that the Minister would want to be doing that—as they are reviewing the relationships, sex and health education draft statutory

[Anneliese Dodds]

guidance. I know that organisations in Oxford are really keen about that, so that they can have a joined-up approach with local schools, with better signage information and so on.

Finally, it is really important, in undertaking this work, that wherever possible young people themselves are included in the conversation, because they know what will be most effective, a lot of the time, with their peers. I believe that one of the most effective measures in my city is a striking memorial painted to Hussain Mohammed, a 15-year-old who died after jumping from Donnington bridge in 2012. Very sadly, he is not the only person to die from that cause. Thirteen years later, that bridge still features the touching mural that reminds people of Hussain and hopefully recalls the need to stay water-safe.

3.34 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing this important debate today. As we have heard, every year in the UK, more than 200 lives are lost to accidental drowning. In fact, it claims more lives each year in the UK than house fires or cycling accidents. That must be a wake-up call.

We have an opportunity and a responsibility in this House today to bring those numbers down. The problem is as clear as it is urgent: too many people grow up without being taught how to stay safe around water. Swimming must be a core life skill, as we have heard, and yet, according to the Royal Life Saving Society UK, one in three children leave primary school unable to swim properly. That statistic should concern us all. Of course, children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to miss out. In other words, those at greatest risk are the least protected.

This is not just about learning to swim, although that is essential; it is about knowing what to do when things go wrong—when someone panics, when cold water shock sets in and when every second counts. Every summer, every bank holiday and every heatwave, like this week, the risk increases. Rivers, lakes, canals and coastlines become magnets for young people and far too often, lives are lost.

My constituency of Esher and Walton has seen three tragic drowning deaths in the past four years. Two of them occurred during the fierce heat of the summer of 2022—a heartbreaking testament to the risks that rise with each heatwave. These are tragedies with unimaginable pain for the families and profound effects for schools, emergency services and the wider community. As a river-based constituency, we owe it to our residents, visitors and local businesses to prioritise water safety. The risks are all around us, particularly this week. The Thames threads through our towns, the River Mole runs through our parks, and reservoirs sit at the heart of our communities. Addressing the root causes is so important.

One of my constituents, Nell Hickman, took up the cause by leading a local water safety campaign along a stretch of the Thames between Thames Ditton and Hampton Court, which I have heard referred to by school children as the Barbados of south-west London. Determined to prevent further tragedies, Nell partnered with the RNLI, Elmbridge borough council and other stakeholders. Together, they installed safety signage and

emergency throwlines. They also expanded water safety training, advising swimmers to stay parallel to the riverbank instead of swimming across the River Thames. That is a powerful example of community-led action, backed by the right support, saving lives.

There is more that we can do. The RNLI plays a vital role in my constituency and I pay tribute to its tireless work. Some schools in Esher and Walton are already leading the way by teaching key life skills through personal, social, health and economic education and citizenship. However, we must do more to ensure that water safety is embedded in our children's education, especially in areas such as mine, with rivers and open waters.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I am greatly pleased that this debate is taking place. In my constituency and within Somerset and North Somerset—the whole of Somerset—there are 8,463 miles of rivers, reans and streams which, from Somerset, would take us as far as Singapore. That level of water coverage presents a danger not only for those who swim and need to be taught to swim, but for young people, who should understand very clearly what to do should the vehicle in which they are travelling goes into water. There are specific rules around how to save ourselves if the car or vehicle we are in goes into water. Does my hon. Friend have a comment about that?

Monica Harding: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing attention to vehicles going into the water. In my constituency, the Thames provides our border with London, so it stretches along the entire constituency, and of course cars could go into the river.

In areas like ours where rivers and open water are a daily part of life, it is essential that our children are taught how to be safe in the water. Would the Minister consider ensuring that water safety is integrated into the secondary school curriculum, so that every young person leaves school equipped with these essential skills for their safety? It is now—in a heatwave when GCSEs and A levels have just finished—that our children are most at risk. I know that because this week I sensed that my 16-year-old after finishing his GCSEs was going to do just that, and it took all my parental bribery, frankly, to ensure that he did not.

Organisations like the Royal Life Saving Society, alongside the RNLI, provide expert guidance, from recognising dangerous currents and raising awareness of cold water shock to assisting people in distress in the river. By working with those partners, we can build a generation that is not only confident in the water, but capable of saving lives. These are not just water safety tools; they are universal lifesaving skills that can make all the difference in emergencies of all kinds.

Countries like Australia rightly treat water safety as a national priority. Children grow up surrounded by water there, so they are taught how to navigate it, just as our children are taught to wear seatbelts and how to cross the road. The UK, an island nation flowing with rivers, should be no different. Let us work towards a future where fewer families face heartbreak and finally make water safety a priority.

3.40 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) and the Backbench Business Committee for

securing this important debate. I also thank Michael Wardle, who is a Royal Life Saving Society UK lifeguard, and his team at the Helly Hansen watersports centre in Salford for their dedication to saving lives in Salford. I had the pleasure of meeting them, and their passion for educating about water safety was inspiring.

In Salford Quays, countless lives have tragically been lost as young people head to the water, unaware of the dangers within. It is a ship canal, so it is incredibly deep and littered with underwater obstacles. The area is now monitored by CCTV cameras and joint council and police patrols in hot weather. Under-18s caught jumping from bridges or illegally swimming will receive a police warning, and adults will be issued with a fixed penalty notice. But that still does not stop people crowding to the quays on days like today, looking to cool off or have fun with their friends. The sad thing is there are supervised open swimming areas in the quays—areas that can offer a safer swimming environment, but they are only open at limited times and are not free, which bars too many young people from them. There is one simple thing that the Government could do to ensure that my constituents are safe, and that would be to provide just a little funding to open up these supervised lifeguarded swim areas to the public for free and for longer during the summer months. That way no young person is tempted to risk their life in dangerous areas when they can have full access to a supervised one.

Secondly, as we have heard, water safety education is critical. While it is a statutory requirement that children are able to swim 25 metres by the time they reach year 7, evidence sadly suggests that the number of children receiving swimming lessons is declining. In 2024, the Royal Life Saving Society estimated that over 140,000 children left primary school without these vital lifesaving skills. There are also inequalities in those statistics. Staggeringly, Sport England found that 50.4% of children from low-income families could swim 25 metres in year 7, compared with 85.8% of high-income families. Barriers to the statutory provision include limited pool access, transportation costs, logistics, staff shortages and cultural and religious barriers. It is critical that the Government secure water safety education on the national curriculum for England as a statutory requirement, but also that they ensure schools are provided with dedicated ringfenced budgets so they can meet that requirement.

Thirdly, I would like to draw attention to a quite staggering fact. I met my local fire service in Salford recently and learnt of the amazing work its dedicated firefighters do to save lives and keep us safe. I met the water response team, which I thought—naively, like much of the general public—was just part of its service. It is not. They do it because they are good people, not because they are funded to or required to. While there is a public perception that the fire and rescue service is responsible for responding to water rescue incidents and engaging in water safety education and prevention, there is no statutory duty on it in England to do so. However, statutory duties do exist in Wales.

The fire and rescue service responds to 999 calls and inland water rescue incidents using its existing general powers and resources. It scrimps and saves from existing budgets to try to resource the lifesaving equipment it needs, rather than that being allocated. As a result, the resource and the coverage are patchy, and firefighters often train in water safety on their own time.

I call on the Government to urgently adopt the National Fire Chiefs Council recommendations on this issue: to consult on establishing a statutory responsibility in England for inland water rescue response and prevention; to provide capital alongside continuous funding to support any new statutory duty introduced; to establish a clear lead Department with accountability for water safety prevention, mirrored at local authority level; and to update the reporting requirements of the incident recording system to more accurately record water-related deaths and injuries.

To conclude, no parent should ever receive that phone call and no person should ever needlessly lose their lives when the asks on Government are so simple. I hope the Government will do all they can to urgently implement the measures that I and others have outlined.

3.46 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is good to see you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) on securing the debate—he genuinely is an hon. Friend. We served together on Southampton city council, we have both been education lead members, and now we are constituency neighbours. I know that he consistently stands up for the great people of the great city of Southampton, and in particular the constituents he has mentioned today. I pay tribute to Joe's mum for the work she has already done and the work she will do in future to make sure we lose fewer people on our waterways across the country.

Although the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen and I share Southampton Water, which is the busiest part of the waterways around and into Southampton, I also have in my constituency the entirety of the River Hamble, which comes off Southampton Water. The River Hamble is internationally known as one of the most difficult rivers to navigate for our sailing and boating community. It is known as an international sailing hub but also as one of the most difficult tidal waterways to navigate across the world.

We saw that, unfortunately, in 2020, early in my career here as the Member of Parliament for Eastleigh, which is in the same area. Emily Lewis, who was on a fast boat in the Solent, was tragically killed after being catapulted out of it when it hit Netley buoy. She was travelling at 44 mph, and two charges were eventually made of manslaughter and failure to ensure safe navigation against the person who chartered the boat.

The hon. Member for Southampton Itchen is absolutely right that we need to have water safety education. I put it to the House and the Minister that we also need to have proper education for not only those who enter the water through our seashores, lakes and rivers, but also people who use the water on a daily basis. As I said, we have the whole of the River Hamble in the constituency of Hamble Valley, and a vast array of people use our rivers and Southampton Water—sailors, motorboaters, kayakers, paddleboarders and rowers. Many people use the river, as they should be able to, because that is intrinsic to the identity of those who grow up and live in my constituency. Given the hot weather this weekend, I intend to go out on the Hamble on Saturday to kayak, but I am aware of the intrinsic dangers of a river such as the Hamble. It is vital, as the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen said, that we educate from a very early age.

[Paul Holmes]

I also want to outline and make colleagues aware of the role of our independent lifeboats. Hamble lifeboat in my constituency has already been called out over 60 times this year. We must raise awareness of these services, because they play a very important educational role for many people in our constituencies. I was delighted to be a founding member of the National Independent Lifeboat Association, which looks after our independent lifeboats, alongside our former colleague Anthony Mangnall, who was the Member for Totnes. I encourage all Members who represent areas with independent lifeboats to get in touch with NILA and to raise awareness of water safety.

The hon. Member for Southampton Itchen highlighted the key variations in access to swimming pools and water education. As I indicated in my intervention, we will both be aware, from our time leading the education system in Southampton, of the number of schools there that have had closures. This is not a political point at all, because we have both been in control of the Administration, and we have had national Governments of different colours, but he will be aware of a reduction in funding for our education system from local authorities, whereby many schools have had to close their pools.

Partnerships that allow kids to be taken to local leisure centres for school lessons have been reduced as well. I remember being a young person—I used to be young once—growing up in Lewisham. The council school bus would come and take me to Lewisham swimming baths every week for a two-hour swimming lesson. That has diminished, and it is vital that we work on a cross-party basis to get swimming lessons and water education delivered to people across the UK.

As I said, this is not just about young people. A brief story: a couple of summers ago, I was out on my kayak when I saw an older gentleman clinging to a kayak in very cold water. He had lost his energy and would have died that day, had I and my friend Jerry not gone past and rescued him. He was not wearing a life preserver, he was very cold, and he was running out of energy, clinging to his kayak. We managed to take him out of the water and save him, and get him medical attention. Frustratingly, such things still happen, which is why any measures taken forward by the Minister need to be attentive to not only young people but all users of the rivers and waterways across the UK.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen and all Members who will speak in today's debate. He has my commitment, alongside that of my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) and, I am sure, the shadow Minister, that this is a cross-party issue that we all need to work on. I wish the hon. Member well in his endeavours.

3.52 pm

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing the debate, and for all the extremely important work that he is doing on this issue. I extend my compliments to his constituent in the Gallery, who we heard at the APPG earlier in the week. Given the circumstances, her campaign is extremely brave, and her words were very inspiring, so I wanted to put my tribute to her on the record too.

I come to this debate because of a situation that occurred within my constituency of West Ham and Beckton very recently, which received quite a lot of press publicity. I do not intend to go into the details—it is still a very fresh event—but I lost an 11-year-old constituent in the River Thames earlier in the spring. That was a huge trauma for her family, and I put on the record—I know the whole House will share in this—my deepest condolences to them. I also extend my congratulations and thanks to the emergency services, search and rescue, and actually local people who stepped in to try to help on that occasion, which obviously had a huge impact on the community too.

This debate is very pertinent for my constituency because I am surrounded by water in east London: I have the Roding to the east, the River Lea to the west and, significantly, the River Thames bordering the south of my constituency. I also have huge amounts of dockland, including the royal docks, which are a very large open space of water, built at a time when we had a lot of shipping. With that comes a lot of open wharves and causeways, many of which are still in use, which is another aspect of water safety. We have reserved industrial spaces, and education is needed on that. People often forget that lots of the Thames is still a working river. We have a lot of industry. At my end, Tate & Lyle and Tarmac use large shipping, in addition to all the other boats that go up and down the river.

Education is therefore hugely important for where I am, including education on safety and a wide range of things. We need to take advantage of the huge opportunity to work with schools, youth clubs, community groups and young people's groups to try to get that education across. I am lucky to have active sea scouts and sea cadets in my area; those groups touch only a small number of people, but there are people out there who can deliver such education.

I am of an age that I can remember public information films made by the Central Office of Information. That disappeared in 2012 and we do not have the same sort of programming—I see some smiles around the Chamber from Members of a similar age who remember such things. I was taught to cross the road by Kevin Keegan; I remember it was Jimmy who threw his frisbee into the pylon, so I did not do that; and it was the Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water who warned us about still pools. The fact that I can remember all that 40 years down the line—if hon. Members are interested, many such films are now online and often seen as nostalgia—shows that that type of campaigning works because it sticks in the mind.

We seem to lack a national campaign on such issues. Ironically, those campaigns happened in a pre-digital age, but they lend themselves to the age we now live in, with social media, TikTok and all the rest of it. We could produce information to share with schools and youth groups, so that they could take advantage of such a campaign. I hope that we get back to being able to produce such campaigns that could be widely shared, so that children will remember and tell their children further down the line.

A second issue that I would like to touch on, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) but is outside the scope of the Minister for Education, is about statutory duty. At the APPG meeting this week, we were told by a fire chief

that there is a lack of statutory duty, which seems like a gap in our services. There have been a number of incidents on waterways in my constituency, both accidents and, sadly, suicide attempts, where the fire brigade attended. The London Fire Brigade is always absolutely magnificent—it turns out and does an exceptional job. However, the fact that there is no statutory duty seems to be a gap to me, so that is an important change that needs to be made.

The hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) talked about the weather that is currently forecast. The marine policing unit of the Metropolitan Police Service, which receives over 2,000 calls a year on water safety, highlights that the risk grows in the summer and in hot weather. Certainly, near me, at the Royal Victoria Docks, we have children jumping in all the time, so this is a pertinent debate now, and as we move into the summer, with the hot weather, the issue is pressing.

I will finish with a couple of asks for the Front Bench. Can we look at how we can put in place a comprehensive education programme, working with schools but also on a national level, perhaps taking advantage of modern technology? Can we also look at the need for a statutory duty for fire and rescue services, so that it is enshrined in law, as perhaps people expect it is not, but it is not at the moment? By doing that, hopefully we can take a couple of steps towards ensuring that no family has to go through the kind of incident and heartbreak that my constituents saw earlier this spring.

3.57 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing this important debate. Shrewsbury is famous for being looped by the beautiful River Severn. It is a source of beauty, nature, tourism and livelihoods for my town, but also, unfortunately, the scene of 14 deaths in the last 10 years. Overwhelmingly, those deaths occurred at the weekends or in the evenings, by men, sometimes after a night out or because of mental ill health, and sometimes because of those two factors combined.

In April 2022 there were two river deaths in quick succession: Toby Jones and Nathan Fleetwood. Those deaths brought the town together, to say that we had had too many such deaths and that we needed to look at the issue as a community to see what could be done. Our local stakeholders and councils came together and launched a water safety campaign. They set up the new Water Safety Action Group, funded by West Mercia Police. We set up safer route signage along the river; got funding for increased solar lighting and rescue throw lines; set up free online water safety courses for schools, colleges and clubs; and we had a poster campaign in pubs and clubs.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) will be delighted to hear that we created videos, to be broadcast in pubs and put out on social media, that told the story of what could go wrong. We also educated bar staff about not overselling alcohol, when too much is too much, and we trained them in mental health response, working with our street pastors. We had free training from the RNLI on waterside response schemes, helping our local businesses. We got funding for CCTV, and we set up the Shrewsbury rangers scheme and taxi marshals to help people to get home safely late in the evening. I am really proud of my

town—of how we took this issue on and said, “We don’t want this to happen in Shrewsbury.” I am proud to the House that the number of deaths has reduced slightly.

I pay tribute to our local stakeholders, who responded so quickly and thoroughly to what we considered to be an emergency, and supported our local community. I thank Shropshire council, Shrewsbury town council, our business improvement district, West Mercia police for its funding and support, our street pastors, the fire and rescue service and our local residents’ “Make Our River Safer” Facebook group. Together, as communities, we can help to move the dial.

4 pm

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesend) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for leading this debate on an incredibly important issue—one that is felt by myself and many constituents. It was only a few weeks ago, at the end of May, that two children entered the River Thames in Gravesend. One child was thankfully rescued, but one young girl tragically lost her life. It was an incredibly heartbreaking accident, and I pass on my deepest condolences to her family, her friends and the community. I cannot imagine the pain of their loss—similarly to so many Members who have shared their stories today.

I place on record my gratitude to those who worked so hard in the efforts to save that young girl’s life and have supported our community through this difficult time, including the coastguard, the RNLI, the Port of London Authority, Kent police, the emergency services and the passerby who, on seeing that the young girl was in trouble, jumped in to try to save her; they did indeed save the little boy at that time. The work that these organisations do is commendable and invaluable to the residents of Gravesend, who are on the River Thames.

The River Thames often looks calm and tranquil on its surface, but underneath the rips and currents are incredibly dangerous. We are lucky to have the RNLI station and the Port of London Authority in Gravesend, which chaperone the hugely busy motorway of boats up and down our city. The RNLI is an excellent charity, and I thank it for its hugely important educational work; its volunteers are incredible. I cannot fail to mention, as other Members have mentioned, those choosing to use bridges to take their lives; we must do all that we can to stop those who feel that that is the only option. I thank the RNLI, the Port of London Authority and even the Thames Clipper for saving some of those people and hopefully giving them another chance at life.

Learning to swim from a young age is incredibly important, and it is great that it is on the national curriculum, but I hear and stand with my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen when he says that we can do more in this space. For those swimming in the Thames—certainly near Gravesend—that will not be enough, so those public awareness campaigns, especially through social media, will be crucial.

