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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 25 June 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

High-speed Internet

1. **Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve the distribution of high-speed internet provision. [904803]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): The Secretary of State is in Singapore celebrating 60 years of diplomacy between our countries and drumming up investment, so I am afraid you have the deputies today, Mr Speaker.

Access to high-speed internet is essential and we are determined to take everyone with us into the digital age. I am glad that 98% of people now have access to superfast speeds and 88% have gigabit. Our latest type C contract with Openreach is adding connections every single day.

Josh Babarinde: Project Gigabit's stated aim is to ensure that no one is left behind, but that is not true for the residents of Mulberry Close on my home estate in Eastbourne, who have not been connected to full fibre despite bearing the brunt of invasive works on their doorstep. Will the Minister meet me, residents of Mulberry Close and local internet providers to ensure that those residents are connected and not left behind?

Chris Bryant: Funnily enough, the statistics in the hon. Member's constituency are better than the national average—just very slightly, by a smidgen—but I am very happy to meet him. More importantly, he could come into the Department and meet Building Digital UK so that we can explain exactly what needs to happen in his constituency to secure the aims that he is seeking.

Online Safety: Children

2. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to keep children safe online. [904804]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on children's online safety, my hon. Friend will know that keeping children safe online is a priority for this Government. We are focused on implementing the Online Safety Act 2023 so

that children can benefit from its wide reach and protection. The children's code that is coming in next month will see a step change in the experience of children online in the UK. While we do not pretend that that is job done, and we are working at pace to develop a further online safety package, children will no longer be able to access pornography or other unsuitable content, including content that encourages or promotes self-harm, eating disorders or suicide.

Gregor Poynton: The National Crime Agency and other law enforcement agencies have highlighted the growing prevalence of AI-generated child sexual abuse material as one of the biggest threats to public safety. It is a growing threat to us online. That is why I was astonished last week to see the Tories and Reform vote against the Crime and Policing Bill, which contains world-leading measures to tackle this horrific crime. Does the Minister agree that it is frankly disgusting to see the Tories and Reform using this issue for party politics?

Feryal Clark: I do indeed agree with my hon. Friend on that. Child sexual exploitation and abuse is one of the most horrendous harms, and the Government are committed to ensuring that UK law keeps pace with criminal use of technologies including AI. As he says, we have introduced a world-leading offence in the Crime and Policing Bill to criminalise AI models that have been optimised to create child sexual abuse material. This new offence builds on the protections in the Online Safety Act, and I am very clear that nothing is off the table when it comes to keeping our children safe.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): As the Minister says, the Online Safety Act has passed into law and is being implemented, but parents in my Gosport constituency are still desperately worried about the scale of the inappropriate content that very young children can stumble across in the online world. Can she reassure us? When will they begin to practically see the changes that the Online Safety Act promised, and when will the big online providers really start having to do what they say they are doing to keep our children safe online?

Feryal Clark: I absolutely agree that some children are still stumbling upon material and content that they should not be. When the Online Safety Act is fully enacted in July, we will see a step change in what children can see online. Ofcom will monitor this and ensure that where such material is continuing, we take action.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah) on her well-deserved honour in the King's birthday honours? I hope the whole House will agree that it is a fitting and well-deserved honour for her expertise and service to the House.

Protecting children online should be a top priority for every Government, and that is why the Conservatives passed the Online Safety Act to give this Government all the sweeping powers they need to act, but when the

Minister was asked in Parliament why implementation under Labour was so slow, she said that implementation must be

“as proofed against judicial review as possible.”—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 405WH.]

Why is she more concerned about protecting herself and the Government than about protecting children?

Feryl Clark: It was the hon. Gentleman’s party that dragged its feet in bringing forward the legislation and that watered it down. We are busy trying to implement the Act as it was set out in the guidance. While the Act is not perfect, we will see a huge step change. Where there are issues and gaps, we are not afraid to act.

Alan Mak: It was my party that passed the Online Safety Act; it is the Minister’s party that is failing our children. Ian Russell, who set up the Molly Rose Foundation following the tragic death of his daughter, says that Britain is now “going backwards” when it comes to protecting our children online. The Government are being timid when they should be bold. Their priorities are wrong, and legal caution is trumping children’s safety. Why is the Minister still defending this Government’s track record of total failure?

Feryl Clark: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. The implementation is happening as set out and against the timeframe that was set out. As I said, we are not only busy implementing the Act, but looking at all the gaps that exist in it because Ministers in his Government watered down the Bill as it went through the House. We will review those gaps in the legislation and come forward with extra measures where they are needed.

Rural Mobile Coverage

3. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve rural mobile coverage. [904805]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): Rural mobile coverage just is not good enough, which is why we have committed all the money needed to complete the shared rural network, with new masts coming online every month. I can also announce that Ofcom’s new coverage checker will come online tomorrow, and I urge every single Member to check their constituency then.

Caroline Voaden: I thank the Minister for his answer. I was going to say that having looked at the villages in my constituency on the mobile map, which was supposed to be updated this month, it is not up to date; it is good to hear that it will be. Many of my constituents have to rely on the 3G network, which is being shut off. We may be years away from getting high-speed broadband across the South Hams, so having access to a reliable 4G network is crucial. Can the Minister tell me exactly how he is working with mobile phone providers to ensure that everyone has access to mobile voice and data coverage?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The new checker comes online tomorrow—I know that many hon. Members will have looked at the checker in the past and thought, “That simply doesn’t bear any relationship to my lived experience.” From tomorrow, it will. The new

checker is much better; Members will be able to see different numbers for all the mobile operators, which I think will encourage the operators to put up more masts and improve their coverage.

I know that the hon. Lady has talked about the village of Staverton in her constituency, which has a population of 717 people—the Sea Trout, I think, is the pub. It even has a telephone booth in it, although I am not sure whether it is still working. I have this horrible fear: I do not want to leave the hon. Lady, like Blondie, hanging on the telephone.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): In my constituency—one of the most rural parts of the UK—whole areas are without mobile phone coverage. People are forced to cope with unreliable phone lines and, most worryingly, are sometimes unable to call 999. Can the Minister assure me that after the withdrawal of the public switched telephone network, no one will be left without access to a phone simply because there is no mobile signal once their landline is switched off?

Chris Bryant: I have been very keen to ensure that the withdrawal of the PSTN—which is being done because it is necessary, as the copper system is not working any more and is more fallible—does not leave anybody unable to contact 999 or get the services that they need. I am very happy to arrange for my hon. Friend a meeting with BDUK to go through precisely how we can ensure that we have proper investment in every constituency in the land so that people have the mobile signal they need to live in the modern era.

Artificial Intelligence: Schools

4. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on AI in schools. [904806]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryl Clark): My Department is working closely with the Department for Education and Skills England to ensure that the education system is ready for the opportunities and the challenges that AI poses. We are assessing the AI skills gap and mapping pathways to address it. My officials have been working closely with the DFE on the education content store, for example, which is a pilot project that seeks to help developers to make better AI tools for teachers by providing a store of reliable and relevant UK data. Last week, the DFE produced guidance to support schools with the safe and effective use of AI in education.

Bradley Thomas: Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to reduce academic dishonesty and plagiarism in schools resulting from the use of artificial intelligence tools?

Feryl Clark: AI has demonstrated that it can help the education workforce by reducing some of the administrative burdens and the hard work that teaching staff and school leaders face in their day-to-day role. On the hon. Gentleman’s question, evidence is still emerging on the benefits and risks of pupils and students using generative AI. We will continue to work with the

education sector on use cases to develop our understanding of how to use AI safely and effectively. As I have said, the Department has issued guidance to teachers on how to identify and best use AI in schools.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): AI is already prevalent in the workplace and in the education system, and we need to equip the next generation to be able to use AI tools productively and securely while also delivering on their unique potential as human beings. How is the Minister working with the Department for Education to ensure that the AI tools that are used in our education system support this kind of learning? Specifically, what advice has she given to the Department with regard to the procurement of edtech tools, which are widely available? Some are free and some need to be paid for, so how are schools to decide which to use?

Feryal Clark: As I have said, I work very closely with my counterparts in the Department for Education. Earlier this year, we launched safe standards for the sector and provided guidance on how to safely develop AI tools for education. The DFE has also provided guidance to schools on how to safely use AI in schools. That work is ongoing. As I have said, we are working both with the sector and with educators to make sure that we get this right.

Artificial Intelligence: Legislative Proposals

5. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): When he plans to bring forward legislative proposals on AI. [904807]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): As soon as we have legislative proposals on AI, we will introduce them to the House and let the right hon. Member know in the usual way.

Sir John Whittingdale: Is the Minister aware of the concerns about the proposed creative content exchange, which appeared without consultation in the creative industries sector plan? Will he confirm that any AI legislation will not seek to impose a statutory licensing model, but will instead facilitate a market-led, dynamic licensing model based on robust copyright law and enforceable through meaningful transparency?

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Member has become terribly Eeyore-ish of late—he has been eating too many thistles, I think. The truth of the matter is that this is a really good idea. It is only at an embryonic stage. It was consulted on in the creative industries taskforce, which is led by Baroness Shriti Vadera and Sir Peter Bazalgette. Of course we will consult with everybody else in the sector about how we can make this work, but it could be an answer to ensuring more licensing of creative content by AI companies and, importantly, remuneration for the creative industries.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpden and Berkhamsted) (LD): First, I echo the congratulatory comments about the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah)—they are absolutely deserved.

Donald Trump's proposals to ban US states from regulating AI for 10 years have been condemned by Microsoft's chief scientist, showing that we cannot trust the US to provide safe and sensible AI regulation. Does the Minister agree that now is the time for the UK to lead on AI safety, and will he join me and the head of Google DeepMind in calling for an AI safety agency modelled on the International Atomic Energy Agency and headquartered here in the UK?

Chris Bryant: Both the Under-Secretary of State and I have been remiss in not congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah) on her damehood. As you know, Mr Speaker, all knights love to see a dame enter the Chamber. The Under-Secretary of State and I work closely on AI and copyright, and on making sure that we have the AI safety and security that we need. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson makes a fair point and it is one of the things that we are considering at the moment.

Science and Innovation Funding

6. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to distribute funding for science and innovation. [904809]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): The Chancellor has announced that the Government's research and development spending plans go through to 2029-30 and that our R&D budget is rising from £13.9 billion in 2025-26 to £15.2 billion in 2029-30—a real-terms increase—and will total £58.5 billion over the spending review period. I am sure that that will benefit my hon. Friend's York constituency.

Rachael Maskell: York and North Yorkshire is a national leader in the bioeconomy. BioYorkshire will create 4,000 jobs, as well as start-ups and spin-outs. It requires £67 million to build its facilities over the next decade, but it will return £215 million back into the economy. When will the science plan recognise the economic and scientific impact of the research base? Can we have a meeting to talk about the brilliant BioYorkshire project?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is right that it is a brilliant project, and it is precisely the kind of thing the UK excels at: we manage to get the private sector working with Government and local government to deliver not only jobs but real innovation. As the Secretary of State is not here today, I am sure I can offer my hon. Friend the opportunity of a meeting with him.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Over the past 10 years, many tech start-ups have left the UK and gone to silicon valley, which costs the UK a huge amount in jobs and tax revenue. What are the Government doing to ensure that start-ups currently at seed stage stay in the UK and grow here, so that we avoid the UK becoming an intellectual property farm for other countries to harvest?

Chris Bryant: One really important part of the industrial strategy we published on Monday and the sector plans within it is that we identified a problem many people in the UK face, which is that they have a really good idea but cannot take it to market because they do not have access to finance, in particular to capital, unless they are in London—and sometimes unless they are a man. We want to change all that, which is why we have said categorically that we are giving the British Business Bank much more significant power to be able to invest in these sectors. That will mean we are a powerhouse in precisely the way the hon. Member wants.

Health Science and Innovation

7. **Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of funding for health science and innovation on the UK's global influence. [904810]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): From the development of vaccines to the discovery of the structure of DNA, British medical innovation has played a fundamental role in changing the lives of people globally and extending the UK's global influence. Our industrial strategy and forthcoming life sciences sector plan will put the UK at the very centre of global efforts.

Emily Darlington: As the Minister will know, Gavi and the Global Fund not only provide a global vaccine programmes and programmes on saving lives from malaria and HIV, but provide us with biosecurity and jobs in the UK, not least over 500 research and development jobs and funding for the institute of tropical medicine. What assessment has he made of whether the UK is to reduce our efforts in that regard?

Chris Bryant: Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance is absolutely essential, not only for other countries in the world, where we have managed to save many lives by introducing vaccines, but for UK innovation. We are fully committed to Gavi. We will be producing our life sciences sector plan soon, and we want to celebrate the sector, which represents 6,800 business and £100 billion of turnover every year.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that the life and health sciences launchpad in Northern Ireland has so far funded 32 business-led projects. That is good news, but 23 of the projects are in the Greater Belfast area. Will the Minister join me and others in our efforts to ensure that there is greater knowledge about the launchpad across the whole of Northern Ireland so that we can all benefit from this very worthwhile project?

Chris Bryant: Yes, indeed. When I was talking about the creative industries sector plan as part of the industrial strategy last week, exactly the same point was made. Belfast is obviously a great centre for innovation and the creative industries, but we need to make sure that the sector extends across the whole of Northern Ireland. It is a point that has been extremely well made.

Digital Inclusion: Southend East and Rochford

8. **Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve digital inclusion in Southend East and Rochford constituency. [904811]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): The digital inclusion action plan is one of things I am proudest of. Only this morning I launched the "IT reuse for good" charter. One thing that is really problematic for many families who do not have access to the internet is that they simply do not have a device. I urge every Member of the House to get every business they know to sign up to the "IT reuse for good" charter so that we can get devices to the people who really need them.

Mr Alaba: Digital inclusion and exclusion vary widely between individuals, households and even communities. Often it is those in low-income, rural and coastal communities who are left behind. What steps are being taken to ensure that Labour's action plan reaches all communities and equips everyone with the tools they need?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a strong point: we need digital inclusion for every community. If we are going to have a digital Government, we need to have a digital nation, and we cannot have some people excluded from that future. That is why we have announced £6 million in this financial year for the innovation fund, and I hope that local authorities will come forward with innovative ideas on how we can break down the barriers to digital inclusion.

Topical Questions

T1. [904818] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): The Department is determined to make the UK the best place in the world for science and technology. Last week, the spending review committed £86 billion to research and development, enabling every aspect of our tech economy to start firing on all cylinders. Building on that, we published the digital and technology sector plan as part of our modern industrial strategy on Monday, backing our innovators in fields like quantum, life sciences and engineering biology with over £1 billion.

Patrick Hurley: Across the northern part of my constituency, from Marshside over to Hesketh Bank—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are not meant to walk in front of the Member who is speaking; it is discourteous. The hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) deliberately looked and carried on.

Patrick Hurley: The mobile phone signal is uniformly terrible across the northern part of my constituency, meaning that my constituents are missing out on opportunities. Will the Minister work more closely with industry to identify and deal with those rural mobile blackspots to further the Government's growth mission?

Chris Bryant: I know that that is an issue in my hon. Friend's constituency because he has tabled at least 10 questions to me on the subject over the last week, all of which we have answered in time. I am keen to ensure that we as MPs persuade the mobile companies to invest more in getting better mobile coverage across the country, both in rural areas and in urban ones.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Why are the Government ignoring the advice of the AI opportunities action plan to encourage the start-up and scaling of tech businesses in the UK and instead favouring market-dominant corporations from abroad over our own domestic businesses when awarding Government contracts?

Chris Bryant: We are not.

T2. [904819] **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): As the Government produce their strategy to support the development, validation and uptake of alternative methods in scientific procedures, what steps will the Minister be taking to ensure that that includes specific commitments to phase out the use of dogs in scientific and regulatory procedures, replacing them with modern, human-specific technologies?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): The Government remain committed to ending the use of all animals, including dogs, in scientific procedures, replacing them with modern, human-relevant technologies. Our long-term goal, as set out in our 2024 manifesto commitment, is to phase out animal testing entirely. As my hon. Friend said, we will publish a detailed road map this year alongside convening roundtables with researchers, industry and animal welfare organisations to ensure that we achieve that and hit the target.

T6. [904823] **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): My constituency is home to five games developers. Does the Minister agree that the use of AI in video game development should not be allowed to push out human creativity? What assurances can he give me that the Government are not being complacent in their approach to AI?

Chris Bryant: We are completely and utterly not complacent, and we are determined to ensure that creators are remunerated for their work. We would never surrender other people's labour to a third party. I know that the hon. Member used to be the editor of *Cruise International*, and I very much hope that as a former journalist she will help us develop policies that can answer the question she asked.

T3. [904820] **Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is clear that Europe and the United States of America are diverging on how they will regulate AI. Given that our EU reset commits us to working closely with Europe on AI regulation, what talks has the Minister had about how we protect UK copyright in that context?

Chris Bryant: One of the issues that is undoubtedly at the heart of AI and copyright is how we ensure that the policy we advocate in the UK works with other countries' around the world. I assure my hon. Friend that we are working closely with our European allies to ensure we do precisely that.

T7. [904824] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): In July 2024, the Secretary of State pledged to launch a consultation on the regulation of frontier AI systems "shortly". [Interruption.] However, recent reports suggest that it will not be forthcoming until summer 2026. As leading AI companies have admitted that their systems could be used to develop biological and nuclear weapons, will the Minister confirm why there has been a delay?

Chris Bryant: I am afraid the shadow Chancellor came in during the question. I have known him for a very long time, and I would not cheer him quite so enthusiastically myself—[Interruption.] As charming a man as he is, it meant that I did not hear the question asked by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), so I am happy to write to her afterwards to confirm.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): Stratford and Bow is a thriving hub of innovation, which is why the Prime Minister chose it for the launch of the AI opportunities action plan earlier this year. One brilliant example is Healthtech-1. Once a kitchen table start-up of doctors and tech experts, it now automates admin for 22% of GP practices, and its new patient registration system has saved the NHS a staggering 183 years of time. What are the Government doing to support home-grown innovation like that to scale up its work?

Feryal Clark: My hon. Friend's constituency is indeed a hotbed of innovation. She will be delighted to know that Healthtech-1 has benefited from a range of Government support to date, including a recent Innovate UK grant.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904861] **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 June.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Angela Rayner): I have been asked to reply as my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister is attending the NATO summit in The Hague. At this time of international volatility, we are working with our allies to de-escalate tensions in the middle east and ensure that the conflict does not further intensify. Our aim continues to be preventing Iran from securing nuclear weapons and urging the Iranians to return to negotiations.

The situation in Gaza remains of the gravest concern. Seeing the return of more hostages' bodies, including that of Shay Levinson, an Israeli with British family, is heartbreaking. The remaining hostages must be released, while aid must be delivered at greater speed and volume.

This week is Armed Forces Week. Our commitment to the armed forces is unwavering. The strategic defence review outlines how we will give our armed forces better pay, better housing and better kit. I pay tribute to their commitment, bravery and selflessness.

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

Mike Tapp: The Conservatives gave up on law and order. They betrayed our country and let criminals run riot. Now, they desperately post wannabe superhero videos, shamelessly pointing at the problems they created. Last week, they had the chance to put it right, and what did they do? They voted against tough action on knife crime, on antisocial behaviour and on violence against women and girls. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that they should hang their heads in shame for failing to protect our streets?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is about Government responsibilities, not the Opposition. I call Sir Mel Stride.

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to stand opposite the right hon. Lady. Despite what many may think, we have a great deal in common, not least that we both viscerally disagree with the Chancellor's tax policies. It is also great to see the right hon. Lady standing in temporarily for the Prime Minister for the second week running—although I know that many sitting behind her wish that this was a permanent arrangement. Indeed, we will find many of their names among the 122 who have signed up to oppose the Government's welfare Bill. They say that the Bill is dangerously rushed and ill-thought-through. Will the right hon. Lady explain why she thinks that she is right and 122 of her colleagues are wrong?

The Deputy Prime Minister: First, it is nice to face the latest wannabe at the Dispatch Box. I will tell the right hon. Member why we are pressing ahead with our reforms: it is because we are investing a billion pounds in tailored employment support, in a "right to try" in order to help more people back into work, and in ending reassessments for the most severely disabled who will never be able to work. We will not walk away or stand by and abandon millions of people trapped in the failing system, left behind by him and his colleagues.

Sir Mel Stride: The right hon. Lady completely sidestepped my question. She cannot even defend her own Government's policy. Can she at least assure the House that the vote on Tuesday will actually go ahead?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I do not know if the right hon. Gentleman listened to what I said, because he was reading off his script—I do not need a script—but I can tell him that we will go ahead on Tuesday.

Sir Mel Stride: There you have it: there will be a vote in this House on Tuesday on the welfare Bill, although many on the Back Benches could be forgiven for thinking that they have heard this before with the winter fuel payment, where they were marched up the hill, and we all know where that story ended. On the Conservative side of the House, we are absolutely clear that we will help the right hon. Lady get their Bill through if the

Government can commit to actually reducing the welfare bill and getting people off benefits and into work. Can she make that commitment right now—yes or no?

The Deputy Prime Minister: If ever we needed a reminder of the Conservatives having no shame, it is their demands for this Bill. The right hon. Gentleman demands a programme to help people into work—exactly what this Bill does—after he left one in eight young people out of the economy. He demands no new taxes—from the party that raised taxes to record levels. He demands welfare savings—from the man who was in charge as the welfare bill absolutely ballooned. They say cut the welfare bill; they failed. They say put people in work; they failed. They say no tax increases; they failed.

Sir Mel Stride: I am afraid that the right hon. Lady has clearly not read her own legislation. The Bill will see the number of people on welfare rising for every single year going forward. There is no commitment from her to cut the number of people on welfare. Even if the Government manage to deliver these reforms, almost every respected economist now says that tax rises are all but inevitable in the autumn. But after the Budget, the Chancellor said,

"I'm not coming back with...more taxes."

British businesses have been hit again and again by Labour's economic mismanagement. They are desperate for certainty. Can the right hon. Lady give them that certainty now and repeat to the House the Chancellor's promise not to raise taxes at the Budget?

The Deputy Prime Minister: This is a bit rich—unbelievable. With inflation above 11% and the biggest tax rises, I will take no lectures from the Conservative party. On this issue in particular, they cannot make up their minds. First, they said our reforms were taking too long, then they said they were rushed, then their Front Bench said our measures were too tough, and now they say they need to be tougher. No plan, no idea—I wonder why their party was left in such a mess.

Sir Mel Stride: The whole House will have heard that the right hon. Lady did not repeat the Chancellor's promise not to raise taxes. Britain's businesses have today been put on notice: tax rises are coming. Specifically, in the right hon. Lady's own area, despite Labour's promises to freeze council tax, the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the spending review will mean the biggest council tax increases in a generation—a £7 billion tax rise. Yet the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have repeatedly claimed that the Government will not raise taxes on working people. Why does the right hon. Lady think that council tax is not paid by working people?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Again, the Conservatives have an absolute nerve when council tax rose ever single year under their Government. In fact, I had to turn down the Tories on the Local Government Association who wanted me to take away the precept to ensure that they could raise taxes above the 5%. We have kept it there while delivering money for local government, while they had austerity, put taxes up and ruined the British economy.

Sir Mel Stride: When you cut out the blather, is not the reality that this Labour Government have condemned us to higher taxes, more debt, fewer jobs and more pain for businesses up and down our country? Borrowing, unemployment and inflation are up, yet the right hon. Lady tells us that the Government's plan is working. It is not just me who is not convinced; the Members behind her are not convinced either. Nor are the public. In fact, I am not even sure whether the right hon. Lady herself is convinced. Is she not just a little embarrassed to defend policies that she does not even agree with?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am embarrassed every week that an Opposition Member comes here who does not apologise for the mess they left this country in. One party crashed the economy and left families to pay the price. We are putting working people first. I am proud that we have got a huge boost to the minimum wage, the biggest uplift in affordable housing in a generation and that we have expanded free school meals to half a million children. The Tories' choice: billions of pounds in unfunded tax cuts for the very wealthy—we know where that gets us. It is the same old Tory failed approach. They have not listened, and they have not learnt a thing.

Q6. [904866] Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Prudhoe community high school in my constituency was forced to relocate to Washington after its just over eight-year-old building, built under the previous Government, was found to have cracks in the infrastructure. This incredibly distressing news has required huge resilience and strength from the local community. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the staff, the parents and, most importantly, the students at Prudhoe community high school, and in commending them for their hard work and dedication during this incredibly destabilising time?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I will do. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important issue to my attention. I can only imagine the disruption and challenges facing the school community. One of the shameful legacies of the Conservative party was leaving schools across our country literally crumbling. We are fixing that with £20 billion of investment in the school rebuilding programme over the next decade to rebuild more than 750 schools. I know that the Minister for Early Education will be happy to meet him.

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

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I associate myself and my party with the remarks of the Deputy Prime Minister in calling for de-escalation in the middle east, the release of hostages and urgent aid to get into Gaza.

We Liberal Democrats oppose the Government's cut to personal independence payments and carer's allowance. With a growing rebellion on the Government Benches, the Government may be forced to push these cuts through with the support of the official Opposition. The Deputy Prime Minister knows that some of those affected are still waiting for justice after the carer's allowance scandal saw thousands of innocent carers hounded for repayments. Can the Deputy Prime Minister give a cast-iron guarantee that if these cuts are pursued, at the very least, not a

single person will lose a penny until the carer's allowance scandal review has been completed and the recommendations have been implemented?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for her opening comments. She knows that we have already taken steps on the carer's allowance, and those steps will continue. As she also knows, the welfare system is failing people. Labour is the party of work, but we are also the party of fairness. That is why our Bill will deliver the largest, permanent, real-terms increase to basic out-of-work support since the 1980s, invest in tailored employment support so people can try work safely, and ensure that those who can never work are properly supported.

Daisy Cooper: It is disappointing that the Deputy Prime Minister could not give that cast-iron guarantee, but if the Government pursue the Bill next week, we will pursue this matter on behalf of carers.

Given the reports that the Government are giving a green light to President Trump's demands for a state visit to be brought forward to September, does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the UK should urgently convene talks with the White House in advance of the visit in order to leverage it to secure US guarantees for Ukraine, including the use of frozen Russian assets, and to secure a joint UK-US message to Putin that together our two countries will not let him win his illegal war?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The UK Government are always in discussions, negotiations and talks with our US counterparts. We are really pleased that the US President is coming for a second state visit, and we will continue to welcome in that vein and continue to have those discussions.

Q8. [904868] Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): In Oldham, 727 families are currently living in temporary accommodation, and 8,000 families are on the waiting list. That obviously has a devastating impact, particularly on children in those families. Will the Deputy Prime Minister outline how she will use the £39 billion that was allocated to her Department in the spending review to fix the housing crisis left by the Opposition, so that families in Oldham, Saddleworth and wider can get the affordable homes they need?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right, and as neighbouring MPs we know the impact that temporary accommodation and children being homeless has on their life chances. She is absolutely right to raise the issue, and to highlight the excellent work of Dr Laura Neilson, who is supporting us to develop a cross-Government homelessness strategy. All children should have a safe and secure home. That is why I am so proud that we have confirmed the biggest boost to social and affordable housing investment in a generation. We are getting on with the job, after the mess that the Conservatives left behind.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): My colleagues and I identify with the comments around de-escalation in the middle east.

I hope that the Deputy Prime Minister will condemn recent disorder on the streets of Northern Ireland, as the Prime Minister and my colleagues have done. Does she

accept that the Windsor framework, although sold to this House as a trade issue, is fundamentally impacting the ability of this sovereign Parliament to legislate on a UK-wide basis on matters of immigration? Will she commit to ensuring that the Government continue to challenge robustly the expansionism that is currently before the courts? If not, will she legislate to ensure that we as a country can control our own borders?