We must avoid future tragedies and deaths, so I urge the Government to work closely with local authorities, emergency services and other organisations to identify these black spots along our rivers and coastlines and see where further safety measures are needed. Our community in Gravesend has been shaken by this recent tragedy, and we owe it to all those who have lost their lives in similar circumstances to take every possible step to prevent such accidents in the future.

[Dr Lauren Sullivan]

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen for bringing this incredibly important issue to the House today. I am proud to stand in support of greater awareness, investment and collaboration to improve water safety across the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I suggest that we have a four-minute time limit to get everybody in?

4.4 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing today's debate, particularly during Drowning Prevention Week. I will speak of not just the risks of wild and open-water swimming, but the enormous benefits that it can offer when done safely and responsibly.

Specifically, I would like to address concerns about the lake at the former Shoal Hill quarry—which is in the neighbouring constituency of Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge—and about Chasewater reservoir. Although that reservoir falls within the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), it is a much-loved site that is frequently used by many of my constituents, particularly those in my home village of Norton Canes. They feel a very strong sense of ownership over what was, for many years before a rebrand, known as the Norton pool. My hon. Friend had hoped to be here today, but due to constituency commitments, he has not been able to join us for this debate. However, he shares the concerns I will raise about Chasewater in his constituency.

As the evenings grow longer and the days get warmer, places such as Shoal Hill quarry and Chasewater become popular destinations for families seeking to cool off. Appealing though it may be, the risks of swimming in dangerous bodies of water can strike anyone. They include cold water shock, currents that drag people down due to the depth of the water, rip currents that drag people away from the shore, a lack of safe exits from the water, cuts caused by hidden objects underwater, a lack of preparation or ways to call for help, and aftershock. Being safe and well prepared before swimming is crucial. According to the National Water Safety Forum, an average of 19 people a year drown when swimming in open water, and I know that every Member in the Chamber today would want to make sure that none of our constituents becomes one of those 19.

Tragically, six years ago, a 21-year-old man drowned in Chasewater while saving a nine-year-old girl from the water. His bravery should not be forgotten, nor should the circumstances that led to such a loss. From memory, I believe that this incident involved an inflatable like the ones used in swimming pools, which—in deep water and with high winds—was pulled some 30 to 40 metres out into the reservoir. However, later that summer and in summers since, we have again seen young children on inflatables in Chasewater. I know I might come across as being a killjoy, but this is genuinely a threat to life, especially for children. As such, I take this opportunity to urge my constituents not to swim in Chasewater—unless it is with an open water swimming group, which I will come to later.

At Shoal Hill quarry near Cannock, too, it is simply not safe to enter the water. Risks lie hidden beneath the surface, including sharp debris, submerged machinery and toxic contaminants. Weed beds and rubbish create an unforeseen web of entanglement, while sheer sudden drop-offs along the quarry floor can turn a step into a deadly fall. But this is not about discouraging people from enjoying the outdoors—quite the opposite. When open water swimming is done properly, it can be incredibly rewarding. People can stay safer while open water swimming by checking the weather, being aware of where to exit the water, making sure they have kit prepared, wearing a brightly coloured swimming cap, and knowing their gear.

Chasewater's open water swimming groups offer one-to-one coaching, compulsory tow floats, and the National Open Water Coaching Association's safety system. That wristband system allows immediate access to emergency details. With safety and training of this kind available, people can enjoy open water swimming and trust that they will be safe while doing so. I also pay tribute to all the other businesses and groups that provide safe activities on Chasewater, including Chasewater Activity Centre, Chase Watersports Centre, Pier 52 Watersports and the Chase Sailing Club.

With the beautiful hot weather upon us, it is vital that we continue to talk about ways to make wild water swimming as safe as possible. By increasing awareness and educating people in high-risk areas, we can start to bring down the number of these tragedies. No one should lose their life from a moment of fun, and no family should suffer the grief of a death that could have been prevented. This is not about stopping people enjoying the outdoors, whether at Chasewater, Shoal Hill quarry or anywhere else across the United Kingdom; it is about giving them the information and tools they need to do so safely and confidently.

4.8 pm

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing this important debate. It is a timely debate, particularly with the hot weather we are seeing and the number of people who will be going into the water this weekend. I am proud to represent the beautiful constituency of Bangor Aberconwy. It is coastal, scenic, and home to some of the most stunning beaches, lakes, rivers and waterfalls. These areas are rightly cherished by residents and visitors alike, but sadly people in my constituency know all too well the pain and devastation that is caused when something goes wrong.

I do not think there will be a single person across my whole constituency whose life has not been touched at some point by a tragedy involving drowning. Those accidents and fatalities are obviously devastating, not just for the individuals, families and communities affected, but for the emergency services and organisations—including the coastguard, RNLI and mountain rescue teams—that are tasked with responding. So much of that painstaking work of search and rescue is carried out by volunteers who give up their time for free, and I want to put on record my thanks to them as well as my deepest condolences to everyone who has been affected by these incidents. This is not just physical work; it is emotional work, never more so than when the incidents involve young people and children.

One specific issue that has been brought to my attention is that of destinations being promoted on social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram. The emergency services are responding to big spikes in visitors coming to our area to see these secluded lakes, amazing beaches and tucked-away viewpoints, which are being promoted as hidden gems—but people are unaware of the dangers. I understand that the Education Minister responding today is not necessarily involved directly in online safety, but it would be wonderful if the Government could address that issue.

Perhaps the Minister could discuss with colleagues how social media platforms could be encouraged to act. Other Members have talked about the potential for social media campaigns, which can be influential, especially when we are talking to young people. I would like the social media platforms to be more aware of their responsibilities in highlighting water safety education and the dangers, and perhaps to work with content creators.

We definitely want people to come and visit north Wales and to enjoy our beaches, lakes and rivers. I am in no way blaming anyone who ever calls for help—I have two teenage children, and they will be out enjoying the water this weekend, as will many others; I just want to make sure we have a cross-societal and cross-governmental approach to water safety education. If the Minister could raise that with colleagues within Government, I would be grateful, because we should all be paying attention to this issue online, as well as in the real world.

4.11 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Sam Haycock is a name that most Members in the Chamber will not have heard before today, but it is my job to make sure that that 16-year-old's legacy does not end four years ago, when he was swimming in a South Yorkshire reservoir with his friends. I want Sam's name imprinted on everyone's brain and etched in everyone's heart today—not only in the name of Sam, but for his mum and for his dad, Simon, who came to Parliament yesterday and talked with me about my private Member's Bill on water safety.

I met Sam's dad for the first time a couple of summers ago; that day at Thorne fire station, when many firefighters and service people were showing how to rescue someone safely from water, he handed me a picture of Sam. Sam's dad does that work week in, week out, tirelessly. Yesterday I could see the anguish in his eyes still, because that call that he got will never go away. It makes such a difference to him to be able to go out and educate children and their families about swimming safely, the dangers and risks, and what learning about those dangers can mean for protecting lives in the future.

Unfortunately, if we look back to 2023, there were another 236 or so Sams out there. That is 236 parents, friends or colleagues who got that same horrible knock at the door or that awful phone call. Some 50% of drownings happen in the months of June, July and August—so half of all drownings this year will happen in the next three months. Of course, it is hot, and this year in particular has been super-hot in the lead-up to summer. That prevailing weather is only a bigger risk in terms of the potential numbers that could join those other Sams.

Some 5.8 million children finish their GCSEs today or tomorrow, as the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) said. Sam died on the day that he

finished his GCSEs and went swimming with his friends to celebrate. Across the UK, we have some of the most beautiful watercourses. We have 40,000 lakes, 43,000 miles of rivers. We have 22 major rivers, 2,000 reservoirs, 273 major reservoirs and 600 designated beaches. Those offer opportunities for any child to go and swim—just to try it, perhaps for the first time.

Of course, there is a balance here; water can be good. It is good for physical health, and it is great for mental health. It is a great source of tourism, sports and leisure in our communities. Some 7.5 million people take part or have taken part in open water swimming. One of those people is Lindsay James, who lives in and works across my community. She is a world champion duathlete, who has only recently learned to swim as she had a fear of water; she has shown how swimming can build resilience and confidence.

Given the amount of water that we have, the most important thing is education, because we cannot protect all the different sites that I have talked about. That is why I am so proud that my Water Safety Bill had a reception this week. The Bill would make compulsory water safety education part of this Government's legal duty, which would save lives—that is the reason we are here today. Our job is to enrich lives, to save lives and to protect lives.

Sam Haycock's story does not need to end on that day four years ago; there needs to be a legacy. He may not go on to fulfil all the dreams he had on the day he finished his GCSEs, but his legacy can and will allow others to fulfil their dreams.

4.15 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing this important debate. I declare an interest: earlier this month, I hosted an event by Future Lidos, a peer network across the UK and Ireland that is working together to bring outdoor swimming pools to more people in our communities. I am also chair of a local group called Splash, which is working to restore and reopen the outdoor tidal pool in the town of Saltcoats in my constituency. Lidos and outdoor pools provide a safe space and opportunity for people to learn to swim outdoors, and tidal pools get people used to swimming in cold water. I fully support the campaign to open more lidos throughout the UK, although we must make them affordable so that people can access them.

Sadly, Scotland has the highest accidental drowning rate of all the UK nations—it is about three times the rate in England. The risk tends to increase with age, peaking in the 60 to 69 age group. Surprisingly, people who plan to go into the water are not always at the highest risk. It has been shown that accidents can occur among walkers and runners, who can slip into the water and drown, which is why it is vital that everyone learns to swim. In Scotland, there is no statutory requirement to provide swimming lessons, and provision is determined on a council-by-council basis. Learning to swim is not a required part of the curriculum, unlike in Northern Ireland, where swimming is part of the minimum content, or in England, as we heard earlier. In Scotland, there is a "learn to swim" framework, but a significant number of children still leave primary school without learning to swim, and this must be urgently addressed by the SNP Scottish Government.

[Irene Campbell]

As a young girl, I learned to swim in the local outdoor tidal pool at the age of four, thanks to my mum, who was a swimming teacher, and swimming has always been important to me. Swimming and water safety skills are vital, and we need to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn to swim, as well as ensuring that these skills are reinforced throughout people's lives in order to protect older people too. It is really important that people are encouraged to learn to swim at all ages, not just from a safety perspective but for the many benefits that swimming offers for health and wellbeing—both physical and mental.

4.17 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for leading today's debate. As many Members of this House will know, I am someone who spends many hours out and about on Britain's rivers and lakes as a keen whitewater kayaker. Regardless of whether it is on moving water, along the coastline or in our lakes, spending time on and in our water is a tremendous joy, but it comes with risks. Regrettably, we have seen a number of tragedies in and around my constituency over the years.

In 2014, Donna Greenall from Horwich in my constituency was sadly found drowned in Rivington reservoir. More recently, in April last year, 17-year-old Joseph Hold died after getting into difficulty in the River Croal in Bolton, having lost control of his canoe. We must learn from these incidents to prevent similar tragedies from happening again. With that in mind, I will make the case for further investment in education to unlock the immense potential of safely being in, on or near water. After all, we owe it to Donna, Joseph and everyone who has lost their lives to drowning, or who has lost loved ones, to continue making improvements to water safety awareness.

Drowning remains one of the leading causes of accidental death, particularly among our young people, yet our approach to water safety remains fragmented. We have national strategies for road safety, for fire prevention and for public health, yet none for water safety. As an island nation that is proud of our maritime history, it is time to change our approach. Indeed, it is high time the Government developed a comprehensive national water safety strategy that brings together civil servants, local authorities, schools, water companies, the emergency services and voluntary organisations in order to raise awareness and, critically, to prevent future tragedies.

There are already some brilliant campaigns that show how simple positive messaging, positioned in the right places, can have a demonstrable impact in reducing incidents. In particular, I commend to colleagues the PaddleSafe campaign, run jointly by Paddle UK and the RNLI, as a good example of what can be done. That summer safety initiative contains five key messages to raise awareness of how to prepare for any type of paddling and to stay safe on any kind of water. Those messages are simple and easy to remember:

"Always wear a buoyancy aid
Tell someone where you're going
Carry a mobile phone
Check the weather
Know your limits".

I have seen at first hand the dangers of not heeding those messages, which is why I know that education must be at the heart of our response. Every child should leave school with basic water safety knowledge: how to recognise danger, how to act in an emergency and how to enjoy our waters safely. It is why I am a passionate advocate for swimming remaining a key component of the national curriculum, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen mentioned.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Austerity hit access to swimming lessons, as evidenced by the fact that 35% of children from low-income families are able to swim 25 metres unaided compared with 82% from affluent families. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that mandatory requirements for swimming and water safety should be in the national curriculum for all primary schools?

Phil Brickell: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's remarks about improving education and how fundamental it is to do so.

Indeed, I support calls from the Outdoors For All campaign to ensure our young children learn essential outdoor life skills such as risk-benefit assessment, self-sufficiency, navigation and swimming in early years learning and throughout their schooling. That campaign is supported by organisations such as the Canal & River Trust, the Outdoor Swimming Society, Surfers Against Sewage and Swim England. I was particularly pleased recently to see an awareness-raising stall at Horwich leisure centre to mark Drowning Prevention Week, making sure that both children and parents are aware of the risks and how to manage them.

Prevention goes hand in hand with responsibility. Our waterways are places not only of recreation, but of environmental and economic value, and access is too often restricted, confusing or inconsistently enforced. All that that encourages is irresponsible and frequently dangerous access. If people want to go for a dip on a hot day, like today, we have to assume they are going to find a way to do it, so we need a more proactive role for landowners and land managers in assessing and managing risk appropriately, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) mentioned.

Finally, we cannot ignore the role of investment. Our rescue services, including our hard-working volunteers in coastguard and mountain rescue teams—such as the Bolton Mountain Rescue Team based at Ladybridge Hall in my constituency—do tremendous work, as do our training providers, and they need sustained, reliable funding. Whether it is better signage, improved safety equipment at popular swimming spots, or stronger enforcement against polluters who degrade our waters or fail to maintain safety measures, proper funding is essential.

To conclude, improving water safety has three core components: first, improving education; secondly, improving safety; and, thirdly, improving and securing access. That will ensure our children, whether they want to swim or spend a day in and around water, are able to do so in a safe manner.

4.23 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for bringing forward this critical debate.

We think a lot about water safety in the Ribble Valley constituency; indeed, the River Ribble is in its name. In the River Ribble catchment, which covers my constituency and some lovely neighbouring constituencies, we also have the Hodder, Calder, Darwen, Douglas and Wyre. The Ribble Rivers Trust is a Lancashire-based charity working to improve the River Ribble and all its tributaries for people and wildlife. Along with the Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service, it does a phenomenal job in advocating for water safety as well.

Lancashire is one of the counties in the UK with the highest water safety risk, which is likely due to the geography, as we have coasts, rivers, canals, reservoirs and quarries. One thing that has changed a lot in this country in recent years is that people move around much more. I grew up in Ribble Valley, so it was built into me not to swim in open water or reservoirs, or we at least knew where the really dangerous areas were. However, with a more transient population across the country, it is far more critical to have universal education to ensure that people who have not grown up around water understand its risks.

Another thing I am keen to raise is that, alongside the excellent case being made for lessons in schools, it is critical that children are able to learn water confidence through their own exploration and play. As others have said, that requires local accessible pools for them to explore. I am grateful to those working with me locally to begin a campaign for a proper public swimming pool in the town of Longridge in my constituency, which is one of the things that was most requested on the doorstep there.

Finally, I take this opportunity to encourage all adults who have never felt fully comfortable with swimming to learn, because it is never too late. I never learnt to swim as a child, but a few years ago when my daughter at quite a young age started diving under the water—something I could not do—I realised that I could not be encouraging her to be confident if I could not do it myself. It is a humbling thing to be a 30-something taking swimming lessons, but I am grateful to legendary Preston swimming teacher Karen Smith for her patience. The first time I swam 40 lengths was a very special moment and I am grateful that now, as a parent, I can be confident in adventures with my family. That joy and confidence should be available to everyone in our island nation and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen for pushing the Government on this matter.

4.25 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) and I praise Nessa for her tireless campaigning.

As a former teacher who taught swimming in my NQT—newly qualified teacher—year, as a mum of three young men who are all confident swimmers, and as the MP for Portsmouth's coastal community where water is a part of daily life, I know just how vital water safety education is. Every child should not only learn how to swim, but understand how to stay safe around water. As has been said today, warn and inform. That is why I welcome Labour's continued commitment to the PE and sport premium, with £320 million for 2025-26, which schools can use for teacher training and to top-up swimming lessons.

Labour's new Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will mean that all state-funded schools, including academies, will be required to deliver the national curriculum, which will include swimming and water safety. In addition, the interim report from Labour's curriculum assessment review recognises the urgent need to rebalance priorities, especially in PE for our older pupils. However, if we are to teach children to swim, we need to ensure we have access to facilities—affordable facilities—in which to have lessons. I am pleased that Hilsea Lido is having a revamp for local use, but we need to help schools work with local facilities, be they private or council, to ensure that pools and transport are a real option and are really affordable.

I also want to echo the praise for, and the promotion of, the Royal Life Saving Society for the work it is doing to help to educate us. Its resources are brilliant and there is no need to reinvent the wheel. I have seen the great work of my local National Independent Lifeboat Association. Alongside Portsmouth RNLI lifeboat and lifeguards, Portsmouth Southsea Voluntary Lifeguards and our local police and fire services, they all go the extra mile.

Raising awareness helps inform and warn, but it needs to be put into practice to save lives. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) noted, I also remember the childhood public service broadcasts some 40 years ago. They do work, and it would be a great and positive use of our online media platforms. In Portsmouth North, where children live near the sea, ponds, shorelines and marshes, these reforms to water safety education and swimming are not optional, but essential. I fully support the Government's steps to ensure that every child leaves school with essential lifesaving water skills. I fully support the extra calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen. I pledge to work with him and others on behalf of our constituents to make a national strategy for water safety a reality for our kids and for all our communities.

4.28 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) on securing the debate. I will be very brief. I just want to highlight an ongoing issue in my part of the world. I am deeply concerned about the case of Serren Bennett, an 18-year-old who has been missing from my constituency since 8 June, 11 days ago. She was last seen approaching Redcar beach, where an item of her clothing has been found. I hope Members across the House will join me in sending our thoughts to Serren's family and friends at this difficult time. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I hope that the Government will be able to assure me that the relevant authorities will be working with Cleveland police to do everything possible so she can be found.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.29 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I am pleased to wind up this debate on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for securing it. As others have said, this debate is incredibly timely, as this week is National Drowning Prevention Week.