The Deputy Prime Minister: First, I do condemn the violence on the streets. Provisions in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement referred to in article 2 of the Windsor framework sought to address the long-standing and specific issues relating to Northern Ireland's past. I hope the right hon. Gentleman is assured that we are appealing on a number of the laws relating to article 2 in the courts, including the Supreme Court. I hope he will also be assured by the reality that the Government have consistently applied and enforced immigration law on a UK-wide basis. The Government will take all necessary steps to defend that position, just as we will remain committed to protecting rights across the whole UK, as it should be Parliament that makes rules on immigration.

Q11. [904871] **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Lab): Last night, "Newsnight" covered the *Daily Mirror's* three-year investigation into the nuked blood scandal, in which thousands of troops had blood and urine monitored and even chest x-rays during nuclear weapons testing, but the results were kept from their medical records and their suffering was denied for decades. I am a fierce supporter of those men and their families, and the Deputy Prime Minister has met them with me, so does she agree that, in this Armed Forces Week, time is now of the essence, and these elderly veterans deserve answers, justice, and an apology?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend for her campaigning work on this issue. I have met some of those affected and know their strength of feeling; I have heard their deeply personal testimony of their experiences. Especially during Armed Forces Week, I pay tribute to all nuclear veterans and their enduring contribution to our nation's security. We are looking into unresolved questions regarding medical records as a matter of priority.

Q2. [904862] **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I join the Deputy Prime Minister in thanking members of the armed forces community for their service. I have had the privilege in recent months of meeting many veterans in my constituency, some of whom still carry the trauma of war. Some, including amputees, have told me how repeat disability assessments are too often required of them in order to access financial support. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that veterans with life-changing service-related injuries should be exempted from repeat disability assessments?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Part of our reforms are to ensure that those who can never work are properly supported and not put through endless assessment, and I thank the hon. Member for raising this case. We are committed to renewing the nation's contract with those who have served, and a range of support is in place for veterans, including dedicated medical and physical healthcare pathways in the NHS, employment, and

housing. The new support system, VALOUR, backed by £50 million of funding, will provide a network of support centres to connect veterans with local and national services.

Q13. [904873] **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): Successive Conservative Governments stripped our councils of funding for youth services, pitting them against services that were under statutory protections. That has led to one in eight councils no longer having a youth centre. Croydon, which is London's youngest borough, is about to lose its youth engagement team and its last crumb of council-run universal youth provision. Can the Deputy Prime Minister outline what this Labour Government are doing to support our young people? Does she agree that it is time to look again at statutory protections for youth services, so that all young people, no matter where they live, can get the services they deserve?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that the Conservatives left a trail of devastation across education and youth services. [Interruption.] Given half the chance, judging by their moans, they would do it all over again. We are making different choices—working with young people to draw up a landmark new national youth strategy, investing £145 million this year to provide stability to the youth sector, rolling out youth future hubs to expand access opportunities and reduce crime, and extending access to mental health support to nearly 1 million more children this year.

Q3. [904863] **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): The Government's expansion of funded childcare from September is welcome, but early years settings face a critical staffing crisis that could make expanded provision practically impossible. Not enough applicants, a lack of qualifications, low salaries and high turnover mean that many nurseries are operating well below capacity. Many now find themselves operating at a loss, due to increased national insurance contributions. Can the Deputy Prime Minister outline what clear steps the Government are taking to address the crisis in early years staffing to ensure that all our children get the best possible start in life?

The Deputy Prime Minister: First of all, I will out one of my kids in the Gallery, because he has just completed his studies on early years, so hopefully that will add a little help. We inherited a depleted early years sector, but we are determined to make sure that all children have the best possible start in life. That is why we are delivering the largest ever uplift to the early years pupil premium, boosting family hubs and Start for Life, funded by £126 million this year, and investing £370 million to create tens of thousands of places in new and expanded school-based nurseries.

Q14. [904874] **Chris Curtis** (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): Milton Keynes has one of the fastest growing tech sectors in the country; one in three people now work in tech jobs at firms such as Red Bull Racing and the AI company Aiimi. Eleanor, a student in my constituency, is in the Gallery today. Can the Deputy Prime Minister let her and this House know how the Government's new industrial strategy will support our tech sector and provide her generation with good-quality jobs in the future?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am glad that I am not the only one who has a young person destined for the future in the Gallery today. My hon. Friend has been a huge champion for Milton Keynes, and he is right. After the Tory decline, it is time to turn the page. We have already created 384,000 jobs since the election, and our industrial strategy will create opportunities across the country and invest in jobs and industries of the future, including in Milton Keynes, where East West Rail will help to build 100,000 new homes and put £6.7 million a year in the local economy.

Q4. [904864] Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): In 1957, my constituent Ronald Clark was among 22,000 UK personnel exposed to nuclear testing on Christmas Island. Those veterans and their descendants have suffered various cancers, crippling illnesses and deformities, but the Ministry of Defence has never accepted liability. I note the Deputy Prime Minister's response to the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey), but it does not go quite far enough. Time is running out. Will the Deputy Prime Minister meet me, my constituent and those veterans to determine appropriate compensation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Again, I know the strength of feeling. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman's constituent Ronald and all the service personnel who participated in the British nuclear testing programme. I am sure that the Minister for Veterans would be happy to meet him and the veterans to discuss this issue.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Under the old guard of the Conservatives, families had to earn less than £7,400, often in low-paid and insecure work, to qualify for free school meals. Under this Labour Government, thousands more children in Wolverhampton North East and 500,000 more across the country will benefit from free school meals. Will the Deputy Prime Minister outline how Labour's plans will put more money in parents' pockets?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We are determined to tackle child poverty, which rose catastrophically under the last Government. That is why we are expanding access to free school meals to more than half a million children, which will lift 100,000 of the poorest children out of poverty and put £500 back into parents' pockets. This is on top of 750 free breakfast clubs, worth £450 a year to parents, and a historic uplift in the national minimum wage, worth up to £2,500 to the lowest-paid workers.

Q5. [904865] Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Given that the right hon. Lady appears to be enjoying spending yet another week practising to be Prime Minister, maybe she can give us her view on who she would get rid of in the coming reshuffle. Would it be the Chancellor for killing economic growth? Would it be the Work and Pensions Secretary for the botched handling of the welfare Bill and the winter fuel cuts? Would it be the Environment Secretary for trying to destroy British family farms? Would it be the Foreign Secretary for giving away British sovereign territory and paying billions to rent it back? Or given that the Prime Minister is now polling as having had the most unpopular first year in modern British political history, would the right hon. Lady do herself and the country a favour and tell him to show himself the door?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Maybe the hon. Gentleman wants a go next week, because it has been quite a carousel. The Leader of the Opposition said that she was going to get better week on week—she already has in the last two weeks by not turning up. I am just wondering when she is going to give the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), a go.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I am proud and honoured to say that I have served this country as a reservist Parachute Regiment soldier. That is why I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our service members and their families during Armed Forces Week. This Labour Government have announced the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. Will the Deputy Prime Minister set out how the Government will rebuild Britain and secure our defence for the future?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his service. He is absolutely right—our armed forces represent the very best of Britain, and put their lives on the line for us every day. It is our responsibility to support those who defend us, so we are delivering the biggest sustained boost to defence spending since the end of the cold war. The strategic defence review sets out our vision for defence, driving jobs and prosperity and renewing the nation's contract with those who serve to secure Britain into the future.

Q7. [904867] Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): It is a pleasure to be asking the right hon. Lady another question at Prime Minister's questions, although just the one this time. There has been a proliferation of houses in multiple occupation in my constituency, in places such as Potters Bar and Borehamwood. Quiet residential streets such as Tiverton Road and Organ Hall Road are being blighted by family houses being converted into houses in multiple occupation, leading to a surge in antisocial behaviour and parking problems. May I therefore urge the right hon. Lady to look at enhancing the powers of local councils to stop these kinds of developments where they are not wanted?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I do miss our exchanges. I hope the right hon. Gentleman has been wearing his factor 50—he knows how it can get for us gingers in the hot weather. He also knows that local authorities have planning powers to limit the proliferation of small houses being turned into houses in multiple occupation. His Government left a housing crisis, and I am getting on with fixing that through the 1.5 million homes that we are going to deliver.

Kanishka Narayan (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): Just this week, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) put a singular burning injustice first: the plight of overseas billionaires who pay too much tax. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with the hon. Member's priority, or does she agree with me that Reform UK doing sweetheart deals with the super-rich is a betrayal of British working people?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I was asked about the hon. Member for Clacton's mathematics the other week, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right—the mask has slipped again this week. The hon. Member for Clacton

demands billions more in unfunded tax cuts for the very richest while he marches through the Lobby in the House of Commons to vote against sick pay for the lowest earners. We know what would pay for Reform's tax breaks for overseas billionaires; it would be tax hikes on working people and patients being charged to seeing their doctor. Labour will not let that happen.

Q9. [904869] **Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): When my young constituent Axel was given his education, health and care plan a year ago, his primary school place was withdrawn, with no replacement offered. His nursery allowed him to stay on until Christmas, but since then, apart from a short break at a school, he has had nothing. He is at home with his mum, with no alternative provision for younger children, who cannot travel a long way. His mother also cannot go to work. I welcome the White Paper in the autumn, but can the Deputy Prime Minister commit to Axel's mum—and the parents of Freddie, Ieuan, Ethan, and the other 640 children with special education needs and disabilities with no school to go to—that there will be somewhere for them in September?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am really sorry to hear about Axel and the other cases that the hon. Member mentioned. Those with special educational needs deserve proper support and should not be left at home. We are determined to fix the SEND system and support children before issues escalate to this type of crisis point. We are investing £3.4 billion this year to deploy specialist teams across early years and primary school settings, helping to identify and respond to speech and language needs, particularly for children with SEND. We will set out our full plans on the reform of SEND this autumn, including support for the early years.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Growth needs to be delivered and felt in all parts of the country, and the infrastructure strategy, changes to the Green Book and the £1.8 billion secured for the north-east are a clear demonstration of our commitment to that. In my area, Moor Farm roundabout is blocking growth and causing misery for people locally. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that improving infrastructure in the north, like at Moor Farm, will show how we are investing in all parts of the country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The previous Government did not have a plan for areas like the north-east. I know she has been a champion for the Moor Farm roundabout. This Government are changing the situation by investing £15.6 billion in local transport projects across the country, opening up access to jobs and improving living standards, including in the north-east.

Q10. [904870] **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Labour has invited proposals from cities to expand their boundaries, and the Mayor of Leicester wants to expand the city to swallow up areas like Oadby, Wigston and Great Glen, but local people do not want that, and thousands have signed our petition against it. It is not just about the higher council tax; they want to keep their own local identity. Will the Deputy Prime Minister rule out this totally unwelcome city takeover? If she does want to press ahead with it, will she at least give us a say in a local referendum, so that we can tell her again that we do not want this?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Well, what the Conservatives were told at the general election was, "We don't want you." [Interruption.] All right, I meant "them": the hon. Gentleman's Government. He might have slipped through! The one thing that I will say is that the hon. Member has said about his own Government, "There's a lot of things we should have done that we didn't do." To be honest, I could not agree more—and we are getting on and doing it.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): In Armed Forces Week, will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to my former colleagues at RAF Brize Norton? I know she will share my horror that some on the Opposition Benches responded to the appalling attack on that base not by recognising the consequences of 14 years of Conservative under-investment in our defence, but by personally smearing one of our brave members of the Royal Air Force. Does she agree with me and my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) that this Labour Government will always support our armed forces, and that those shameful comments by the deputy leader of Reform, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), bring disgrace upon him and his party?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. and gallant Friend speaks with great authenticity and authority on this matter. The attack on RAF Brize Norton was disgraceful, but what was even more disgraceful was Reform blaming the commanding officer—an accomplished woman who has served her country—rather than the criminals who were responsible. That is not leadership, but we should not expect anything better from the party of the Putin apologists.

Q12. [904872] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): London boroughs are collectively facing a funding shortfall of at least £500 million for the current financial year. Despite that, the money allocated to local authorities in London by the Government's spending review fell 35% short of the amount requested by London councils. Under the Government's planned changes to local authority funding, the two councils in my constituency—Richmond and Kingston—are set to lose out even more, while the cost of funding local services continues to rise. Is it the Government's policy that London residents should continue to receive ever-increasing council tax bills, while their local authorities have less and less money to spend?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We are fixing the foundations of local government after the 14 years of austerity that were inflicted on local government, with the aiding and abetting of the hon. Lady's party. We have put record funding into local government, with multi-year settlements: we are helping local government, where the last Government ruined it.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): Digital black spots—areas without good mobile broadband connectivity—are holding communities back. In Middleton, an area that my right hon. Friend knows well as a fellow Greater Manchester MP, many local businesses and people remain cut off from the economic growth of the wider city region due to the lack of a mobile signal. How can we ensure that this Government's mission to capitalise on the promise of technology is felt in all parts of the country, including Middleton?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have experienced digital black spots as well, so I understand my hon. Friend's frustration. The industrial strategy was launched this week, and there were some great ideas to make sure that we get superfast broadband everywhere and we can all use our phones—to make sure we can get connected, whereas the last Government left us disconnected.

Q15. [904875] **Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 June. Yesterday 86 people were killed in Gaza by Israeli forces. A further 56 were shot dead while queuing for food to try to sustain themselves under the occupation of the Israeli forces. Israel stands condemned for acts of genocide, for war crimes, for its occupation of Gaza and for its activities in the west bank. Let me ask the Deputy Prime Minister two questions. Why does Britain still supply parts for the F-35 jets that have been used to

take so much life in Gaza, and how has this country got to a situation in which we stand on the wrong side of international law where war crimes and genocide are concerned? Will the Deputy Prime Minister support my private Member's Bill, calling for an independent inquiry into how our policies evolved into this parlous situation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Israel's recent action is appalling and counterproductive, and we strongly oppose the expansion of military operations, settler violence and the blocking of humanitarian aid. We have suspended free trade agreement talks and sanctioned extremists supporting settler expansion in the west bank. It is a long-standing principle that genocide is determined by competent international courts and not by Governments, and we do not sell arms directly to the Israel Defence Forces when that might breach international humanitarian law.

Nuclear-certified Aircraft Procurement

12.38 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's plan to procure nuclear-certified F-35A aircraft.

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): The UK will purchase 12 new F-35A fighter jets and join NATO's dual capable aircraft nuclear mission in a major boost for national security. The Prime Minister has announced at the NATO summit that the UK intends to buy at least a dozen of the dual capable aircraft, which can carry both nuclear and conventional weapons. The Secretary-General of NATO, Mark Rutte, said this morning:

"The UK has declared its nuclear deterrent to NATO for many decades, and I strongly welcome today's announcement that the UK will now also join NATO's nuclear mission and procure the F-35A."

The decision will support 20,000 jobs in the United Kingdom, with 15% of the global supply chain for the jets based in Britain, supporting highly skilled jobs and opportunities for working people and delivering a defence dividend across the country. The announcement responds to two recommendations in the strategic defence review: recommendation 30, that the UK commence discussions "on the potential benefits and feasibility of enhanced UK participation in NATO's nuclear mission",

and recommendation 46, on the mix of F-35B and F-35A.

The purchase represents the biggest strengthening of the UK's nuclear posture in a generation, and reintroduces a nuclear role for the Royal Air Force for the first time since the UK retired its sovereign air-launched nuclear weapons following the end of the cold war. The UK's commitment to NATO is unquestionable, as is the alliance's contribution to keeping the UK safe and secure, but we must all step up to protect the Euro-Atlantic area for generations to come.

James Cartlidge: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. You will recall that the Government's plan, announced today, to procure nuclear-certified F-35As was previously covered in *The Sunday Times* the day before the SDR was published. You therefore granted an urgent question that day on this very subject, but we received no meaningful answers at all. I hope the Minister can be more forthcoming today.

On 25 May, I wrote in the *Express* that our nuclear forces needed to be "even more resilient", including in respect of the continuous at-sea deterrent, but also,

"potentially, by diversifying our methods for delivering nuclear strike."

That is because we have to recognise the threat posed by Russia in particular, and its ability to operate nuclear weapons at tactical and theatre levels. To deter effectively, we must be able to do the same.

In principle, then, I welcome the announcement, but I have the following questions. What is the anticipated in-service date for the 12 F-35As? Will they already be nuclear certified, or will that occur after delivery? We note that the 12 F-35As will be ordered instead of 12 F-35Bs, but will the Government still order the remaining F-35Bs

as planned? How will the F-35As be air-to-air refuelled, given that the current RAF refuelling capability is probe and drogue? On operational sovereignty, we are fully committed to our strong military partnership with the United States, but given that the announcement is about diversity of delivery, has the Department given any thought to additional tactical options for which we have greater industrial input, such as Storm Shadow and Typhoon?

Ironically, it was Lord Robertson, as Defence Secretary in 1998, who removed our last air-launched nuclear capabilities. It is noteworthy that, as one of the authors of the SDR, he said to the Select Committee recently that the authors were

"not terribly enthusiastic about it."

That is before we get to the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary voted against the renewal of Trident. On this side of the House, we wholeheartedly back our nuclear deterrent. Does this situation not show why we need a robust plan to get to 3% on defence in this Parliament, rather than Labour's smoke-and-mirrors and lack of a fully funded plan to properly increase defence spending in this Parliament?

Maria Eagle: On the in-service date, as the Secretary of State said this morning, we are hopeful that the aircraft will start delivering before the end of the decade. On the tranche being ordered that will now include 12 F-35As, yes, we will still be ordering the remaining F-35Bs, so there will be 15 extra F-35Bs in the next tranche. On refuelling, this is a NATO mission, and NATO will of course be able to do the air-to-air refuelling. It is quite normal for different allies to contribute their different capabilities, whether nuclear capable or conventional, to NATO's nuclear mission.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I welcome the announcement and, on behalf of the Defence Committee, I welcome the additional detail that has been added to the SDR. It is imperative that we recognise and close some of the gaps in our national defence, including the size and shape of our combat air force, and this announcement does part of that. But 14 years of under-investment mean that some of the choices about basing and complementary capabilities will bring some challenges; will the Minister provide additional detail on how some of them may be addressed?

Maria Eagle: I am pleased that my hon. Friend is supportive of the announcement. As the House is aware, this Government have increased our defence spending by more than at any time since the end of the cold war. The increase is fully funded, unlike some of the fantasy plans of the previous Government.

James Cartlidge: It is 2.4%—less than we spent.

Maria Eagle: We have shown how we will increase spending to 2.6% of GDP by 2027. That is fully funded, and we have made clear how we will get to 3% in the next Parliament, as conditions allow. The announcement was made today at NATO of a 5% target; all allies will focus on providing that funding in due course. Over the next 10 years, NATO will check every year, as it always does, whether its requirements are being met, and we fully expect to be able to meet them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is clear that we have entered a new and uncertain era. Putin's imperialism represents a once-in-a-generation threat to our security. We must maintain the effectiveness of the UK's independent nuclear deterrent to stop Putin or anyone else launching a nuclear attack. It remains the ultimate guarantor of Britain's security.

We support more investment in our defence capability, but we need more detail on the proposed use cases for the F-35As, and on their relation to our existing strong deterrent through Trident. We also need a clear explanation of why the Government have chosen this priority over others. There are still huge gaps in the armed forces, including as a result of 10,000 troops being cut by the Conservatives, and those gaps need filling if we are to show Putin that we are serious. Can the Minister confirm whether the Government will move further, faster, in rebuilding the strength and size of the other essential guarantor of UK security and deterrence—the British Army?

Maria Eagle: I am glad that the hon. Lady supports these measures. As I have already made clear, this decision is not at the expense of buying more F-35Bs, which we will do. The extent to which we fully implement the strategic defence review, and the order in which we implement its recommendations, will be decided through our investment plan, which is being worked on now and will be fully published and available in due course. There is no doubt that, as she says, the threats we face are increasing. We need to make sure that we are capable of deterring those threats, with our allies in NATO, and this decision will assist us in that. By joining the NATO nuclear mission, we will be able to play our part. As we said in the SDR, our policy is “NATO first”, and our commitment to NATO is unshakeable.

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): I commend the Government on the prompt procurement of the F-35A fixed-wing, which is of huge strategic importance, but this is already creating great uncertainty in Lancashire—in Chorley, Mr Speaker, and in my constituency of South Ribble—where the workforce of the Typhoon Eurofighter live. Can the Minister please assure me that the Government will still be constant in looking to procure the Typhoon aircraft for the RAF? Also, with our NATO partners all increasing their defence spending, is there not a huge opportunity to urge them to procure the Typhoon Eurofighter as well?

Maria Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. What we are talking about does not of course preclude any support for the Typhoon. We are very committed to our Typhoons, and we are committed to upgrading them, as per our existing plans. We are engaged in many efforts to export, and one would hope that some of them will come off at some point in the not-too-distant future.

We are very keen on making sure that the skills and abilities of the workforce at Warton are fully used. We of course have the future combat air system and the global combat air programme, which will use those skills in the longer term. Many people working for BAE Systems—not at Warton, but at Samlesbury—make parts for the F-35, and I think they will be pleased to hear the announcement today.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I join Conservative Front Benchers in welcoming the answer to the urgent question, although maybe it should have been a statement. May I ask about autonomy and national sovereignty over the weapons system that will be deployed from this aircraft? There is considerable press reporting that it will be dual key, meaning that the Brits cannot use it without American say-so. Is that true? If so, why has the Ministry of Defence elected to take that option, rather than having full national sovereignty?

Maria Eagle: We have a fully sovereign national nuclear capability—a continuous at-sea deterrent—that is dedicated totally to NATO and to protecting the European homeland. The current decision is about joining the NATO nuclear mission. Any deployment under that mission requires the agreement of the NATO nuclear planning group of 31 allies, who act as a senior body on nuclear matters in the alliance. Under that governance arrangement, the UK will always retain the right to decide whether or not to participate.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): May I say how much I welcome this announcement, and the extra capability that it will bring? Will the Minister outline how this decision will support jobs across the UK, particularly for those in my constituency of North East Derbyshire who work in defence?

Maria Eagle: The procurement of the F-35As and the next tranche of F-35Bs will support 20,000 jobs across the UK, with over 100 UK-based suppliers contributing to the F-35 programme. That demonstrates yet again that defence can be an engine for growth, because these are good jobs across all parts of the nations and regions of the UK, including in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I fully welcome the announcement, and I thank the Minister for making the statement. In an age of uncertainty about the reliability of our US ally, it seems an odd choice to be leaning into them, in the sense that we will be dropping dual-key, US-made munitions from these planes. It makes more sense if this is a stepping stone to a fully sovereign UK capability, but that would raise questions about the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Will the Minister comment on whether this is a stepping stone to a fully sovereign UK capability?

Maria Eagle: It is not such a step. We are joining the NATO nuclear mission. We have just published a strategic defence review that sets out that our defence posture is “NATO first”. We are trying to support our allies in NATO in deterring any threat that might come from possible adversaries; that is what this is about. It is not a stepping stone to anything else.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I also welcome this announcement of increased capability—the F-35As that will be brought to the defence of this country. This announcement, which is in line with the strategic defence review, shows that this country is once again serious about defence. What response have we had from our NATO allies to our joining NATO's nuclear mission?

Maria Eagle: I welcome my hon. Friend's support. We have had strong support from our allies in NATO. In my reply to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), I read out the response of the Secretary-General, who was full of praise.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister is well aware of my interest in the F-35 programme. Lockheed Martin manufactures around 150 jets a year, and there are nearly 600 on order by everyone from Switzerland to Singapore. On top of that, there are 1,200 still to be delivered to the US air force, so whereabouts are we in the queue? She mentioned that we would expect the first deliveries before the end of decade, but are we cutting to the front of the line? Given that the orders from some allies are not due to be fulfilled until 2032, will delivery of all 12 planes be completed within a decade? On refuelling, will she clarify that we have no sovereign air-to-air refuelling capability outside of a NATO mission?

Maria Eagle: I know that the hon. Gentleman has a very close interest in these matters because I have to answer all his parliamentary questions, and I welcome that interest. As the Secretary of State said this morning, we hope that we can start receiving delivery of these planes before the end of the decade. The hon. Gentleman is right that any manufacturing capability has queues, but orders are subject to contractual discussions and arrangements can be made, so that is what we are aiming for. Obviously, we will keep the House informed of how we get on.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the news that our deterrence capability will be enhanced and made more flexible as we take another step on the escalatory ladder. We are talking about a US aircraft with substantial UK industrial participation, a US weapon, US-UK decision making and a NATO mission. Does the Minister agree that this is a powerful statement about the strength of the special relationship between the US and the UK, and the strength of the NATO alliance?

Maria Eagle: I agree very much with both points. The decision indicates the strength of our alliance with the US, as well as the growing strength of NATO.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I do not understand industrially or militarily why the F-35 is the default choice. If the F-35 can be delivered only by the end of the decade, why is Tempest, which is more than capable of being delivered by the mid-2030s, not being considered? That is if we agree with the decision to be part of the nuclear sharing enterprise, and I do not agree with that, because no other nuclear-armed state takes part in nuclear sharing, no other P5 member delivers any other nation's nuclear deterrent, and no nuclear power in the world delivers anyone else's nuclear weapons.

Maria Eagle: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. We are committed to buying 138 F-35s in the next tranche of F-35s. We have substituted 12 F-35As for what would have been 12 F-35Bs, so there is that change to the mix, as recommended in the strategic defence review. One of the recommendations was that we should

consider the mix, and we have considered it. Another was that we should rejoin the NATO nuclear mission; we have considered that and consulted, and we are acting. We have already implemented two of the major recommendations of the SDR. Given the welcome that the SDR had from Members around the House, we should all be glad to see the implementation of those recommendations.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the welcome announcement of the F-35A programme, which comes at a time when this Government are increasing defence spending at a rate not seen since the cold war. BAE Systems, in my constituency, is one of the companies leading on the programme to support avionics for our forces, and there is an outstanding invitation for the Minister to visit the company. Will she confirm that this announcement will mean a significant increase in jobs and opportunities, including apprenticeships for local people, young people, and constituents across my area and the country?

Maria Eagle: Yes. I have been reminded of my promise to visit; that is on the list, and the visit will move closer to the top of the list after today. I agree with my hon. Friend. If we are to deter potential aggressors and adversaries, it is key that we implement the findings of the SDR and increase our capability, and that is what we are doing.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I encourage the Government not to be at all bashful about the fact that the decision on whether one of these weapons will be used—heaven forbid—will be an American one? There is a long tradition of American nuclear weapons being based in NATO countries, not least the Cruise and Pershing missiles of the 1980s, which helped to end the cold war. Will the Minister confirm that not only does this fill a gap in our deterrence spectrum, but it reasserts the commitment of the United States to the defence of the other NATO countries?

Maria Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman is correct that the decision does all those things, and he has made a very good point.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I welcome the acquisition of the F-35As, not least for the impact it will have on industry and jobs in my constituency. In answer to the question about refuelling, the Minister described very well how this new capability meshes with existing NATO capability. Will she say a little more about how this capability supports the defence of not only the UK, but our NATO allies?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is correct. In addition to the industrial benefits that we ought to glean from increasing the F-35 order, it is absolutely right that it strengthens NATO. That is what the strategic defence review said that we should focus on, and NATO first is what we are doing. Rejoining the NATO nuclear mission is a striking commitment. We accepted the recommendation to make that commitment and we are now implementing it.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I also welcome this announcement, but can we talk about money? We already know that 20% of our defence budget is spent on the nuclear deterrent. It is disproportionately

expensive. If we are now extending the nuclear capability with these airdrop weapons, what impact will that have on the budget for the rest of our conventional armed forces?

Maria Eagle: I welcome the hon. Lady's support. The F-35As are actually cheaper than the F-35Bs, so replacing 12 F-35B orders with 12 F-35A orders is a cheaper option and she does not have to be too concerned about the direct impact of the decision on budgets. The total cost of the next procurement tranche, including the 12 F-35A models, will be an estimated £3.2 billion, but these are plans that were there and that we are now funding.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the Rugby No. 1 branch of the Royal British Legion, who I believe are in Tesco this week for a service, and the Hillmorton branch of the RBL, who will be holding a ceremony on Armed Forces Day? I was pleased to see that this commitment will support 20,000 jobs across the UK in the years to come, with over 100 UK-based suppliers contributing to the F-35 programme. Does she agree that this demonstrates that our national security and economic security go hand in hand, and that this Government will deliver that?

Maria Eagle: I commend my hon. Friend's Royal British Legion branches who are getting on with what many of us are doing in Armed Forces Week, which is attending events that show our appreciation for our armed forces in every part of the UK. He is correct to say that, in addition to deterring our enemy and supporting NATO and our allies more strongly, there is growth potential and economic benefit from the spending that we put into our armed forces and our capabilities.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The proposed NATO 5% target will be split into two categories: a new, broader set of defence-related items at up to 1.5% of GDP, alongside a commitment to spend at least 3.5% of GDP on traditional defence. Will the Minister confirm the UK Government's commitment to article 2 of the NATO treaty on the development of peaceful and friendly international relations? Will she also confirm that funding for UN peacekeeping missions qualifies as defence spending to NATO and that this budget will not lose out on the increase in the MOD budget?

Maria Eagle: I would argue that defence spending is there to create peace, not to fight wars. It is cheaper to deter wars than it is to end up fighting them, so I would argue that our commitment to 2.6%, as it will be by 2027, to 3% in the next Parliament and then on to the 5% target—including the 1.5% broader definition—by 2035 shows a very strong commitment across NATO to do just that. Let's deter these wars.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's response to the urgent question. The purchase of 12 new F-35A aircraft will increase our nuclear capabilities and shows that our commitment to NATO is unshakeable. As the chair of the Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire all-party parliamentary group, I am always on the lookout for opportunities for growth in my region. Given that this announcement supports 20,000 jobs and places 15% of the global supply chain

in the UK, will the Minister say how that will benefit my region and how she will ensure that all the investment, jobs and growth opportunities will be spread to each part of the UK?

Maria Eagle: I cannot say precisely whether any of the 100 companies that are UK-based suppliers on this programme are in my hon. Friend's constituency or his region—I will have to go away and look it up—but I do know that these procurements spread prosperity around all regions and nations of the UK. That is one great thing about the defence industry: it provides jobs and growth across the UK.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I welcome the Minister for Defence Procurement's announcement. This is welcome news for our country. Given that in-service dates for key pieces of military equipment are often later than predicted, has she given any thought to training our pilots in advance of delivery, either on a simulator or by embedding them into a unit that operates these planes around the world, so that we are ready to hit the ground running as soon as they are delivered?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is correct. Anything that can bring in-service dates forward slightly by planning and training in advance is something that we will be in favour of trying to do. These days it is much more the case that such arrangements are thought of at the same time as the procurement, so I am certain that we will be on to the point that he makes.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Following on from the previous question, I have to declare that I have flown an F-35—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"] It was a simulator. Dramatic pause there. There are companies in Edinburgh that are involved in the supply chain and I was keen to see what they were constructing.

I welcome the Minister's leadership on this. It is a fantastic sign that we are absolutely committed to NATO, and it is also a fantastic advertisement for our young people who are looking for a great career. They need look no further than the RAF. Much of the discussion has focused on the nuclear capabilities of this aircraft, but can she confirm that it could have a much wider role and be put to much greater use?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is correct. This is a dual-capability aircraft, which will not only be used to fly NATO nuclear missions but be available to do training and all the other things that our fantastic pilots in the RAF do.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I feel like a lone voice, but in an increasingly unstable world I personally find it quite harrowing that the British Air Force might be flying planes that can drop nuclear bombs and where that might lead. Can the Minister tell us whether, under this agreement, tactical nuclear weapons will be stored on UK soil; and if so, what safety and security measures the Government will be undertaking for their storage?

Maria Eagle: I am not sure I quite understood that question, Mr Speaker. What I can say, though, is that we do not normally confirm or deny where nuclear weapons might be stored. It is not something that we have

[*Maria Eagle*]

ever done. I think that is what the hon. Member was asking, but I am not absolutely sure. I would be happy to speak to her afterwards if I have got that question wrong.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Have any alternative platforms been considered for the potential delivery of a tactical nuclear weapon? In particular, have the Government looked at the Astute class attack submarine as an alternative or additional platform, or at its successor, the SSN-AUKUS?

Maria Eagle: We are not seeking to widen our range of nuclear capability. We are joining the NATO nuclear mission and contributing to that. As I said earlier, this is not some kind of stepping stone to acquiring tactical nuclear weapons. Our nuclear deterrent is our submarine-operated continuous at-sea deterrent—CASD—and that is how it will continue.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The prospect of UK fighter jets carrying Donald Trump's nuclear bombs cannot be anybody's vision of security. This decision flies in the face of our obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. It ties us further into a US military that cannot even keep its own classified intelligence secure. It ties us further to a Trump Administration who are the very definition of a loose cannon. Given the inescapable truth that nuclear weapons make the world more dangerous, and that normalising tactical weapons is incredibly reckless, how can the Minister possibly justify this decision?

Maria Eagle: First, what I have announced today is compliant with the non-proliferation treaty—

Ellie Chowns: The letter, not the spirit!

Maria Eagle: It is compliant with the non-proliferation treaty. The NATO nuclear mission has as a governance the NATO nuclear planning group of 31 allies—everybody gets a say—so it is not a question of it being Donald Trump or any other US President's nuclear bomb. This is a NATO mission to defend Europe and to do what NATO was set up to do: deter another war.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): On 6 January, I raised with the Minister in this Chamber the fact that refurbishing Typhoons will not touch the sides of maintaining the 6,000-strong workforce at Warton, in my constituency, and that relying on export orders that have not been secured will not keep the workforce in work for now, before the GCAP comes online. When I asked the Minister whether she would give a delayed Christmas present of an order for 25 Typhoons, she replied:

“It might not be a Christmas present—I do not know when his birthday is—but a present some time later.”—[*Official Report*, 6 January 2025; Vol. 759, c. 586.]

We were awaiting an order of Typhoons for the Warton site in the strategic defence review, but it turned out to contain an empty box instead of a present. If the Minister was not simply buying time and giving false hope to the workforce then, when will we see the order of 25 Typhoon jets for the RAF?

Maria Eagle: I do not think the previous Government were committed to buying Typhoons, so I do not see why the hon. Gentleman should be so outraged by the fact that after less than a year, we have not yet ordered any more Typhoons. We are committed to the Typhoon fleet that we have. The buying of any more will have to be considered in the investment plan that is being worked on now. Other European nations are buying some Typhoons, so there is some work there, although I know they are not assembled at Warton if other nations buy them. We also have export orders that we are trying to pursue. Although I cannot advance what I said to the hon. Gentleman previously, it is something that I am very conscious of, and we will continue to see what can be done about the future of our Typhoon fleet. We are committed to the fleet that we have and to the upgrades that we need.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): In response to an earlier question, I was pleased to hear the Minister commit to seeking to compress the timetable between delivery and the in-service date. I believe I heard the Minister say that the delivery date was the back end of the 2020s. Can she confirm the anticipated in-service date?

Maria Eagle: I cannot confirm the anticipated in-service date beyond saying that we are hopeful that we will get the aircraft as soon as possible and that we will be able to use them as soon as possible thereafter, subject to all the usual requirements to get something in service. That is as good as I can do for the hon. Gentleman today, I am afraid.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Minister just confirmed that the UK adheres to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. That treaty requires the declared nuclear-armed states not to allow proliferation and to take steps towards nuclear disarmament. What the Minister has announced today is an increase in nuclear capability, with the construction of new nuclear warheads that can obviously be used anywhere in the world by airdropping them. Can she explain how it is possible to say that this announcement is in compliance with the NPT when it is so obviously and clearly the very opposite of that?

Maria Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong, I am afraid. It is in compliance with the non-proliferation treaty. The NATO nuclear mission would carry US nuclear weapons, which are already subject to the non-proliferation treaty. What we are announcing today is the buying of aircraft that are capable of assisting with that mission, not the purchasing of new nuclear weapons. I hope that is clear for the right hon. Gentleman.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly, the aim is to enhance what NATO has as a defensive structure, so will the Minister confirm that this is not a substitute for any of our other NATO allies withdrawing aircraft from service, and that we are adding to the potential cover against threat in case we are attacked?

Maria Eagle: We are adding some of our capability to the NATO nuclear mission by purchasing these weapons, which has been welcomed by our allies and by the NATO Secretary-General as improving the position for the NATO nuclear mission.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I thank the Minister for her statement. Following the announcement of the purchase of these 12 F-35As, I have read concerns expressed by defence analysts this morning over the size of this fleet and whether it truly represents either a capable offensive launch or, indeed, a capable deterrent. In earlier statements, I think the Minister has said both that these F-35s are part of the current F-35 purchase envelope and, potentially, that these F-35s are in addition to those currently on order. I would be grateful for clarification on that point. Finally, could the Minister offer any reflection on the effect that this purchase will have on our commitment to GCAP?

Maria Eagle: For clarity, I did not say that this order was in addition to our already committed tranche of F-35s. I said that we were substituting what would have been 12 F-35Bs with 12 F-35As, so it is not in addition. We already have 39, and we have already purchased 48, not all of which have been delivered. This is a tranche of the next 27, 12 of which will be F-35As and 15 of which will be F-35Bs. It is part of acquiring the next tranche of F-35s that Governments of all stripes have been committed to over the time that the F-35 has been in production.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I am sure the Minister recognises that in addition to this plan to diversify the deterrent launch method, the UK must ensure that our strategic CASD enterprise has an effective and productive industrial base, delivering faster maintenance times. Can she therefore confirm whether these aircraft will be budgeted from the ringfenced Defence Nuclear Enterprise budget?

Maria Eagle: The ringfenced Defence Nuclear Enterprise budget is not for purchasing aircraft; it is for dealing with our submarines. It is a fair question—I hope that that is a clear answer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers, which have been positive and strong—it is just what this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland needs today. I welcome the news that these jets are to be procured. Having watched the Red Arrows' intricate manoeuvres in Newtownards on Armed Forces Day last Saturday, I know that our skilled pilots are world class, and they deserve the tools to do their vital job. I recently read that the Royal Navy has regularly failed to meet recruitment targets since 2011. What can the Minister do to get boots on planes, on boats and on land by enhancing recruitment, particularly in our Royal Navy, at this very important time?

Maria Eagle: Part of our commitment to defence reform is to try to improve our procurement and acquisition to ensure that we meet our contract aspirations more quickly and to give us more control of the budget and more direct lines of accountability so that it will be clearer, if things are going wrong, that there should be intervention. The defence reform agenda that the Department is undertaking should improve our acquisition and procurement arrangements.

Mr Speaker: I call John Cooper.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the rare opportunity against the run of play to follow my near neighbour, the hon.

Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) from Strangford. Mark Rutte, the NATO Secretary-General, has recently congratulated President Trump on his “decisive action in Iran”, which he says “makes us all safer”. Will the Minister take the opportunity to do what no one in government has so far done and congratulate the Americans on taking out the Iranian nuclear programme? If not, will she explain why we are out of step not only with the Americans, but also now with NATO?

Maria Eagle: I think it has been fairly clear from proceedings in the House that the Government have said that we agree that Iran should not have a nuclear weapon, but that, in this instance, we are very keen that diplomacy is the way forward.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): In Armed Forces Week, I want to thank our brave servicemen and women who do so much to keep us safe. I welcome the Minister's response to this urgent question tabled by His Majesty's Opposition, but can she give us a cast-iron reassurance that our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent will be supported and maintained by His Majesty's Government, and that they will not contemplate any reduction in the submarine fleet from four to three submarines, which was alarmingly floated by the third party not so long ago?

Maria Eagle: I and the Government have been very clear about our commitment to the continuous at-sea deterrent and to procuring the new Dreadnought boats and the new warhead, so I can give the hon. Member an absolute assurance on that.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): The UK has 225 warheads and a number of nuclear-capable submarines that are in a position to fire at any adversary at short notice. We are now investing in aircraft that can deploy nuclear weapons. Given that we are a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty, will that not be seen as an aggravating feature by nations that are also subscribed to it?

Maria Eagle: No, our continuous at-sea deterrent has been the policy of both governing parties for many years and that has not changed. The announcement today is about our joining the NATO nuclear mission, which carries US weapons that are already accounted for under the non-proliferation treaty. This is not about increasing the number of nuclear weapons that we hold, so it is not, therefore, a breach of the non-proliferation treaty.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): As a member of the RAF contingent of the armed forces parliamentary scheme under Wing Commander Basco Smith, may I take this opportunity to say that the application window is open for next season? If any Member has not applied to it, they should consider doing so. Recently, we visited Marham, the current home of the F-35s. Can the Minister update us on what steps have been taken to remove the risk of attack on centralised basing, and to continue to invest in alternative dispersal bases for our aircraft? While these additional frames are welcome, will the Minister confirm that they are being matched by concurrent investment in the training of pilots and additional crews in the advanced skillsets that will be required for these operations?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is correct that one cannot just buy aircraft and not train the relevant people—whether they be pilots, engineers or ground crew—to deal with the necessity of looking after them and operating them. On the matter of security, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces made a statement the day before yesterday about the review that is being conducted into the security of our bases, and I hope that that will be reported in due course.

Points of Order

1.22 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday, the High Court ordered a £60,000 cap on contribution to the Government's legal fees by campaigners seeking justice for the change in the pension age—the so-called WASPI women. This is a major breakthrough for that campaign, which has had support from across the House, including from the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), who is in his place, the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) and many others. You will recall, Mr Speaker, that the ombudsman highlighted maladministration by the Department for Work and Pensions, and no Government of any party have stepped up to the mark, including this one. Have you had any notice, Mr Speaker, that the Government will make a statement to the House to see whether an appropriate offer can be made to these women to end this injustice?

Mr Speaker: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I have had no notice that the Government will come to the House to make a statement. What I can say is that he has certainly put his points on the record, and I know that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what he had to say.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You may remember that on 23 April, I asked a question in Prime Minister's questions about blood donations and how people were being turned away because of low haemoglobin levels.

The week before, I had put down some parliamentary questions about diversity and blood donation deferrals. When I got the responses back, I found that up to 70% of black donors were being turned away because of low haemoglobin levels. I had wanted to raise this matter with the Minister directly in a meeting two weeks earlier. This meeting was attended by leaders from the NHS Blood and Transplant service. A few days later, they pulled the answers to the questions that I had presented to them.

NHS Blood and Transplant's own website states that it can meet the Ro blood type only 50% of the time, which means that black blood donations are extremely important. Since 12 May—for six or seven weeks—I have been trying to get answers to my questions, which I had been told were incorrect. I have been writing to Ministers and to NHS Blood and Transplant. The best that NHSBT could do today was to send me a letter to say that it was sorry, and that it would give a response to me next week. That is outrageous. NHSBT was talking about quality of data, but if any agency should look at its quality of data—given the important service that it provides—it should be NHSBT.

I have a number of other questions as well, but NHSBT needs to understand how much everybody is doing. A few weeks ago, it was National Blood Donor Week and people across the country donated so much that the website crashed. *[Interruption.]* People are doing their bit, but the same cannot be said of NHSBT.

Mr Speaker: One of us will have to give way, and it will not be me.

First, let me reassure the hon. Lady that I am very, very concerned about questions not being answered in a reasonable timeframe. I think that is totally unacceptable. It is also totally unacceptable to give the wrong answers and for the Department not to take such questions seriously. I take them very seriously. I know that the hon. Lady would not bring this as a point of order if she did not have real concerns. I know that her concerns are genuine, which is something that I am very concerned about. I know that she will keep in touch with me.

I say to the hon. Lady that, after everything she has said, she should consider putting in for an Adjournment debate where this matter could be discussed more widely. I think that that would be a good way to deal with it. I am sure that the Table Office can help the hon. Lady. If answers are not forthcoming, I ask her to please come back to me, perhaps with another point of order, but I must impress on her that she should consider an Adjournment debate, because I genuinely believe that this matter needs to be aired.

I recognise that many Members, from all parts of the House, are struggling to get questions answered and to receive letters. That is not acceptable. I say to those in Government Departments that they must get on with the job that they are there to do. This is all about looking after the Back Benchers of this House.

BILLS PRESENTED

ARMED FORCES (DEPLOYMENT OUTSIDE THE UK) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Calum Miller presented a Bill to require parliamentary approval for the deployment of UK armed forces outside the UK; to provide for exemptions from that requirement in cases of emergency or in respect of compliance with treaty obligations; to make provision for retrospective parliamentary approval in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday on 11 July, and to be printed (Bill 276).

FESTIVALS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Max Wilkinson presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to enter into negotiations with the European Union for the purpose of agreeing a visa waiver for UK artists and musicians performing at festivals in EU member states; to make provision to facilitate the movement of artists and musicians, and of their equipment, between the EU and the UK to perform at festivals; to require the Secretary of State to publish a Festivals Strategy; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July, and to be printed (Bill 277).

Criminal Cases Review (Public Petition)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23) 1.27 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the general public to petition the Criminal Cases Review Commission to review sentences that the petitioners believe to be either too harsh or too lenient; to make provision about the review of such sentences; to make provision about the referral of such cases to the Court of Appeal or the Supreme Court; and for connected purposes.

Before looking at the provisions, I ask you, Mr Speaker, to join me in a journey of the imagination to a distant, respected democracy, where there is an elected leader, an independent judiciary that is respected and a respected legal system, and where, historically, there has been confidence among the people of this democracy in that judicial and legal system. Then imagine that a bad event occurs, and the elected leader of that distant democracy effectively instructs the judiciary to impose the harshest possible sentences on potential transgressors.

Imagine a scenario where someone in a fit of anger puts out a bad, offensive and inappropriate tweet for a few hours, then calms down, apologises and withdraws it, but because of that tweet is then charged and sentenced in a very serious way—potentially receiving a sentence of some 31 months, which might be significantly longer than the sentence given to a shoplifter, robber, mugger or drug dealer and the like. For people to have confidence in a legal system, sentences must be comparative.

Imagine that while in prison that individual is the recipient of violent maltreatment, including being manhandled to the ground and handcuffed to the point of having significant bruises five days later. Imagine that they are then being dragged up not one, not two but three flights of stairs to the naughty girls wing, when they had been a model prisoner and had been promised to be taken to the good girls wing. Mr Speaker, you may think that that must be happening in some distant democracy and cannot be valid here, but it is with regret that I must bring you back to the reality: that scenario has occurred in the United Kingdom in the last few months.

That is why I am bringing this criminal cases review Bill to the House under the ten-minute rule Bill process. It is known outside this House as Lucy's Bill. Confidence in our judicial system and the sentences that are handed out is vital. I believe that the public want to trust our system, but justice works when it is natural, fair and decent and when the public believe that sentences are appropriate. If we lose that, potentially we lose everything.

We are all human, and even noble, experienced and wise judges can get things wrong, and there is a system of appeal. But the provisions of the Bill are so important because maybe the public would have ever more confidence in a vibrant democracy and our justice system if there were some kind of treble check, with safeguards over sentences, but without being able to impinge on the original judgment following a case. Let us say that 500 members of the public sign a petition to ask the Criminal Cases Review Commission to reconsider a sentence, and the commission, within eight weeks, felt that the sentence was too lenient or too harsh, it could then be referred to an appropriate court.

[Richard Tice]

That would give people extra trust and confidence in the fairness of our system and the comparative appropriateness of sentences. I believe that people would then feel that this is a democracy and a justice system that works for all, with the appropriate safeguards. It is for that reason that I bring the Bill to the House. I believe that it is worthy of further debate and consideration.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Richard Tice, Nigel Farage, Lee Anderson, Sarah Pochin and James McMurdock present the Bill.

Richard Tice accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July, and to be printed (Bill 275).

Estimates Day

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

Criminal Justice

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Ministry of Justice:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £8,221,872,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,367,223,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £8,813,378,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Sir Nicholas Dakin.*)

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

1.34 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this important debate on the spending of the Ministry of Justice on criminal justice.

An effective criminal justice system is vital to the proper functioning of a democratic society. An ineffective criminal justice system presents grave risks for both social and economic stability. We are at a pivotal moment for the health of our criminal justice system, with prisons operating at close to full capacity, coupled with a backlog in the Crown courts of over 74,000 cases. Investment and reform are required.

The Ministry of Justice suffered some of the most severe budget cuts of any Department during the years of Tory austerity. In 2023-24, its resource expenditure level was 11% less in real terms than it had been in 2010-11. I therefore welcome the Labour Government's investment in the criminal justice system, announced through the main estimates and the spending review. The main estimates confirmed that the MOJ's day-to-day spending is set to increase by £793 million or 6.5%, which includes further investment in the Prison and Probation Service and the Courts and Tribunals Service. The MOJ's investment capital spending is also set to increase by £351 million or over 20%, largely driven by investment in creating new prison places and major projects to maintain court capacity and invest in digital systems and security measures.

The spending review also announced £7 billion to be allocated between 2024-25 and 2029-30 to support the delivery of 14,000 urgently needed new prison places by 2031, and an increase of up to £700 million a year for the Probation Service by 2028-29 compared with 2025-26. This is especially important given the recommendations made by David Gauke's independent sentencing review, which I will come to in a moment. The spending review also announced up to £450 million a year of additional investment for the courts system by 2028-29, aimed at increasing Crown court sitting days and implementing the forthcoming recommendations from Sir Brian Leveson's independent review of the criminal courts, which is set to deliver its first report next month.

Combining the estimates and the spending review presents a largely positive picture for investment in the MOJ. The estimate for resource expenditure in 2025-26 is 14% more than the spending plans for 2024-25. This increase may help to offset some of the underfunding that the Department was subject to in the 2010s. The estimate for capital expenditure in 2025-26 is 32% more than the plans for the year 2024-25. This will be a record high level of capital expenditure for the MOJ over the course of a financial year. It remains to be seen whether the funding will be enough to address the challenges that the criminal justice system faces.

In the interests of time, I will focus on three key areas: prisons and probation, the courts and legal aid. His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service is the largest body within the MOJ in terms of expenditure. It makes up 47% of the MOJ's day-to-day spending budget and in the 2025-26 main estimate will make up 82% of its planned capital spending. The prison population has more than doubled over the last 30 years and stands at around 88,000. It continues to grow year on year and is at a record high. If things continue as they are, the prison population will be at 93,500 by September 2026 and over 100,000 by September 2028, and there will not be sufficient places.

The MOJ cites the following reasons for the increase: an increase in police charging activity and flow into the courts; an increase in people on remand, who now make up an astonishing 20% of the prison population; and changes in sentencing policy, which keeps the more serious offenders in prison for much longer.

I welcome the Lord Chancellor's commitment to build 14,000 prison places by 2031, and I hope that will ensure that emergency measures such as SDS40, which last year saw prisoners released automatically having served 40% of their sentences, do not have to be used again. In the context of the prison capacity crisis, the Government commissioned a sentencing review, which reported last month, by David Gauke, who gave evidence to the Committee last week. Many of the review's recommendations have been accepted in principle by the Government. They include a recommendation for a new model of sentencing called the "earned progression model", which could see some prisoners serving fixed-term sentences released after a third of their sentence, dependent on their behaviour. That recommendation and others in the review are aimed at making greater use of non-custodial sentences and therefore attempting to reduce the prison population. I look forward to seeing the detail of how those recommendations will be implemented in the forthcoming sentencing Bill.

Non-custodial sentences will place an additional burden on the already struggling Probation Service, to which I will turn. But, before I do that, could I issue a cautionary note? Even if David Gauke's recommendations are wholly successful, prisons will still be full, and that has unintended consequences. It means, for example, that prisoners have to be slotted into places where those become available, and rehabilitation is more difficult. As Sky News reported recently, some prisoners are put into lower category prisons—category C and D prisons—years before they should be with regard to their sentence planning, and the prisoner escort service, which is already in a pretty parlous state, often brings prisoners late to court because it is not available at local prisons. Therefore, anything that can be done for effective community punishment and rehabilitation is clearly good.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): With 80% of offenders being reoffenders, does that not show that our current system is really broken and that we need a different approach? Does my hon. Friend agree that we have an opportunity with the sentencing review to keep our communities safer by properly addressing reoffending?

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend, who is knowledgeable on these issues, is absolutely right. We are relying on the implementation of the Gauke review's recommendations to do two things: to ensure there is capacity in the prisons for the growing number of people being sentenced in our courts; and, in the longer term, to reduce prisoner numbers through effective rehabilitation. That can take place in prisons—not in overcrowded prisons on the whole—but it can take place more effectively in the community by way of getting people back into normal daily life, which prison certainly is not.

In that vein, let me turn to the Probation Service, which will receive an additional £700 million a year to support the reforms in the sentencing review. That is a substantial increase in funding, which is intended to enable probation to supervise more people in the community and expand electronic tagging.

The Probation Service currently manages 240,000 individuals on court order or licence. Worryingly, in last year's annual report, HM inspectorate of probation labelled 10 local probation services as "requires improvement" and 14 as "inadequate". It identified staffing challenges, unmanageable workloads, deficits in casework and insufficient management of risk, public protection and safeguarding. However, it also found outstanding statutory victim work, commitment and vision from staff and some good partnership working. The Committee has seen that itself on its visit to probation services.

I will however raise my concern about the ability of Serco, the current electronic tagging provider, to deal with the dramatic increase in demand on its services that will inevitably result from the sentencing Bill. The Committee has been in frequent correspondence with the Prisons Minister to raise our concerns regarding Serco's poor performance, which has also been highlighted by Channel 4 and its "Dispatches" programme.

The Committee has identified several issues with management of the tagging contract, including substantial delays to the fitting of tags, even to serious offenders. We were shocked to learn that financial penalties have been levied on Serco every month since it took on the service in May 2024. It is unclear how Serco will be able to deal with increased demand given its unacceptable performance in managing the electronic tagging service at its current level.

I turn briefly to conditions in the prison estate. In 2023, HM chief inspector of prisons Charlie Taylor said that one in 10 prisons should be closed down. He stated that about 14 Victorian jails were so poorly designed, overcrowded and ill-equipped that they could not provide proper accommodation for prisoners. Last year, 63% of prisoners reported overcrowding. That is often with two or more prisoners in a cell that was designed for one person, with no private toilet facilities.

Drugs are an increasing problem in prisons. The Committee has covered that extensively in its "Tackling drugs in prisons" inquiry, which is due to report shortly.

[*Andy Slaughter*]

Between April 2023 and April 2024, almost 50,000 adults aged 18 and over were in alcohol and drug treatment in prisons and secure settings, which was a 7% rise compared with the previous year. In the 12 months to December 2024, there were 10,600 assaults on prison staff—violence is also on the increase in prison, which is partly a result of the unpredictable environment created by the abundance of drugs available—which is equivalent to 122 assaults per 1,000 prisoners, an increase of 13% from the previous year and the highest number of assaults on prison staff recorded in one year. The use of force by prison officers and rates of self-harm among prisoners have also been increasing in recent years. Self-harm was 10% higher in 2024 than in 2023.