[*Steff Aquarone*]

There have been a number of excellent contributions today. I was very pleased to hear the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), and want to associate myself with the points she and other hon. Members made on the importance of being prepared to spot the dangers and react to them and to be ready when things go wrong, which is just as important as being able to swim in the first place. Other hon. Members have raised important points and details—even in short interventions—and I am particularly pleased to see so many colleagues from across the House who have attended recent debates on rural and coastal communities in their places. There is clearly a theme building here.

The hon. Member for Southampton Itchen spoke about calls for ministerial responsibility. I think that could fit very well within the portfolio of a Minister for coastal communities, and I look forward to exploring that possibility with him further.

Members who have paid close attention to my past speeches in this House might have noticed that North Norfolk is a proud coastal community. By our nature, we have a lot of water, and our beaches and seas are beloved by residents and tourists alike, although for those who are not confident in the water, they can also be incredibly dangerous. Norfolk's inland waterways are also very special, with the Norfolk broads and fantastic rivers and chalk streams like the Glaven, Bure and Stiffkey.

This is a serious concern not just to me, but to Imogen, who attends a primary school in my constituency, and who wrote to me with her concerns. Imogen said:

"All around North Norfolk there are lots of rivers which are wonderful. Apart from that if people don't know how to swim they may fall in and drown. This is a tragic problem which affects people all around England. If people were on a walk around a river or lake and accidentally slip in and inhale the water their families would be distraught. I am not asking for a law that people know how to swim, but am requesting your attention so that you can review the problem if it persists. It may be a good idea to think about how this affects England as a whole."

She closes by saying:

"I know there are lifesaving rings dotted around but feel there is not enough and that a few more lives could be saved if there are more that can be used. Swimming lessons are charged quite high making it harder for people to be able to teach their children to swim which may be part of the problem."

I am sure hon. Members will agree that Imogen, despite being in primary school, has summarised this problem and highlighted the issues just as well as any of us could have.

Water safety is an issue that could affect any one of our constituents, potentially when they least expect it, as Imogen points out. I agree with her that we need to take a serious look at this across the House, and I hope that the Government will be able to provide not just reassurance and answers, but a promise of action to Imogen and everyone else who is concerned about this issue.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to mandatory swimming lessons in schools and are calling on the Government to ensure that identified swimming skills gaps are urgently addressed. The fact that 30% of 11 to 12-year-olds are unable to swim more than 25 metres is

a real worry for those of us in rural and coastal communities who worry for the safety of our young people in our rivers and seas.

To address those issues, we have to invest more in our local swimming pools. I am delighted that in North Norfolk, in the past few years, we have built the Reef leisure centre swimming pool in Sheringham—a real state-of-the-art facility, which is a great asset to the community. I am equally delighted that the Lib Dem council has secured funding for a multimillion-pound expansion and refurbishment of Fakenham leisure centre, which will include a new 25-metre swimming pool, in the constituency of my neighbour, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew).

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con) *rose—*

Steff Aquarone: On that note, having seen the hon. Gentleman in his place, I will give way to him.

Jerome Mayhew: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his first outing on the Front Bench—he is doing a very good job. Secondly, I will not quibble over who it was who obtained the funding from the Conservative Government—the Conservative Member of Parliament or the Liberal Democrat district council—so let us leave that to one side. Thirdly, I join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming the development of having a swimming pool in Fakenham. Does he agree that that will go a long way in helping people in Fakenham and the surrounding area to learn to swim?

Steff Aquarone: Let me absolutely clear: everybody involved in securing that bid deserves congratulations—I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Jerome Mayhew: Was that the hon. Gentleman's next point? I intervened too soon! [*Laughter.*]

Steff Aquarone: I think the point the hon. Gentleman is making is that many in Fakenham, as well as the nearby villages in my constituency, are delighted by the news and thrilled with the hard work that has gone into securing it.

Liberal Democrats also want to end the closure of swimming pools by designating them as critical health infrastructure, which would enshrine protections in law, meaning that central and local government would have a legal duty not to cut these services and to maintain adequate funding to keep them open.

Of course, people are not just swimming in pools, as many people enjoy gaining confidence through wild and open water swimming. However, in order for them to be able to do that, we have to clean up our rivers and seas after years of scandalous sewage dumping. For those looking to swim, only 14% of rivers and lakes in England are in good ecological health. Last year, water companies dumped sewage more than 100,000 times into areas with bathing water status. That is unacceptable. We must crack down on the years of unchecked profiteering and environmental damage that the water companies have caused. We must bring in tougher new laws to protect our environment and the health of those who enjoy it. In North Norfolk, we will not stand for it a moment longer.

To conclude, to secure the water safety that we need, we must have strong education, enabled by strong facilities and a clean environment. If we do that, then Imogen and people of all ages can enjoy the rivers and seas in North Norfolk and around our beautiful country with confidence and safety for years to come.

4.34 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Let me pay tribute to the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) for leading this important debate and for doing such a good job in setting out all the different issues at stake. Although he covered a huge amount of ground in his opening statement, we also heard some excellent speeches from across the House, with everyone adding important points.

We have had excellent speeches from the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), and the hon. Members for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey), for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan), for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), and for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin). Various points will stay with me. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) raised the hugely important issue of safety on ice and the terrible, terrible case involving his young constituents.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) caught my attention with her description of the Barbados of south London, which I very much enjoyed. I also strongly agreed with her tribute to water safety groups. My hon. Friend the Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) talked about the terrible case of Emily Lewis and the issue of safety on boats, which is a crucial part of this debate. The hon. Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) raised the issue of those old Central Office of Information films that have stayed with all of us, particularly the chilling “The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water”, which we all seem to have seen. The hon. Member for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) then brought us bang up to date by talking about what social media could do in this space. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) made the crucial point about the importance of not drinking and swimming, and the critical dangers there.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) reminded us of the benefits of being able to swim outside, yet there are certain places in which it is just not safe to swim. A number of other Members made the point that, in a more transient society, not everyone knows where those places are any more. The hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) made a powerful speech, talking not just about Sam and his father, but about his private Member's Bill, the Water Safety Bill.

We also had a really interesting contribution from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell), who has a beautiful constituency, which I associate with seaside holidays as a child—and as an adult. A surprising fact in her speech was that this subject is not on the curriculum in Scotland, which seems like an obvious first step. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) talked about the awful case of the missing child in his constituency. We of course hope for the best for that family.

I will turn in a moment to talk about some of the things that the previous Government did. I do so not to say that everything is wonderful, because of course it is

not, but because I thought that it might be a way of prompting further reflections on what more we could do to go further. As has already been mentioned, it was the previous Government who updated the national curriculum in 2013 to add swimming and water safety education. It is surprising that it was so late. That was where we got this rule that pupils should be taught to swim at least 25 metres.

A few people have talked about facilities. The previous Government announced the first £10 million and then £57 million to open up access to pools in schools, as it is obviously very sad to see good facilities not being used after school hours. We enabled 220 schools to open up their pools more than they had been doing, and we want to do more of that.

We worked together with some brilliant organisations in the National Water Safety Forum, including the RNLI, Swim England, the Royal Life Saving Society and many more. We have heard from a number of Members about important local and individual campaigns that can be so powerful, and I pay tribute to all the people involved in those.

I was involved in using the sugar tax to create and then expand the PE and sport premium, which has provided more funding for PE lessons in schools. In 2017, we doubled the funding that primary schools received to improve the quality of their PE and sport provision, including water education—it went up from £160 million to £320 million. However, there is still much more to be done, because about a third of adults—about 14 million people—still cannot swim. I must pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis) for leading by example and learning to swim as an adult—good on her for doing that.

All of us are affected by these hugely important issues. Members might think that since my constituency is as far away from the sea as it could be, the main risk is normally people with metal detectors fishing in the canal and constantly fishing out hand grenades, but water safety is relevant everywhere. Just at Christmas a one-year-old girl was rescued from the River Welland.

This has been an important debate. We welcome the Government's decision to look carefully at what can be done to build on the existing statutory guidance and update it. We have heard excellent contributions from Members on both sides of the House, and I look forward to the Minister's comments.

4.40 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): I join Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) on securing a debate on this incredibly important topic in this very timely week and on his powerful opening speech. I was truly saddened to hear of the deaths of his constituent Joe Abbess and Sunnah Khan at Bournemouth beach in June 2023. I extend my heartfelt condolences to their families and pay tribute to Vanessa Abbess for her campaigning.

I thank the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) for paying such thorough tribute to all Members for their contributions. If I am honest, he has saved me the task, as he did real credit to the widespread and important contributions that have been made. A number of Members present are clearly working very hard in Parliament on water safety issues,

[Catherine McKinnell]

and it is a real honour to work with them. I welcome the engagement from my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen on this topic and wish him every success in his new role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on water safety education.

By holding this debate, we alert more people to the issue of water safety, and we spread understanding of the dangers of water, particularly in this hot weather. As mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), we must remember those who have been affected. There have been many names mentioned and many tragic stories, and by remembering them today, we save lives and prevent tragedies from happening to others. I want to put on record how sorry I am to hear about Serren Bennet, who is still missing from Redcar beach. My thoughts go out to her family and friends and to the emergency services, who will be working incredibly hard to find her.

This is a timely debate, as we mark the Royal Life Saving Society UK's Drowning Prevention Week. I am pleased to support this important campaign. Each year, it reminds us of the sobering truth that drowning is one of the leading causes of accidental death in the UK, and children remain a very vulnerable group. As parents, carers and educators, we have a shared responsibility to ensure that every child understands the fundamentals of water safety. By having conversations with children about water safety and providing practical learning, we can equip children with the knowledge and skills to recognise danger, know how to respond in an emergency and enjoy water safely, which is fundamentally what we want for children. Schools have a vital role in achieving this aim.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I have known her since she first came to the House, and she knows that she has my respect and regard. Swimming is critical. It is true that people who can swim still get into trouble, but if someone cannot swim at all, they are at much greater risk. Will she work with colleagues across the House, including me in respect of Deepings leisure centre, to make sure that there are good swimming facilities across the whole of our nation?

Catherine McKinnell: The right hon. Member is right to recognise how fundamental swimming is, but it is really important to recognise that it is not enough, as has come across very strongly in this debate. But being able to swim is the foundation that every child should have. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, it takes a cross-Government effort to make sure that we have the facilities that children and everybody else can use to learn how to swim.

The national curriculum for PE, as has been noted, includes mandatory requirements on swimming and water safety at primary school. As has been acknowledged, pupils should be taught to swim 25 metres unaided, to perform a range of strokes, and to perform safe self-rescue in different water-based situations. Academies and free schools are not currently required to follow the national curriculum, but they do have to provide a broad and balanced curriculum. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which was introduced in December 2024 and is

making its way through the House, places a requirement on all state-funded schools, including academies, to teach the national curriculum and will, once implemented, extend the requirement to teach swimming and water safety to all state-funded schools.

Data from Sport England's active lives survey reported in 2024 that 95.2% of state primary schools surveyed reported that they did provide swimming lessons. We want all pupils to have the opportunity to learn to swim. Support is available, as has been highlighted, through the PE and sport premium, and a range of guidance and support is available from sector organisations. We are working really closely with sector experts, including the Royal Life Saving Society UK, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and Swim England, to ensure that all schools have access to high-quality resources to provide swimming and water safety lessons to their students.

I was therefore delighted to announce last week that the PE and sport premium would continue at £320 million for the upcoming academic year. Schools can use their premium funding to provide teacher training and top-up swimming and water safety lessons for pupils if they still need additional support to reach the standard required in the national curriculum after they have completed their core swimming and water safety lessons.

Then, alongside water safety and PE lessons, schools also currently integrate water safety into their PSHE programmes, equipping students with an understanding of risk and the knowledge required to make safe, informed decisions. The water safety code provides a foundation for water safety education, providing simple, easy-to-remember information that helps keep people safe. That is why we are working to ensure that teaching pupils the water safety code at primary and secondary school will feature in our new RHSE statutory guidance, which will be published shortly. I hope that reassures the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) and many others who expressed concern today.

During my time as Chair of the Petitions Committee, when I sat on the Opposition side of the House, I worked really closely on water safety, alongside Rebecca Ramsay, who was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen, who tragically lost her son Dylan in 2011. So I am really pleased now to be in a position where I can help deliver better water safety education in schools and really make further, meaningful progress on this issue, so that no more families lose a child in such circumstances.

In 2024 the Department launched its independent curriculum and assessment review, chaired by Becky Francis CBE, to shape a curriculum that is rich and broad, inclusive and innovative for learners from five to 18. The interim report, published in March, rightly recognises the growing challenges that schools face in prioritising subjects like PE, particularly at key stage 4, and the lack of sport opportunities for 16 to 19-year-olds. So I really want to thank members of the National Water Safety Forum education group for their thoughtful contributions to the panel's call for evidence. The review is considering a wide range of evidence. We are really keen to work with the sector, not only on what will be included in the curriculum, but on how, as a Government, we can support its implementation so that we have high-quality standards across all schools. Every child deserves the best start in life, no matter their background

or ability, and it is our mission to ensure that we do everything we can to achieve that. No child should miss out on the opportunity to learn how to keep themselves safe in and around water.

Last month I was pleased to announce a grant of up to £300,000 a year to the consortium led by Youth Sport Trust to deliver Inclusion 2028, a programme to upskill teachers to deliver high-quality and inclusive PE, sport and physical activity to pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. Inclusion 2028 will provide inclusive swimming and water lessons. Two hundred young water safety champions will be trained to promote water safety to their peers. Seven new online resources will be created. The consortium will work with disability sport organisations, and nine inclusive school swimming specialists are being delivered to help deliver continuing professional development to staff at schools and leisure centres.

Paul Holmes: The Minister is right and I agree with everything that she has outlined on ensuring that those lessons are delivered at school and particularly as early on as possible. May I have her reassurance, and will she briefly outline, how she intends to ensure that is enforced further down the line, once the national curriculum comes out?

Catherine McKinnell: As I said, we are working with sector organisations on the content of the curriculum, and we are working with the sector on the delivery of these programmes. I could go into detail on Ofsted and the changes we are making on accountability, but I do not believe there is time in this debate. However, I take the challenge and I will take that away. I agree that not only do we need to say that children should have these things, but we need to make sure that they are armed with the knowledge that we know will keep them safe.

A number of Members, inspired by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser), have mentioned public information campaigns. That brought to my mind the story of Evan Crisp from Newcastle. Six years ago, Evan and his friends were at Beadnell bay in Northumberland, celebrating finishing their exams, as we know lots of young people will be doing at the moment. He was caught in a rip and was swept out to sea.

As Evan lost sight of the beach, he recalled an RNLI advert that he had seen very briefly—only for a minute—before a film that he had gone to see. Everyone who falls unexpectedly into cold water wants to follow the same instinct: to swim hard, to fight the cold water. Yet when people fight, the chances are that they will lose. Cold water will make you gasp uncontrollably. Breathe in water and you will drown. If you just float until the cold-water shock has passed, you can control your breathing and have a far better chance of staying alive. Evan followed that advice and managed to hold on to consciousness for 45 minutes until he was rescued. He feels incredibly grateful to be alive because he knows that many people do not have that opportunity. He did not learn that information at school, but from a public information campaign.

I will therefore take away the asks that have been made—they are not necessarily for my Department, but for the Government more broadly. Many useful suggestions have been made in our discussions, and we can take

those away and work on them. It is clear from this debate that water safety must be a part of every child's education. Alongside the national curriculum, education settings should have access to a wide range of engaging programmes, so that young people can know how to enjoy water safely. It can be done and it should be done.

I am delighted that representatives from RLSS UK, Swim England, RNLI and the Canal and River Trust have all agreed to meet me to discuss their work to support water safety education in schools. I am grateful for their ongoing work in that area. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen, the APPG on water safety education and all Members who contributed to this important debate. My final word goes to the families who have been affected by the terrible loss of a loved one, and in particular Joe Abbess's family, who are here today. Your brave campaigning will save lives, so thank you.

Mr Speaker: Beckie Ramsay is my constituent, and it was her son Dylan who drowned in that abandoned quarry. He will never be forgotten. The loss that she suffered, and that others have suffered, as has been mentioned today—none of us can imagine what they went through. I just want to say that Beckie does a great job of going into schools, educating and saving lives for others.

4.53 pm

Darren Paffey: I thank all Members, from across the Chamber, who have taken part in this debate. I will mention a few key strands that have been raised, just because they align with some of the things that I have asked for. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) mentioned that the fire response, which is often the first response to these terrible tragedies, is not statutory. Does she agree that a Minister with particular responsibility for drowning prevention might bring that coherence?

Rebecca Long Bailey *indicated assent.*

Darren Paffey: I hope the Minister has followed that. I do not expect everything to be on education, but there is a necessary cross-departmental organisation response that needs to happen. It goes beyond education and some of the recommendations reflect that.

My hon. Friends the Members for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) and for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) mentioned the information campaigns that are necessary, particularly using contemporary tools of social media, which takes me to another campaign I am involved in. The potential of social media to do good is great. Unfortunately, too often that is not what happens, so we need to hold social media companies to account, to ensure that they keep our young people safe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) mentioned a wonderful community-led campaign, and there is a real example to take from that. On the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), I met Sam's dad when he was in the House yesterday and I know he appreciates the work that my hon. Friend does, so I commend him for Sam's law. He can count on my support and, I am sure, that of many others across the House. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for

[Darren Paffey]

Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis), who, despite the focus on schools that some of the debate has necessarily taken, made an incredibly salient point about why water safety education needs to go wider, and adults learning to swim would also benefit from that.

We heard during this debate—and during Drowning Prevention Week—about the wonderful variety of waterways that we enjoy. We have heard about the Thames, from its historical east to the tropical west. The hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) mentioned the neighbouring river to mine—of course, the greatest river is the River Itchen. I share the Solent with my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin). We heard about the quays and canals of Salford and Greater Manchester, the Severn, the Ribble, the national parks, and the lidos from Ayrshire to Hilsea. We say that these waterways must be enjoyed, but they must be enjoyed safely, and we must look at how we can move on from the current situation.

I thank everyone who has added breadth to the appreciation of this issue, as well as adding weight to the sense of urgency that we must take. Hon. Members from across the Chamber have demonstrated why the ability to swim and the knowledge of what happens in different waterways up and down the country is absolutely crucial. Although we have done that through heartbreaking personal accounts, I hope that their names and stories, having been heard in this place, will move us to action.