Overcrowding, increased drug use, violence and self-harm contribute towards a distressing environment in prisons such that the vital function of prisons to rehabilitate offenders can be almost impossible in some institutions. We are undertaking a major inquiry into rehabilitation and resettlement, which I hope will shed more light on these troubling pictures.

Beyond all that, we have the continuing scandal of IPP prisoners—those imprisoned for public protection. I recommend to the Minister the proposals published this week by the Howard League on a new approach to IPP prisoners, which would serve to reduce the numbers continuing in custody substantially.

Let me turn to His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, which is the second-largest body in the MOJ. In the Government's main estimate for 2025-26, spending on HMCTS accounted for 21% of planned resource spending and 12% of capital spending. The current backlog of outstanding cases in the Crown court stands at about 4,000. That is a result of a number of factors, one of which is the shortage of criminal lawyers, driven by low legal aid pay rates and poor working conditions. The backlog in the courts is detrimental to the lives of thousands of people. Victims, witnesses and defendants alike are forced to wait in limbo for justice.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about court backlogs. Another factor is having the appropriate magistrates, legal advisers and so on to hear these cases. The Magistrates' Association has raised concerns that the spending review allocation is insufficient to tackle that. Does he share those concerns?

Andy Slaughter: I do share those concerns. I want to take only a few more minutes with my speech, so I do not have time to go into what is happening in the magistrates courts as well—that is a debate for another day—but the shortage of magistrates, the shortage of legal clerks and low pay rates across HMCTS are clearly some of the factors that prevent us from getting to grips with the backlog, even though I have no doubt the Government wish to do that.

I welcome the Lord Chancellor's allocation of 110,000 sitting days in the Crown court for 2025-26: the highest sitting-day allocation made since HMCTS was created and the biggest financial settlement ever made for the Crown court. I hope that that is enough to bring about some reduction in the backlog. However, I note that the allocation is below the 113,000 days that the Lady Chief

Justice told the Committee the Crown court could sit for in the last financial year, and there have been similar increases in sitting days for other courts, including the magistrates court, which will sit for up to 114,000 days a year.

The Government have acknowledged that the allocation of days is not enough on its own to severely reduce the backlog in the Crown courts and that more radical reform is required. I therefore welcome Sir Brian Leveson's independent review of criminal courts, which will propose options for both short and long-term reforms aimed at ensuring cases are dealt with proportionately in the light of current pressures on the Crown court and explore how the courts could operate as efficiently as possible. I look forward to the first report of the review, which is due to be published next month.

I will briefly touch on the role of the Legal Aid Agency. In terms of expenditure, the LAA is the third largest body within MOJ. Its day-to-day budget was around £0.9 billion, which comprised 8% of the MOJ's total resource budget. Between 2009-10 and 2023-24, resource expenditure on legal aid decreased by 2% in cash terms and by 31% in real terms. I was surprised to see that the spending review did not include a specific funding allocation for the Legal Aid Agency; the only reference to it was in the context of potential efficiency savings that the MOJ will make in the review period.

Concerns have been raised about the sustainability of the criminal legal aid sector, given the number of legal aid firms and of solicitors and barristers practising in this area. In March 2025, the Law Society said that the number of criminal duty solicitors had fallen by 26% since 2017 and that that may, in future,

“leave many individuals unable to access their right to a solicitor and free advice.”

Even though I welcome the MOJ's announcements in December 2024 of an additional £92 million per year for criminal aid solicitors, and I look forward to seeing the results of its consultation on that, it may well not be enough. Indeed, the 15% uplift in criminal barristers' fees as a consequence of the Bellamy review took so long to come in and was so far overtaken by other increases in cost that that again needs to be looked at in the near future if we are to sustain the criminal Bar.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of legal aid solicitors and barristers will only compound the problems of the court backlog? That is because cases will either have to be adjourned as a consequence of lack of legal counsel or they will take longer when defendants appear without legal counsel because those defendants will need more time and support from the court and other court services. Is my hon. Friend concerned about that?

Andy Slaughter: That is already happening. Non-availability of counsel, whether Crime Prosecution Service or defence counsel, is already one of the main reasons for ineffective trials. I therefore hope we will hear something about that and the Government's plans to alleviate it when the Minister responds.

I briefly mention the cyber-attack that the Legal Aid Agency was subject to in April. The attack revealed serious concerns about the robustness of Government-managed digital services and the protection of sensitive data, and holds risks for the day-to-day operation of

the justice system. We need the further statement that the Courts Minister promised on the steps being taken to recover that position—not today, perhaps, but soon—and the Committee will conduct its own inquiry into access to justice, beginning with a call to evidence this summer.

I reemphasise the importance of the role the criminal justice system plays in the proper functioning of our society. Out of sight should not be out of mind, in that respect. I appreciate the steps that this Government are taking and the struggle and the tasks that they have going forward. However, there is so much to do that we need to get on with it in a speedy fashion.

Finally, let me thank all those who work in the criminal justice system: those who risk their lives and their safety as frontline prison officers and probation officers, and those who keep the system running—judges, barristers and court staff. Across the piece, we see people going above and beyond because of the situation in which the system has been left. I am sure this is one point that will unite both sides of the House: we all appreciate the work that goes on every day to keep people safe and to ensure that justice is done.

1.54 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Chancellor substantially increased the budget of the Ministry of Justice in the spending review from £11.9 billion in 2023-24 to £15.6 billion in 2028-29. We are told that that is a real-terms increase of 3.1% over five years. It is our duty in this place not just to applaud ever larger sums of money being spent, but to scrutinise whether that money is spent well and to ensure it represents good value for money for the taxpayer. There is no question but that the criminal justice system is under strain. I trust the Lord Chancellor will do her best to ensure that she uses the money wisely to fix the various problems the Chairman of the Select Committee has described.

One of the biggest problems facing the criminal justice system is the Crown court backlog. As of the end of 2024, almost 75,000 cases were awaiting trial. That is an increase on the figure when the Lord Chancellor took office and it is projected to rise further. Justice delayed is justice denied. Witnesses' memories fade and victims feel that they have been forgotten. I appreciate that much of that rise was caused by the pandemic, and we are still dealing with the fallout, but the Lord Chancellor must do more to reduce that backlog.

Although there is more money for the courts as part of the spending review, we need to ensure it is effectively deployed. The Government say it is a priority, yet we still have empty courtrooms. When the Lady Chief Justice came to Parliament last November, she offered 6,500 additional sitting days. Will the Minister explain why the Lord Chancellor did not accept every single one of the extra days offered? The Lord Chancellor must use the additional money she has been given to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of both the Crown and magistrates courts, and to reduce the backlogs.

The justice system also faces a lack of prison spaces. The Gauke review, commissioned by the Lord Chancellor, has effectively recommended the ending of short prison sentences in favour of community sentences. About half of admissions to prison are for sentences of less than 12 months. The Howard League says that about 30,000 people a year are sentenced to six months or less. Setting aside for one moment whether that is the right policy,

which I doubt, if it is implemented by the Government it will require a very large increase in the number of probation officers.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about probation and prison places. Does he share my concern that it is all very well for the Government to announce £7 billion to deliver prison places by 2031, which is six years away, while 16,000 prisoners are walking the streets because they were released earlier by this Government? What will happen in the next six years? Will more prisoners be released early while we wait for those prison places?

Sir Ashley Fox: The danger is that the public lose confidence in the criminal justice system if prisoners are released so early. As I mentioned, there is already a shortfall of nearly 2,000 probation officers. In fact, there are now 200 fewer probation officers than when Labour took office. If the Government intend to go ahead with this plan, we need to know how they plan to recruit the additional probation officers that they will need. What is their plan? If they go ahead with abolishing short sentences, those community sentences will have to be seen by the public to be really tough and worthwhile if the criminal justice system is to retain confidence. I fear that the Government do not have a plan for that. Although we see more money allocated in the budget for prison and probation services, we do not get any detail about what that means for the recruitment of those extra probation officers. I would be grateful if the Minister could address that point.

I also ask the Government to look at other methods of alleviating the strain on prison places that do not involve additional expenditure—for example, deporting foreign national offenders. There are currently 11,000 foreign offenders in our prisons, but our record on deporting them remains poor. Only 3,500 were deported last year, and too many are still able to avoid deportation by using the European convention on human rights. This needs to change. The Government have said that they will review the right to family life being used in appeals in serious cases related to asylum seekers who have been convicted of sexual offences. I welcome that, but we need to go much further. We should deport all foreign national offenders at the end of their sentences and disapply the Human Rights Act.

The obvious way to ensure that we have enough prison spaces in the longer term is to build more prisons. During the general election campaign, Labour promised to build 20,000 additional places, but in the year since the Government took office, little progress has been made, and it was recently revealed that they have actually cut hundreds of millions of pounds from the capital budget to cover the cost of pay increases for staff and the imposition of the Chancellor's jobs tax.

It is always tempting to welcome an increase to a Department's budget, but we need to ensure that the spending is matched by proper accountability and planning. We cannot afford for this new funding to be simply absorbed by justice bureaucracy. Will the Minister explain how much of the extra money that his Department has been allocated will go in additional national insurance charges, wage rises and inflation? It is simply not credible to make countless promises in opposition or on the campaign trail, only to quietly shelve them when in office. The Opposition will hold the Government to account for the commitments they have given.

2.2 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my good friend, the Chair of the Justice Committee, for his excellent speech and for securing this debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in it and I declare my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for miscarriages of justice. I welcome the estimate and the commitment in the spending review, but I want to focus my remarks on an area of grave concern: Ministry of Justice spending on criminal justice—and, more specifically, the adequate prevention and correction of miscarriages of justice.

What is the value of justice if innocent people are still being convicted, imprisoned and left to rot in our criminal justice system? The sad truth is that for all the billions we debate today, the Ministry is failing in one of its most fundamental duties: ensuring that innocent people are protected from wrongful conviction and supported when the system fails them. Miscarriages of justice are not theoretical; they are real and ongoing, and they destroy lives.

Andrew Malkinson was wrongfully imprisoned for 17 years for a crime he did not commit. He was exonerated last year, but only after a tortuous journey through a system that was more interested in protecting itself than uncovering the truth. Peter Sullivan, wrongfully convicted of murder, spent 38 years in prison before being exonerated only last month. He is a victim of the longest miscarriage of justice involving a living prisoner in British legal history. These cases expose deep systemic flaws and happened in plain sight, but across the country individuals are experiencing criminalisation and injustice without proper recourse. Their names do not always make the headlines, but their stories are no less important. Miscarriages of justice are not rare accidents; sadly, they are now an inevitable consequence of a failing system stripped of its checks and balances.

At the heart of that system is the Criminal Cases Review Commission—a body that was designed to be the safety net, to identify where the system had gone wrong and to help innocent people find justice. Yet the CCRC is in crisis. In May, the Justice Committee published a damning indictment of its leadership and performance. It stated that the CCRC had shown

“a remarkable inability to learn from its own mistakes”

and that it had “deteriorated significantly” in its ability to fulfil its vital function. The Committee concluded that “root and branch reform” is required, and it is found in the clearest possible terms that it was untenable for the current chief executive Karen Kneller to remain in post. That is not political rhetoric; it is a cross-party Committee of this House carrying out its scrutiny function and reaching deeply troubling conclusions.

The CCRC’s failures come at a terrible cost, not only to those wrongfully convicted but to public confidence in the rule of law. Every year that it fails to identify miscarriages, innocent people remain behind bars, their lives on hold or, worse, permanently destroyed. But I also want to acknowledge a step in the right direction. I welcome the appointment of Dame Vera Baird KC as the interim chair of the CCRC. Dame Vera has a long and respected record of championing justice and accountability. I hope her leadership marks a turning point, and I look forward to seeing real progress, not just in leadership, but in culture, performance and independence. For that

to happen, the Government must take these responsibilities seriously. Reform cannot come on the cheap. The CCRC must be properly resourced and empowered to do the job it was created to do, because until we properly fund our safeguard, miscarriages of justice will continue, the human cost will remain unbearable and the financial cost unsustainable.

I also want to touch on two areas critical to justice: legal aid and forensic sciences. Since 2010, funding has been slashed by hundreds of millions of pounds, and access to justice and representation is now a postcode lottery. We are seeing the collapse of criminal defence provision across England and Wales. There are now entire areas with no local legal aid solicitors, which disproportionately affects those from marginalised groups—those most vulnerable to miscarriages of justice.

Forensic science, which was once the gold standard, has been fragmented and degraded. A three-year inquiry into forensics set up by the APPG for miscarriages of justice recently concluded that the sector is in a “graveyard spiral”, leading to poor police investigations, increasing numbers of unsolved crimes and more wrongful convictions. Evidence shows that our system continues to fail to ensure not only the prevention of miscarriages of justice, but their speedy identification and resolution when they do occur. We support calls for a full national audit of forensic provision to access the urgent support needed to prevent further decline and to protect future investigations and trials from preventable failure.

Let me turn to prisons and the chronic underfunding that is failing staff and those in custody. At the justice unions parliamentary group yesterday, I heard at first hand about the crisis in prison education. According to Ofsted, 82% of prisons and young offender institutions are rated “inadequate” or “requires improvement” for education, skills and work provision. Prison educators are paid less than their counterparts in the wider further education sector. The Education Committee warned in 2022 that poor pay, unsafe working environments and a lack of respect have driven a recruitment and retention crisis. That is unacceptable. Education is one of the most powerful tools for rehabilitation, yet we are underfunding and undervaluing the very people delivering it.

The same is true of prison maintenance. Privatisation has been a costly failure. Basic repairs remain undone, squalor is widespread and the maintenance backlog is estimated to cost nearly £2 billion. I support the POA’s “Bring it Back” campaign for insourcing prison maintenance. The promised biggest wave of insourcing in a generation must start here. In our crumbling prisons, where contracts have failed, conditions are decaying and dangerous for both staff and prisoners. I also support the POA’s campaign on retirement age. Asking officers to work until they are 68 in such a high-stress, high-risk environment is simply unsustainable. Sixty-eight is simply too late.

We are debating how to spend £18 billion in the Ministry of Justice, but money alone is not the issue; it is about priorities. If the very foundations of justice are crumbling, every other investment is undermined. The criminal justice system continues to fail innocent people. Chronic underfunding has rendered safeguards weak and ineffective. Leadership has been absent where it was most needed, and time and again the system refuses to admit it when it gets things wrong.

Miscarriages of justice are not tragic accidents. They are the inevitable consequence of a system that is under-resourced, poorly led and structurally resistant to scrutiny. Every wrongful conviction is not just a personal tragedy, but a betrayal of our legal system and the values it claims to uphold. Justice denied to one is justice denied to all.

Let us invest not just in buildings, but in truth; not just in processes, but in people. Above all, let us put real justice—not convenience or cost-cutting—at the heart of everything the Ministry of Justice does.

2.11 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I rise to speak as the Member of Parliament for Colchester and as a member of the Justice Committee. I also declare an interest as the recently elected chair of the all-party group on penal affairs.

The estimate for the Ministry of Justice proposes a 6.5% increase in day-to-day spending and a 20.8% increase in capital investment. Those are welcome figures. They are necessary because this Government inherited from the previous Government a crisis across the criminal justice system: in our courts, our prisons and our probation services.

Let us begin with our courts. As my hon. Friend the Chair of the Justice Committee outlined, the Crown Court backlog stands at more than 74,000 cases—double the number in 2019. Victims are waiting years for justice. The increase in sitting days and the investment in digital infrastructure are a necessary first step. As a member of the Select Committee, I have visited our courts where dedicated public servants are working hard, despite the challenges, to deliver justice for victims. We need bold reform, and I look forward to the recommendations of Sir Brian Leveson's review later this year. We all hope that they will indeed be bold. The justice system too often appears to be stuck in a bygone age.

In our prisons, we all see the failures of the last Government laid bare: failure to plan for the long term in prison places, failure to rehabilitate prisoners, and failure to prevent reoffending. The prison population now exceeds 87,000, with projections of more than 100,000 prisoners by 2028. Overcrowding is rife, with 24% of prisoners held in crowded conditions. The maintenance backlog has ballooned to £1.8 billion. There cannot be effective rehabilitation in a prison system that is so overcrowded.

Time and again, the Select Committee has heard about poor contract management, and a failure around transparency and value for money across a range of contracts, from education to maintenance to drug and alcohol services. I hope that the Procurement Act 2023 will tighten up those essential processes. The Act has to be fit for purpose. If procurement is not fit for purpose, prisons will not be fit for purpose.

The Government's 10-year prison capacity strategy promises 14,000 new places, compared with just 500 under the last Government over those 14 wasted years. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) said, we cannot just build our way out of this crisis. We need a smarter approach to sentencing and rehabilitation. I welcome the Justice Secretary's commitment to the earned progression model and the expansion of community-based alternatives. Earned

progression must be matched with access to decent prison programmes, health, education, wellbeing and so on, so that progression is indeed earned and helps offenders to turn their life around, thereby protecting the public and victims from harm.

Those reforms must be matched by investment in probation. The Probation Service is under severe strain, with many local services rated as inadequate and staff turnover still too high. The £700 million earmarked for probation reform is a start, but we must ensure that it delivers real, measurable improvements in reoffending rates.

Expenditure on legal aid is down 31% in real terms since 2010. That hollows out access to justice. The recent commitments to increasing funding for solicitors and youth court work are welcome, but I echo Labour colleagues' comments that we need to go further on legal aid where possible. A justice system that works only for those who can afford it is no justice system at all.

The estimate reflects a Government who recognise the scale of the challenge. The Secretary of State and her ministerial team have worked hard to deliver the increase in funding. The last Government lost control of the courts, prisons and probation. These measures will go some way towards putting that right so that we can all have faith in our justice system again.

2.16 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I, too, am a member of the Justice Committee. I am also a former prosecutor who worked in the criminal justice system.

Today is an opportunity not only to examine the Ministry of Justice's estimates for the coming year, but to assess whether our criminal justice system is being resourced to meet the scale of the challenges it faces and to make our communities safer. I want to talk about the sentencing review and its impact on resourcing, especially for the Probation Service.

We inherited a system that was on the brink of collapse. The 2024 report on prison population growth revealed that England and Wales had the highest per capita prison population in western Europe. Our Government had to respond to that crisis immediately on entering into office. My right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary's temporary early release scheme was a difficult but necessary decision to protect the justice system from breaking altogether, and to ensure that dangerous offenders were not turned away from the courts due to lack of space.

Joe Robertson: The hon. Member referred to the early release scheme as temporary. Is she 100% confident that it is a temporary scheme, and that the Government will not release more prisoners over the next few years?

Linsey Farnsworth: We inherited a particularly drastic situation, which will not be turned around overnight. The Minister will speak on behalf of the Government, but I expect the Government to make these difficult decisions until we are in a better position. That may have to be reviewed in due course. I do not speak for the Government, but I trust them to ensure that the public are safe and that there are places available, by whatever means, so that dangerous criminals can be put in jail.

[*Linsey Farnsworth*]

We must move beyond crisis management. This mission-driven Labour Government are investing to deliver 14,000 new prison places by 2031. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Pam Cox) was right to point out that that contrasts starkly with the 500 prison places that the previous Government created in 14 years. However, it is clear that the solution to overcrowding cannot simply be to build more prisons, but instead lies in breaking the cycle of reoffending.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As a member of the Select Committee, you will want to be accurate in what you say about prison places—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Dr Mullan, there is no “you” in the Chamber; you are talking through the Chair.

Dr Mullan: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member will want to be accurate in what she says about prison places. Does she accept that we added 13,000 prison places during our time in office?

Linsey Farnsworth: I recognise that prison places were created, but we are talking in net terms, and net, there were 500 extra places. [*Interruption.*] We are certainly not happy with only 500 places, net, over 14 years. That is why this Government are taking action to increase prison places in real terms.

We must sort out the cycle of reoffending, which places a massive strain on the system. Almost 60% of those receiving a prison sentence of 12 months or less reoffended within a year, and in those instances, focusing on what happens after a crime has been committed is the best way to prevent future offending. We do not need a justice system that is bigger; we need one that is fairer and more effective. Our ambition and reforms to make our streets safer cannot be achieved by enforcement alone. They must be backed by proper sustained funding, particularly to support the Probation Service, which is at the heart of a functioning and fair justice system.

That takes me back to a project in Nottingham that I was proud to be involved with in the early 2000s. It was the community justice initiative under the last Labour Government’s “respect” agenda—yes, I am that old, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. For the record, I did not comment on the lady’s age.

Linsey Farnsworth: Indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful for the fact that you did not; I am very conscious of my age myself. The community justice initiative brought the community into the justice process. It allowed community impact statements to be made for certain offences, such as antisocial behaviour, and took a holistic approach to sentencing. It aimed to tackle drivers of offending, including drug misuse, unemployment, and poor education. Although the initiative worked, it was unfortunately short-lived because it lacked the resources and funding that would have made it sustainable in the longer term.

Just like the community justice initiative, the reforms set out in the first year of this Government offer enormous promise. I do not have a crystal ball and do not claim to

see into the future, but as we look ahead to the Ministry of Justice’s prescribed spending for the following year, it seems that, as ever, two possible scenarios are before us. In the first we learn from the past; in the second, we repeat its mistakes. Let me be clear: we cannot allow history to repeat itself, and we must not allow ourselves to return to crisis point because we are unable to resource initiatives that will help us to reform the justice system.

As a prosecutor, I saw the same individuals pass through the courts again and again. I saw how the cycle of reoffending devastated lives, clogged up courts, and cost the taxpayer millions. I therefore wholeheartedly welcome the shift from short prison sentences, which are proven to do little to reduce reoffending, towards community sentences, which get to the root of the offending behaviour. I am pleased that we have a research-based sentencing review, through which we can work to reduce the problem and tackle the causes of crime, but that work must be financed in a sustained manner if it is to succeed.

The Probation Service is at a crossroads, and its future will be decided by the adequacy of resourcing, staffing, and funding. The Government have promised that it will receive an increase by 2028-29 of up to £700 million to support the reforms set out in the independent sentencing review, and the Minister responsible for prisons, parole and probation has set a target to recruit 1,300 probation staff in the next year. The Ministry of Justice’s budget for 2025-26 shows other welcome increases, including nearly £800 million more for day-to-day spending, £523 million of which is allocated to prisons and probation, and a huge 32% increase in capital expenditure.

The justice system has suffered from years of underfunding and under-resourcing, which has resulted in overcrowding and overburdening. Justice reform is about protecting communities, supporting victims, and giving offenders the opportunity to transform their life and reintegrate into society. If we are to avoid a return to the crisis we inherited, the Probation Service must receive the resources that it desperately needs.

2.25 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): We who knock on doors week in, week out, know all too well the trend that has grown in recent years; every display of incompetence, every proof of national decline, and every sign of political self-interest from the Conservatives has damaged—indeed, hollowed out—public trust in the ability of our democracy to get things done. The public have had their fill, and in few other policy areas, and with no other political party, have they seen such incompetence, such decline, and such self-interest as with the criminal justice system and the Conservatives. It was the Conservatives who melted our criminal justice system, and the Conservatives who lost control of the security of our communities. It was the Conservatives who clung to hopeless policies. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that in crashing the criminal justice system, the Conservatives did more harm to our country’s faith in democracy, and the ability of the state to get things done, than we can ever know or quantify.

I do not exaggerate that, because when I knock on doors I hear that when people ring the police, they cannot get them to attend. When they submit crime reports, they do not hear back, and they feel that there is an absence

of visible policing on their streets. That is the inheritance that the Conservatives gave the Labour Government. There is a hopelessness in our politics, and we need to reckon with that reality. Our courts are clogged, victims are waiting years for justice, police officers are stretched to the limit, legal aid is hollowed out, and communities feel unsafe and unheard. Shoplifting, antisocial behaviour, and the illegal use of e-scooters and e-bikes are examples that people in our communities raise of local decline, and they say that there are too few police to respond to those issues. This is not just a matter of law and order; it is a matter of fairness, decency and safety.

This Labour Government have a challenge: to put right a criminal justice system that was fundamentally broken—[*Interruption.*] When I see that Opposition Members are here in such few numbers, and are laughing at what I say, it is really disheartening.

Dr Mullan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Hayes: I will happily do so if the hon. Gentleman will apologise for 14 years of chaos.

Dr Mullan: I gently point out that the hon. Gentleman might consider the ratio of Labour Members to Conservative Members, and look at how many people are on the Conservative Benches and on the Labour Benches. We can be pretty proud of our showing, compared to that of Government Members.

Tom Hayes: That is so wide of the mark. It is unsurprising that the Conservatives are floundering in polls and so unwelcome in our communities. We can and must regain public trust in our criminal justice system, and in the ability of our democracy to do things. We want a criminal justice system that works for everyone and protects the public, that respects victims, and that rehabilitates offenders where that is possible, and where that is not possible, locks people up for the appropriate amount of time. We want a system that protects the Probation Service and our prison officers, and ensures that we are truly able to be a secure country again.

I welcome the announcement that our Labour Government will provide 13,000 more police officers, with 40 going to my area. I welcome the fact that we are tackling court backlogs by creating more sitting days; those who work in the court system across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole have privately told me that they welcome that. We must champion victims' rights. Having run a domestic abuse service for five years before my election, that particularly matters to me, and I know that many colleagues across the House care passionately about tackling domestic violence, as well as rebuilding our youth services. Having run a mental health and domestic abuse service, I know the importance of the third sector. I plead with the Minister to ensure that the third sector has a role in our thinking about how we can rehabilitate those who can be rehabilitated.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on that important point. Will he join me in acknowledging the excellent work of organisations such as Futures Unlocked in Rugby? I recently met John Powell, its operations manager, as well as its trustees and volunteers. Those small charities do so much work to help ex-prisoners transition to life outside prison.

I was hugely impressed. They often do work that the Probation Service cannot do, despite its best efforts, after 14 years of underfunding under the previous Government.

Tom Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for that really important point. I welcome the work of the charity and the charities in his area, as I welcome the work of charities in all our areas. He puts his finger on the issue.

Charities are able to do things that the Probation Service is not. They can create trust in people and refer that trust on to statutory services. They can provide bespoke support that treats individuals as human beings seeking education and skills training, employment support, mental health and addiction support, housing assistance and peer support—in some cases the most powerful support. In providing that bespoke support, charities can help not just to reduce offending rates and rehabilitate and get people into work, but to bring down crime rates and the cost to the public purse of our criminal justice system.

I will say one point on that issue: we need to recognise the link between poverty, exclusion and offending rates. I want to be very clear that that is not to say people who grow up in disadvantage ought to commit crime, but we need to recognise what the evidence shows. There is a correlation and a causation, and as a Government we therefore need to tackle the root causes of poverty and exclusion. In so doing, we can tackle the reasons why people may offend.

I thank the Minister for what he is about to say, which I am sure will be excellent, and I thank hon. Members for their contributions. If our democracy feels fragile, it is because of the record of the last Government in this area. If our democracy is to recover, it will be because of the prompt and proportionate action that I believe this Government will take, building on the action that they have taken to truly address the challenges we face. The British people know what they want—they tell us often enough. It is our job to listen and provide the competence, progress and better outcomes that they are crying out for.

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

2.31 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), working with the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth), for making the pitch to the Backbench Business Committee to secure this debate. I join him in thanking the incredible staff who work across our criminal justice system. If I may, I will add that charities such as the incredible abandofbrothers in Eastbourne work with young ex-offenders across my hometown to tackle crime.

As has been documented in this Chamber today, the last Government left our criminal justice system in a state. Our prisons were left in crisis and overcrowded, with increases in violence and self-harm incidents at their highest since records began. Our probation services were left high and dry, with an electronic tagging contract that left offenders with violent convictions unmonitored for far too long. Our courts were left dealing with staggeringly high backlogs, with tens of thousands of

[Josh Babarinde]

open cases and victims waiting months and even years for justice. As has been mentioned by hon. Members, reoffending is through the roof, with 80% of people in our prisons being reoffenders. That is a symbol of more crime, more victims and more misery and harm. That carries an enormous price tag, with reoffending costing society more than £18 billion a year.

The consequences of that dire set of circumstances have been plain for us all to see; I saw them myself when I worked in this space before being elected to this House. I spent my career supporting young ex-offenders out of crime and out of gangs in the east end—very far from Eastbourne in many different ways. I remember working with a particular young person. I said to him ahead of his first day of work with us to come in wearing some smart trousers, and he did not know what I meant. He said, “Josh, do you mean court trousers?” What a sad state of affairs it is when a young person in our country has grown up more accustomed to the criminal justice system than to our education system. I am afraid that is a legacy of the last Government.

I remember working with another young person who went into a young offenders’ institution that was notorious for its issues with violence. He was working with us as a phone repair technician before he went in. He came back when he came out of that institution, except he came missing a finger as a result of some of the things going on in that place. Again, some of our institutions are out of control.

As a victim, I have experienced what it is like to wait for years to have a case heard through an adversarial criminal justice system that seeks to beat down victims, as opposed to supporting them to rise up. That needs to change. Giving credit where it is due, I welcome the investment that this Government are making in our criminal justice systems through the spending review, but that investment is not a silver bullet, and it might not go far enough to right the wrongs of the past: it must be accompanied by reform.

There is no mention in the spending review specifically of investing in our crumbling courts, which cause so much inefficiency and cost our system, victims and justice. As the hon. Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) mentioned earlier in the debate, the Magistrates’ Association has been particularly concerned about the lack of mention of funding for legal advisers in magistrates courts. The lack thereof is resulting in one in 10 sittings being cancelled.

While investment in creating new prison places has been announced, the spending review features no reference to extra funding for women’s centres—an alternative to custody—despite David Gauke recommending that in his independent review and charities such as Working Chance telling us that women’s centres are often at least 10 times more effective at reducing reoffending and are more cost-effective than the prison system. Although we welcome the £700 million committed to the Probation Service, it is critical, as per the demands of Women’s Aid, that some of that cash goes towards mandatory training for probation officers as far as recognising domestic abuse and protecting survivors of domestic abuse is concerned.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): On that point, we are clear that the money that goes into the probation system may not be enough to deal with the scale of the added pressures on the probation system. I think the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), talked about contract management. The example of Serco is a really good one; there will be so much more reliance on electronic tagging. Will the money actually allow that to happen?

Josh Babarinde: I agree with the point that my hon. Friend makes. This is about much more than just the spend: it is about the efficiency of the spend. Taxpayers deserve far better than what they are getting at the moment from the Serco contract, under which, as I said earlier, many offenders are being left without the proper, robust monitoring that victims, survivors and our communities need and deserve.

Let me come on to reoffending. The Gauke review offered many recommendations to unlock supply in our prisons, but it was fairly light on what can be done to stem the demand going into our prisons. Preventing crime and reoffending was the Cinderella of his review. It may be out of scope in some respects, but it is critical that our criminal justice system is reformed in a holistic way. That is the true means of being able to make our criminal justice system more efficient.

When it comes to victims and survivors, commitments around reversing the damaging impact of the national insurance increases for employers were missing from the spending review. Victims’ charities have written to me to say that the increase in those taxes, as well as cuts to police and crime commissioner core budgets, are tantamount to a 7% real-terms cut in their budgets. This means that victims’ services—services not dissimilar from the independent sexual violence adviser services that I once accessed at SurvivorsUK—will be compromised. I urge the Government to look again at this issue.

The status quo of more reoffending at an exponentially high cost to the taxpayer is both immoral and unsustainable. While this investment will go some way towards reducing backlogs, increasing prison capacity and improving our probation services, vital challenges are still unmet. As I have said just this week—in fact, it may have been yesterday—directly to the Minister, Liberal Democrats stand ready to work constructively with the Government. We will scrutinise their measures, but also give credit where it is due in order to help achieve more justice for victims, survivors, and our communities.

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

2.40 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of His Majesty’s Opposition to this estimates day debate on Ministry of Justice expenditure as it relates to criminal justice. I thank the Select Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), for securing and opening the debate. We are in Armed Forces Week, and those of us who have been involved in the criminal justice system in various guises over the years know that in our prison service, around a quarter of prison officers have an armed forces background. In that sector alone,

we see the ongoing contribution that people from the armed forces community make to our public services in different ways. It is a pleasure to be able to pay tribute to them on the record today.

Criminal justice is, of course, a very important topic for discussion. Our courts, prisons and probation services are the bedrock of our criminal justice system. This Government have been in charge of these key areas of public expenditure and activity for almost a year now, and we have heard from Members about the challenges that those who are in contact with the criminal justice system continue to face. We all know that, almost from day one, this Government have lurched from crisis to crisis, and sadly the Ministry of Justice has not been spared. As we consider the estimates for expenditure and the Government's linked plans to overcome challenges in the criminal justice system, we can only have a meaningful debate if we consider the journey we have been on to reach this point.

I will begin by responding to the points that have been raised about the inheritance that this Government had. Their inheritance can only be fairly considered in the light of what we inherited, what we delivered despite the challenges, and what challenges remain. Labour Members talk about challenging inheritances in the criminal justice system, but what did we face upon arriving in office? We have heard a lot in recent months about Labour being forced into early release schemes for prisoners as a sign of the pressures on the system, but what exactly was happening with early release at the end of Labour's last period in government? Under the last Labour Government, an astonishing 80,000 prisoners were released early—a huge number—with those releases stopping just before the election for purely political reasons. We were left to pick up the pieces across the prison estate that we inherited. During our 14 years in office, we released just 6% of that figure. If the number of prisoners that Labour Members say they have been forced to release since they came into office is a barometer of failure, what exactly do they make of releasing 80,000 prisoners early after more than a decade in charge?

Perhaps Labour had a good excuse for releasing that many prisoners early—maybe it happened because Labour had been spending its time in office rightly toughening up sentencing for the worst offenders. I am afraid not. In fact, in what I consider to be an enormous historical mistake—the consequences of which we are still battling today when it comes to delivering proper punishment through the justice system—Labour introduced automatic halfway release for essentially all offenders when it was last in government. Those offenders were not included in the figure of 80,000 released early under the emergency schemes I have spoken about. Essentially, all offenders were released early, yet Labour still managed to have a sustained crisis in prison capacity, so I do not take any lectures from Labour Members about the history of the Labour party and the criminal justice sector.

Under the previous Conservative Government, we worked to restore public confidence that serious offenders would face the punishment that their crimes deserved, and worked hard to ensure that—unlike when Labour was in government—we did not have to release 80,000 prisoners early through emergency release schemes. We brought in serious reforms. We reduced automatic release from halfway through a sentence to two thirds of a sentence for the most serious offenders, which was a

huge step forward in introducing a greater degree of proper punishment into the criminal justice system. Building on that, we introduced whole-life tariffs for the premeditated murder of children. We increased maximum sentences for the worst child abusers through Tony's law; for killers of emergency service workers through Harper's law; and for those who kill through driving in memory of victims such as Violet-Grace. I am proud of all those reforms, and make no apologies for them.

Such measures do create challenges for prison capacity, but as I will go on to explain, those changes were necessary. More than any other factor, it was covid that created the challenges we now face. Of course, we had to tackle the enormous challenges presented by covid, which have left a long legacy in the criminal justice arena. We prioritised the right to jury trials in a way that the rest of the world struggled to; we had one of the shortest suspensions of sittings of trials, and did what we could to support the continuation of jury trials. We increased sitting days, allowing the courts to sit at maximum capacity for three years in a row; we invested £220 million in essential modernisation work for courts up to 2025; and we extended the use of 20 Nightingale courtrooms in 2024-25. That kept our justice system moving, despite what Labour now claims.

Undoubtedly, the backlog still presents challenges, but again, I am happy to compare records. Labour MPs are now deeply concerned about the backlog, but how concerned about Crown court backlogs were Labour MPs when they were last in government? I can tell Members that pre-pandemic backlogs in the Crown court reached higher levels during Labour's time in office than they did under us. The increase in the remand population of approximately 7,000 above the historical average, which is directly linked to covid, is a major factor in the prison capacity challenges we now face.

What has Labour done to make a decisive difference since coming into office? Did the Government rush to maximise sitting days to get the backlog down? No, they did not—they have repeatedly dragged their feet. For almost six months, they did not take the Lady Chief Justice up on her offer of further sitting days, and even now, there are more days available to the Government that they have not funded. With each month that has passed, that has meant more lost court days, more people waiting and more pressure on the system than if they had just increased sitting days from the outset. What has been their biggest celebration when it comes to prison building? It is the opening of a new prison, HMP Millsike, which was planned, paid for and largely built under the previous Conservative Government.

Despite what Labour says, we created 13,000 prison places during our time in office, including in two new prisons, HMP Five Wells and HMP Fosse Way. I am not aware that any of Labour's projected plans for prison places use net figures, which Labour Members want to use when looking at our record. The Government have announced plans for 14,000 prison places by 2031, supported by £7 billion, but 6,500 of those places were already in the pipeline, having been announced by the previous Conservative Government. Four of their new prisons were already planned or under construction, so this announcement is less a bold new strategy than it is a tired re-announcement. Even more concerning is the funding gap. The Government have allocated £7 billion, but the National Audit Office reports that the Ministry

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of Justice and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service expect the cost of expansion to be closer to £10 billion. That is a £3 billion shortfall, placing a serious question mark over how the promised places will be delivered.

How are the Government building on their legacy of releasing over 16,000 prisoners early just in their first six months, which is 11,000 more than planned? In the name of what they call sustainability, they are embedding even greater levels of early release into the system, unpicking the positive steps we took in government to turn around Labour's legacy of weaker punishment. The Government are doing this on the back of a sentencing review carried out by David Gauke, based on the premise that increasing prison populations were unsustainable. I am clear that that review was an insult to the views of victims and their families—many have told me so directly—and it is unfortunate that so many Members speak positively about it. Imagine launching what you describe as a “landmark review of sentencing”, and then giving almost no consideration in the pages of that report to what victims and their families actually want from sentencing.

Worse, instead of a serious attempt to engage with what victims and their families might want, Mr Gauke chose to deploy the all-too-common patronising talking points of those who want us to believe that victims and their families simply do not understand sentencing, and that if they did, they would undoubtedly feel much better about it all. This might be of particular interest to the Chair of the current Select Committee, because Mr Gauke, in particular, cherry-picked quotes from our excellent report from a previous Session on public understanding and expectations of sentencing. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick might remember, that report very much engaged with what the public wanted and how to determine that more effectively. It takes a particular type of intellectual approach to go through a report full of rich detail and just pick out what suits you, hoping no one will notice. Well, I noticed, as did representatives of victims and their families such as Justice for Victims.

That half-baked exercise in considering sentencing has now served as the launch point for the Government's sentencing policy. If halfway release was not an appalling enough legacy from the last time Labour was in government, the Government are reducing release to a third of the sentence for most offenders, and turning our two-thirds release for the worst offenders back into halfway release. Let us be clear: prisoners will now be rewarded for doing what should be expected of them. Obeying prison rules and engaging in education or working are the basic behaviours of any law-abiding citizen. They should not qualify offenders for early release, and they certainly should not allow them to serve as little as one third of their sentence. That is not justice.

Labour's model rewards serious offenders, does little to protect the public, and is a dereliction of duty. All the while, our Crown court backlogs have increased by more than 10% and stand in excess of 70,000 cases. Our remand population sits at more than 17,000 people. Wherever we look, problems that Labour promised to fix in opposition are just getting worse. How does the Lord Chancellor now plan to tackle this challenge?

The £450 million committed to the courts in the spending review is a perhaps useful, if not fully adequate, indication, but how will the money be spent? Unfortunately, that is where the Government fall short.

The Government have no substantial ideas of their own, with 14 years apparently not long enough for them to think of their own innovations. While we await the findings of yet another independent review that they hope will solve all their issues, they have announced that custodial sentences of under 12 months will all but vanish, replaced by community sentences. The consequences are staggering. Up to 43,000 offenders, including burglars, shoplifters and knife carriers, will avoid jail altogether. I have met local businesses at their wits' end. They tell me about the rise in shoplifting, staff who are afraid and customers who no longer feel safe. Removing custodial sentences for repeat offenders does not send a message of reform; it sends a message of impunity.

Labour has chosen the easy way out. It is tackling the prison population not with long-term reform or capacity investment, but by quietly reducing sentences and downplaying criminal behaviour. It is short-term thinking that puts public safety at risk. In fact, just last week it was reported that the Government declined to move forward with building a new prison block. They say they are doing everything possible to avoid releasing prisoners early, but how does that square with that decision?

We might think that the Government would grab opportunities that cost nothing, but we have seen them stand in the way of reforms we put forward as amendments to the Victims and Courts Bill this week. Labour did not support making sure victims are awarded compensation equivalent to their losses, or allowing victims the freedom to speak their minds in victim personal statements. Labour did not support increasing the time available to collect courts fines, or giving victims and families a better chance to appeal unduly lenient sentences. All their lofty spending plans will be of little use if this Government's ongoing mismanagement of the economy leaves us with even less money to spend on the Ministry of Justice.

Across nearly every single major economic metric, Labour has made things worse. Unemployment is up, inflation is up and all the projections of economic growth it inherited from us have been downgraded. Is it any wonder why? The Office for Budget Responsibility is clear about the damaging impact of the Government's jobs tax, and businesses can see what is on the horizon with the Employment Rights Bill. The costs of borrowing are soaring. The MOJ's expenditure pales in comparison to what we will be paying on interest in ballooning debt over the course of this Parliament.

I will finish with three short questions. First, given the funding allocated to probation and the increasing reliance on it and given that, as the Justice Committee member, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) highlighted, the number of probation officers has gone down since Labour came into power, how do the Government plan to ensure that money is delivering effective services? Secondly, how do they plan to close the £3 billion gap in the prisons budget? Thirdly, given that so much of their own thinking is relying on it, when will Brian Leveson's report be published? The British people deserve a justice system they can trust—one that

protects victims, punishes offenders and keeps our communities safe. This Government's approach fails on every single count.

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

2.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): I start by thanking the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), for his opening remarks and for securing this important debate, and I thank everybody else who has contributed so thoughtfully. I echo his words in paying tribute to everybody who works in the criminal justice system. They do an amazing job to maintain public protection, which is so important. I support the words of the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), in highlighting the role that people who have formerly been in the armed forces play in our criminal justice system. There is much for us to agree on.

One of the things we know is that Labour has always been tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. I will give three facts to evidence that. In 13 years of Labour Government, we added 27,830 prison places. In 14 years of Conservative Government, they added 500 net prison places. So far under this Government, we have already added some 2,500 prison places. The figures speak for themselves.

We want a criminal justice system that works for everyone. That is what my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) said, and I think everyone in the House would agree. Last summer, our prisons were operating at over 99% capacity. Just days after taking office, we had no choice but to take emergency measures to avoid running out of space altogether. Had we not acted, the result would have been catastrophic. Our courts would have ground to a halt and the police would have been forced to halt arrests. In short, we would have faced a total breakdown of law and order.

We were left in that parlous position because the previous Government, despite all their promises and fine words, delivered only those 500 additional prison places in 14 years. At the same time, sentence lengths rose exponentially. As a result, the prison population is now rising by 3,000 each year. This Government take our duty to protect the public seriously, and that is why we are taking the robust, bold action needed to bring an end to this cycle of crisis, ensuring that the British public are never again put at risk by the failure to have enough prison places.

We are committed to bearing down on the outstanding caseload in the courts, which a number of Members have alluded to, and delivering swifter justice for victims, but we acknowledge the significant challenge facing the Crown court. As part of the spending review settlement, we agreed with the Treasury that we will fund record investment for the courts system by 2028-29, keeping sitting days at record highs over that period. We have 110,000 sitting days in the Crown court just this year.

We recognise, however, that that is not enough given the scale of the challenge we inherited. Even with record levels of Crown court funding and our plans for record

numbers of sitting days, the backlog will continue to grow without substantial reform of our criminal courts. That is why the Lord Chancellor has commissioned an independent review of the criminal courts, led by Sir Brian Leveson, one of our most distinguished judges, to consider the options for longer-term reform, as well as reviewing the efficiency and timeliness of court processes through charge to case completion. I hope that that review will report shortly. We will also fund capacity to speed up the processing of asylum appeals, supporting the Government's priority to reduce illegal and irregular migration.

Legal aid is a vital part of the justice system, as we have heard from colleagues from across the House. It underpins our plans to build a justice system that works fairly for all parties. In December, we announced that criminal legal aid solicitors will receive up to £92 million more a year to help address the ongoing challenges in the criminal justice system and get justice for victims. Following that, in January we began consulting over a £20 million uplift to civil legal aid fees for lawyers working in the immigration and asylum and housing and debt sectors.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson), who spoke about the importance of forensic science in addressing miscarriages of justice, as well as prison maintenance issues. We are failing victims if courts cannot deliver swift justice. Prisons run out of places entirely, and crime goes without punishment. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Pam Cox) spoke about that in her contribution. It would have damaging consequences for the criminal justice system if that happened. That is why we are taking the steps to rebuild a justice system that works and that victims can have confidence in.

We are looking at imposing tougher exclusion zones that limit the movement of offenders, instead of limiting the movement of victims, and we are continuing the provision of free sentencing remarks to victims of rape and serious sexual offences. Our reforms will include continuing to expand our application of electronic monitoring to perpetrators of violence against women and girls, and the use of specialist domestic abuse courts, with trained staff to support victims and more co-ordinated management of perpetrators. We will continue to fund services supporting victims and witnesses. The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), made some eloquent contributions on that issue, which I heard clearly, and I thank him for that. We are creating a new domestic abuse flag at sentencing, so that domestic abusers are known to the Prison and Probation Service and their victims are better protected.

Since taking office, we have opened 2,400 prison places. Between 2024-25 and 2029-30, the Government are providing £7 billion to deliver the commitment to build 14,000 new prison places by 2031. That is the largest expansion since the Victorian era.

Sir Ashley Fox: During my speech I asked the Minister how much of the extra money allocated to his Department would be spent on higher wage rises, higher national insurance charges and inflation. I am just giving him a chance to respond before he finishes his own speech.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: As the hon. Gentleman will understand, the budget is being applied and worked through in an appropriate way, but the figures I have just given are the figures on which we will deliver, so he can be confident about that.

While this investment is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own, so to address these challenges and ensure that our prisons create better citizens, not better criminals, the Lord Chancellor commissioned the independent sentencing review, chaired by the right hon. David Gauke. As the Lord Chancellor announced in May following David Gauke's findings, we will be introducing an earned progression model based on a three-part sentence. On this model, offenders' release points will be determined by their behaviour. If they follow prison rules, they will earn earlier release; if they do not, they will be locked up for longer. However, that will not be true for all offenders. For those currently serving extended determinate sentences with an automatic release point of 67%—it is different for people with earlier releases; we will leave that as it is.

In the second part of the progression model, offenders will enter a period of intensive supervision. That will see more offenders tagged and under close supervision by the Probation Service. The supervision will be tailored according to each offender's risk and crime type, and bolstered beyond the current system with a set of new restrictive measures and a major ramp-up in tagging and probation investment. In the third part, offenders will be monitored in the community by the Probation Service, and can be returned to prison if they breach their conditions.

Alongside the progression model, we are also taking forward the recommendations to introduce a presumption to suspend short sentences. We will be investing in this model and intensive supervision by significantly increasing our probation funding through the spending review settlement. I welcomed the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth), and also what was said about the contribution of third sector organisations by my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) and for Rugby (John Slinger). Our additional investment will increase up to £700 million by 2028-29, allowing us to increase substantially the number of offenders on tags and to ensure investment in services that address the drivers of offending.

Tessa Munt: Following the Leveson report, will there be capacity for more funding for his recommendations?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We await the Leveson report, and when it arrives the Lord Chancellor will update the House. Matters such as that will be rightly dealt with then.

On efficiencies, the spending review has given the Department a settlement, and the Department will ensure that it is good value for money by applying all the appropriate methods.

This Government inherited a system that was creaking under pressure, having suffered chronic underfunding for 14 years. The Justice Committee rightly pointed out

that by 2016-17 the day-to-day budget of the Department had fallen by a third in real terms from its peak in 2007-08. That is why we are delivering the ambitious, once-in-a-generation reform of the justice system that the country needs, with public safety at its core.

3.3 pm

Andy Slaughter: I do not need to add anything to my opening speech, because the inevitable gaps have been filled eloquently by the subsequent speakers. Let me just take two minutes to thank those who have contributed to the debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Pam Cox) and for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth), the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt), the hon. Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) and the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde). They are all members of the Justice Committee, although the hon. Member for Eastbourne was wearing his other hat today as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, and I thank them for being here today. Indeed, I thank all the Committee members. With the exception of the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills, who resumed a distinguished parliamentary career after a short gap, they are all new Members, and they all give a great deal of time to this role in addition to everything else that new Members have to do.

I also thank the other Members who have spoken. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for his forensic dissection of the last Government's failings in this area, and I thank, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson), who covered ground that I did not have time to cover in relation to the Criminal Cases Review Commission and miscarriages of justice. I am grateful for her work in chairing the all-party parliamentary group for miscarriages of justice, as I am to my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson)—who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on access to justice—for her work on that and to other APPGs in this field.

I even thank the Front Benchers for their contributions. The hon. Member for Eastbourne is always very critical but very constructive. Perhaps the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) would like to adopt that approach.

Dr Mullan *indicated dissent.*

Andy Slaughter: No, I thought not. However, I very much enjoyed our time together on the Justice Committee, and I also enjoy his taking every bad point during these debates—although he should have been kinder to the distinguished former Lord Chancellor David Gauke, who, in my view, produced a very good report. As for the Minister, he is a very good friend of mine, and I thank him for his contributions. We know what a difficult job he has, but that will not stop us being on his back all the time to ensure that the many problems that have been identified today are resolved.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

National Armaments Director

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

[Relevant documents: Thirty-Second Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, The Future of the Equipment Plan, HC 716; Report of the National Audit Office, Investigation into military support for Ukraine, HC 230; Correspondence between the Chairs of the Defence Committee and the Committee of Public Accounts and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, on the Defence Equipment Plan, reported to the House on 12 March and 28 January.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Ministry of Defence:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £28,705,830,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £13,278,878,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £36,416,759,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Maria Eagle.)

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

3.6 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): Let me begin by thanking you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this debate, which, if I may say so, is particularly appropriate in Armed Forces Week. Let me also thank the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), who is sitting on the Opposition Front Bench, for being here to listen to my speech. I hope the Minister will answer a few of my questions. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, who would have joined me following our joint application for the debate, but his Committee has been away from Parliament on a visit.

The defence budget is one of the most important estimates that the House can debate and scrutinise. With war waging in Ukraine, the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict and with what is now happening in Iran, our world feels increasingly unstable. The Prime Minister has recently returned from the G7 and is now at the NATO summit, ensuring that our interests align with our European, AUKUS and American allies, which is critical. As General Walker, Chief of the General Staff, said last July, we must be ready for war within three years, and the rest of my speech is devoted largely to that theme.

I wish first to discuss the figures in the defence budget. I think that most Members are pleased that defence spending is now considered a priority. The strategic defence review announced in early June was welcomed, and confirmed that defence spending would rise from 2% to 2.5% of GDP by April 2027, with an extra 0.1% going towards intelligence and security services contributions. There was a further commitment to increase defence spending to 3% of GDP in the next Parliament, but it has been noted that no date has been set so far. The new announcement by the Prime Minister at the NATO summit suggests that the Government will expect to

spend 5% of GDP on national security and defence by the end of the next Parliament or by 2035, which includes 3% spent on core defence spending and 1.5% spent on resilience and security.

I ask Members to bear with me while I go through the somewhat complicated figures that this involves. In 2024, 1% of GDP was about £28 billion, according to the House of Commons Library, but hopefully our GDP will increase as the years go by. Members should note critically that a percentage increase in the budget is not the same as an increase in the percentage of GDP, hence the much higher figures that I am about to give. According to the Treasury Red Book, the current Ministry of Defence budget for 2025–26 is £62.2 billion, which is around 2.2% of GDP. For the Government to reach the needed 2.5% of GDP by 2027—setting aside the fact that the MOD budget does not quite align with the NATO-compliant spending—the defence budget must increase to around £70 billion in 2027–28. With the extra 0.1% that I mentioned earlier, the total is £72.8 billion. Therefore, another £9 billion to £11 billion needs to be found in the next two years.

If we are to reach 3% of GDP in the next Parliament, the defence budget will need to equate to around £84 billion in current prices. After today's announcement, the equating figures are 3.5% or £98 billion on core defence and 1.5% or £42 billion on resilience, so the total spending by 2035 will need to be £140 billion. These calculations are dependent on the GDP staying the same and not increasing, in which case the budget will of course increase as well. I simply ask the Minister: where is all this money coming from? It is a huge amount of money.

Given the failure to produce the defence investment plan alongside the strategic defence review, the SDR is merely a list of ambitions and aspirations, with few receipts and invoices attached. When he gave the ministerial statement on the SDR, I asked the Secretary of State to confirm when we would be able to scrutinise the figures, but I understand that the defence investment plan is still an unfinished piece of work and is not due to be published until the autumn. That is a long way off.

I am Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, which is always looking at how effectively money is spent, whether it could be spent more effectively to give the taxpayer best value for money, and whether spending is feasible. However, the Committee has not been able to fulfil its statutory role of scrutinising defence equipment spending for at least 12 months. The last defence equipment plan was published in November 2022, and it set out a 10-year spending plan for equipment procurement, costing around £305.5 billion. There was a £16.9 billion shortfall compared with the money that was then available.

I am pleased that the permanent secretary accepted the invitation to come to our Committee in April to discuss the equipment plan, but he did not come with any proposals as to how and when we might be able to scrutinise the relevant defence expenditure, to see whether the huge aspirations were affordable in the current budget, in the next budget of 3%, or in the following one of 3.5%. It is really important that Parliament has a timetable for when we can do that scrutiny.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the equipment plan; does he share the Defence Committee's frustration that the last time anyone was able to scrutinise that spending was in 2022? Is he aware

[*Lincoln Jopp*]

that when Lord Robertson came to the Defence Committee to discuss the strategic defence review last week, he was surprised that the Defence Committee was being denied access to the equipment programme—as indeed are the Public Accounts Committee—meaning that the Government simply cannot be held to account for what they are spending money on?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend has made the case eloquently, and I have also made it. The Minister will have heard and, hopefully, she might have something positive to say when she responds to the debate.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): To what extent does my hon. Friend believe that the situation is even worse than he has outlined? Inflationary pressures bear far more heavily on defence than on, with the possible exception of healthcare, practically any other part of public spending, yet I see no evidence in the defence review or anywhere else over the past 12 months of that being properly accounted for by Ministers or those who advise them.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My right hon. Friend must have read my mind; when I come on to submarines, I will mention that very factor of inflation in defence costs.

The MOD is being reorganised into four sections: there will be a permanent secretary in charge of the Department; the chief of the defence organisation will be in charge of all personnel matters; there will be a new national armaments director in charge of all matters to do with procurement, digital and research, including all the matters to deal with what is now in the Defence Infrastructure Organisation; and there is of course the Defence Nuclear Organisation. This debate is focused on the national armaments director, whose appointment has been ongoing since it was announced on 17 December 2024. I am hopeful that the Department might soon be in a position to announce who they have selected to do the job, which I have to say is very prestigious and very large, with a very large £400,000 salary attached.