I appreciate the Minister's words on what is happening. I am encouraged to hear about the meetings taking place. I look forward to reading and engaging with the RSHE guidance. I remain of the view that this should be foundational, not pieced together by different approaches. I look forward to engaging further and ensuring that by Drowning Prevention Week 2026, we will have moved on and have acted and saved more lives. By then we will have been through what is already proving to be a hot summer, and indeed through the winter—the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) rightly pointed out the dangers of ice.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee, all those who have supported and spoken in the debate, my team who have made today happen, and the various organisations—I will not list them all—helping us to move the dial on this issue. Finally, and most importantly, I thank Ness, who has been an incredible inspiration for me in the debate; I hope she sees today that her work is of national significance.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered water safety education.

Public Sector Pensions: McCloud Remedy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)

4.58 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I rise today to discuss an issue that I am sure affects not just my constituents in Edinburgh West but many of our constituents across the United Kingdom. Since 2018, thousands of civil servants, teachers, doctors, nurses, police officers and firefighters have been waiting for the compensation they are entitled to through the McCloud remedy, after the judgment in the Court of Appeal which ruled that changes to public sector pensions unlawfully discriminated against younger workers.

That impacted a huge number of dedicated public servants, including at least 400,000 civil servants and more than half a million teachers. In Scotland, more than 13,000 police officers were impacted and are due remediation, as are around 90,000 NHS workers, according to figures produced by the Scottish Government. It is understandable that, with so many people needing remediation, there could be delays, particularly for more complex cases or older cases that need to be examined manually, but these are having a significant impact on people's lives.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)

Christine Jardine: As I say, these delays are having a significant impact on people's lives.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. I have had a number of cases come into my office as well. My constituent Gavin Templeton, who served 25 years of dedicated service in the Fife constabulary, was forced to return to work because his incorrect pension was so low. Does she agree that it is time we did much more to support hard-working public servants like Gavin to receive the full pensions they worked so hard for?

Christine Jardine: I thank the hon. Member for raising a very good point, which I will come to later. I agree completely; this has been particularly difficult for many people in the light of the crises we have faced in recent years, with the soaring cost of living and sky-high energy bills.

This is what has happened to my constituents in Edinburgh West who have come to me with their issues with the administration of the remedy—not the remedy, but the administration of it—and the possible future impact on other pension schemes. One of my constituents who was affected is a retired police officer who served 25 years. His pension scheme was forcibly changed in 2017 to the CARE—career average revalued earnings—scheme, which was found to be discriminatory. He retired in February 2023 with his 25% lump sum, on the assumption that the remedial scheme would be in place by October that year. He estimates that he is now owed more than £30,000 in terms of both his commuted lump

sum from the new scheme and the lower monthly pension. He is also one of thousands of immediate detriment officers still waiting for their remediation letter from the pension authorities, despite claims that the number of retired officers receiving these has accelerated, including in Scotland.

Another constituent started working for Lothian and Borders police, as it was, in 1996 and retired in 2022, knowing he would only receive his pension for his service between 1996 and 2015, while the remedy was calculated. He was told at the time that he would receive his remediable service statement by April 2025, three years after his retirement. He also estimates a loss in pension income of more than £30,000, given that seven years of his service to our community was not counted when he first retired.

A third constituent of mine has raised a possible issue that he faces when retiring with an NHS pension. The Government's approach to NHS pension remedies means that pension growth will be calculated under an older scheme from 2008, even if he believes this rollback leaves those in the middle of their careers vulnerable to artificial breaches of the annual pension allowance and significant income tax charges because of the set-up of the 2008 scheme used for calculation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. I spoke to her beforehand to ascertain her focus, which is clearly on the McCloud remedy. The McCloud remedy will have implications on tax for some members, with some needing to pay more tax—she has outlined three—and others being entitled to a refund. My constituents in Strangford are experiencing the same issue as those in Edinburgh West and are in a similar position of uncertainty. Does she agree that discussion with financial advisers is essential, and for those who do not have access to financial advisers, the employer—the national health service, in the case of my constituents—must provide workshops to ensure that workers can understand what their choice will mean in reality?

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. This issue has affected all our constituents, in a different way. His is exactly the sort of point that I hope the Minister may be able to address.

All the cases that we have mentioned show the impact that the remedy process has had on people who have dedicated their lives to serving our communities. It is unfair and must be tackled. In written answers to myself and other hon. Members, Ministers have said that it is up to individual pension schemes and their managers to implement the remedy rather than the relevant Government Department, but that seems to allow the schemes to delay, or leaves them without the resources and support that they need to process claims at pace. Will the Minister outline how the Government work with these authorities to ensure rapid delivery of remedial pay?

What steps will the Government take to ensure that pension authorities can also deliver RSS notices to speed up the process of calculating and awarding remedial pay? That is particularly important for police pensions, as there appears to be a severe backlog in issuing those notices to retired officers to allow them to make their choice under the law. That is leaving my constituents in Edinburgh West and others facing years of further

uncertainty on their finances, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referenced, and losing out on money that they are entitled to for their work.

As policing is devolved in both Scotland and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, in Northern Ireland, how are the Government working with the devolved Administrations on these pension schemes to share best practice across Departments, provide increased resource and finally give these public servants, who have served our communities, taught our children and kept us safe for so long, the safety, security and financial stability that they deserve for their retirement? Surely that is what they are entitled to.

5.6 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this debate. I am grateful for her speech, and agree that the people we are talking about keep us safe and well, and show true dedication to public service. I absolutely understand the point that she is making.

I will talk a little bit about the background to McCloud, before talking about the progress that has been made to date and what further steps the scheme managers still need to take, as the hon. Lady outlined. The McCloud remedy is, by its nature, a complex undertaking, as I am sure she will appreciate. It applies to 20 public service pension schemes in the UK, and the scheme managers for those schemes are responsible for ensuring that the remedy is administered properly and in accordance with their statutory provisions.

This issue, as the hon. Lady said, arises out of the introduction of new pension schemes for public sector workers in 2014-15. When introducing those pension schemes, the Government at the time gave what is called a transitional protection to older workers, but as she set out, in 2018 the Court of Appeal found that those protections gave rise to unlawful discrimination on the grounds of age, race and sex. In 2019, the Government announced that they would address that discrimination through the McCloud remedy.

There are two main elements to the remedy. The ongoing difference in treatment between older and younger workers was removed by closing the older pre-2015 pension schemes and moving all active members into the new pension schemes in relation to employment after 31 March 2022. However, addressing the discrimination that occurred between 2014 and 2022 is considerably more complex, as hon. Members will appreciate, because whether individual members are better off under the older legacy schemes or newer reform schemes will depend on their individual employment histories and circumstances, and in some cases will not be certain until they retire. The remedy therefore gives a choice over legacy or reform scheme benefits, which is given at the point of retirement for active and deferred members, and is in the process of being rolled out for members who have already retired.

Delivering the remedy to more than 3 million affected scheme members is also an intensive administrative challenge. There are many different elements to it, but the most crucial is that all those affected must be provided with individualised information about their pension entitlements during the 2015 to 2022 remedy period, through what is known as a remediable service statement or RSS.

[Emma Reynolds]

In addition, a smaller group of members, whose tax position during the remedy period may have changed, need to be provided with a remediable pension savings statement—an RPSS. Given the complexity of the McCloud remedy, schemes are also providing significant levels of guidance and online resources to help members understand the information they receive and the decision they need to make. That information is often very complex, as hon. Members know because many have been in the position of receiving it. There is also a dedicated HMRC digital service to allow members receiving an RPSS to understand their tax position. There are processes in place to allow members to pay additional tax or, as will be the case for the majority of members, to claim either a tax refund or compensation from the scheme where a refund is not possible.

Providing these statements to members, together with the other aspects of implementing the remedy, is the responsibility, as the hon. Lady will know, of pension scheme managers. For the largest public service schemes, including the NHS scheme in England and Wales, the teachers' scheme in England and Wales, and the civil service scheme across the UK, the scheme manager is the relevant Secretary of State. The local government, police and fire schemes are administered locally, which means each responsible authority, force or brigade has its own scheme manager, who is responsible for the operation of the scheme in that area.

The devolved Administrations—this is pertinent to the concerns raised by the hon. Lady, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie)—have responsibility for administering their schemes. The Scottish Government, through the Scottish Public Pensions Agency, have responsibility for the police, fire, NHS and teachers' schemes in Scotland. The Welsh Government are responsible for the firefighters' scheme in Wales. Pension schemes in Northern Ireland are established under a separate legal framework and are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Government.

This means that the picture on implementing the remedy across the different schemes is complex and may be subject to particular factors that affect one scheme but not necessarily another. The remedy itself varies across the schemes, reflecting the fact that the schemes themselves are specific to each workforce and have different benefit designs. This can be seen in the differing levels of progress that schemes have so far made.

I am aware that across the police scheme in England and Wales, around 90% of the total number of RSSs have so far been issued, and I understand that the picture is similar in the police scheme in Scotland, with 97% of deferred choice and over three quarters of immediate choice RSSs already issued. Although that is not yet matched by other schemes, significant progress is being made elsewhere. For example, the civil service scheme in England and Wales has issued around 45% of immediate choice RSSs and the teachers' scheme around 47%.

It was always anticipated that providing RSSs to members would be challenging, and that is specifically recognised in the legislation governing the remedy. In particular, the Public Service Pensions and Judicial

Offices Act 2022 sets out that for the provision of RSSs, there is a deadline of 31 March 2025, or—here comes the qualification—

“such later day as the scheme manager considers reasonable in all the circumstances in the case of a particular member or a particular class of member”.

Given that I was asked about delays, I think it is worth reflecting that hon. Members have raised concerns about their constituents who are experiencing delays in receiving the remedy. I am standing in for the Pensions Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), but I used to be the Pensions Minister myself, so I have some knowledge of the issue, and I encourage scheme managers to take every step possible to resolve those cases as quickly as possible and to prioritise cases where individuals may be in particular need. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West reflected on a number of such cases in her excellent contribution.

I assure anybody in this position that where there is an uplift in interest on pension payments, interest will be paid on arrears, so they will not lose out financially as a result of the delays, but I do understand that the delays are frustrating. As the hon. Lady will be aware, the overarching principle of the McCloud remedy is to put people back in the situation they would have been in if the discrimination had not occurred. In order to do that, it is necessary to apply interest where payments should have been made at an earlier date, whether by the scheme or the member. In this debate, we have heard more about the delays of the scheme towards the member. Interest is applied at 8% when the scheme owes money to the member. Where the member owes money to the scheme, interest is applied at the NS&I direct saver rate, which is currently 3.5%. I hope that reassures the hon. Lady to a certain extent.

We think it is right that these decisions are made by scheme managers, as they are the only ones with full possession of all the relevant information. As I have said, with that information and the variety of different factors, the situation is complex. Having said that, the Government are committed to ensuring that all affected members are provided with the remedy they deserve as quickly as possible, including ensuring that members already in receipt of pension benefits or approaching their retirement are prioritised.

Where scheme managers have exercised their statutory discretion to extend the deadline for providing some members with an RSS, it is therefore important that appropriate new deadlines are set out and that robust plans are in place to ensure the new deadlines are met. Scheme managers must ensure that the plans are properly communicated to pension scheme members to provide them with certainty. The Pensions Regulator must also be kept informed of plans and progress, and I know that schemes have been having these discussions with the regulator.

Similarly, there have been delays in other aspects of the remedy, such as the provision of the RPSSs to those who need them. As I set out earlier, that affects a smaller number of people. However, it is difficult for those people if they are kept waiting. It is important that schemes keep members informed and provide them with appropriate resources and support. Although I am pleased to say that the process of sending out RPSSs in England and Wales is 90% complete and that some

schemes have sent them to all affected members, I know that there are issues in other parts of the country. As I said, this is a very complex area. If I have not answered all of the hon. Lady's questions, I am happy to write to her.

Given the importance of delivering the McCloud remedy effectively, the Pensions Minister has recently written to responsible Departments, requesting details of their plans to issue remaining RSSs and RPSSs to all affected members. All those affected by the McCloud remedy can be assured that a robust and complete statutory remedy has been put in place and that schemes

are working to ensure that members receive the information and support they need. I do, though, note the points that the hon. Lady has made about the impact of the delays on her constituents. They will have the opportunity to decide whether to receive legacy or reform scheme benefits in relation to their service. I again thank the hon. Lady for bringing this matter to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

5.17 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 19 June 2025

[Ms EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

Priorities for Water Sector Reform

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): We begin with the Select Committee statement. Helena Dollimore will speak about the publication of the second report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, “Priorities for water sector reform”, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions can be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call other Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Helena Dollimore to respond to those in turn. Questions should be brief, and Members may ask only one question each.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Ms Lewell. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for me to make a statement on behalf of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee about our second report of this Parliament. The report is entitled “Priorities for water sector reform”, and it is intended to be the first in a long-term inquiry into reforming our water sector. We will continue to return to this subject throughout the Parliament, as we know how important it is.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has made reform of the water sector one of his five core priorities. Sir Jon Cunliffe was appointed by him to lead an independent review of the sector and to make recommendations. Unusually, therefore, our report does not make recommendations to the Government but to Sir Jon himself. It is intended to feed into the work of the Independent Water Commission.

Over the past six months, we have been wading into the water industry and its many problems. Before I come to our findings, I want to thank my fellow Committee members, the Committee staff and the Chair for their hard work in getting this report over the line. Most of all, I thank the campaigners across the country who have helped to expose what is happening in our water industry.

The story of what has happened in the water sector in this country reads a bit like the film “Erin Brockovich”—individuals who care about the state of their sea or their local river, going out to test the water only to find shocking levels of sewage pollution. A shocking number of them have then ended up having to go to court to find out the truth of what is happening. The seas, rivers and waterways of a whole country have been desecrated. In my own constituency, in Hastings, Rye and the villages, we have been at the sharp end of this crisis, suffering at the hands of Southern Water.

In our inquiry, we tried to take the public’s questions to the water bosses, to channel that anger into seeking answers about how we solve the crisis and about how we

got here. We hauled in the water bosses one by one, and heard story after story of corporate failure, environmental degradation and a lack of accountability. The boss of Thames Water explained why it put 98 critical infrastructure projects back, instead spending that money on dividends rather than fixing broken pipes. Some companies, including Thames, are now struggling to stay afloat, thanks to the previously high levels of dividends extracted from the companies. That should never have been allowed to happen.

We heard about serious failings during major incidents in which the public were abandoned. In Brixham, during a cryptosporidium outbreak, while residents lay in hospital from drinking the water, the boss of South West Water, Susan Davy, was missing in action. She could not explain why she refused interviews with the media during the crisis.

We grilled the boss of Southern Water, Lawrence Gosden, about major incidents in my own constituency, when residents in Hastings and Rye were left without water for up to eight days. Proper provisions were not made during that time for residents, and communication was seriously lacking. In the Hastings water outage, Southern Water initially refused to cough up any compensation. After I grilled him about it in Committee, the chief executive agreed to reverse the decision and pay compensation. Our Committee has taken the learnings from such incidents to recommend that we have a clear set of guidelines to say what people can reasonably expect from the water companies during a major water outage—such as providing portaloos, showering facilities or food provision as the crisis goes on.

One water boss after another justified taking an eye-watering bonus while presiding over serious failure. They were always quick to justify the need for bonus cheques to deliver good performance, but had no answers for us about why their bonuses were 150%, while the lowest-paid frontline workers out repairing pipes and leaky mains got just 3% or 5%. Bonuses going up while sewage pollution incidents increase—the Committee is not sure how that meets the definition of performance-related pay.

At the heart of the issue is a perception that the water companies are prioritising profits over people and the planet. We found that the current structure of these companies is dominated by private equity and opaque financial arrangements that have been used to take debt to unsustainable levels. Some companies have clearly been bought by irresponsible owners who have prioritised shareholder returns over long-term investment and environmental stewardship.

We were also disturbed by how much of our water industry—a whopping 70%—is in foreign ownership, often that of countries regarded as hostile to the UK. Is it really in the UK’s national interest to have water, a critical piece of infrastructure, in the hands of our adversaries? Major changes are needed to bring about a fundamental shift in leadership. The sector is deaf to the crisis it faces. Vetting or vetoing of owners could be a first step.

We also believe that the commission and the Government should be open-minded about different ownership models. As well as publicly and privately owned businesses, options include not-for-profit enterprises, community interest companies, co-operatives and hybrid approaches. Regardless of the approach taken, other factors may need to be considered, such as the power to vet owners—a

[*Helena Dollimore*]

power that Ofwat does not currently hold. The commission should conduct a serious analysis of whether alternatives could bring about a culture that is better focused on public service, transparency and accountability.

We know that there is also a need for other changes. The report calls for tighter regulation of financial practices, including limits on debt gearing levels, better oversight over complex business structures and greater scrutiny of dividend policies. We also want to see changes in the regulatory environment, which is too complex and too ineffective. Regulators such as Ofwat have been found asleep at the wheel during the crisis, too often focused on processes instead of outcomes. The rise in pollution incidents shows that regulators need better resources and powers to properly monitor the environment and enforce environmental protections.

The price review process is not working either. Our Committee found that it must be reformed or replaced to better serve the interests of customers and the environment. It has failed to support the necessary investment in the sector and to maintain or improve the resilience of assets, and has allowed money to be siphoned off into bonuses and dividends instead of spent fixing broken infrastructure.

The sector and the regulators have woken up too late to the need for investment in that broken infrastructure, and customers are now bearing the brunt of a huge increase in bills that should have been spread over a longer period. It is the most vulnerable households that will suffer. We welcome the Government's commitment to introduce a better single social tariff to protect those households and urge them to move quickly in introducing it.

This week, we took evidence from Sir Jon Cunliffe, and impressed on him the importance of seeking fundamental reform of a sector that is failing. This is a time not for tinkering around the edges, but for bold action to meet the expectations of people across this country. This report should serve as a wake-up call and a stark reminder of the challenges in our water sector. It is the first step in a long-term inquiry, but our message is clear: the water sector must change.

We welcome the efforts recently made by the Government and Ofwat to tackle some of the problems of governance, bonuses and financial mismanagement, including the recent announcement of a ban on bonuses for overseeing failure thanks to the new powers introduced in the recent Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. However, we urge the Government to go further. We need a system that puts people before profits, protects our rivers and seas and earns the trust of the public. Let us not waste this opportunity—let us build a water sector that is transparent, accountable and fit for the future.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for that comprehensive overview of what is a really impressive piece of work by the EFRA Committee. It is shocking, but my Hazel Grove constituents will not be surprised, because they are subjected to United Utilities dumping sewage in the rivers Goyt, Tame and Mersey.

Could I press the hon. Member for a little bit more information? She mentions the open-mindedness of the Committee when it comes to ownership models of water companies, but I wonder how open-minded it is

when it comes to the regulator. She talked in her remarks about improving resources and extending powers, but does she agree that scrapping Ofwat and starting again with a new regulator would be part of the solution?