As I said, the national armaments director will be responsible for all defence procurement and all of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, including defence housing, as well as digital and research. This represents a huge part of the defence budget. He will have significantly more control over the acquisition process than hitherto. I hope that some of the Government's announcements will come to fruition, including that on reducing the time it takes to award a contract to a two-year maximum, which the Department hopes to do by involving industry at a much earlier stage in the process, to help to solve problems. Rather than over-specifying on requirements, this should streamline things and simplify the contracts. It should also allow our defence sector to export more equipment to the international market, which will in turn support even more jobs in the sector.

One contract that demonstrates the weaknesses in our procurement strategy was that for the Ajax armoured fighting vehicle programme, which was contracted to General Dynamics. The contract was the subject of many Defence Committee and Public Accounts Committee inquiries and of many urgent questions. It was originally contracted in 2011 for delivery in 2017, then deferred to 2020-21. As we all know, the trials were halted due to

safety concerns, and the contract was renegotiated for 2024. Perhaps the Minister could tell us when all 180 vehicles will be in operation?

General Dynamics was also awarded the infamous Morpheus battlefield radio system contract, which has cost £828 million so far. Will the Minister confirm that it is currently in the evolve-to-open transition partnership, and when its in-service date is likely to be? It was intended to replace the existing Bowman communications system by 2026, but that will now have to be extended with modifications to at least 2031, and possibly to 2035. That may leave a capability gap in our defence system. I think the whole House would appreciate an update on where we are with our tri-service battlefield communications system, and how it could be accelerated.

Another contract that should receive more scrutiny is the E-7 Wedgetail early-warning and control aircraft. Although the SDR says that we will procure further units, and share the costs with our NATO allies, the Pentagon has labelled the E-7 “expensive”, “gold-plated” and “not survivable in the modern battlefield”.

Again, we would be grateful for further detail from the Minister on that contract.

As I said to the Minister in my question on today's statement, I welcome the fact that the Government have committed to buying more F-35 aircraft—12 F-35As and 15 F-35Bs. The F-35A capability will be an alternative to our seaborne nuclear capability. Another huge commitment as part of the SDR is the one to invest in up to 12 new SSN-AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines. The submarines are due to be in operation in the 2030s and 2040s, with one being built every 18 months, but there are huge challenges ahead due to it being a new class of submarine and concerns with the lack of capacity at Barrow-in-Furness. No cost per submarine has ever been disclosed, and the programme is likely to take more than 10 years, so we really need to see some of the detail. Is the deal underpinned by the Government's eventual commitment to increase expenditure to 3% in the next Parliament? We need to be able to see whether it is feasible.

Speaking of long in-service dates, as I was in respect of the F-35s earlier—and the Minister agreed—we need to see the early work on feasibility and contracts beginning as soon as possible to meet the long tail into the buying, building and commissioning of the submarines.

This strategically important contract will, when costs are announced, need leadership from the national armaments director to ensure that it remains on track and on budget, unlike so many others before it. The Public Accounts Committee has asked for an update by the end of June 2026, which will demonstrate how well defence procurement has improved under the first year of the national armaments director group. The renewed focus on nuclear is important when looking at the ever-increasing nuclear enterprise budget. In 2024, the budget was £10.9 billion, which is about 18% of the whole budget. The 10-year defence nuclear enterprise costs have increased by £10 billion from £117.8 billion to £128 billion, and it is not clear whether the extra £15 billion announced in the SDR that has been committed to the warhead is included in that figure.

The budget is rising due to various factors, including technical factors, inflation, and the speed of manufacturing at which we now need to build these submarines to meet

the timetable that is absolutely necessary for our defence. The budget is one of the few that is left unscrutinised due to the sensitive nature of these contracts, but as Chairman of the PAC, I am constitutionally obliged to see the detail. This needs to be resolved, and I am grateful for the commitment of the Secretary of State in working towards a solution. Sensitive scrutiny has never been more important, due to the context of the figures I announced earlier.

Defence personnel is another focus of the defence budget. The budget has had to increase by £14.3 billion to pay for the Treasury's employer's national insurance tax rise. The number of people leaving the armed forces is far too high. Last year, for every 100 personnel we recruited to the Army, we lost 130. This is completely unsustainable, especially as the SDR commits to increasing our armed forces to 76,000. The PAC recently held a session on cadet and reserve forces, and the SDR again clarifies that the Government want to increase the number of cadets by 30% and, critically, of reservists by 20%. Again, I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed how much that will cost.

We need to make joining the armed forces a much more attractive option than it currently is. Frankly, a prisoner would get better and safer conditions than some of the defence housing I have seen, much of which has mould, rust and leaks. This must change if we want to improve the retention and recruitment of our armed forces by giving them a better package of remuneration and conditions of service. I welcome the £1.5 billion to improve defence housing as part of the SDR and the £6.1 billion spent to repurchase 35,000 homes following the landmark deal with Annington Homes. This will allow the MOD to undertake major improvement schemes.

Another recruitment issue is the length of time it takes to enrol service personnel into training. We used to have an armed forces recruitment centre on every high street in the country. People could walk in off the streets, sign up and be wearing a new uniform within two weeks. There are now stories of recruitment taking well over six months, which is simply not good enough. We need to look further afield to ensure that the military has the right skills for the future. Cyber-warfare is becoming an increasing and real threat, and I believe the MOD could do more to recruit those with artificial intelligence and digital skills, but who would not necessarily meet the medical and fitness entry requirements needed for normal military personnel.

Dr Murrison: Would my hon. Friend comment on the Government's enthusiasm or otherwise for the Haythornthwaite review of careers in the armed forces? It was put in train by and carried out under the last Government, but we hear tell that there has perhaps been some backsliding since. That is a pity, as Rick Haythornthwaite's review was magisterial and had already shown signs, through zig-zag careers and the spectrum of service, of being appealing to servicemen and servicewomen, and holding them in—both in the regulars and the reserves. It would be a pity if that process did not continue on the basis of not-made-here-itis.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I cannot tell what is on the Government's mind, but maybe the Minister will be able to tell us. However, given that the SDR makes it perfectly clear that they want to increase the numbers of our armed forces considerably, we have to consider

every aspect of recruiting and retaining more. We must make sure that they do not just leave the Army or the armed forces as soon as they get particular skills. My right hon. Friend has raised a really important issue.

In conclusion, there is no greater duty on a Government than defending the nation, yet all Members of this House and the general public need to have confidence that our armed forces are properly equipped to do the job. That does not mean we can complacently give in to every demand, and it is the role of PAC members to carefully scrutinise the defence budget. Wasted spending and shortfalls are stopping our armed forces keeping us safe in the most efficient and effective ways. It is therefore imperative that the MOD releases more information on its finances in a timely manner, so that we can thoroughly scrutinise it and thus assure Parliament that our armed forces can do their job in the most effective way, with world-beating equipment.

3.25 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): It is welcome that this debate focusing on the remit of the national armaments director comes, as the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said, as the Prime Minister attends the NATO summit, where we are likely to see greater focus and action on the need to increase defence spending. However, as this Government have said, this is not all about numbers on a spreadsheet or a press release, and the national armaments director will allow the UK to focus on how defence money is being spent to increase the lethality of our armed forces and ensure that the deterrent effect of the combined UK armed forces is sufficient to prevent a war that no one in this Chamber wants to see.

The position shows that our Government are delivering the change we promised: greater coherence and a strategic focus on our procurement and industrial planning, cracking down on waste and boosting Britain's defence industry. I want what I am sure others in this House want, which is for us to move as quickly as possible, because only by doing so can we make sure our adversaries know that we are committed to our own defence. I want to raise three specific issues, and ask the Minister to provide clarification and assure me that these will be among the first priorities for the armaments director and, indeed, the Ministry of Defence.

First, looking at a globe rather than a flat map shows the strategic reality the UK faces as well as the importance of Scotland's position. From the High North, Russian ships and submarines can threaten NATO, merchant shipping and, crucially, underwater cables in the Atlantic. The strategic defence review highlighted the need for "improving NATO's deterrence...in Northern Europe and the High North."

Recently, NATO Secretary-General, Mark Rutte, emphasised

"a larger role for NATO in the High North."

This very much makes the UK, and Scotland in particular, a frontline nation in combating Russian aggression. To do that, the SDR spoke of the need for:

"An 'always on' supply line for shipbuilding",

with the Royal Navy continuing to move towards

"a more powerful but cheaper and simpler fleet".

The Type 31 frigates being built by Babcock at the Rosyth dockyard in my constituency would seem to fit the bill for that kind of move, along with providing the

[Graeme Downie]

requirement for an “always on” supply of shipbuilding. The first Type 31, HMS *Venturer*, was recently floated off, and the other ships of the initial five ordered by the Royal Navy are progressing well. I will take this opportunity to once again thank the workforce at Rosyth for the incredible contribution they make to our nation’s defence in the construction of the Type 31, as well as the other incredible work they do for us and our American allies. Can the Minister confirm that the armaments director will urgently consider the need for more Type 31 frigates to reflect the flexibility of this platform as well as the lower cost and faster production that the incredible workforce at Rosyth have been able to deliver?

Secondly, there have been many discussions in this place, particularly those led by the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), on the need to improve the UK’s air defence capability. This has been a key theme of the ongoing Sky News podcast “The Wargame”, created by a range of defence experts and advisers. I have certainly been listening to it over the last couple of weeks, although I think I am a few episodes behind at the moment. Improving that capability will require a number of solutions in collaboration with NATO and other allies, but it has been suggested that the future air dominance system and Britain’s next-generation Type 83 programme could be part of countering the emerging threat from hypersonic missiles. With the increased prominence of this type of threat visible in both Ukraine and recent conflicts in the middle east, can the Minister please provide an update on those programmes and on how the armaments director is likely to prioritise this important work?

Finally, as part of our increased defence spending, it is vital that we make defence an engine for growth, boosting prosperity, jobs and growth in every corner of the UK. We are strengthening the UK’s industrial base to better deter our adversaries, and to make the UK secure at home and strong abroad. That means engaging all parts of society and business, including the growing network of high-tech small and medium-sized enterprises and skilled manufacturers in my constituency, in Fife, and across Scotland and the rest of the UK.

This week, we heard from the Secretary of State for Business and Trade about the exciting prospect of a defence growth fund, which could bring together different bodies to deliver on their combined objectives of economic investment and improved defence. In my area, that could include opportunities for Fife council and Fife college, both of which could play a much larger role in delivering on defence and providing the skills and training that our young people need and deserve.

I have raised this topic numerous times in this place. We have seen the total failure of the SNP Scottish Government on devolved matters such as skills and infrastructure spending. We have the farcical position that senior people in the SNP say that it is party policy that public money should not be spent on military equipment; and even more ridiculously, the SNP responded to a request for medical aid from the Ukrainian Government by dictating that the aid could not be used on military casualties, a preposterous view that is utterly detached from reality. That position puts Scotland’s security at risk, and reduces opportunities for young people in my constituency.

Will the Minister provide an update on her discussions with the Department for Business and Trade on the defence growth fund and how it will benefit people in Scotland—something that the SNP has failed to do so far? This Government have responded brilliantly to the global threats that the UK faces, building alliances and partnerships across the world, creating the national armaments director, and undertaking the reorganisation that we have heard about today and in previous statements. I just hope that we can accelerate down that path as much as possible, to ensure that we deal with those threats, as the British public expect us to.

3.30 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Today this House is quite properly considering the scale and seriousness of the threats we face, from those requiring conventional deterrence in Europe to those of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. The case for strengthening our armed forces is not just compelling but essential. However, we must be honest about how we fund this renewal, and what we are willing to sacrifice to do so.

Let me be clear: the case for increased defence spending is self-evident. Like many others, I have long argued that we must invest more in our sovereign capability, critical munitions, advanced deterrence and national resilience, including by expanding both the remit and the resourcing of the national armaments director. The strategic significance of that role has grown substantially. In today’s volatile security environment, the national armaments director is not merely a procurement official; they are the principal architect of our defence industrial strategy, responsible for ensuring that our armed forces are equipped not just adequately, but decisively. Their portfolio spans capability planning, acquisition reform, exportability and the stewardship of our defence supply base, from the factory floor to the frontline. In an age of contested logistics, technological disruption and rapid rearmament by authoritarian regimes, the role is fundamental to preserving both operational readiness and sovereign capability.

Delivering a credible deterrent in today’s world means accelerating procurement cycles, building in modularity and adaptability, strengthening domestic supply chains, and driving long-term collaboration between government, industry and academia. It means ensuring that we can surge production in a crisis, replenish stockpiles at speed and invest in the innovation that gives us the strategic edge. That cannot be done in isolation or as an afterthought. That work must be led, co-ordinated and embedded across defence planning, not in spite of fiscal pressures, but because of them.

If we are serious about resilience, readiness and regeneration, we must empower the national armaments director with the authority, capacity and resources to act not simply as a technical overseer, but as a strategic enabler at the heart of defence policy. Only then can we translate increased spending into real-world capability, and ensure that British power is not only credible on paper, but deliverable in practice.

However, this investment must not come at the expense of our international development commitments. Funding defence by slashing foreign aid is a false economy. Worse, it risks undermining the strategic posture that we seek to build. Aid is not an indulgence. It is not a

soft option, and it is certainly not a luxury for easier times. It is an instrument of national strategy—a projection of British values, a tool of soft power, and a forward-deployed asset in the defence of the realm. When Britain pulls back from the world, our adversaries do not hesitate to step in. China in particular has understood this dynamic. It does not wait for crises to send in troops; it sends in investment, infrastructure and influence, often to the very regions from which we have retreated. When we reduce aid, we do not save; we cede ground and create vacuums that others are all too willing to fill.

Let us be frank: foreign aid and defence are not in conflict. They are complementary. One builds resilience, prevents crises and supports our allies; the other protects us as those crises unfold. A truly strategic posture requires both, because real security does not start when the first shot is fired. It starts in the classrooms of conflict zones, in the clinics of fragile states, and in the partnerships we forge before troubles take root. If we choose to retreat from the world, we shall find that the world does not retreat from us.

3.35 pm

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): My husband was an Army reservist who served in Afghanistan. He has not told me a great deal about what his job entailed, but he has told me about taking flights in helicopters that hugged mountains on which the burned-out remnants of Soviet tanks stood ghostly guard; about his interactions with the people in the Afghan army and the civilians who worked with us; about buying bread from locals; and about visiting the children being treated in the hospital on the international security assistance force army base.

Our armed forces are the best in the world. That can be a throwaway phrase used by politicians, but it is one that I stand by, and I know that many families of our armed forces, both in Derby and across the country, stand by it too. As we celebrate Armed Forces Week in Derby, I will be thinking of them. It is essential that our armed forces have the kit, the arms and the technology that they need, and in my view, those who serve our national security by working in the defence industry and their families should have their contribution celebrated, too.

We are in a new era of threat that demands a new era for UK defence, so it was absolutely right for this Government to announce the largest sustained increase to defence spending since the end of the cold war, and to have already boosted defence spending by £5 billion this year. As the Government increase defence spending, they are making defence an engine for growth, boosting prosperity, jobs and growth in every corner of the UK.

Over the last few weeks, Derby has been mentioned many times in this Chamber. It is one of many cities benefiting from the Government's commitment to defence and security, which is creating the skilled, secure jobs that we see in our city and across Derbyshire and the east midlands. Under the new defence industrial strategy, UK-based firms will be prioritised for Government investment, and that will drive economic growth, boost British jobs and strengthen national security. Under the last Government, small businesses often felt locked out of defence, and just 4% of Government defence spend went to small and medium-sized enterprises. The Government's specific support will open the door to small businesses.

Derby has a large part to play in this, because we make things there. Rolls-Royce in Derby is known for having created the Merlin engine, first produced in 1936 and used in Lancaster bombers, Spitfires and Hurricanes, but we also have Rolls-Royce Submarines, which builds the nuclear reactors that power our at-sea deterrent. The UK's submarines are the most awesome and lethal machines in the world's history. I believe in the power of politics and the power of negotiation to preserve peace, which we all desperately want. However, we have to acknowledge that our submarines, with their sheer size and power, have spoken louder than words for more than 60 years, and they help to underwrite our security. We cannot wish away the threats that are growing; we have to deter them. Time and again, our Prime Minister has confirmed that security and defence are the first duty of Government, and that priority can be seen in the investment that is being made. From submarines to drones, Derby has a major role to play in supporting the Government in making and keeping Britain safe, so that it is secure at home and strong abroad.

3.40 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I have been banging on like a howitzer—well, maybe like a small-bore cannon—about the need to mobilise British industry as we ramp up for possible conflict in an increasingly hostile world. I welcome the news that the new national armaments director is being resourced to oversee the alliance between our military brains and brawn and the sinews of the British defence industry.

Civilians talk tactics, but veterans talk logistics, for old warriors know that a modern army marches not so much on its stomach, as in the days of Wellington and Napoleon, as on a very long supply chain, anchored mainly in small and medium-sized enterprises. That extends—to use the military's favourite phrase—to all domains.

We have had recent sharp lessons on the reality of modern warfare, from the muddy hell of trenches in occupied Ukraine to the arid highlands of Iran. We have seen high-tech systems—drones, cyber, space and stealth—undergo a baptism of fire. We have also seen weapons that would have been familiar to my infantryman grandfather on the shores of Gallipoli in 1915 plying their old trade to deadly effect; artillery remains the queen of the battlefield. While our sailors, soldiers and aircrew are the tip of the spear, the essential shaft is our factories and shipyards, and every corner of the country can play its full part. I say “every part”, but there is bad news from Scotland under the yoke of the SNP, where the nationalists and their Green party fellow travellers have engendered a hostile environment for defence firms. We have seen young apprentices denied entrance to the Holyrood Parliament by an elected representative tipped to lead the Greens; and, in recent days, we have seen former First Minister Humza Yousaf—still an MSP—blundering around on the world stage, shroud-waving about it being a war crime to allow US military aircraft to refuel at Prestwick airport, and bemoaning the proscription of the saboteurs of Palestine Action.

There is a presumption, as we heard from the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie), that the Scottish Government will not channel funding towards ordnance—a battlefield prerequisite. That has led this Government to step in and say that they will

[John Cooper]

help to fund a new Rolls-Royce centre of welding excellence on the Clyde, which will be key to submarine and warship building.

The stakes could not be higher. Scotland is already a defence powerhouse. Umbrella body ADS estimates that 16,250 people in Scotland work in the sector, producing Royal Navy warships, cutting-edge radars, optronic masts—do not dare call them mere periscopes—for submarines and smart missiles such as Storm Shadow. Even my rural constituency of Dumfries and Galloway produces the helmets vital to the sensor suite on F-35 Lightning fighter bombers, of which we are purchasing 12 more nuclear-capable Alpha variants.

Figures from 2023 show that the Ministry of Defence spends £370 per person living in Scotland. It is—or ought to be—Britain's arsenal, and as such, Scotland should be top of the national armaments director's in-tray, yet firms wanting to set up the new ordnance factories recommended in the strategic defence review, or seeking to expand in order to fulfil new MOD orders, cannot count on financial support via the Scottish Government. Whose side is Scotland's First Minister on? Will the Minister tell the House what powers the new armaments director will have to eliminate the Scottish Government's reckless fifth columnist policies on defence?

3.43 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I start by thanking everyone in our armed forces who serves, who has served, and who has fallen. Our country is safer and better because of their service.

In assessing the financial necessity of meeting our defence needs, it is important, first, to look at the state of our world—not only our real adversaries but our potential adversaries, our allies and the most powerful country in the world, the United States. In our country and across the world, there is an assumption that the foreign policy of the current President will be a blip, and I do not believe that to be so. For my constituents and for the House, it is important to reflect on that reality as the country and the Government set their path towards a long-term investment in the defence capabilities that we so desperately need.

The 2017 national security strategy of the United States, released by President Trump, said:

“After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned.”

In 2022, the national security strategy released by President Biden said:

“The most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy.”

In 2017, the era of co-operation, which had defined multiple US presidencies in the post-cold war era, was declared dead by President Trump. In 2022, the era of competition that had defined the Trump era was given new life by President Biden—two contrasting presidencies, two sides of the same coin.

As Russia illegally invaded Ukraine, a sovereign, democratic country, and China made clear its designs on Taiwan, a sovereign, democratic country, those two autocracies have deepened their ties, and they have collaborated more closely with other UK and US rivals.

It is clear that the consensus that has been emerging in the beltway was accurate. The main priority of American foreign policy as great power competition is clear. The aspiration of the outcome that the US stays ahead of the pack is clear.

We in this House will debate the motivations, character and behaviour of President Trump. They will be open to interpretation, but, in some important ways, his worldview has a more settled nature. With him and Biden as presidents and the United States as a great power pursuing US interests in a world where competition is the enduring and defining feature, our American ally has for some time now been telling a story about how it sees itself and the world, and we would be foolish to see the current presidency as a blip. It is the continuation of a tradition.

Of course, there are differences between the two presidencies: in their approach to diplomacy and how nationalistically it should be pursued; in their assessment of American interests and how aggressively they should be pursued; in their adherence to American values and how devotedly they should be upheld; and in sum, whether to collaborate with countries with which it has always collaborated, such as the United Kingdom, either as an end in itself—to reinforce and sustain an American-led order of democracies—or as a means to an important end, which is to pursue an economic strength and a national security that traditional democratic allies would seek, too.

The presidencies and presidents do not differ in their assessment of the international system and the need for competition. That is a critical point that will define UK defence decisions this year and in subsequent years. I obviously have a preference for a particular style of behaviour. I would much prefer President Biden's form of foreign policy, but the outcomes that are being pursued are clear. This prompts the question: will whoever succeeds President Trump deviate from or continue his foreign policy? I argue that it will be a continuation.

If the priority of the US, our closest ally, is to stay ahead of those autocracies in the long term, and we have stronger ties and shared values with the United States as it becomes more competitive with those rivals, it is in our interest to do all that we can to counter the rise of those rivals, to mitigate against their worst behaviours, to minimise their risk to our security and to militate against their threats to our values—with the United States wherever possible, and with other democracies that make the same assessment of our threat. That is why it is so important that we invest in our defence capabilities.

We are making the largest sustained increase to defence spending. We have boosted defence spending by £5 billion this year, and we are committed to spending 4.1% of our GDP by 2027, and 5% by 2035. I commend that strongly given the international circumstances that we face. It is so important that we achieve that, and we must educate our constituents about why that is. In this House, it is important that we bring the right scrutiny to our defence decisions.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Tom Hayes: No, I will not. Please sit down.

It is important that we bring the right scrutiny to our decisions and our defence strategy. It is important, too, that across the House we conduct ourselves in an appropriate fashion. In advancing our defence and security, with the decisions that are pursuant to that, the House should be united. Given the ways in which our society has been disunited, we need as a House to come together and find solutions in a cross-party way.

This year we marked the 80th anniversary of VE Day; 80 years have passed, but memory is not enough. Imagine a world without victory in Europe—a world where tyranny had triumphed and darkness endured. Now look at the world today—a world where autocracies dominate, divide and deceive, and where freedom is retreating. We all owe those who fought and those who fell more than remembrance, and we owe those who carried that loss nothing less than vigilance. That means vigilance against those autocracies and against the risk of misjudgment, miscalculation and misadventure.

All of us in this House have an important role to play in the defence decisions of this Government. That means being a strong democracy, cohering our society, strengthening the institutions of our state, growing economically, securing our clean home-grown energy, investing in new technologies and equipping our military with the tools and technologies that it needs. It means being a true ally and telling our allies around the world when things are not working. It means giving them reasons to listen by growing in strength and purpose. We must speak with the affection and wisdom of an old country that has known what it is to rise, to navigate uncertainty, to be attacked at home, to know the blessings of freedom being imperilled, and to decline from great power but none the less to work with allies and partners to secure freedom in our world against very difficult circumstances.

3.51 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): When I gave my maiden speech just under a year ago, I took the opportunity to express my frustration that the Government had announced a spending review that would essentially buy the political cover to get to a defence spend of 2.5% of GDP. The frustration I expressed was that the dogs in the streets knew that we needed 2.5%, and that we essentially wasted the best part of a year.

The evidence for that is clear to us all. Lord Robertson and General Barrons appeared in front of the Defence Committee when the Government kicked off the strategic defence review, and I said that when Lord Robertson had done his prior defence review, it was very clearly threat-based and foreign policy-led, whereas this one seemed to be saying, “2.5% is the answer, but now what is the question?”. It proved to be the case, because part way through the strategic defence review the Government asked, “What can you get for 3% by the next Parliament?”, and then they asked, “What can you get for 3% by 2034?”, and then, “What can you get for 3.5%?”. As the Prime Minister turned up at the NATO summit, we got the mystery bump up to 5% for defence and security. My suspicion, maybe slightly cynically, is that that 1.5% is made up of 0.75% smoke and 0.75% mirrors, but we shall see. It would be churlish of me, while defence expenditure is going up, to question it. I therefore think it is important to concentrate on how the money will be spent.

I remind the House of an exchange that took place at the Defence Committee the other day with the Chief of the Defence Staff after the publication of the strategic defence review. He said that we come from a position of strength and that this additional expenditure will simply make us stronger and more secure. I said, “I obviously did not expect you to know the answer to this question, but if I were to ask you, how many working tanks have we got?” He batted away the question in the following way:

“I suppose my caution on that would be that, while we are charged with the nation’s security and safety, it may be that having 50 tanks or 100 tanks is not necessarily going to be the defining factor as to whether the country remains safe. To me, that is the problem with those questions.

I come back to this: is our readiness at a level that we are playing our part, with our NATO partners, and achieving deterrence with Russia?”

Clearly not. He continued:

“Are we really confident about that?”

The problem with a micro example is that it skips over what is fundamentally our security construct. We are a beneficiary of a collective group of nations in Europe. Never mind our 50 tanks or our modest increase in the Army; they are increasing their armies by tens of thousands and they are increasing their tanks by hundreds.”

If that is the attitude the Minister is getting to our having very few working tanks, she should be wary of the voices she might be getting from certain parts of the Ministry of Defence. I think that she and the Prime Minister would like some options beyond simply reaching for the nuclear button; there needs to be something in between. I hope that she will take that forward in her conversations with the national armaments director on their priorities.

I asked the Minister when we were discussing the national armaments director whether the director would have free range to tear up the book on defence procurement. The book certainly needs tearing up. I speak as someone who, as well as serving on the frontline on four tours of Northern Ireland, the first Gulf war, the second Gulf war, Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, managed to squeeze in about five years in the Ministry of Defence. I am sure the Minister is aware of the conspiracy of optimism in equipment planning, where people in uniform will tell part-truths about how much things will cost to get them into the programme—it is called entryism, and it has been going on for years—and then, all of a sudden, those same people will come back and say, “Minister, I am afraid our aircraft carriers won’t cost the £2 billion we told you; they will cost £6 billion. But what are you going to do? You’ve already announced them, and anything else will cause you huge amounts of political pain.”

I urged the Minister to tear up the rulebook, and she gave me a positive response: the national armaments director will indeed be earning their salary. The Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee said it was £400,000—I think that he or she will be on a potential £600,000 with bonuses—but they have got to be worth that. They must have free range to tear up the book. As a member of the Defence Committee, I do not want them giving us evidence a year after their initial appointment and saying, “I wanted to change things, but they just would not let me.”

This is my final point. Alongside the appointment of the national armaments director, we have defence reform going through. It was telling that when Lord Robertson

[*Lincoln Jopp*]

and General Barrons came back to the Defence Committee having published their SDR and I asked them about the culture change required in the whole of defence reform, Lord Robertson told an interesting story. When Colin Powell moved from uniform to politics and was asked, “How do you bring about a culture change in an organisation which has gone in the wrong direction?” General Powell said, “Well, how do you stop a column of ants? You stamp on the first 10.” The Minister needs to prepare herself for some seriously robust conversations with the Ministry of Defence if money is to be spent wisely and honestly on things that go bang and bring about the effect—not just the input—that we all desire.