Helena Dollimore: I thank the hon. Member for that important question. On the Committee, we heard about the failures of United Utilities in her constituency and other places that it is meant to serve properly.

We found that, at the moment, we have a very complex regulatory regime that does not serve anyone well. There is a lot of confusion about who is responsible for what, in the sector and among consumers. People do not know where to go when things go wrong—that is not clearly enough understood. We feel that there could be a much simpler, clearer regulatory regime, which needs more powers and also more resources to do the job properly.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for the work that we did together on this report in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. As she will know, I represent a Welsh seat in Mid and South Pembrokeshire. Welsh Water's not-for-profit model avoids dividends and maintains a low gearing level of 60.4%, but that has not stopped it from having more spills and longer spill durations than those in England. On top of that, there is poor performance on enforcement and we have an asset renewal rate of 0.09% from 2020 to 2025. Does my hon. Friend agree that in terms of the radical need for renewal to regain public trust and confidence in the sector, this goes far beyond simply changing ownership models? Change must be right across the piece.

Helena Dollimore: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Committee, and for his questioning of the boss of Welsh Water about many of these issues. He is right that at the moment all the indicators are going in the wrong direction on debt gearing and on the structures these companies use, all while sewage dumping incidents are, too often, increasing. In the report, we have called for limits on debt gearing levels, better oversight of the complex business structures that even the water bosses in front of our Committee did not seem to understand and were not able to explain, and greater scrutiny of dividend policies.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) not only for leading this statement but for her forensic and passionate scrutiny of water companies as part of this inquiry. It has been a real pleasure to sit with her on the Committee.

Whether it is billpayers or citizen scientists, as a Committee we heard story after story of the people whom water companies are there to serve being disregarded or even subject to legal action. We know that the terms of Sir Jon Cunliffe's review rule out public ownership, but we also know that disgraceful behaviour in private, often foreign-owned, water companies has been rampant, and has ignored the fact that water is an essential public service. Does my hon. Friend agree that co-operative and mutual principles, which she and I both champion, should be fully explored as they could resolve so many of the issues that our inquiry has uncovered?

Helena Dollimore: Absolutely; I thank my hon. Friend for that point. He and I are both Labour and Co-operative Members of Parliament. We believe in the strong potential of that model. The Committee report urges the commission to look very closely at the potential benefits of community interest companies, co-operative models or other approaches. My hon. Friend is right that that could be a good way of looking at the change we need in the water industry.

1.44 pm

Sitting suspended.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Social Mobility: Careers Education

1.53 pm

Andrew Ranger (Wrexham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of careers education in improving social mobility.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Lewell, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for this debate. The term “social mobility” is used widely and in many contexts, but it is worth setting out what it means. The Social Mobility Commission defines it as

“the link between a person’s occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents.”

Where there is a strong link, there is a lower level of social mobility; where there is a weak link, there is a higher level.

For a long time, the focus often centred on moving a select few from the bottom to the top, but there is now a move from a one-size-fits-all model to a broader view of distinct kinds of social mobility, sometimes over shorter distances for a greater number of people. That means not only focusing on, for example, those with the top grades getting into elite universities and then moving to London to work for a top accountancy or law firm, but celebrating the children of parents who were long-term unemployed growing up and getting jobs in their local area.

Such short-range mobility is equally important and should be encouraged, which is why the time is right for a renewed conversation about the role that careers education can play. Over time, we have developed a framework of careers education in our classrooms, but the framework is there to be challenged and improved on, and I look forward to debating it further today.

A report released towards the end of 2024 by the Office for National Statistics showed that around 872,000 young people aged between 16 and 24—about 12% of them—were not in education, employment or training. In many cases, that is not because young people are not willing or do not want to work, but because they perhaps lack the opportunities or support to pursue it. Evidence shows that the earlier the intervention we can make in a young person’s life, the greater chance their chance of succeeding.

Students who are on free school meals are less likely to move into work, education or an apprenticeship when compared with their peers. Part of the reason for that is unequal access to the information and guidance that enable young people to develop their ambitions and make informed choices in relation to their studies. Those from lower social and economic backgrounds are less likely to feel career ready, less confident talking about their skills in job applications and do not always have the support at home and elsewhere to make crucial and important decisions about their own futures.

Crucial skills for job applications—which are too often not talked about, but make a significant difference—include effective communication, problem solving, the ability to plan and adapt, leadership and effective teamwork. These skills, sometimes referred to as soft skills, are often taken for granted, but the reality on the ground

[*Andrew Ranger*]

tells us a much different story. A National Foundation for Educational Research study found that by 2035 up to 7 million workers may lack the essential skills they need to do their jobs.

Almost 90% of the 2.2 million new jobs that are expected to be created between 2020 and 2035 are set to be in the professional sector. We need to send school leavers out with the mindset that these skills are just as important as their technical or academic qualifications, and just as crucial when it comes to progression in their chosen profession. It is therefore vital that when it comes to careers education, we seek to ensure that soft skills education becomes common practice in educational institutions and other environments across the UK. As suggested by the Skills Builder Partnership, we could look to achieve that by adopting a common language for essential skills and introducing a national standardised framework for teaching and assessing them, starting at a younger age and with clear milestones. We want all our young people to have ambition in abundance, but ambition is too often frustrated not by talent or ability but by a postcode or someone's background.

When we think of careers education, including our own experiences, we are probably more likely to remember it as being part of our secondary or further education, but it is increasingly clear that attitudes towards ambition and achievement are often set much earlier—at primary-school age or sometimes before. Evidence also tells us that children begin to form ideas about their futures when they are as young as five or six. By the age of 10, many young people have already made career-limiting decisions, which can be set in stone by the age of 14.

When asked as part of the covid, social mobility and opportunities survey, 16 and 17-year-olds from low-income or “never worked” households were more likely to agree that people like them do not have much of a chance in life, particularly when their household net income was £19,000 or less. The Social Mobility Foundation found that parents and their social networks are the key source of careers advice for 76% of young people. As it rightly said, such reliance on parental support risks replicating existing networks and employment structures. The parents and their individual networks are more likely to have sector knowledge, therefore making parent-child career replication far more likely.

The issue is further compounded by geography. Rural areas are less likely to have the same diversity of employers and sectors as cities, reducing opportunity and crucial interactions that can have an incredible impact in broadening horizons.

One part of the solution can be found in Wales, where careers and work-related experiences—known as CWRE—cut across the curriculum for students from the age of three up to 18. The aim is to ensure that, from the offset, children develop the attitudes and behaviours that support them in overcoming barriers related to employability. The Rofft primary school in Wrexham reported that it supported the development of children's self-growth, confidence and employability skills, as well as authentic, purposeful, world-of-work experiences.

It is very welcome that in their “Get Britain Working” White Paper the Government have set out a vision for a youth guarantee that includes an entitlement to two weeks, or 15 hours, of work experience for all school

and college students. However, we must ensure that with quantity comes quality, and that work experience is both worth while and impactful for every young person's prospects. One way to ensure that could be through a national platform for work experience that enables virtual opportunities, and allows schools to select opportunities that fit the needs of their pupils, removing a large part of the administrative burden that can so often emerge.

Funding is, of course, also crucial. When asked, almost half of schoolteachers in the state sector said they wished to see more resource and funding allocated to careers guidance in schools. Notably, there was recognition of the need for remuneration for those who work as career leaders, to give them more time to focus on that work. Private schools are estimated to invest up to four times more in careers education than the state sector. If we do not act and take practical steps to close that gap, we risk further educational divides and entrenching low social mobility outcomes.

I have spoken about work experience in the school years, but it is also important to look at what it can offer to young people for whom, for whatever reason, education may not have worked, or who have fallen through gaps. WeMindTheGap, which is based in Wrexham, works with people aged between 16 and 25 in north-east Wales and north-west England. Known as “gappies”, those taking part engage in an 18-month fully-funded programme that offers work placements, including a paid six-month placement, and a mentor who is with them every step of the way. The results and effects on young people's lives have been transformational.

I have some testimony from people who have been through the programme. The transformation is clear in what they have experienced. Vicky finished college and had been on jobseeker's allowance for nearly a year when an adviser suggested the programme. Vicky spoke of being shy and withdrawn, and of her life not having focus. She said:

“Going for interviews then, I never heard anything back”, but by the end of the programme

“I was far more outgoing and could not stop talking, thanks to all the support I received from the charity. I enjoyed all my placements, especially the Ramada Plaza Hotel. I got a job at the end of the programme, but the biggest change was that I started to draw again. I did a placement at Glyndwr University, who took me to their Art Department. Laura”—

one of the mentors—

“encouraged me to show them my drawings. After all these years of being told I cannot draw I found that people like what I do, and people call it a talent.”

Sophie was 16 and found herself living in a hostel in Wrexham. Her supporter at the hostel said that she should apply for the programme at WeMindTheGap. Sophie said:

“Looking back, I must have been horrible. If I did not like doing something I would say so, loudly; if things went wrong for me, I did not know how to try again. I liked all my placements, but my favourite part of the week was Essential Skills. We always started with a maths quiz, and I would win easily. I had GCSE maths and Pam helped me think about getting more qualifications. I asked the team to help me apply for an Apprenticeship in a Bank or Finance office because even I realised I was good at numbers.

“I got nervous at the end of the programme about leaving but Laura and Diana said they would still be there for me. I had no other work experience and I was just 18 and it was hard getting a job. All the other gappies on my course got something and I felt

if I wasn't careful, I could slip back into my old habits. So, I asked if I could come into Moneypenny and volunteer over Christmas. I had so much fun and loved being part of the team. Diane told the Finance Director how good at numbers I was and after a couple of months, I was offered a permanent contract! Diane got in touch with Coleg Cambria and got me on an Apprenticeship accountancy course to help me alongside.

"I am Moneypenny's first Finance Apprentice. I completed my course in June 2019. I work 4.5 days in the busy finance team and am responsible for looking after client accounts, reconciliations, and debt recovery. I have a much better relationship with my family—they are proud of me. I've also been on my first holiday abroad. I participate in We Belong sessions, I love meeting new gappies."

Those are but a few of many success stories from that one body doing that work, but there is a wider general message: if we meet young people where they are, recognising their circumstances and their hopes and aspirations, we give them a greater chance to succeed. Fewer than one in five 16 to 21-year-olds feel that they have had sufficient guidance, so there is a clear need to rethink how we support young people during those pivotal years. Rather than expecting them to navigate an often complex and unequal system alone, we need to invest in personalised, compassionate guidance that acknowledges their lived experiences. This means more than just providing opportunities: it means building trust, offering consistent mentorship, and creating environments where every young person feels seen, heard and believed in.

To summarise, there is a lot to be proud of when it comes to careers education, including the fantastic work being done by careers leaders in schools to guide young people, and the many organisations opening doors and broadening horizons. It really has come a long way but, none the less, we still need to be more ambitious. I have set out a few areas in which I believe we can be, and I look forward to hearing colleagues' contributions. One of this Government's overarching aims is to break down the barriers to opportunity; let us be ambitious and put careers education at the heart of achieving that and improving social mobility.

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): I remind Members that if they wish to be called, they should bob. I am imposing an informal four-minute time limit.

2.5 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for introducing this important debate, and I welcome the thoughtful contributions that we are about to hear from across the Chamber. I make my speech within the context of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

This discussion about careers education could not be more timely, with almost 1 million young people in the UK currently not in education, employment or training, and our universities facing unprecedented challenges. I am therefore grateful for the opportunity to speak on this subject. It is deeply concerning, as we have heard already, that children eligible for free school meals are 20% less likely to progress into higher education. Shockingly, in Scotland, a total of 1,351 pupils—enough to fill an entire school—left school last year without a single qualification. Even for those who reach university, funding has been reduced since 2013. University student funding in Scotland has seen a real terms cut of 22%, and as my

hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham rightly highlighted in opening the debate, many of our young people are also being let down within that context.

We all recognise the transformative power of education in creating equality of opportunity, yet in recent years it feels like that has faltered. Too many young people are not receiving the skills training and support that they need to navigate a rapidly evolving job market. Addressing that requires targeted investment in left-behind communities, focusing support—as we have heard—on lower-income families and reforms to ensure that our service delivery achieves the best possible outcomes for children of all backgrounds. One key avenue for achieving that is through careers education. It plays a vital role in improving social mobility by equipping young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the knowledge, skills and social capital needed to better access opportunities.

Having spent 24 years as a professor at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, I have seen at first hand the life-changing impact of education—I have also seen students arrive at university who were born after I started working there, but that is a secondary issue. I have also witnessed growing barriers to social mobility and shrinking opportunities for young people in Scotland. Too often, the most disadvantaged bear the brunt of underfunding in the sector. That makes high-quality careers education all the more essential, so that every young person can make the most of the opportunities available for them. It is so much harder for disadvantaged kids to repeat a year or start again, so it is important that we get it right for them first time.

I worry, however, that the budgets for those services will be squeezed in the funding crisis that universities face across the UK, but particularly in Scotland. If we are serious about economic growth, we cannot let that happen. I have seen careers advisers doing exceptional work in that space. They recognise that, while every student has potential, not all have access to the networks and opportunities needed to realise it. A report from the Behavioural Insights Team in 2021 noted that many ambitious pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are held back by "career confusion", whereby the students do not undertake the qualifications required for their chosen career path. It is clear that those students do not lack aspiration or even aptitude, but they have been let down by a lack of support.

Not only does that hold back pupils and their aspirations; it further exacerbates the social inequalities that we see right across the UK, as young people from more advantaged backgrounds often have better access to informal networks of career advice, which their less advantaged peers do not. Career advisers, and all of us, have a duty to ensure that every young person, regardless of their background, can progress to a positive destination and thrive in work and life. In partnership with employers, they deliver structured and impactful support. It is not just about writing a CV or finding a job; it is also about building confidence, enhancing social capital, and defining and enhancing essential workplace skills, and good careers advisers understand the difference between finding a job and starting a career.

Careers advice needs to inform educational choices, not just respond to them. We often speak in this House about the need to strengthen higher education and expand pathways for young people, including apprenticeships and vocational training, which we heard about in today's statement. However, we speak far less about the support

[Dr Scott Arthur]

our young people need to make informed career choices in the first place. As the Government have rightly stated, breaking down barriers to opportunity is not a challenge for tomorrow; it is a priority for today. I therefore welcome the £3 billion investment in skills and training, but we have to make sure that our young people can take advantage of that through good careers advice.

It is particularly important that we are talking about this issue today, as the UK is facing a skills shortage that it is estimated will cost the country £120 billion by 2030. At the same time, ONS data shows that 872,000 young people are out of work, education and training. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham for bringing this important debate to the House. His work highlights the urgent need to invest in proper training, education and support for young people. For their sake and for the future of our economy, I hope the Government continue to act on the issues raised.

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): We will now have a formal three-minute time limit.

2.11 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell.

In my constituency of Tiverton and Minehead, we have almost no sixth-form provision, with the exception of a small number of places at Petroc college in Tiverton and West Somerset college in Minehead. At the crucial juncture of 16 to 18, when most people will begin to look ahead at future career paths, my younger constituents are in the unenviable situation of lacking access to conventional careers guidance. Instead, they have to travel long distances, often entirely at the mercy of the quirks of an unreliable and insufficient public transport network. There are very high levels of socioeconomic deprivation in my constituency, particularly along the coastal belt of west Somerset, which is 324th out of the 324 areas of England on the social mobility index. There are very few options to attend post-16 education, and the transport system is underdeveloped and unreliable. That is hardly a recipe for improving social mobility.

The recently launched Ada in Porlock community initiative looks to propel young people with potential, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status, into careers in science, technology, engineering and maths. The initiative seeks to reimagine careers support by providing resource-rich guidance and a pathway into dynamic networks of opportunity and mentorship. At its recent launch, I was inspired by the project, which is named after Ada Lovelace, who created the first computing system in 1844, more than 100 years before Alan Turing. It will act as a stimulus for my many talented young constituents, especially young women. As their MP, my message to all my constituents is: think big, dream big and always aspire to be the best person you can be. They can rely on me to do my best to help to make it happen.

2.13 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for bringing this really important debate to the House.

Growing up in Salford, I saw how regional inequality limits opportunity. My journey to Parliament involved luck and being in the right place at the right time, but opportunity should never be a lottery. As the MP for Leigh and Atherton, I am proud to serve in a Government where 92% of the Cabinet is state educated, yet background still shapes outcomes. Too often, talent is overlooked because someone did not attend the right school or speak with the right accent. Professionals from working-class backgrounds still face a pay gap. That is not just unfair; it is a drag on our economy.

Careers education is vital, but we must look beyond the classroom. Leigh ranks in the top 1% for transport-related social exclusion. Poor connectivity limits access to jobs, education and services, trapping people in poverty.

Education alone is not enough. Systemic barriers such as financial constraints, discrimination and limited mobility continue to hold people back. Although 81% of employers value outreach, more must be done. Expanding free school meals for families on universal credit is a huge step forward, but a degree no longer guarantees success. Apprenticeships, internships and work experience are now essential. I served my time on an apprenticeship, which got me a fantastic career in marketing, so I cannot promote them enough—they are a vital part of social mobility. Initiatives such as the MBacc in Greater Manchester are helping to unlock local talent and boost productivity.

Improving social mobility could add £1.8 billion to the UK's business profits annually. Failing to act costs us £19 billion a year. Last week, I hosted the launch of the Social Mobility Alliance in Parliament, and one voice stood out: Salma from Sheffield, an Oxford student who spoke about the hidden financial barriers to university applications.

Opportunity must be built into the fabric of our society, not left to chance. If we want to unlock the full potential of our communities, we must tackle child poverty and ensure that every young person, regardless of background, can thrive.

2.16 pm

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) on securing the debate.

Social mobility is the backbone of this country, as the Leader of the Opposition knows from her short stint in a McDonald's one summer. Although Members on opposite sides of the House might disagree about how to facilitate social mobility, we all agree that every child should have the opportunity to realise their full potential.

Some children grow up knowing precisely what they want from life and precisely how to get it. Most children, however, grow up with some idea of their direction but little clue about what their ultimate destination could be or, more importantly, how to get there. Careers education provides two opportunities: to broaden children's horizons by providing career guidance and to allow children to experience their desired careers at first hand through work experience placements.

On the first point, a study by the Sutton Trust found that parents, friends and wider social networks are the main source of careers education for more than three quarters of young people, but a child from a working-class

family may have never met a barrister, an engineer or a scientist. They may not even know those professions exist, let alone understand the pathways to reach them. On the island, the assumption is that tourism is the only career; it is not. It is for those children that careers education is most crucial, but the unfortunate reality is that they are the least likely to have access to it.