3.59 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): It is a privilege to rise on estimates day, during Armed Forces Week, an annual moment of national recognition for the extraordinary contribution of our armed forces, to speak about the importance of our defence industry. Across the country this week, from school assemblies to community events, people will quite rightly pay tribute to the men and women who serve our nation with distinction. I particularly reference my uncle, Donald Campbell, who died in 2016. He joined the armed forces as a youngster straight from school. He left aged 21 after a schizophrenic breakdown, which ultimately defined the rest of his life, but he, like so many veterans, remained extremely proud of his time in the Army and the role that he played, especially in Northern Ireland.

In my constituency, we will mark Armed Forces Week with Proms in the Park in West Bridgford on Saturday, and celebrate the two events. It will bring together families, veterans and the wider community to show their gratitude and support for those who serve. It is those local, heartfelt gatherings that remind us that defence is not an abstract concept; it is about people, communities and the security that we enjoy because of the historic and ongoing sacrifice of others.

In today’s estimates day debate, I will speak both to the reforms under way and to the Government’s broader vision for rebuilding Britain’s security and supporting jobs at home. As I said in a recent op-ed on defence to my constituents, we are now firmly in a new era for defence—one defined not just by increasing geopolitical threats, as has already been described by a number of Members, but by a determination to face them with seriousness, strategy and solidarity.

This Government have committed to the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war, already boosting spending by £5 billion this year and setting out a path to 2.5% of GDP and beyond. We have heard today about reaching 5% of GDP on defence and security by 2035, and it is important that this House can scrutinise the trajectory for getting to those targets.

Thankfully, this Government have already taken some shorter-term, practical steps that I welcome. They include awarding the largest pay rise to service personnel in 20 years; establishing the new independent Armed Forces Commissioner to improve service life; and spending an extra £1.5 billion, in a record uplift, to fix substandard forces housing. Just as importantly, we are thinking

differently and changing how defence operates, ending waste, rebuilding capability and making defence an engine of growth across the country.

That is particularly notable in my constituency in the south of Nottingham. Many of my constituents work for Rolls-Royce and on their behalf, I welcome the £9 billion Unity contract announced in January to design, manufacture and provide in-service support for the nuclear reactors that power the Royal Navy’s fleet of submarines. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), I also welcome the confirmation that Rolls-Royce will receive £2.5 billion to produce the first small modular reactor, which is key to our energy security. Both announcements are good news for thousands of people in my region of the east midlands, who will be part of the supply chain for those two iconic developments.

We cannot confront 21st-century threats with 20th-century systems. The hard-fought lessons from Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine remind us that a military is only as strong as the industrial and technological base that supports it. That is why I applaud Ministers and civil servants for their work on the strategic defence review and the defence reform programme. At the heart of those reforms is the creation of a new national armaments director to lead a unified group responsible for procurement, research, support and innovation. That is a long-overdue development.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the new national armaments director should have as one of their priorities making sure that the welcome uplift in spending by this Government means that SMEs really get a fair share of that, and that that will do great things for constituencies such as my hon. Friend’s and mine, where there are many smaller and medium-sized businesses that seek to benefit from that process?

James Naish: I was just about to get on to the fact that under the previous Government only two of 49 major defence projects were delivered on time, and SMEs have been locked out of that procurement process, so my hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of changing that.

The new defence industrial strategy puts UK-based firms at the heart of procurement, ensuring that Government investment strengthens our national security and supports good jobs at home. That is great news for places such as Rushcliffe, as I said, given that it sits at the heart of the east midlands manufacturing base, which is home to firms in aerospace, engineering and precision technology, all of which are well placed to contribute to our defence future.

Importantly, not only will this new direction open the door to a better relationship with new businesses, but SMEs in Nottinghamshire will be able to be prime contractors, and it will make defence accessible, collaborative and responsive. We will be able to tackle long timelines, improve communication and, of course, invest in skills. As the Member of Parliament for Rushcliffe, I will continue to champion policies that bring jobs, investment and innovation to the east midlands. Defence must absolutely be part of that equation. Our region has a proud industrial heritage and a bright technological future if opportunities such as these are developed.

Finally, I want to return to where I began: our armed forces. All these reforms, strategies and spending commitments come back to them—the people we ask to defend our democracy, uphold international law and respond at moments of crisis. We owe them not just words of thanks during Armed Forces Week but action, investment and reform every week of the year.

This Labour Government are serious about defence and keeping Britain secure at home and strong abroad. After years of drift, we are delivering the long-term decisions needed to safeguard our country and support our communities. We are not just patching up a broken system; we are building a modern, resilient and forward-looking defence infrastructure, one that reflects the values of our armed forces and the aspirations of our country. I therefore welcome the steps the Government have taken to date and are taking through these estimates.

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

4.6 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Today's debate takes place at a moment of acute global instability, with war still raging in Ukraine, mounting threats from hostile states and an unreliable security partner in the White House. The world is more dangerous than it has been in a generation. In that context, the Liberal Democrats warmly welcome the Government's commitment in February to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027. The Government's subsequent commitment to a new NATO defence spending target of 5% is also the right decision. It reflects a recognition of the new threat environment that we find ourselves in and of what is necessary to support Britain's long-term defence.

It remains the case, however, that the Government are still playing catch up on questions of the nation's security. The last Conservative Government cut the Army by 10,000 troops, even as tanks rolled across continental Europe. That decision was staggeringly short-sighted and irresponsible. Despite that, this Government have dragged their feet on rebuilding the strength and size of our Army and have said that there will be no expansion to Army numbers beyond 73,000 troops until the next Parliament. In the context of the threats we face, that timeline can only be summarised as a day late and a pound short. The British Army remains one of the strongest deterrents we have—if the Government can commit to supporting its regeneration fully. While I welcome this Government's shift in tone compared with the Conservatives, I urge Ministers again to commit to a much more rapid reversal of those troop cuts.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): The strategic defence review mentions that there will be an increase in the size of the Army at some point if funds allow. Does my hon. Friend not agree that, now that we will be spending 3.5% of GDP on defence, we can accelerate that shift and grow the size of the Army now to provide that deterrent effect?

Helen Maguire: I agree with my hon. Friend that it would absolutely help our deterrence if we could increase troop numbers. The Liberal Democrats are calling for new bonus schemes to recruit and re-enlist 3,000 personnel, allowing the Government to reach their target of 73,000 trained troops as soon as possible, meaning that they

can grow Army numbers further and faster beyond that in this Parliament. I encourage the Minister to consider those proposals.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I agree that we need an increase in troop numbers, but the challenge for any Government is not only setting the important policy, but saying how they would pay for it. I therefore invite the hon. Member to set out the Liberal Democrats' plan for paying for her proposals. Please let her not say that it will be funded by a digital services tax, like all their other policies.

Helen Maguire: The hon. Member will know, if he has read our policies, that our proposal costs a maximum of £60 million, which is insignificant compared with the entire defence budget. Getting us to 76,000 as soon as possible will help us with deterrence.

The Government have promised a new defence investment plan for the autumn. That gives them a vital opportunity to provide clarity about how they will effectively address the ubiquitous shortage of equipment throughout the armed forces. However, serious questions remain about why they did not think it appropriate to develop and publish the plan, or a defence equipment plan, alongside the strategic defence review earlier this month. All efforts should be made to accelerate the publication of the plan so that parliamentarians can scrutinise the Government's proposals at the earliest opportunity.

The threats to our security mean that the Government cannot afford to delay. With President Trump casting doubt on America's commitment to NATO, the UK must lead in Europe. That means moving much faster to reach the new 5% NATO target than the currently proposed 2035 timeline, which would take us beyond the life of even the next Parliament. I therefore again urge the Minister to convene cross-party talks so that the whole House, representing the country, can together agree a pathway to the high amounts of defence spending that our security demands.

Our attention has turned this week to security crises in the middle east, but it is vital that we do not lose sight of Putin's continuing barbarism in Ukraine. We are currently sitting on £25 billion in frozen Russian assets. Across the G7, that figure rises to \$300 billion. I recently visited Estonia, and I cannot emphasise enough how strongly the Estonians urge the UK and His Majesty's Government to develop plans on how best to support Belgium in unlocking those assets, and to lead from the front by seizing assets across the UK. Liberal Democrats again call on the UK Government to work with our allies to seize those assets and repurpose them directly for Ukraine's defence and reconstruction. If Putin's imperialism is to be stopped, we must act decisively and boldly now.

We also need a strategy that looks beyond the battlefield, because supporting our forces must mean supporting our veterans, service families, and the defence industry. Liberal Democrats would put in place a long-term defence industrial strategy to protect sovereign capability, provide certainty to industry, and ensure investment in R&D, training and regional jobs.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Will my hon. Friend join me in urging the Government to award the New Medium Helicopter contract to Leonardo UK in Yeovil, and to

[Adam Dance]

reassure us that a “defence dividend” will include supporting jobs, apprenticeships and the resilience of domestic defence firms across the south-west?

Helen Maguire: I know how important the defence industry is to my hon. Friend’s constituency, so I ask the Minister to consider that.

We would end the scandal of poor service housing by requiring the Ministry of Defence to provide housing above the legal minimum standards. No one who puts their life on the line for this country should live with leaks or mould. We would extend access to military health services to service families, improve mental health support for veterans, and tackle discrimination and harassment in the armed forces by fully implementing the Atherton review recommendations.

As the US has become an unpredictable ally, the UK has a greater responsibility to lead, to stand with our allies and to act decisively. We must now move faster to restore and grow our armed forces, reverse past cuts, and invest in the skills, infrastructure and sovereign capabilities that our military needs.

The UK must rise to the challenges of standing with Ukraine, securing our alliances, and building the resilience to protect our people in the face of a more dangerous world.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Defence Secretary.

4.13 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to respond to today’s estimates debate on defence expenditure. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, for securing the debate with the Backbench Business Committee, and particularly for timing it perfectly for the NATO summit and Armed Forces Week.

Given the threats we face from Russia and the instability in the middle east and elsewhere, it is welcome in principle that NATO states have agreed at this week’s summit to increase spending. Nevertheless, when we consider what the Government’s announcement means for UK defence expenditure, we must be clear that talk of 5% on national security and 3.5% on defence is nothing but a con. It is unadulterated smoke and mirrors when we need real investment at real pace to produce a real step change in our deterrence.

Consider first the promise of 5% on national security by 2035, consisting of 3.5% on the core defence budget and 1.5% on resilience and security. The Prime Minister confirmed on GB News yesterday that the 1.5% is already being spent. Not a penny of new money is being spent on actual military capability. As for the core defence budget, Labour has promised 3.5% in 10 years’ time, but the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirmed on yesterday’s media round that there is no plan to fund that increase, and there will not be one until at least 2029. If there is no plan for 3.5% in the Parliament after next, what about a plan for 3% in the next Parliament? The authors of the strategic defence review wrote on the day of its publication, 2 June, that the decision to go to 3%

“established the affordability of our recommendations across a 10-year programme.”

The problem is this: the Government no more have a plan to fund 3.5% in a decade than to fund 3% in the years leading up to it. It means that the promises of the SDR were dead on arrival, and the headline pledge of “up to 12” nuclear submarines is a fantasy fleet based on fantasy funding. Most worryingly, the smoke and mirrors are not just being used for spending in future Parliaments. What I am about to say is subject to the caveat that in response to our written questions to the Treasury, it is simply not sharing with us the quantum of money that has been moved from the intelligence budget into defence. Nevertheless, as far as we can see, Labour is not going to spend the 2.5% that it promised for defence by 2027.

To recap, in his defence spending statement in February, the Prime Minister confirmed that intelligence spending would be added to the core defence budget, taking it to 2.6%. By our reckoning, that intelligence spend is the equivalent of almost 0.2% of GDP. Subtracting that from 2.6% gives a figure of just over 2.4%. The smoke and mirrors do not end there. That 2.4% will have to cover the cost of Chagos, which is at least £250 million next year, rising to a total of £30 billion. That 2.4% will also have to include spending on election interference, and other non-official development assistance FCDO expenditure that the spending review confirmed would now be added to the defence budget. The significance of that is that if 2.6% is actually in the region of 2.4%, it will mean that the increase in defence spending to 2027 is not the biggest since the cold war, because it will be less than the increase when Boris Johnson was Prime Minister in 2019.

Here is the upshot of the so-called 5% on national security that Labour has announced at NATO: no new money in the 1.5% for security and resilience, just reclassification of existing spending; no plan to get to 3.5% on the core defence budget by 2035; and no plan to get to 3% on the core defence budget in the next Parliament. The detail of the spending review confirmed that when spending hits the supposed figure of 2.6% in 2027, it does not increase towards 3% but stays flat. Worse than that, as I have explained, defence spending does not get to 2.6% on defence at all, but to something like 2.4% at best. It is smoke and mirrors at every turn.

If there is one thing worse than the lack of substance in Labour’s defence spending spin, it is the lack of urgency. Its promises are all about 2035, a decade away, but the threats that we face are real and imminent. As the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee said in his excellent speech, last July the head of the Army, General Walker, said that we must be ready for a war not in a decade or even five years, but within three years. The SDR promised a bigger Army in reserve, but only in the 2030s. Its big headline promise on attack submarines will be delivered into the 2040s.

Warfare is changing fast, but Labour is moving far too slowly. The SDR was promised for the spring, but published in the summer. The defence industrial strategy was also promised for the spring, but the Minister recently confirmed to me in a written answer that it is months away. The Government must move much faster to boost the total lethality of our forces in the near term, not least by rapidly embracing the extraordinary opportunity to boost our overall mass and capability through autonomous systems and drones.

In my defence drone strategy, the aim was to provide high-quality drone and anti-drone tech for Ukraine—which we have done, and I am very proud of that—and then to learn from that, in parallel, to build a UK sovereign drone industrial base, but that has been completely stymied by the procurement freeze effectively in place since the election. Labour is prioritising penny-pinching over rapid rearmament. While Ukraine is producing thousands and thousands of drones every month, Labour ordered just three new military drones for the British armed forces in its first financial year in government.

What would we do differently? We would go to 3% on defence in this Parliament. We would scrap the Government's crazy Chagos deal and use the money to rapidly rearm, starting with next year's £250 million on Chagos. That cash could be spent not on tax cuts for the Mauritians, but on drones and anti-drone tech from British SMEs—on tech that is battle-proven in Ukraine and can be produced in months, and that can be ordered at a low cost but a sufficient scale to enable the Army to start training comprehensively in drone warfare by next year. That is the kind of urgency that we need to see against the threat we face.

If the country hears that the Government are going to spend 5% of GDP on defence, it will assume that it will be like in 1985, when we actually spent 5% of GDP on our military, not on smoke and mirrors. That gave us 337,000 regular personnel, over 600 combat aircraft and a full array of tactical nuclear weapons for land, sea and air. Perhaps there is a reason why our 5% then was so different from Labour's 5% today: in 1985, our Prime Minister actually led the country.

Instead of surrendering sovereignty, Mrs Thatcher stood up to Galtieri and successfully defended the Falklands. She would never have been neutral when asked if she supported strikes by the US on the nuclear programme of a country like Iran. By standing shoulder to shoulder with Washington, she helped to bring down the Berlin wall and relight the torch of freedom in Europe. Far from returning to the days of 1985 and actually spending 5% of GDP on defence, we now have instead a massive con trick from Labour. Unfunded ambitions and smoke and mirrors will not deter our adversaries. In Armed Forces Week, those who bravely serve our nation deserve much better.

4.22 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): I thank all those who have spoken in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on obtaining it, very properly in Armed Forces Week, to highlight some of the issues. I will try to answer a few of his questions. I have had an interesting read of the 32nd report of his Committee; he and I used to serve together on the Committee many moons ago, so I take PAC reports very seriously.

Although it is true that there has been no equipment plan for the last two years—during which time both Governments have been in power—because of some of the disruption around the election and the wholesale reordering of the way in which the MOD works, I recognise the fact that his Committee is not satisfied with the current state of affairs, and I agree that it cannot stay how it is.

Ministers are committed to increasing transparency, and I undertake to work closely with the National Audit Office and the hon. Gentleman's Committee to try to work out a suitable arrangement going forward that they will be happy with. We are not seeking to undercut transparency or to fail to report properly to Parliament, so I hope that will give him some reassurance. Of course, we have only just received his report; I think we have a couple of months to ensure that we reply to its recommendations properly, and I will take an interest in ensuring that we do so.

I recognise some of the figures that the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his excellent speech. He asked where all the money is coming from—one or two others have asked a similar question, with varying levels of outrage. What I can say is that in this Parliament, we have already committed an extra £5 billion this year and resources to get up to 2.5% in the core defence budget—more than £10.9 billion extra in real terms. I do not think any of the Defence Ministers have turned up at NATO today with a fully set-out plan for getting to 5% by 2035. Each country has its own way of producing budgets and will do so over different periods, and I think it is quite reasonable for us to say that during the election we had a manifesto commitment to get to 2.5%, we have set out how we are going to do that and how we will pay for it. The hon. Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) said that he regretted the way in which that commitment is being paid for, but we have made that choice—difficult though it is—in order to make it clear where the money that we have committed to in this Parliament is coming from.

We have always met our NATO commitments. That goes for parties on both sides of the House; when the Conservatives were in government, they met our NATO commitments, and we have always met them and will continue to do so. The way that our spending commitments will be funded in the next Parliament will be set out during that Parliament, but we cannot set a path directly from this Parliament into the next one. NATO will be looking at that. *[Interruption.]* Well, I would say to the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) that we do not budget for that length of time in the future, and neither did his party when it was in office. It is not how we do budgeting in this Parliament and it is not how his Government budgeted either.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Maria Eagle: I mean, the right hon. Gentleman has only just walked in. If he wants to start heckling me, I am happy to have a discussion with him in the Tea Room afterwards, but there is no point in him heckling me from a sedentary position when he has not taken part in the debate. *[Interruption.]* It is very kind of the right hon. Gentleman to allow me to continue my speech. I am trying to answer questions posed by the Chairman of the Select Committee, whose debate this is.

We know that NATO will—as it usually does—check each nation's spending against its expectations on a yearly basis, so that will be an obvious way in which we can see progress being made towards our goal. We will also continue to report, as ever, and I have no doubt that we will get to 3% in the next Parliament and that there will be a trajectory towards 5% overall, with the

[*Maria Eagle*]

1.5% security and resilience spending. Instead of making allegations about that commitment being smoke and mirrors, it would be better for the Opposition to say that they would do the same if they were in Government. If they did so, we would have a proper consensus to give industry certainty that this is what we are committed to do as a nation. I welcome the fact that the Liberal Democrats said that they would commit themselves to that goal.

I look forward to engaging with the Chairman of the Select Committee on the recommendations in the report, and I intend to make sure he is satisfied by what we come back with. He had some particular requests about Ajax—we all know that notorious name—including when the 180 vehicles would be delivered. The initial operating capability of Ajax will be by December 2025; I am hoping it might be sooner, but as far as I am aware, that commitment is on track and at least 180 vehicles will be delivered by that time. Morpheus and the broader land environment tactical communications and information systems programme has been a troubled programme in some respects. It is a £6.5 billion, 10-year programme. It involves lots of things fitting together, as the hon. Gentleman will recall. We are trying to make sure that the programme delivers what it is supposed to deliver.

Some of the programmes we have inherited have troubled histories. That is one of the reasons why we are committed to defence reform. One of the problems with our procurement and acquisition system—this was mentioned, including by those who have perhaps experienced it in their professional life, whether in the forces or in the Department—is that it is not fit for purpose when it comes to doing things quickly and delivering what it says it will. The defence reform agenda is not about reorganising for the sake of it. That is not what we ought to be doing. Were the system in perfect order, we would not be reforming it. This reform is about ensuring that the national armaments director is accountable to Ministers and the services for delivering the equipment that the services need in a timely fashion, because that is not what happens now. Currently, each service goes off on frolics of their own. They have their equipment budgets and top-level budgets, and know what they want, and they never really talk to each other across services. As the hon. Gentleman said, a programme might get started because people think that they want the equipment, and it is a 10-year programme that is not funded right to the end, so money gets wasted. We have to do better.

One way we will do better is by having much clearer accountability. The NAD is a tremendously important figure in that. We will also make sure that we shorten our acquisition timescales. We cannot just have CADMID—concept, assessment, demonstration, manufacture, in service and disposal—for everything, with pre-contract phases and so on. We cannot do that any longer. We are not in times when we can get away with taking 10 years to produce something that is not quite what we wanted in the first place. There has been too much of that, and that is why we are segmenting our acquisition budget. The NAD will be in charge of delivering the capabilities that all our services need in much shorter timescales.

As for drones and that kind of capability, we are trying to get to contract within three months. By standing up UK Defence Innovation with a ringfenced budget of

£400 million this year, and 10% of our investment budget in future, we aim to ensure that there is the money to innovate fast and get lethality into the hands of our warfighters faster. That is essential. We need to shorten the time it takes to get there, even for nuclear submarines. Members will have seen the aspiration in the SDR to get the time to contract down from an average of six years for those kinds of things to two years. That is a challenging aim.

On spiral upgrades and the new radars for our existing capabilities, we need to make sure that we get the time to contract down to a year. We need a much faster pace of innovation, change and improvement. The NAD will be responsible for that. There will be direct lines of accountability, and direct budget lines for which he is accountable. We have to ensure culture change to empower those at a lower level, so that we do not slip back into the old way of doing things. That is a challenge, but we need to meet it, given the times we are in.

Adam Dance: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Member is going to ask me about the new medium helicopter.

Adam Dance: The Minister must be a mind reader. Will she give us a timescale for when the new medium-lift helicopter contract will be awarded? I hope it will be awarded to Leonardo in my constituency.

Maria Eagle: I am not making any announcements today, but I have heard what the hon. Member said, and I want these matters dealt with more swiftly than in the past. He needs to listen out, because the announcement will come in due course.

We are undertaking this defence reform to make a real difference to acquisition and a real improvement to our procurement, to stop wasting money, and to get things into the hands of our warfighters faster. We can argue about money, as the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) likes to, but we must do better with the money that we receive, because the money allocated to defence could be spent on other things—on hospitals, schools, and helping people with their needs at home.

We all accept that we have to show the public—the voters—that we are spending the money in a way that provides us with maximum value. I know that the Select Committee will help the Government to do that, and I am determined to ensure that we do it. That is what defence reform means.

James Cartlidge: The Minister mentioned money, and it is brilliant that she is engaging in that debate. I mentioned the 2.6% issue. This is very important; the pledge is for 2.6% of GDP by 2027. In written parliamentary answers, we are not being told what quantum of money will be added to the Ministry of Defence budget—namely, what the intelligence spend will be, and the spend on the Foreign Office items outside Chagos. Will the Minister tell what that quantum is, so that we know whether the MOD will really be spending 2.5% on the core defence budget?

Maria Eagle: What the hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his speech was very simple, I must say. I understand the point that he has made, although I have not seen the answers to which he has referred, so I shall

have to take his point away. I am happy to discuss it with him on another occasion, but I cannot give him an answer today.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I deliberately included a little bit about recruitment and retention in my speech. There will, I think, be a tension between the armaments director and the Chief of the Defence Staff over recruitment versus the budget for equipment. It is not possible to suddenly turn on the tap and recruit more people; it takes time. Can the Minister say anything today about when she will start to ramp up that recruitment?

Maria Eagle: A great deal of effort is already being made. Both the Minister for Veterans and People and the Minister for the Armed Forces are leading a number of efforts to improve recruitment and retention. As the House will know, in a “flow and stock” situation, it takes time to turn around a long-standing trend, and unfortunately the last Government did not meet the recruitment targets for the armed forces in any one of their 14 years. This is like turning around a supertanker. We have already made some reforms to try to speed up the time that it takes to recruit a young person who wants to join the forces, and that will start to show results in due course.

John Slinger: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Maria Eagle: I am conscious that I am probably overusing my time, so I do not want to give way any more. I apologise, but there is another debate to come.

All of us in the House essentially understand the importance of increasing our defence spending in a way that is effective and gives us good value for money, so that we can boost the capacity of our armed forces to defend the nation and deter potential adversaries. I think we are all on the same page in that regard, and that is a good way for me to end my speech. I thank all Members for taking part.

4.37 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I thank the Minister for that positive contribution. Twenty-five years ago, when we sat next to each other in the Public Accounts Committee, passing each other notes and holding the civil service to account, who would have thought that we would be in our respective positions now? I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) for his contribution. In fact, I thank all Members for a very positive debate. We look forward to seeing positive results from all the requests that have been made today, and to working with the Government, while strictly holding them to account for all the promises that they have made.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

Department for Transport

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 23 April, on Work of the Secretary of State for Transport, HC 346; Written evidence to the Transport Committee, on Department for Transport Main Estimates Memorandum 2025-26, reported to the House on 3 June; Correspondence between the Transport Committee and the Secretary of State for Transport, on Supplementary Estimate 2024-25, reported to the House on 29 April and 25 March.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Department for Transport:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £13,913,148,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £12,296,785,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £20,121,455,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Keir Mather.*)

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

4.39 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Whether they are walking or cycling, riding on buses, trams or trains, or planes, transport plays a huge role in the daily lives of our constituents, and for the businesses and public services on which we all depend. I welcome the fact that the Government are investing properly in transport, particularly local transport. I also welcome the Chancellor's announcement of £15.6 billion to connect our cities and towns, as well as the fourfold increase in local transport grants by the end of this Parliament. This Government's ambition on transport is way ahead of the last Government's.

The Transport Committee is tasked with holding the Department to account on its programme, in respect of both delivery and the use of resources, so I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and to discuss the estimated departmental spend for the coming financial year. It is inevitable that Members will also want to consider the wider transport issues that affect their constituencies, but I will try to keep my remarks mainly to the estimates.

As our scrutiny role means seeking assurance that the departmental estimates link to the Department's strategic objectives, this debate is important. Following the publication of the supplementary estimates for 2024–25, I wrote to the Department in March seeking clarity on how the spending aligned with the Department's strategic objectives. The Transport Secretary replied saying that officials would

“work with the House of Commons Scrutiny Unit and HM Treasury to consider any changes to the presentation of the Department's Estimates.”

I have not received more detail directly, and the Department's main estimate memorandum provides no additional information to explain how spending is aligned with the Department's strategic objectives. That memorandum and correspondence is linked to on the Order Paper.

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

Furthermore, the Department's main estimate memorandum was not received on time, making it harder for my Committee and others to undertake effective and timely scrutiny. The Department for Transport was one of only three Departments, along with the Cabinet Office and the Home Office, whose memorandums were not provided alongside the publication of the main estimate.

Under the previous Government, outcome delivery plans were produced that listed the outcomes that Departments hoped to achieve through their spending, alongside specific metrics by which progress could be measured. The Department for Transport's most recent outcome delivery plan was published in 2021. In the 2025-26 main estimates memorandum, the Department said:

"DfT's Outcome Delivery Plan for 2025-26 outlines the ambition to build a modern, efficient, and sustainable transport network that raises living standards for communities. It details how resources are allocated between DfT's three Priority Outcomes",

which are given as growth; greener, safer and healthier transport, and improving transport for people. The memorandum later states that the

"DfT's ODP includes delivery strategies, delivery plans and a suite of core metrics to articulate progress against each Priority Outcome."

But the outcome delivery plan for 2025-26 has not been published, and the estimates memorandum does not explain how spending in the estimates relates to core metrics and so on.