Equipping schools to showcase the full range of possible careers to secondary school students will be pivotal. We should all welcome the 1,000 careers advisers that the Labour Government will recruit, as well as the additional £1.2 billion per year that the Government will invest in skills by 2028-29.

Isle of Wight West is home to many fantastic businesses that provide high-quality jobs for islanders, particularly in engineering, manufacturing and defence. My team and I work closely with a number of local employers, including BAE Systems, GKN Aerospace, Isle of Wight Tomatoes and Vestas. I wholeheartedly welcome the contributions of large companies to the island. However, it is also true that 99.8% of businesses on the Isle of Wight are classed as small and medium-sized enterprises. Research by the Edge Foundation shows that SMEs are typically far more hesitant to offer work experiences, not due to a lack of willingness but due to limited time and resources, which prevents them from tackling the logistics of arranging work experience placements.

The Edge Foundation recognises the crucial role that SME brokerages play. I want to put on record some of the excellent work that Isle of Wight organisations are doing, particularly the Solent Careers Hub, the Isle of Wight Youth Trust and Island Careers Partnership, which are working in concert with careers advisers and businesses across the island. Those organisations are absolutely crucial to opening doors to SMEs. I am pleased to say that a youth partnership event will be taking place in Newport on 1 July. It will be an important chance to get Isle of Wight students and SMEs in the same room.

A working-class child from the Isle of Wight may never have met a scientist, but they could go on to become a great one. It is our responsibility to ensure that every child has that opportunity.

2.19 pm

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for securing this important debate. I associate myself with many of the comments made by other hon. Members.

Given the time limit, I will focus my remarks on the creative industries. The creative industries will be highlighted in the Government's industrial strategy, which will be coming forward soon, and they have huge potential—particularly for my constituents in north Wales. We have a brand-new creative industries hub, which has been launched by Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, and new film studios on Ynys Môn. The new series of “Game of Thrones” is being filmed nearby. There are huge opportunities, but many children and young people do not know that those opportunities exist, as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) just said. If they do not know that these jobs exist, they will never be inspired to go for them.

Let me put this in context. I grew up in north Wales, but as an adult I went behind the scenes of Granada Studios in Manchester, and saw for the first time the variety of jobs there, such as storytellers or set designers—a huge number of jobs that I had never thought existed. I went behind the scenes of ITN News and saw the same thing. There was a group of children from Manchester there. I thought, “That’s fantastic,” but there are so many children growing up in rural areas, far away from cities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham said; if they do not have parents, peers or people around them working in these kinds of jobs, they will not know they exist. My hon. Friend made some good points about that.

I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we need far more ambition. I went to meet advisers at Llandudno jobcentre recently. They were talking about the youth guarantee, which we already have in Wales—that is fantastic—but they were saying that too many 16-year-olds arrive with no idea of what they want to do after they leave school, because they are leaving those decisions too late. We need to start talking to children and young people far earlier and inspiring them about the jobs of the future. Whether in the creative industries, advanced manufacturing or cyber-security, children and young people need to know that jobs and opportunities exist. That should be a shared ambition for us all in this place. We must do whatever we can to drive that agenda forward.

2.22 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for securing this vital debate.

I want to stress how important it is for disabled young people that we have careers education that supports social mobility. Nearly half of families with a disabled child are living in poverty, and just this week we learned that the attainment gap for pupils from poorer backgrounds in Scotland is still widening. It is frustrating that the Scottish Government have not done more to address that. In Scotland, we know what works in terms of support for young people to make the often challenging transition from school to work or continuing education.

Before I was elected to this place, I had the privilege of working for the charity Enable, which runs a programme called Stepping Up. The programme is delivered in 75 schools in Scotland, across 15 local authorities, to more than 1,000 young people every year. It builds confidence, life skills and employability through real-world experiences and personalised coaching. It ensures that young people are equipped not only to reach positive destinations but to sustain them. That leads to lasting change and improved educational and employment outcomes. Over the course of its work, Stepping Up has supported more than 5,000 young people, 98% of whom go to positive destination—either a job, a modern apprenticeship, training or college. Ensuring that all our young people can be supported to have confidence in themselves will be vital if we are to improve social mobility in this country.

In Lochgelly, in my constituency, one in three children lives in poverty. Careers education is vital to their life chances. The developing the young workforce programme at Lochgelly high school is making that difference.

[Richard Baker]

Led by the co-ordinator of the programme, Pauline Abbie, it provides 100 work experience placements to pupils every year. It gives pupils a fantastic insight into the world of work in a whole range of industries, from hospitality to engineering, as well as into opportunities in education.

The programme at Lochgelly high school has more than 50 DYW partners, including Shell, Purvis Group, Fife Fabrications and Fife college. Not only do pupils benefit, but employers do, by connecting with their next generation of workers and supporting our local community. The developing the young workforce programme at Lochgelly high school proves that a stronger community partnership between local businesses and our young people benefits the whole community.

Over the past two decades we have not made nearly enough progress on social mobility, certainly not in Scotland, but given the investment this Government are making in education and the proven success of programmes such as Stepping Up and Developing the Young Workforce, we can be confident of far greater success for all our young people in the future, and they can have confidence in themselves.

2.25 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for securing this important debate. I have seen at first hand the decimation of good careers, education, work experience and guidance in our schools. The link between strong careers, education and social mobility is undeniable. The latest Social Mobility Commission report shows that Wolverhampton North East has real potential, with strong prospects, growing industries and young people determined to succeed despite the odds.

But it is on the fourth factor, conditions of childhood, where Wolverhampton falls into the red zone. This measure looks at child poverty, parental education and occupation, all of which shape a child's life chances. The picture in Wolverhampton and Willenhall is stark. Around 40% of children are growing up in poverty, which is one of the highest rates in the west midlands. Fewer than a quarter of pupils on free school meals achieve a strong pass in both English and maths at GCSE. Many parents are working in insecure or low-paid jobs, with little access to training or upskilling. Those realities too often dictate how children in Wolverhampton and Willenhall grow up and, crucially, what they believe is possible for themselves. That is why good careers education is so vital.

I have seen the work experience requests from students who grow up not knowing a lawyer, engineer or scientist. Their aspirations are often limited not by their talent, but by exposure. I have worked with students who have lacked connections and the confidence and opportunity to try something new. Good careers education shows young people what is actually out there, tailored to the local labour market and what they are capable of. We need a careers system that starts early, in primary schools through to post 16 and beyond, embedded in the curriculum, delivered by trained professionals and connected to local sectors, whether that is advanced manufacturing, green technology, digital, defence or aerospace.

In Wolverhampton and Willenhall we have fantastic schools, colleges and employers and an ambitious university, but too often the bridge between them is missing, so a dedicated careers adviser in every school should be that bridge. If we are serious about social mobility, careers education has got to be a priority in the curriculum and assessment review—not an afterthought, but a vital tool to raise aspirations, widen horizons and open doors.

2.28 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): For too many people, the belief that intelligence, hard work and perseverance will be rewarded no longer holds true. The ladder of opportunity that once allowed previous generations to climb to a better future is now harder to reach and sometimes even harder to ascend. This is not just a personal frustration; it is a societal warning sign. When talented, hardworking individuals feel stuck, and when they see that no matter what they do they will not achieve what their parents did, we are not only wasting potential; we are eroding trust in our economic system.

Social mobility must not be viewed as a bonus only applicable to the good times. It is the foundation of a fair and functioning society. Without it, resentment grows, division deepens, and our social fabric begins to fray. First and foremost, we must recognise the pivotal role that our education system, our schools and our teachers play. Education remains the single most powerful engine of mobility. Great teachers do not just pass on knowledge; they ignite ambition, unlock potential and open doors that otherwise remain shut. But teachers cannot do this alone. They need investment, support and the resources to reach every child, not just the ones already on a path to success.

Part of that support must include a renewed focus on careers education. For too many people, particularly those from lower-income households, the guidance that they need to navigate future pathways is patchy at best and absent at worst. Careers education bridges the gap between parental knowledge and wider opportunity, and it is often the only structured support for those who lack the social capital to network their way into the world of work. Beyond the school gates, as I have discussed before, our youth services must be at the heart of the solution.

Youth workers, clubs and community programmes are often the safety net, and sometimes the springboard, for young people who need extra support. They provide mentoring, build confidence, offer practical life skills and connect young people to opportunities they might not otherwise see. When I look at youth services across my constituency, from local authority-funded provision to sports and community clubs, I see a patchwork of services funded from a variety of pots of money. I call on the SNP Scottish Government, if they are serious about equity and opportunity, to fund properly our local councils and commit to long-term support for youth services.

At a national level, I put on the record my appreciation for the work done by the Co-op and Demos for their "The Opportunity Effect" paper. There is clearly a need for better workplace practices to help address the lack of social mobility within our workplaces today, and the paper provides a number of solutions that I hope will receive Government attention. Careers education must be at the very heart of any strategy to restore social

mobility in this country. It is the bridge between potential and opportunity; between what young people dream of becoming and the pathways that can make those dreams come true. Getting careers education right is key to success. Careers education is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

2.31 pm

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for securing the debate. The topic of the debate is very close to my heart. I went straight from school, aged 15, to working in a factory. There was never any suggestion that I could do something different; it was just, "Go out and get a job." There was no encouragement to look further afield, and there were no resources to find and develop an interest in an alternative career path or vocation. As a 15-year-old girl, I would have benefited so much from careers education in my school.

At the age of 40, I went back to school, so to speak, taking a six-month course in IT at John Wheatley College in Glasgow. Not only did that transform my CV and career opportunities, but it transformed my confidence. I discovered that it was not too late to try something new. In that sense, it was the most important piece of career education I ever received. I ended up waiting 25 years until I could consider another career option, to start a different life with a brighter future. That underlines the importance of careers education at an early age to change lives for the better. It also shows that high-quality careers education can be instrumental in transforming opportunities at every stage of life.

Responsibility for careers education in schools and colleges in Glasgow North East falls to the Scottish Government, so I will keep my remarks brief, but one area where we can see clear failure in careers education in Scotland is the housing sector. Data from the Chartered Institute of Building shows that three quarters of Scottish children have a positive view of a career in construction, but we are not seeing that translate into more of our young people beginning careers in bricklaying, carpentry, plumbing or any of the associated trades in the building industry.

That points to a clear issue at the careers education stage, where the enthusiasm and interests of our young people in this and many other sectors are not being adequately harnessed. They are well-paying jobs offering children a route out of poverty, which should be signposted through good careers advice. The failure is part of a much wider and very concerning decline in the quality of schooling in Scotland. Our schools are the driver of social mobility, and yet last year, nearly 24,000 young people—42% of pupils—left school without a single higher or equivalent. That shameful failure in our schools is holding back Scotland and our young people, especially in my constituency.

2.34 pm

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. Every young person deserves the opportunity to thrive, explore their talents, pursue their ambitions and succeed on their own terms. Too often, however, a child's future is shaped more by their postcode than by their potential.

Young people in every community need to see the full range of what is possible. For many, that means opening up direct conversations with local employers; whether those careers are in tourism, renewable energy or the creative industries, we need to connect students with real-world routes into them. That is powerful, as it not only grows our future workforce, but broadens young people's horizons and ideas about what success looks like close to home.

We should also recognise the transformative power of role models. When a young person sees someone from their own community succeed in law, engineering or the arts, it sends a powerful message: "Your ambitions are valid and achievable." One brilliant example is the extraordinary Jack Bailey, a Rhyl lad through and through. He is a shining example of what can be achieved with talent, determination and the right support.

Jack is now an associate at a global law firm, having graduated from Cambridge University with a first-class degree in law. His journey began at Rhyl high school and Prestatyn sixth form, where dedicated teachers and the support of the Seren Network helped him to realise his potential. Seren is a Welsh Government programme that supports more able and talented learners in state schools and colleges to reach top universities and careers, helping to ensure that academic ability leads to real opportunity.

Jack's story is not just about his success; he now champions social mobility and visits local schools, including Rhyl high. He is living proof that background should never limit ambition, and he is using his voice to tell others. We need more Jacks—more stories of local success and resilience that are shared openly to raise aspirations and broaden horizons. By connecting young people with opportunities, and sharing real stories like Jack's, we can show that success is possible for everyone, no matter where they are from. Let us keep building pathways so that every young person has the chance to turn their talents into real opportunities and a bright future.

2.36 pm

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for securing this important debate. I want to touch on a couple of points that hon. Members have already eloquently made.

First, on careers education for those with special educational needs and disabilities, the SEND system in Derbyshire is failing many of our young people. Many of my constituents are struggling to get their children adequately cared for in school or to secure them a place in school at all. I would like to highlight Landmarks specialist college in Eckington, which does a fantastic job in weaving careers education throughout the general education it provides, and sees the core of its mission as preparing its young people to enter the world of work and achieve their full potential.

In careers education, as well as highlighting the many fantastic careers that young people can go on to do, it is important to have an industry approach to careers and advise young people of the breadth of careers available within a specific industry, if that is what excites them. Many young people tell me that they are excited about

[*Louise Jones*]

becoming a YouTube influencer, or something related, and there are many fantastic careers in the industry, such as being a video or sound technician, that they might get just as much out of.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) spoke eloquently about the social mobility opportunities available later in life. That reminded me of my mother, who could not go to university until she was my age, and what a difference it made to her life.

I have often seen that at first hand when people leave the military. Many people serve in the military for only a few short years before they go on to another career. It is important to say to young people aged between 12 and 18 that the decisions they make now will not lock them in for the rest of their lives. Many of the opportunities that are available—such as university and further education—will be there for them in their 20s, 30s, 40s and even beyond. One of the people I served with started her A-levels in her early 30s and is now a fully qualified doctor. It is never too late to change your future.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some assurances when it comes to careers education. Although we should tell young people about the opportunities, jobs and so on that could be out there, we should also tell them to focus on the industries that they are interested in. Although the decisions they are making have a large impact, they should not forget that they will have plenty of time throughout their adult lives to take advantage of other opportunities.

2.39 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) on securing this important debate.

There is general consensus in the Chamber that every young person, no matter their background or needs, should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. They should be able to get the information and advice that they need to pursue a variety of career options for the many jobs and careers of the future. The options are growing by the day, and many of us do not even know about them yet. We know, however, that 12.5% of all 16 to 24-year-olds are not in employment, education or training, and that 37% of gen Z feel they will be financially worse off by the time they reach their parents' age—a sobering statistic.

We know, as we have heard clearly today, that many people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds cannot rely on the parental networks, role models, advice and guidance that so many of us—including many of my constituents—are able to benefit from. It is important for the Government and us, as parliamentarians and policymakers, to find ways of trying to even out those inequalities. That is challenging, but there are steps we can take to address them.

As things stand, careers information, guidance and advice often comes too late in a young person's academic career, and when it does, it can be quite generic and inconsistent. It is not even a compulsory element of all schools' curricula. When it comes to thinking about higher education post school, students from more affluent

backgrounds are 1.4 times more likely to think about higher education at primary school, say, than their disadvantaged peers. UCAS notes:

“Disadvantaged students are more likely to consider higher education later, which can limit their choices, especially for more selective subjects and higher tariff providers.”

The problem is not limited to just those who want to go to university. The Social Market Foundation reported in 2022 that support for students pursuing vocational options was weaker than for those pursuing academic options, with university often presented as the “default option”. One child told SMF that it was not until they got to year 12 that they realised there were other options besides university, with another saying that, “Help isn't given to you,” if people do not want to go to university. It is high time that we level the playing field and put forward the full range of options—whether that is apprenticeships or other vocational training—on a par with going to university. How can we excite our children and young people about the wide variety of futures that could lie before them if they do not feel they have the options?

When high-quality and effective careers guidance is offered, the benefits to young people are immediately tangible. Students in schools that meet all eight Gatsby benchmarks for careers guidance are 8% less likely to not be in education, employment or training, and that figure increases to 20% for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We know that schools and organisations that engage with local employers and businesses also score well on the Gatsby benchmarks.

That is where I would like to pay tribute to the south London careers hub, which works across five boroughs of south London, including my own. It works with 80 business volunteers and has provided meaningful experience in the world of work for students in 95 schools across those five boroughs. It has held themed events focused on certain sectors of the economy, such as the green economy. I opened an event for the hub in my constituency a couple of years ago that focused on entrepreneurship and showed young people how they could create their own work and business opportunities in the future. Critically—to speak to some of the points already made—it also focuses on SEND provision, because we often overlook those with particular needs.

At the other end of the country, I visited South Durham university technical college a couple of years ago. UTCs are different from mainstream schools and colleges because they focus on vocational skills. I was blown away by the partnership that that UTC—I know this is also true for other UTCs across the country—has developed with local major employers to provide meaningful experiences for the young people it is working with. For example, its careers guidance people accompany young people to meetings and events with employers. Clearly, schools do not have the capacity and resources to do that kind of intensive careers guidance, but there is a lot for mainstream schools to learn from UTCs.

I have several asks of the Minister. As the Government are looking at the curriculum and assessment review, will they ensure that high-quality, age-appropriate careers education, starting from primary school, is part of the curriculum? Will they look at including financial literacy, as recommended by the Education Committee?

The hon. Member for Wrexham talked about soft skills; I would not call such skills—communication, teamwork and so on—soft; they are life skills that are critical to success in the world of work. They are key to securing a job, being able to navigate interviews and networking, and then holding down a job in the workplace.

Have the Government considered expanding the National Careers Service to ensure more face-to-face time for careers guidance for adults, particularly now that we know that so many people will be changing careers and going into new and emerging sectors of the economy? What plans do the Government have to strengthen the professional careers guidance workforce, as well as to ensure that our main teacher workforce is recruited from a diverse range of backgrounds, to share those experiences with children and young people?

I will end with the elephant in the room: none of this will be possible until we fix school funding. I know from talking to headteachers across the country, including those in my constituency just yesterday, that school budgets are absolutely at breaking point. With neither the rise in employers' national insurance nor the teachers' pay rise being fully reimbursed, they are having to make all sorts of cuts, and some of them are planning teacher redundancies. Careers education will be one of the first areas that they look to cut, because they do not want to compromise on teaching the core subjects that they have to get children through.

I therefore ask the Minister, when she responds, to address some of those questions. How will she fund schools so that they can provide the careers education and guidance that our children absolutely need and deserve?

2.47 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for securing this debate, and all Members for their contributions. I am, of course, very pleased to respond to today's important debate on behalf of the Opposition.

It is an undeniable truth that while talent is spread evenly across the UK, opportunity is not. We in the Conservative party take real pride in our record on expanding opportunity and social mobility to ensure that every young person, regardless of their background, no matter where they are from, has the chance to achieve their full potential and build the best possible career for themselves. More than 5.8 million apprenticeships across 700 occupations, from level 2 to degree level and backed by £2.4 billion by 2024-25, were started under successive Conservative Governments, giving young people the chance to gain real-world experience, to earn while they learn and to develop the skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

We are equally proud of our achievement in the schools system. The Conservatives drove up school performance across the board, with 90% of schools rated good or outstanding at the end of our time in office, up from 68% under Labour. Under the Conservatives, England became one of the top-performing countries for education in the western world. It was named "best in the west" for reading, and recently for maths, and it is in the top five globally for science. This transformation did not happen by accident; it happened because the Conservative party relentlessly focused on standards, rigour and ensuring excellence to help drive opportunity for all.

We can contrast that with other places in the UK—for example, Scotland. Nowhere is the effect of a Government allowing ideology rather than evidence to drive education policy more obvious than in Scotland. After almost two decades of the SNP being in power, its failure to close—indeed, its unrivalled ability to increase—the attainment gap in our schools is a record that should shame the SNP.

Every day, the impact of this failure is being borne out in the life chances of children and young people across Scotland. The attainment gap between the poorest and wealthiest school leavers is at a five-year high. Young people from the most deprived areas in Scotland are over three times less likely to enter work or further education compared with those in the least deprived areas. Across science, reading and maths, there is an average performance gap of over 90% between the top and bottom socioeconomic classes, and pupils from the poorest areas are 23% less likely to leave school with at least one national 5, increasing to 38% for higher.

Scotland's schools were once rated among the best in the world. We are now ranked 14th in Europe for reading, 30th for maths and 32nd for science. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said:

"something, somewhere is going wrong in Scottish education."

That "something" and "somewhere" can be found in the ideology of consecutive SNP Governments at Holyrood.

I return to the Conservatives' record at Westminster. We encouraged every secondary school to have a trained careers leader, to make the most of available connections and to co-ordinate and integrate the careers programme throughout schools. We launched the new careers programme, offering young people strengthened careers advice that would see all year 8 to 13 pupils have at least six opportunities to meet a range of providers of technical education, giving pupils an understanding of the full range of opportunities available to them, including apprenticeships, T-levels and higher technical qualifications—not just the traditional academic routes.

If social mobility is to continue to improve, there must be no drift on the education and skills agenda under the current Labour Government. However, we have already seen the Government cut the minimum duration of apprenticeships from 12 to eight months. They have also ended the requirement for adult apprentices to complete English and maths functional skills. There is a proposal to divert half of the apprenticeship levy into other non-apprenticeship schemes—a change that will halve the number of quality apprenticeships available to young people—and level 7 apprenticeships are to be scrapped, which has been described as a direct attack on social mobility.

We should also be clear that careers education and facilitation of social mobility are not delivered in a vacuum; they depend on stable staffing, adequate funding and overall stability in the education sector. Changes to the national pay and curriculum rules in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill risk undermining the very autonomy that has driven improvement in some of the most disadvantaged communities. The tax on independent schools is projected to push up to 90,000 pupils into the state system, swelling class sizes and putting even more pressure on local schools already struggling to balance the books. The rise in employer national insurance contributions has hit schools and colleges hard.

[*Harriet Cross*]

When she winds up today, I hope that the Minister will outline how schools can continue to provide meaningful careers guidance and prioritise maximising social mobility for their students when they are struggling to pay their staff overheads and manage rising class sizes. If we are serious about social mobility, as I believe all hon. Members present are, then careers education cannot be an afterthought. It must be embedded in the curriculum design, teacher training, local employer partnership and the national policy. The Conservative party will continue to champion opportunity and to support high standards, academic excellence and rigorous technical education. We will always stand up for the right of every young person to choose their path, find their passion and make the most of their potential.

2.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): It is a real pleasure to speak this afternoon, Ms Lewell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) on securing this important debate. I acknowledge all the remarkable contributions from hon. Members across the Chamber. My hon. Friend is clearly very driven and knowledgeable about this area. I thank him for sharing the success of Rofft school in Wrexham and the transformational testimonies of Vicki's progress with her art and Sophie's with her maths. It was so lovely to hear about Sophie going on her first holiday as well.

With regard to the broader professional skills framework, the Government agree on the importance of soft skills, which the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) referred to as life skills. Officials recently met with Skills Builder to discuss that framework. I make it known to my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham that we recommend its use in our recently updated statutory careers guidance for schools.

I also acknowledge other Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) spoke about the need for young people to be able to make informed career choices. They need to be given the right advice to prevent confusion. I acknowledge the contribution from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour). I absolutely agree that children and young people need to think big, dream big and aspire to be the best they can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) was clear that the career progress of children and young people should not be a lottery, and that we need to make sure that we continue to combat child poverty. That is extremely significant. I acknowledge the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) about the Government's work on 1,000 career advisers. I appreciate his contribution. My hon. Friend the Member for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) spoke passionately about the creative industries, and the need for young people to know what jobs are available and for that information to be made known to them. That is extremely important. They need to know what exists, from a young age.

Hon. Members spoke about many topics, including having the chance to go on to a career as an older person, not just as a younger person. For some, life begins at 40 or beyond. We must not reduce the opportunities for

children and young people, or for adults. Many stories have been shared today, including the story of Jack Bailey. I thank hon. Members for all those contributions. I absolutely agree that we need to support young people in the choices that they make. The hon. Member for Twickenham spoke about a range of learning, training and skills that should be on a par with universities. There is no disagreement from us on that. She also spoke about the value of career hubs—again, I absolutely agree.

There was much criticism of the Scottish National party and its many failures. That came across very clearly. So much needs to be done there, and we will hold them to account every step of the way, as do Members across this Chamber. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross), also spoke about SNP failings, but seemed to ignore her own party's failings when in government.

Young people need the right opportunities and the right information and guidance to set them on the path of success. That is crucial if we are to meet the skills needs of the future and deliver on the Government's five missions. We will do better than the last Government. Almost one in eight young people across the United Kingdom is not in education, training or work. That limits our productivity and growth. More than half a million vacancies are due to skills shortages. We can all agree that those are very real challenges and there is an urgent need to take action.

We are investing £15.8 billion in the financial year 2025-26 in apprenticeships, further education and higher education. We are serious about the changes that are needed. We are developing a comprehensive strategy for post-16 education and skills to break down barriers to opportunity and to support the development of a skilled workforce in all areas of England. A skills system fit for the future will give young people the training and skills to gain a sense of success and purpose and to build confidence and the opportunity to pursue a rewarding career.

Too often, young people from deprived backgrounds and communities lack the information, connections and encouragement to look beyond their current landscapes; we have heard that from many Members this afternoon. Careers education is a great enabler, empowering young people to explore their potential and to navigate their future with confidence. Teachers should and must make the classroom an important place of career exploration, and I absolutely agree with hon. Members that that must start early. We should encourage aspiration among primary-age children by opening their eyes to a wide range of jobs and careers and speaking to them about opportunities, jobs, careers and what they could go on to do. We should tell them that they can go on to be sustained in a career they enjoy.

For secondary pupils, through career learning in curriculum subjects, teachers can help to connect and apply knowledge and skills to real-world contexts. Careers education can illuminate career pathways through conversations with employers, training providers and careers advisers. The foundations of the careers system and improving outcomes for young people are in place. By using the Gatsby benchmarks of good career guidance, dedicated careers leaders are developing careers programmes for young people against a set of world-class standards, overseen by the Careers and Enterprise Company—a national network of 44 career hubs, delivering career support to 95% of secondary schools and colleges.

The hubs are partnerships with strategic and local authorities that connect careers provision to the needs of local economies and leverage support from thousands of employers. They are targeting the right young people to promote social mobility in every region. For example, the Cumbria careers hub worked with the local hospitality industry and 10 schools, targeting students with low social mobility. The students visited a local college, where top Cumbrian chefs cooked a three-course lunch while explaining food presentation, food service and food provenance. The careers hub funded all the transport costs.

Careers hub membership leads to stronger career provision, as those schools and colleges meet an average of 5.8 out of the eight Gatsby benchmarks. It leads to more understanding of technical routes: 80% of young people are likely to report awareness of an apprenticeship by year 11, almost on par with A-levels. It leads to increased employer engagement: learners in 64% of schools have 10 or more encounters with businesses. Only yesterday, I met a young person in the Department undertaking an apprenticeship in business management. She spoke excitedly, and so well and confidently, about her experience. We need to ensure more of our young people have such experiences all around our country.

There is also well developed evidence linking good career guidance to reduced levels of young people not in education, employment or training. Young people in schools and colleges with the highest-quality careers provision are 8% less likely to become NEET. That effect is magnified in the most disadvantaged schools, where the highest-quality careers provision is associated with a 20% reduction in NEET rates. But there is more to do to ensure that young people from all backgrounds can realise those benefits. The data shows a gap in career readiness ranging from 2% to 5% between the most and least economically disadvantaged young people. Disadvantaged people are less confident in talking about their skills when applying for courses or jobs. Only 25% of schools and colleges fully achieve all eight Gatsby benchmarks, which represent the highest-quality careers provision.

We want to accelerate progress, close gaps and better support young people to raise aspiration and meet the country's skills needs. That is why we are committed to improving careers advice in schools and colleges across England. We have raised the bar of our expectations for careers guidance for young people by publishing updated statutory guidance for schools and colleges, which adopts the updated Gatsby benchmarks framework with evidence-based improvements that will lead to even better outcomes for young people. That includes opening up opportunities to young people with SEND. There are many examples of that. York and North Yorkshire careers hub is working with Forest Moor school, a SEND school in a rural area, to support year 11 pupils to access experiences of trade, such as bricklaying, plastering and decorating.

I recognise that time is moving on. Much more could be said about what the Government are doing in this area. Too many young people are missing out on the work experience that they need. We will continue to develop skills and improve work readiness to ensure that young people are supported. That includes virtual workplace experiences for more than 1,000 schools in rural and coastal areas, providing access to wider national networks of employers outside their local community, including with key employers such as Airbus and Siemens.

The need for high-quality careers education is not confined to the young. The "Get Britain Working" White Paper set us on the path to creating an inclusive labour market in which everybody can participate and progress in work. Careers and employability support are at the heart of that. To help bridge the gap for those who might otherwise struggle to find employment, a new youth guarantee will ensure that 18 to 21-year-olds in England can get support to find training, an apprenticeship or work. We are also providing support for adults who want to work, increase their earnings, change their career or even retrain.

In England, the National Careers Service and Jobcentre Plus will be brought together as a new jobs and careers service. That will create greater awareness of opportunities, and a focus on skills and careers, as well as better join-up between employability, support and career provision.

I am enormously grateful for the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham for this agenda, and for all hon. Members' contributions, which have shone a light on the vital role of careers education in tackling disadvantage. I have set out some of what we are doing to ensure that people from all backgrounds are supported in finding rewarding and fulfilling careers.

3.5 pm

Andrew Ranger: I thank the Minister, the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for their remarks—they are much appreciated. I thank all hon. Members who took part in the debate. It was great to hear their insightful and valuable contributions. They spoke about the experiences and initiatives in their constituencies, which are vital to this debate.

I will keep my remarks short. I look forward to continuing to work with the Government and other hon. Members to take this important subject forward across the House and beyond. It is about the future of this country, and it is vital.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role of careers education in improving social mobility.

3.6 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 19 June 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Capture Redress

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): I am today delivering on the Government's commitment to provide an update on the form, scope and eligibility criteria of the redress scheme for postmasters negatively affected by the Capture software.

This follows the Government accepting the findings of the independent investigation by Kroll Associates, which concluded that there was a reasonable likelihood that Capture could have created financial shortfalls for postmasters.

Our approach to redress

Over the past months, we have been working with stakeholders, including postmasters, the Horizon Compensation Advisory Board, the National Federation of SubPostmasters, and others to develop a fair and sound approach to redress. In doing so, we have drawn on lessons from other Government schemes to ensure that this one delivers timely, accessible support, recognising both financial losses and wider personal impact.

Unlike the Horizon schemes, Capture presents a different set of challenges due to time elapsed and a lack of documentation that still exists. To accommodate this, the scheme is being designed to provide a practical and fair way to recognise harm, even where records are limited.

The scheme has two clear stages to make the process as simple as possible: first, an eligibility review to confirm who can access redress; and secondly, a panel review to ensure that each claim is independently assessed.

Eligibility Review

To be eligible for redress, claimants must demonstrate that they:

- were a postmaster between 1992 and 2000;
- used the Capture system in their branch; and
- suffered a financial shortfall related to a Capture software error.

Eligibility will be determined based on the claimant's statement and available supporting documents. We will also work with the Post Office to source any additional information where it exists. The scheme will also accept applications from relatives of deceased postmasters or those who need additional support.

All claims will undergo an initial eligibility review by trained caseworkers. In recognition of the time many postmasters have already spent waiting for resolution, those deemed eligible will promptly receive a preliminary payment. This ensures early acknowledgement of loss, ahead of a further assessment by an independent panel.

Independent panel and appeals

The panel will take a holistic view of each claim, including assessing the credibility and strength of evidence provided.

Claims will be assessed on the balance of probabilities, using a guided scoring and banding model that reflects both financial and non-financial loss. This allows consistency in awards, while remaining flexible and fair—an approach informed by other Government schemes, such as the infected blood compensation scheme.

The panel will recommend an appropriate payment for each eligible claimant. Claimants will also have the right to appeal the panel's recommendation in certain circumstances, in line with similar redress schemes.

To ensure impartiality, the panel will operate entirely independently of Government and will be composed of experts across relevant fields.

Separate consideration for convicted individuals

This scheme is specifically for those without a criminal conviction related to Capture. For those who may have criminal convictions related to Capture, the appropriate route is through the Criminal Cases Review Commission or its Scottish equivalent. The Government remain committed to supporting the CCRC in its ongoing investigations. If any convictions related to Capture are identified and overturned, we are committed to ensuring that appropriate redress is provided for those affected.

Next Steps

As this approach departs from the structure of existing Horizon redress schemes, we want to ensure it is fair, proportionate and accessible. To support this, we will launch with a phased roll-out for an initial 150 claimants. Lessons from this first phase will inform any refinements needed ahead of wider roll-out.

We expect the scheme to open for applications in autumn 2025. Over the coming months, we will finalise guidance and publish further details on applying. We urge those who believe they are eligible to begin searching for evidence that they may hold and to prepare their case for once applications open.

We remain committed to delivering swift and fair redress—recognising the enduring hardship, and the need for a trusted, transparent process ensuring that those affected by the Capture system receive what they deserve

[HCWS713]

TREASURY

UK Infrastructure: a 10-year Strategy

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): The Government have today laid the "UK Infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy" [CP 1344] which restores confidence and drives economic growth by funding at least £725 billion for infrastructure over the next decade and transforming how infrastructure projects are planned and delivered.

Better infrastructure has a vital role to play in delivery of all of the Government's missions, creating and connecting people to good jobs, supporting new housing and neighbourhoods, ensuring people can depend on vital public services and providing resilience in response to a changing world.

Delivering this requires a new approach. Infrastructure investment has been too erratic and too low in the UK, hampering productivity and wages and making delivery slow and costly. Across policy and delivery, there has been insufficient co-ordination, across sectors and between Government and industry.

In the 10-year strategy, the Government are doing things differently to fix the failures of the past, prioritising long-term outcomes over short-term announcements, providing the certainty and stability needed to attract investment, boosting British supply chains and jobs, and taking a joined-up view to improve planning and delivery across all types of infrastructure

[HCWS717]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Publication of Environmental Guidance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Today the Government are publishing new guidance relating to offshore environmental impact assessments. The guidance sets a world-leading example by ensuring the full effects of fossil fuel extraction on the environment are recognised in consenting decisions. The ruling means that North sea developers must, for the first time, consider the impact of burning the extracted oil and gas in their environmental impact assessments.

The Government have acted decisively to respond to the independent Supreme Court, which ruled before this Government took office that the global environmental effects of burning oil and gas are an inevitable consequence of extraction projects. Offshore developers will, from now, be able to submit their applications for consent to develop already licensed fields, a process which has been on pause since the Supreme Court ruled in the Finch case.

The reopening of the consenting regime brings greater clarity for Britain's oil and gas sector, as the Government continue their work with the industry to build a clean energy future for the North sea. It comes as last week's spending review confirmed £9.1 billion for carbon capture and storage projects, marking a major step forward in the Government's mission to make the UK a clean energy superpower that will drive economic growth, create jobs and deliver the Government's plan for change.

We have moved as quickly as possible to finalise this guidance, while taking the time necessary to carefully account for the substantial amount of feedback we received in consultation with a range of stakeholders, including industry, NGOs, academia and members of the public.

The new guidance is aimed at applications for projects in North sea oil and gas fields that are already licensed. As with the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime, Ministers will, on the advice of officials, consider the significance of a project's environmental impact while taking into account and balancing relevant factors on a case-by-case basis, such as the potential economic impact and other implications of the project. Developers should therefore consider their projects in the context of the Government's overarching objectives, including the objectives for the North sea's energy future, which were set out in the consultation on building the North sea's energy future.

The North Sea Transition Authority's independent consenting role is unchanged by the publication of this guidance. It will continue to evaluate consent applications on their individual merits in accordance with relevant

regulatory requirements. Licensing is similarly unaffected by the publication of this guidance. The Government have consulted separately on their commitment not to issue new licences to explore new fields as part of their consultation on the North sea's energy future. A Government response to that consultation will be issued later this year.

This Government are determined to secure a prosperous future for the North sea and we are working in lockstep with industry to unleash private investment, helping to create thousands of jobs in clean energy to boost our energy independence as part of a phased and responsible transition.

[HCWS719]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Statutory Learning Disability and Autism Training

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Today I am pleased to lay in Parliament the Oliver McGowan draft code of practice on statutory learning disability and autism training. The launch of this code represents a significant moment in the journey towards improving the care and treatment of people with a learning disability and autistic people. With its clear focus on ensuring that people receive tailored and compassionate support, it is especially fitting to be launching this code after recently celebrating World Autism Awareness Day in April and during Learning Disability Week, which this year is focusing on ensuring that people are seen, heard and valued. An easy-read version of the code is also available.

The purpose of the code is to ensure that service providers registered with the Care Quality Commission have the necessary guidance to meet the legal requirement introduced in the Health and Care Act 2022. The effect of the requirement is that, from 1 July 2022, CQC-registered providers are required to ensure that their staff receive training on learning disability and autism, appropriate to their role. To aid those who need to comply with the training requirement, the Secretary of State is obliged by the 2022 Act to issue a code of practice. Therefore, this code sets out the standards that training needs to meet to comply with the legislation and guidance on what providers need to do to meet those standards.

As set out in the code, the Oliver McGowan mandatory training on learning disability and autism is the Government's preferred and recommended training package to support CQC-registered providers to meet the new requirement. The training is named after Oliver McGowan, a young autistic teenager with a mild learning disability, who very sadly died after having a severe reaction to medication given to him against his and his family's strong wishes. Oliver's parents, Paula and Tom McGowan, have tirelessly campaigned for better training for health and care staff to improve understanding of the needs of people with a learning disability or autistic people. The training has been trialled with over 8,000 participants and independently evaluated to ensure that the final package is robust and high quality. A long-term, independent evaluation on its delivery and impact is also now under way.

People with a learning disability and autistic people experience disparities in the quality of care they receive. Research indicates that a lack of understanding and knowledge of learning disability and autism likely contributes to this. This government have set out three big shifts needed to make our health service fit for the future, including shifting from treatment to prevention and from hospitals to communities. Ensuring that health and care staff have the right knowledge and skills to provide informed care for people with a learning disability and autistic people will help to meet these goals and improve health outcomes.

The legislative requirement and the code must be the catalyst for positive cultural change. With them we can help to deliver care and support that is tailored to the person, making sure that staff have the right attitudes, skills and behaviours to support people with a learning disability and autistic people safely, confidently and respectfully.

[HCWS715]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Deprivation of Citizenship Orders (Effect during Appeal) Bill

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The Government have today introduced the Deprivation of Citizenship Orders (Effect during Appeal) Bill to the House of Commons.

Removing someone's British citizenship—also known as deprivation of citizenship—is a vital tool that is used to preserve the UK's national security. It is used against those who obtained citizenship by fraud and against the most dangerous people, such as terrorists, extremists, and serious organised criminals.

The power to deprive a person of their British citizenship on "conducive to the public good" grounds is used sparingly, complies with the UN convention on the reduction of statelessness, and always comes with a right to appeal. The Home Secretary decides each case personally.

Bill proposals

This Bill is extremely narrow in its scope and intent, focusing solely on closing a loophole in the existing deprivation of citizenship process. The Bill does not change any existing right of appeal or widen the reasons for which a person could be deprived of their citizenship.

In the recent case of *N3 and ZA v. Secretary of State for the Home Department*, the Supreme Court decided that if an appeal against a deprivation decision is successful or if a deprivation of citizenship order is withdrawn, the initial order will have had no effect and the person will be considered as having continued to be a British citizen. This means that people who have been deprived of British citizenship will automatically regain that status before further avenues of appeal have been exhausted.

This Bill will amend section 40A of the British Nationality Act 1981 in order to protect the UK from people who pose a threat to national security by preventing those who have been deprived of British citizenship and are overseas from returning until all appeals are determined. It will also prevent a person who has been deprived of citizenship on the grounds that it is conducive to the public good from seeking to undermine deprivation

action while an appeal in their case remains ongoing, such as by renouncing their other nationality and putting themselves in a position whereby a deprivation order would render them stateless.

[HCWS720]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Best Value: Thurrock Council

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): As I have previously stated when updating the House, this Government are committed to resetting the relationship with local and regional government, and to establishing partnerships built on mutual respect, collaboration and meaningful engagement. Local councils must be fit, legal and decent, and this Government are taking the action necessary to fix the foundations of local government. I am today updating the House on the steps that we are taking to support Thurrock council to recover and reform.

I am today publishing the commissioners' most recent report, which I received in May. It is clear that the council is in a very different place from where it was when the previous Government first appointed commissioners to it in September 2022. I want to commend the council's members and officers and the commissioners for the improvements that they, together, have made; and I am pleased that the commissioners consider that the council "continues to own the recovery agenda".

However, the issues that the council faced at the start were both broad and deep, and the commissioners' fifth report makes it clear that the recovery remains fragile, as the improvements still need to be embedded across the organisation.

While progress has been made to address its historical financial accounts and governance, the council still relies on Government support to set a balanced budget and there remains an annual structural deficit. The council's general fund debt position is estimated at £800 million by the end of 2025-26. The Government have indicated that we will provide an initial tranche of financial support for debt repayment for Thurrock council in 2026-27, ahead of local government reorganisation. We will continue to work with the council to ensure that any support represents value for money for local and national taxpayers.

The council still needs to evidence deliverable plans to make corporate transformational savings to secure sustainable services, and there remains a need for it to strengthen its internal controls, especially across internal audit and risk management. A robust transformation plan is needed to deliver the council's proposed operating model and meet savings targets. Organisational capacity challenges remain and the commissioners consider that the council has not yet

"demonstrated that it has the capacity and capability to sustain its own journey of continuous improvement".

Having considered the report carefully, I am satisfied that the council is not yet meeting its best value duty.

While proposals for local government reorganisation and devolution present the council and its residents with real opportunities, it is vital to ensure that the

council has the capacity and capability to continue to drive its own recovery and reform alongside the implementation of either or both of these substantial change programmes.

Proposed package

I am minded to exercise powers of direction, under sections 15(5) and 15(6) of the Local Government Act 1999, to issue new directions to Thurrock council extending the intervention at the council until 30 April 2028. These would require the council to take actions to address the outstanding issues and priorities, as well as continuing to engage with commissioners who would be able to exercise specific council functions. The commissioner team, if appointed, would continue to consist of a lead commissioner, a finance commissioner and a managing director commissioner.

This extension to April 2028 would give the council time to deliver further improvements and embed the necessary changes across the organisation, but it would also ensure that the intervention timetable reflects the broader context for the area and aligns it to the proposed timelines for local government reorganisation. This seeks to ensure that there is external oversight and assurance of the council's improvement journey as it prepares for any future arrangements and provides flexibility to review the model of intervention throughout this period. It will be important that there are clear measurable milestones over the next phase of the intervention, and I would intend to review the proposed arrangements, if implemented, by summer 2026, when I would expect there to be further clarity on broader plans for devolution and local government reorganisation across greater Essex.

Representations

I am now inviting representatives from Thurrock council and any other interested parties on the proposed intervention package by 2 July. All representations will be carefully considered and any other evidence received, before I take a final decision about how to proceed.

Conclusion

I am committed to working in partnership to provide the necessary support to ensure Thurrock council's compliance with the best value duty and the high standards of governance that local residents and service users expect.

I will deposit in the Library of the House copies of the documents referred to, which are being published on gov.uk today. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS714]

Social Housing Local Connection Test Exemptions

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): In his conference speech on 24 September 2024, the Prime Minister set out this Government's commitment to supporting the most vulnerable to access social housing.

To support the delivery of that commitment, I have today laid regulations to exempt certain victims of domestic abuse and young care leavers from any local connection tests for social housing applied by local councils in England in order to facilitate their access to social housing.

Victims of domestic abuse and young care leavers often have to leave their local area for their own safety or to receive suitable support and therefore struggle to

meet local connection tests in places where they would best be able to build a safe and stable life. We know that most councils use the flexibilities available to them to exempt care leavers and victims of domestic abuse from local connection tests, but we must ensure that these exemptions are consistently applied.

The regulations laid today will ensure that this potential barrier will be removed and that they will no longer need to meet a local connection test for social housing. The regulations will come into force on 10 July.

Statutory guidance will be updated to reflect these changes. This includes specific guidance on improving access to social housing for victims of domestic abuse to ensure that victims can rebuild their lives away from abuse and harm. Statutory guidance will also be updated to ensure that councils are giving appropriate priority for care leavers who wish to stay in the area where they were placed.

These regulations follow those made in December, which exempted all former members of the regular armed forces from any local connection test for social housing, regardless of when they last served.

The Government are committed to supporting vulnerable groups and veterans to access social housing more generally by increasing the supply of social and affordable homes to better meet demand. Over the past 11 months, we have taken decisive steps to prioritise investment in social and affordable housing. At the spending review, the Government confirmed £39 billion for a successor to the affordable homes programme over 10 years of starts from 2026-27 to 2035-36—the biggest boost to social and affordable housing investment in a generation.

[HCWS721]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Veterinary Medicines: Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The Government are committed to safeguarding supplies of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland and to the protection of animal health and welfare. I therefore wish to update the House that today the Government have published a policy paper called "Protecting Animal Health: the Government's Approach to Veterinary Medicines in Northern Ireland" and have deposited copies of the paper in the Libraries of both Houses.

Certain exemptions from EU law currently facilitate the supply of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland. These exemptions will end after 31 December 2025. Ensuring the supply of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland from 1 January 2026 is therefore of critical importance. We have seen significant progress to that end, as large sections of the pharmaceutical industry have taken and are taking the steps needed to continue to supply veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland. This means that, in the vast majority of cases, vets, farmers and pet owners will continue to have access to the medicines they need. But I recognise that even a small disruption could cause real difficulties, and that there are understandable concerns in those limited areas where supply may be disrupted and there are no alternative products authorised or available in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, the Government are taking further measures to ensure access to veterinary medicines in such cases, as set out in the paper.

The Government have undertaken extensive engagement with the pharmaceutical industry, suppliers and retailers to understand the scale of any likely disruption to supply of veterinary medicines. Disruption is expected to be highly limited as a result of the pharmaceutical industry making the necessary changes to continue to supply Northern Ireland. We will continue to support industry in that endeavour in the coming months. Of the products that will be discontinued—which, on the basis of current analysis, we expect to be 10% to 15% of authorised products—most will have alternatives authorised in Northern Ireland or are not sold or only sold in limited quantities. Only a very small proportion, if discontinued, would be unlikely to have a suitable alternative and lack of access would have a significant adverse impact on animal health.

In line with the commitment in the “Safeguarding the Union” Command Paper, the Government will “deploy all available flexibilities to safeguard and sustain the supply of veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland”. To that end, the Government are setting out steps in relation to the supply routes of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland, making use of provisions within or consistent with EU law to improve access for veterinary surgeons, farmers and pet owners.

The Government are therefore launching two new schemes to ensure the needs of animal health and welfare can continue to be met. First, the veterinary medicines internal market scheme will allow veterinary surgeons to use their own judgment to determine whether to move veterinary products into Northern Ireland from Great Britain, where doing so is the only reasonable way of preventing unacceptable suffering of animals in their care, building on and simplifying existing processes. The requirement for a special import certificate will also be removed for Great Britain to Northern Ireland movements of therapeutic veterinary medicines, reflecting the importance of the UK internal market and recognising that this requirement exists for products entering the UK from outside the UK rather than movements within the UK internal market. Secondly, the veterinary medicines health situation scheme will allow the supply of alternatives to critical products in Northern Ireland, if these are not authorised and the situation of animal or public health so requires. These arrangements will last for as long as the animal or public health justification for it persists.

The combination of progress to date on the adaptation by industry and the measures set out in the paper means that the Government are confident that Northern Ireland will continue to enjoy access to the veterinary medicines necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals, and the livelihoods of farmers and veterinary surgeons.

Further guidance will be issued in due course, and we will continue to monitor emerging risks to animal health and veterinary medicine availability. Intensive engagement will continue through 2025 and beyond to address any gaps. Where they have yet to do so, we are encouraging the pharmaceutical industry to make any necessary changes as soon as possible. The Government will invite the veterinary medicines working group to continue to meet to provide a forum for discussion of both the implementation of the measures set out, and for the identification and escalation of issues to be addressed.

[HCWS716]

PRIME MINISTER

House of Lords Appointments

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I am today setting out the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in making nominations to the House of Lords.

Role of party leaders

As democratically elected representatives, it is for political parties to decide who will best represent them when making nominations to the House of Lords. The Government announced in December 2024 that political parties must now provide citations that clearly set out to the public why an individual has been nominated to the House of Lords. I expect party leaders to take full responsibility for properly considering the suitability and quality of their nominations, including whether nominees have the skills, ability and willingness to contribute to the work of the House and have a commitment to high standards in public life.

The House of Lords works best when there is a diversity of perspectives represented, including from all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. Party leaders should consider this when making nominations to ensure the second chamber better reflects the country it serves.

Role of the House of Lords Appointments Commission

The House of Lords Appointments Commission is an independent advisory body, responsible for vetting all peers to the House for propriety and for nominating non-party political individuals to the Prime Minister of the day for appointment to sit as Cross-Bench peers in the House of Lords. Advice on propriety is separate from judgments about the suitability of candidates, which are for political parties.

The vetting process is the same for all nominations for life peerages, although the vetting for ministerial appointments to the House of Lords may be completed on an expedited timeline.

The commission can decline to support a nomination on propriety grounds and will inform the relevant political party if this is the case. It is a matter for the Prime Minister to decide whether to recommend an individual to the sovereign. In the unlikely event that I, as Prime Minister, were to proceed with a nomination against HOLAC's advice on propriety I would write to the commission and this letter would be published on gov.uk. HOLAC would write to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to notify Parliament that their propriety advice had not been followed.

The commission may also provide advice on whether there are any presentational risks associated with a nominee. The commission does not withhold support for a nominee due to presentational risks.

Appointments to the Cross Benches

I will continue to ask HOLAC to make nominations for individuals to sit as Cross-Bench peers. HOLAC invites applications from the public and assesses candidates against the criteria set out on its website. On my invitation, HOLAC will then put forward successful nominees to me, and I will recommend them to His Majesty the King for appointment.

In addition, as Prime Minister I will continue to recommend directly for appointment a limited number of candidates to sit as Cross-Bench peers based on their public service, including both distinguished public servants

on retirement and individuals with a proven track record of service to the public. These nominations will continue to be vetted for propriety by the House of Lords Appointments Commission.

This Government set out a commitment in our manifesto to reform the process of appointments to the House of Lords to ensure the quality of new appointments and to

seek to improve the national and regional balance of the second Chamber. This statement is further evidence of our commitment to taking pragmatic and straightforward steps to strengthen and clarify our existing arrangements in support of this commitment.

[HCWS718]

Petition

Thursday 19 June 2025

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Construction of an underpass at the Bicester level crossing

The petition of residents of Bicester,

Declares that proposals to close the London Road Level Crossing as part of the East West Rail development have failed to reflect the strong local preference for an underpass that accommodates light vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians; and notes that widespread community support for such an underpass has been expressed through public meetings, correspondence and local engagement.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the construction of an underpass at the London Road level crossing in Bicester that could accommodate car users as well as cyclists and pedestrians.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Calum Miller, *Official Report*, 3 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 280.]

[P003078]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

As part of the EWR project, Network Rail and East West Railway Company have recommended that the level crossing at London Road in Bicester be closed due

to the safety and connectivity issues at the crossing which would result from the introduction of EWR services, though no final decision on its future has yet been made.

EWR Co is considering an accessible pedestrian overbridge or underpass to provide a suitable replacement crossing for pedestrians, cyclists, and other non-motorised users of the crossing. It is also considering how vehicle traffic might be re-routed via existing roads. EWR Co is also looking further at the alternative routes that drivers would take and is exploring opportunities to introduce upgrades to local roads, such as improvements to junctions to help reduce journey times.

Following feedback to the recent non-statutory consultation in 2024, discussions are ongoing between EWR Co, Network Rail, and the local authority to understand the feasibility of evolving the design work to incorporate some form of vehicular access. However, this will be subject to both affordability and feasibility.

EWR Co will present a single-option solution for further consultation at a future statutory consultation.

The Department for Transport recognises that there are strong views locally in Bicester about closing the crossing and the concerns felt by local people that closing the crossing could damage connectivity and lengthen journey times for motorists. A diversionary route could be less disruptive for vehicle users than the congestion and delay that would be caused by waiting at the barriers once EWR is open in full. EWR Co's analysis shows that the crossing barriers could be lowered for more than 32 minutes per hour, resulting in significant disruption for motorists, as well as a greatly increased safety risk that would come from a more intensely used level crossing.

Written Corrections

Thursday 19 June 2025

Ministerial Correction

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Iran-Israel Conflict

The following extracts are from the statement on the Iran-Israel conflict on 16 June 2025.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): This is obviously a dangerous and perilous time, and we need to do everything we can to bring about a ceasefire between Israel and Iran. Can the Foreign Secretary assure us that no British weapons or components are being used to bomb Iran, which could be used as a pretext for saying that Britain is directly involved? What assurances has he had from the Government of Israel that they will not use or even consider using in any way the nuclear weapons that they possess?

Mr Lammy: We have the most robust export licensing regime in the world, and I am proud of that. That was a matter that this House voted on just a few years ago under the last Government, and the right hon. Gentleman will know that we made a decision to restrict arms sales to Israel that could be used in Gaza. I also refer him to the statements that I have made about Iran's nuclear intent, the work of the IAEA, the huge global concern and the UN resolution that the UK did so much to secure last Thursday.

[*Official Report*, 16 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 72.]

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, his reassurance that Gaza will not be forgotten, and for having been really quick to come out and ask for de-escalation and a negotiated settlement. Nobody wants to see a nuclear Iran, not least the people of Iran, who are paying for this investment by the Iranian regime, but Netanyahu justified the bombing raids by saying that Iran was close to having a bomb and that it could be years or just months away. Was Netanyahu correct?

Mr Lammy: I call to mind the work of the IAEA, and refer my hon. Friend to the resolution of the UN Security Council just last week, all of which confirmed Iran's intent and its deception.

[*Official Report*, 16 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 73.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy):

Mr Lammy: We have the most robust export licensing regime in the world, and I am proud of that. That was a matter that this House voted on just a few years ago under the last Government, and the right hon. Gentleman will know that we made a decision to restrict arms sales to Israel that could be used in Gaza. I also refer him to the statements that I have made about Iran's nuclear intent, the work of the IAEA, the huge global concern and the resolution of the **IAEA Board of Governors** that the UK did so much to secure last Thursday.

Mr Lammy: I call to mind the work of the IAEA, and refer my hon. Friend to the resolution of the **IAEA Board of Governors** just last week, all of which confirmed Iran's intent and its deception.

Other Correction

JAMES NAISH

Political Prisoners

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Political Prisoners on 18 June 2025.

James Naish: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. She has just mentioned Canada; I understand that the Canadians are considering granting honorary citizenship to Jimmy Lai, as a small but significant contribution to demonstrating their commitment to him. Does she agree that that is something that the British Government could consider?

[*Official Report*, 18 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 155WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish):

James Naish: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. She has just mentioned Canada; I understand that the Canadians are considering granting honorary citizenship to Jimmy Lai, as a small but significant contribution to demonstrating their commitment to him. Does she agree that **a public recommitment to Jimmy Lai** is something that the British Government could consider?

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