The Cabinet Secretary recently promised to share the next set of ODPs with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, subject to ministerial approval. Without the ODPs, how can our Committee, and therefore the House, be assured that the Department's policy objectives are clear, and that its spending aligns with those objectives and with the Government's really important and very welcome missions? I accept that the Minister may want to write to me after the debate to answer some of my questions. Will the Department for Transport follow the Cabinet Office in planning to publish its outcome delivery plan for 2025-26?

To move on to devolution and accountability, there have been increases in funding in the main estimates, with £100 million allocated to the mayoral combined authorities. Subsequently, at the spending review, there were increases to devolved institutions in England, with just over £15 billion for city region sustainable transport settlements and local transport grants.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): The previous Government forced Transport for London to come with a begging bowl every year to get the money needed to keep the tube and the buses going in the capital. Does my hon. Friend welcome this Government's multi-year funding deal for TfL, which is the largest settlement for over a decade, and does she agree that it will bring stability to TfL's finances and the ability to plan ahead?

Ruth Cadbury: I welcome the intervention from my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. As a London MP, I know that stability in transport provision in London will be of huge benefit to my constituents, Londoners, visitors and commuters to London. We did not get

everything we wanted in the spending review—in our case, the west London orbital—but we certainly got a lot more than we got from the previous Government, and for that we are very grateful.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): This Government's commitment to supporting transport across the country has led to a quadrupling of money for local transport grants, meaning that Bracknell Forest council will receive almost £7 million of transport funding through the spending review. To return to her previous point about strategy, does my hon. Friend agree that, in developing and setting out their national road safety strategy—I hope, later this year—it is important that the Government listen to local communities and areas such as Bracknell Forest. I plan to launch a consultation with my constituents on road safety this summer. Does she hope that the Government will listen to those views?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend anticipates what I will say about road safety later, but I agree about listening to communities on the devolution of funding. There are also the adjustments to the Green Book, which may have cost us a little bit in London compared with the funding we have had in recent years, but communities across the country will benefit from the overall national perspective on devolution and considering the country as a whole.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward, has secured £2 billion for transport to and between Derby and Nottingham. Considering that the east midlands has languished at the bottom of the list for transport spend per person, does my hon. Friend agree that this Government are taking strides to ensure that the growth that comes through transport is felt in every corner of the country?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend and fellow Transport Committee member is absolutely right. The changes that this Government are making will be felt across the country and in all types of cities and regions.

To return to the specifics of the £15 billion for city region sustainable transport settlements and local transport grants, which I mentioned, they are deliberately not ringfenced, which is good for local democracy, but does create challenges for the Department in achieving national priorities. I heard from one colleague who is concerned that the politics of their authority is very based on cars, and although we want to encourage people to use public transport and active travel, what can the national Government do if the local authority uses that funding for cars?

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important speech, and her passion for transport is clear for all to see. I welcome the additional funding for bus travel in Essex, but I am very aware that it is for Essex county council, which oversees bus travel there. Does she agree that this is not just about providing that funding to local authorities, but about accountability and ensuring they act in the best interests of residents and spend that money efficiently and in the correct way?

Ruth Cadbury: Efficiently and correctly, but also transparently, and I hope all local authorities do fully, properly and accessibly account for their spending to their residents.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The hon. Member talks about £100 million being available for mayoral combined authorities, but is she confident that that is genuinely new money, rather than money reallocated from other pots for mayors to distribute?

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Member asks a good question and the answer is that it is a mixture. It is the philosophy of devolution that is important because mayoral combined authorities in particular can deliver in ways that will be different according to their specific priorities and needs.

There has been a potential challenge to the Department in achieving national priorities. It is also worth noting that the main estimate for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government provides additional funding for the West Midlands and Great Manchester combined authorities, so there are other pots of money from other Departments that mayors can pool together to put to best use for their authorities. Will the Minister set out what happens if a devolved institution diverges from departmental priorities, for example by opting not to fund active travel despite the Department's objective to increase active travel?

The future introduction of place-based business cases, as set out in the spending review, has the potential to transform how Government think about the value and benefit of transport interventions and outcomes. When business cases are reformed along those lines, we look forward to seeing a difference in how the Government draw and think about those connections.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's comments about the importance of place-based transport investment. Does she share any of my concerns that some of that place-based transport investment is a little too urban and concentrated too much in mayoral combined authorities, and that there may be areas outside those regions where more transformational place-based investment is warranted?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend makes a good point. One reason that the initial emphasis has been on mayoral combined authorities and urban areas is because work is already being done on such transport strategies, so they are often further ahead. Our buses inquiry deliberately focused on buses connecting communities away from the large urban areas. My hon. Friend is right that as local authorities have been stripped out over the past 15 years, much of that expertise among members and particularly among officers, just is not there, so there are often not the people needed to do that strategic work. I hope that will change and that when our buses inquiry report is published that element of the debate will be included.

I will move on to specific transport modes, starting with buses. Evidence to our Committee inquiry on buses connecting communities emphasised the value of bus services, and the need for measures to promote their use, especially in rural and suburban areas.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Buses are important to my community in Wales, including the No. 65 that connects Monmouth and Chepstow and is supported by an incredible community group called the Friends of the 65 Bus. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must have more funding for buses across the UK?

Ruth Cadbury: I cannot remember whether my hon. Friend was in the debate on the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, but there will be more opportunities to make those points. As she says very well, it is one thing to look at the structures through the Bill, but for many areas, unless the funding is in place, the buses are not there. It is interesting that she mentions the 65: I also have a local battle about the 65 bus. However, that battle is within the context of Transport for London, a regulated transport network, so we have a level of accountability, expectation and information about our buses that was stripped out in the 1980s by the Thatcher Government, when buses outside London were deregulated.

We must ensure that there are strategic objectives underlying the Government's buses policy, funding and fares approach. We welcome the retention of the £3 bus cap until at least March 2027, as it gives bus companies and local authorities an element of certainty that they did not have. I note that fare subsidy from Government has been cut as the cap was raised from £2 to £3, and I would like to understand from the Minister how the funding links with Government objectives. What is the Government's bus fare strategy? Are they aiming to achieve economic growth, particularly in those towns centres that are failing because the people just cannot get to them to spend their money? Or is this about increased connectivity? Is the bus fare cap policy being used to tackle the cost of living, to increase ridership or to achieve modal shift? We are still waiting for some sense of what the Government are trying to achieve in their bus fare strategy.

I am now going to move on to roads. We are still waiting for the list of road investment projects in the third road investment strategy—RIS3. No scheme was published at the spending review. The more recent UK infrastructure 10-year strategy stated:

"A full list of projects will be set out as part of the development of the third Road Investment Strategy."

When will that strategy and that list be published?

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): My constituents in Chichester are beyond frustrated by the congestion on our A road, the A27. A bypass was originally included in the road investment strategy pipeline covering 2025 to 2030, but that has since been deferred to 2030 to 2035, with no guaranteed funding. Does the hon. Member agree that strategic investment in key arterial roads is vital not only to unlocking economic growth but to easing the daily pressures on communities such as mine and across the country?

Ruth Cadbury: I do not know the detail of the proposals of which the hon. Member speaks, but I am well aware that there are bottlenecks on our road systems. This has to be looked at carefully. I learned a lesson about increasing road capacity many years ago when I was a planning student, and of course I remember the widening and further widening of the M25. I once had a boss who said, "You can throw seeds to the pigeons but you will get more pigeons coming to get the seeds." People will remember the old days when we were able to feed seeds to the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, but that was stopped. We have to do the right stuff in the right way, because otherwise we could end up making the problem worse, but I take her point about the sense of frustration for her constituents.

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

I want to touch on road safety. Given that our serious road casualty and road injury statistics have flatlined in the UK in recent years, I am concerned that the funding for road safety research has been cut, despite the backdrop of the Government's plans for road safety. I know that we are due to see the road safety strategy towards the end of the year, so why has that research funding been cut?

To move on to maritime, the UK Shipping Office for Reducing Emissions, otherwise known as UK SHORE, has a research and development programme that was set up to develop innovation to reduce maritime emissions and create skilled jobs across the country. Funding for UK SHORE is coming to an end this year. We are still waiting for the final evaluation report. Meanwhile, the advanced manufacturing sector plan, published this week, said that there would be

"a further £30 million towards the development of clean maritime solutions through the UK Shipping Office for Reducing Emissions (UK SHORE) from 2025 to 2026".

My question is, will that £30 million be sufficient for the Government's long-term plans for UK SHORE, given that, as I am hearing, the UK appears to be lagging behind competitor countries on decarbonising maritime?

On walking and cycling, I welcome the sizeable increase for day-to-day and capital spending for Active Travel England after the cut made by the previous Government, and the fact that this is an increase for the next year. However, these figures for growth appear inconsistent with the spending review announcement of a four-year figure, which, when divided by four, looks like a reduction. I wonder whether the Minister could respond to that.

The last mode I will mention is rail. Rail reform will no doubt significantly affect the size and shape of the Department's spending on rail. The Department is right to be planning for savings and efficiencies as a result of the creation of Great British Railways removing duplication, in particular, while also delivering a better rail service for passengers. My Committee will pay close attention to the Department's rail reform plans—not just the new structures it establishes, but how effectively those new structures are able to achieve the Government's aims.

Does the Department have a costed, achievable plan for reducing the cost base by £200 million, as stated, and for growing passenger revenue, as shown in the estimates memorandum? What level of subsidy will continue to be required?

I look forward to responses to my specific questions on the estimates, but I would like to address a couple of other issues on revenue and investment funding. Fines, fees and charges are mentioned only once in the main estimates for transport, namely in the increase in the charge for the existing Dartford crossing. In a report published last week, the National Audit Office has said that

"The government is missing opportunities to deliver efficiencies and share good practice."

and that

"it is unlikely that the current arrangements for fees and charges will deliver value for money for customers, businesses and taxpayers."

I will provide two examples. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency spends £175 million a year on the costs of licences, but only £135 million comes in through fees.

Is that sustainable? The fee for the driving test has been unchanged for years. In effect, learner drivers are incentivised to take their tests too early, as it is cheaper to have a go at the test than to have another lesson. Should the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency not be empowered to respond to that?

Are the Government addressing this policy vacuum on fines, fees and charges? We need a coherent strategy where each is set at a level that addresses a particular objective—this might be to incentivise or disincentivise, to cover costs, to track the retail prices index, or whatever.

It is important to evaluate how capital investment is spent, given past challenges with managing large infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2. I welcome the announcement regarding its reset; the Committee is planning to hear from Mark Wild, chief executive of HS2, on 9 July.

Finally, I will repeat the point I have made before in this Chamber about the need to develop more, and more innovative, forms of funding transport infrastructure—land value capture, risk sharing, private finance initiatives and more. Putting all that together, we can ensure that all parts of the country can benefit from badly needed transport infrastructure investment in the future.

5.3 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I agree with the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (*Ruth Cadbury*) on one thing, which is the importance of transport for connecting communities. I then diverge from her a little, because if this Government are serious about unlocking and delivering economic growth, particularly across the west midlands, they would be serious about funding transport.

This Government's commitment to £10.2 billion for rail enhancement is welcome, but, as ever with the Government, it lacks detail and leaves unanswered questions. Take the example of the midlands rail hub, for which the previous Government not only committed to the initial £123 million, but pledged £1.7 billion to deliver the hub in full under Network North. However, today, through the spending review and responses to my written questions, it has become clear that the hub is funded not to delivery, but only to the next stage. I hope that, in his summing up, the Minister will clarify once and for all whether the new Government are committed to fully funding the delivery of this project. If so, when will it be completed? It is critical to the infrastructure of the west midlands and beyond.

Staying on the topic of trains, I cannot let this debate go without mentioning Aldridge train station. The city region sustainable transport settlements are also covered in these estimates. It was thanks to the hard work of the previous mayor, Andy Street, working with the then Conservative Government that we secured and set out a fully funded CRSTS programme. That included £30 million to deliver Aldridge train station in my constituency. The funding for the delivery of the station was earmarked for 2027, providing rail connectivity for the first time since the 1960s. Sadly, it was the decision of the Transport Secretary, together with the Chancellor, to approve Mayor Parker's decision to convert the capital funding to revenue. The funding had been ringfenced for our station, but it has now been moved away from Aldridge train station—I suspect that it has been moved to fund the mayor's vanity bus project.

The 2025 spending review also confirmed £15.6 billion in funding to provide transport for city region settlements for nine mayoral authorities, including £2.4 billion for the west midlands. The mayor could have chosen to get Aldridge station back on track, but no, he has chosen to keep it in the sidings. This is despite the Chief Secretary to the Treasury indicating in this House on 4 June that the mayor had not spent all his money, and even encouraging colleagues to lobby him on how he might wish to spend the rest. Suffice it to say, the Mayor of the West Midlands knows my views and he knows my ask, and I will continue asking.

Let me turn now to bus services, which are key to connectivity and to opportunity, particularly for communities such as mine which find themselves still without a train station. We have seen in the estimates that the national bus fare cap, which was increased from £2.50 to £3 in January 2025, is being extended to March 2027. That is fine, but the Transport Secretary claims that this is a measure to reduce the cost of everyday journeys for working people, yet for those of us in the west midlands, it is yet another hit on top of what we have already seen from the mayor, who has hiked fares and monthly and annual bus passes by more than 8%.

In the debate on the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill earlier this month, I asked the Transport Secretary about how the so-called “socially necessary” services referenced in the Bill would be protected and how they would be defined. She told me that it is down to individual local authorities to define what is socially necessary, but gave no assurances about how they would be supported to continue to provide these vital services. As we saw, £750 million per year announced in the spending review is to maintain and improve bus services. It would be really helpful to understand what allocation from the spending review will go to fund these services in the west midlands.

Joe Robertson: My right hon. Friend talks about the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, which is now in Committee. Does she share my concern that the franchising arrangements that that Bill offers have little attraction for small local authorities such as mine on the Isle of Wight, because if it were minded to go down the route of franchising, it would take all the risk and could end up with a very large shortfall that perhaps metropolitan boroughs can swallow, but certainly smaller local authorities such as mine could not?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point on franchising. He is right to highlight the potential impact and the challenge for smaller authorities, but there are also challenges for the bigger authorities. My constituency is part of the West Midlands combined authority, and also part of Walsall metropolitan borough, but I am equally concerned about how this new model that our mayor is pushing will be sustainable. I fear that, in the future, my residents might find either a reduction in services, or increases in cost. For constituencies on the edge of a large combined authority, there is always that feeling that services are sucked into the centre and that we are left out on the periphery.

Transport is vital to people and communities, and it is vital in accessing employment and opportunity. From the Government's plans, it is quite clear that they have simply used reviews to move money around to their pet projects,

and they are not joining up communities—simply another missed opportunity. For as long as my constituents continue to raise with me the question of Aldridge station, I assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will continue to raise it in this place.

5.10 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let me begin by agreeing with the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). She is right to welcome the huge ambition that the Government have shown on transport. It is certainly much more ambitious than what we saw under the previous Government. I urge the Government to grow that ambition boldly, particularly for the areas that were left behind under the previous Government, and to enable growth and opportunity to reach every corner of the UK.

Much of my speech relates to my constituency and the great city of Bradford, which will not be lost on you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the recent announcement in the spending review of £2.1 billion for a new tramline and bus station in Bradford. Those projects represent an important step forward, and I am grateful that Bradford is finally receiving the long-overdue attention that it deserves. Communities in Bradford such as mine, and indeed yours, Madam Deputy Speaker, have waited too long to see promises become progress. I have long campaigned for improved transport links in Bradford and across West Yorkshire, alongside colleagues, campaigners and Bradford council, because I know how vital transport is to unlocking economic growth. It is a driver for regeneration, a bridge between communities and a pathway to opportunity.

If the Government are serious about long-term regional growth, they must go further. We need additional funding to ensure that Bradford receives the full investment in transport that it needs, not only to support our local communities but to strengthen the economic performance of West Yorkshire and the wider north. Despite being one of the largest cities in the UK, Bradford has historically been left behind when it comes to national transport planning. The absence of strong rail connectivity continues to limit our potential, and that must change.

I believe that Bradford would benefit significantly from a new, modern and fit-for-purpose railway station. While I welcome improvements to Forster Square, we must be far more ambitious if we want to deliver a station that truly connects Bradford to the rest of the country and enables wider regeneration in our city centre. A new railway station is deliverable and could be built at pace, with low risk of cost increases. I understand that different Departments have already been looking at the business case and evidence for it. The benefits would be transformative. Improved connectivity between Leeds and Bradford would unlock our huge growth potential.

I would also like to make the strong case for Bradford to be linked into the £11 billion trans-Pennine upgrade. I know that there have already been consultations on its feasibility, and I ask the Minister to address that in his remarks.

By linking Bradford to Huddersfield on the trans-Pennine line, we would have direct access to the wider region. It would speed up journeys to Manchester by half, help put Bradford on the map and be a huge boost for growth. I ask the Treasury to continue to work with the

[Imran Hussain]

Department for Transport and regional partners to explore improvements in east-west connectivity to complement the city's long-term growth strategy.

Let me turn to the huge economic benefits not just to Bradford or West Yorkshire but to the whole of the north. Maximising investment in mass transit and Bradford rail would open key regeneration and housing sites. It is central to delivering Bradford's southern gateway—West Yorkshire's largest regeneration opportunity—and could unlock up to 10,000 homes across the wider city centre. More investment in Bradford would be not a cost but a long-term saving: it would mean lower welfare dependency, better access to jobs and learning, and a more prosperous, healthier population.

If Bradford were just to meet the UK average for productivity, enterprise and employment, we would unlock over £4.5 billion in additional annual economic output. As the House will know, Bradford's 2025 city of culture programme is already unlocking billions in regeneration across West Yorkshire, but to truly meet the Government's growth objectives and level up opportunity, we need a fair, ambitious settlement, because without mobility there is no capability.

I welcome what the Government have done for transport in Bradford so far, but again I make the case for a new rail station, which I know the Minister and different Departments are looking at seriously. I also ask the Minister to consider the strong case for giving Bradford real access to the trans-Pennine line. I urge the Government to set out what additional funding and support can be made available.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I know that a fully connected Bradford will lift the entire region. We will continue to campaign for the transport investment that Bradford so clearly deserves.

5.17 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I am grateful to the Chair of the Transport Committee and the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to debate the transport estimates.

I felt a bit underwhelmed by the Chancellor's offering for transport following the spending review. I am not really sure what she had to offer my constituents in North Norfolk. We saw funding for the continuation of the bus fare cap, which is welcome, but still an increase to the £2 cap that was previously in place. Other than that, what will help them? Upgrades to the Ely and Haughley junctions, which would support improved connections for business and passengers out of Norfolk, were once again overlooked, which will lead only to a higher cost when the Government eventually realise they are necessary. There were also questions over funding for active travel at a time when we should be investing more to encourage modal shift and making walking and cycling an easier and more attractive option, and a complete fiscal straitjacket was placed on the future of the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, on which I will focus my remarks.

I am serving on the Bill Committee, and we have learned that the Government have applied a money resolution that means the Bill can incur expenditure only under existing Acts and not create anything of its own that would require any actual money. It often feels

like we are living through a certain political sitcom in this place. In this instance, the Treasury has effectively shut the Department for Transport in the back of a taxi and tasked it with coming up with something incredibly popular and completely free. I fear it is only a matter of time until we get a ministerial statement doubling the number of quiet carriages on trains.

The serious point is that we cannot deliver the radical change and improvement that our rural public transport network needs without new money to support it. The Minister responsible for buses, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), has made laudable efforts—I believe that he really believes in buses—and there is a lot of really good stuff in the Bill, but just creating and distributing powers without any funding to support their use, and barely any funding to support and develop best practice on how to use them, will not deliver the improvements we need. Indeed, the Department's Bus Centre of Excellence is staffed by a grand total of three people, and with day-to-day spending cut by the spending review, we are not likely to see a hiring spree any time soon.

Supporting rural public transport helps across Departments. It supports people's access to medical appointments in a timely manner, reducing missed appointments or worsened conditions. It reduces the benefits bill by widening access to employment and training opportunities. It is better for the planet, reducing car journeys and the resulting emissions. Revolutionising rural public transport would be a cross-Government win. I hope the Treasury can see it that way too and finally give it the funding that it needs.

5.20 pm

Catherine Fookes: Monmouthshire is a rural county and access to transport is critical, so I am delighted to speak in this estimates day debate. Transport enables people to get to work, school, hospital appointments and, of course, anywhere else they need to be. It also enables me to get up here from Monmouthshire. I have already talked about my favourite bus service, the No. 65, which goes through the lovely villages of Trellech and Devauden, and is incredibly important for allowing young people who cannot drive yet to get to work and so on.

I am delighted with the expenditure outlined in the comprehensive spending review for improving transport links across south Wales and reaching over the border. This has the potential to be an absolute game changer for my constituents. A lack of regular, reliable public transport is holding our county back, and it is frustrating and restrictive for residents. More importantly, it is a major barrier to economic growth, which is the main mission of this Government.

That is why I and Monmouthshire residents were over the moon when, in the spending review, £445 million was committed to Welsh rail. The funding is being made available for the Burns stations—five stations outlined in the Burns review that run between my constituency of Monmouthshire and across to Cardiff. That includes an important station to me: the station of Magor and Undy. Hundreds of new homes have been built at Magor and Undy, and the commuters who live in them do not have a viable option to get to work other than by

road. There are major road congestion problems around Magor, particularly on the nearby M4, so this transformative rail funding will see huge benefits for my community and allow huge numbers of people to avoid using a car at all for their commute.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. My community, like hers, also depends on rail services running from London to south Wales. I want to underline the benefits she is outlining based on my own experience. Reading has benefited hugely from the Elizabeth line and the rebuilding of the station, and that is linked to new homes and businesses clustering around the station. Does she agree that the Government's strategy, as outlined earlier, brings forward real benefits to many constituencies across the country, and that there are already such examples where Labour councils and the Government are working well together?

Catherine Fookes: I strongly agree. It is great to see two Labour Governments working together, here in Westminster and down in Cardiff, to deliver those better transport links between London and Reading and all the way down to south Wales.

It is important that we have Magor and Undy station as soon as possible. It is a walkway station, which is really innovative; people will walk to the station from the surrounding area. It is innovative, it is green and it is an affordable choice to kick-start this important new set of transport links. We have to start somewhere with our five stations down in south Wales, so I am using this debate to strongly suggest that Lord Hendy and the other Transport Ministers support starting the journey at Magor and Undy.

Another key issue we face is the closure to heavy goods vehicles of the M48 bridge over the Severn. That is really impacting businesses around Chepstow, particularly on the Newhouse Farm industrial estate. Drivers are being forced to add miles to their journeys. Of course the safety of our bridges is incredibly important, but the closure of the M48 bridge is bad for businesses, bad for the environment and bad for everyone driving locally, as they face even more congestion. Sadly, the situation is expected to continue until late 2026, but I am delighted that the Roads Minister has confirmed to me today that she is encouraging National Highways to expedite the process as soon as possible. I must stress that current timescales are going to hit Monmouthshire hard, so support for local businesses, many of which are in the logistics sector, and help for National Highways to move faster would be extremely welcome.

We need the bridge fixing and we need our station at Magor. Those are two really big transport issues for Monmouthshire, proving the importance of the UK and Welsh Governments working together to improve connectivity, sort out congestion, reduce vehicle emissions and, ultimately, supercharge economic growth. I wholeheartedly welcome the funding outlined in the spending review to help us take steps in that direction.

5.25 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I praise and thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for her wide-ranging opening speech to this important debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving time for it.

There is much to welcome in the spending review announcements for transport, particularly the capital investment in many parts of the country, but it is going to be important to hold the course and be consistent in the support for such schemes. For example, proposals for a West Yorkshire tram have been in and out so many times that people living in that region have understandably lost count. Hopefully, this time it really will happen.

Beneath the positive headlines about capital spending, and hidden a little in the footnotes, is a 5% cut to operational expenditure during the spending review period. Looking at the detail, there are some somewhat optimistic assumptions that form the basis of how that will be borne. For example, in section 1.7 of the DFT memorandum for the main estimate 2025-2026, it is clear that the assumption as to how some of those savings will be made is through ongoing recovery of passenger revenues since the pandemic, as well as planned cost efficiencies from rail reform. It states,

"Should revenue growth be lower or implementation of rail reform be slower than anticipated then that could result in spending pressures."

Although Great British Railways certainly has the potential to improve things, I think all concerned would accept that on its own, it will not solve all our problems.

Given that our transport system is not going anywhere—we are not going to see closures of railways or large cuts—I think it is time that we collectively stop viewing it as a burden and spend intelligently to make the most of the assets and the costs that come with them. By spending a little bit more or approaching things a little radically, we can make far more of those sunk costs that go into our transport system and will continue regardless.

It is important to recognise the suggestions at the moment that funding for the existing network may well be constrained by the expensive disaster that the implementation of HS2 has become. We do need high-speed rail in this country, but the costs are simply unbelievable. However, I suggest to the Government that it would be as wrong to punish the conventional network for HS2's failings as it would be to deprive local roads of investment because of an over-budget motorway project.

Here are a few friendly suggestions to the Minister and his colleagues for how that 5% operating expense gap could be plugged by growing revenue. When it comes to taking the railway to the next level, there are some things that cost very little, if anything, that could be done. I personally find on-train ticket checks to be inconsistent. Where guards are present, they really should be present on the train, ensuring that we maximise revenue gathering from ticket sales. Full electrification of our busiest and fastest inter-city and freight routes would lead to higher train reliability, better acceleration and therefore more capacity, making the most of what we already have. It is not just me who thinks that a rolling programme of electrification would reduce costs; chief executive of Network Rail Andrew Haines recently said in front of the Transport Committee that it is "incontrovertible" that it would do so.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the electrification of railway lines boosts capacity and enables them to ship more freight across our great nation?

Olly Glover: My hon. Friend is quite correct. Having previously worked on this subject in my past life, modelling of acceleration shows that electrically hauled freight is transformative compared with diesel, and it enables more to be hauled, making the most of the limited capacity that we have.

Let me give an example from my constituency. The electrification of the 10 miles between Didcot and Oxford would reduce operating complexity and costs by reducing the long periods when trains sit idle at Didcot because of the split between London to Didcot, which is electrified, and Didcot to Oxford, which is not. It would also enable the sort of fast and frequent suburban service that is needed to serve a proposed major housing development and an artificial intelligence growth zone site at Culham. Full electrification of East West Rail would cost very little, as the project is based on new and heavily upgraded railways, yet massively increase its potential.

Rail freight promotion would reduce the need for costly upgrades to roads such as the A34. Even National Highways acknowledged that to me in a meeting the other day. The A34 through my constituency has heavy freight traffic from Southampton's ports, including container haulage heading to the midlands and the north. There are capacity constraints that prevent more of that freight being taken on the railway between Southampton, Reading and Birmingham.

As a recent excellent report by the Transport Committee on accessibility highlighted, accessibility improvements make our railways far more attractive. Last night, it was my pleasure to attend a meeting in Cholsey, where people are campaigning hard for accessibility improvements at their station. Such improvements have been made down the line at Pangbourne, Goring and Streatley. New stations on existing lines, such as at Grove and Wantage—an area of major population growth in my constituency—would make more of the infrastructure that we already have.

Do the Government plan to think radically, or will they be stuck in a rut, doing more of the same? Government support for more depot capacity at Temple Mills in Stratford is all that is needed to get more people using international rail services. The private sector will do the rest. That would free up landing slots at the ever-busier Heathrow airport, potentially avoiding the need for a costly and disruptive third runway. I call on the Government to provide sustained and generous funding for Active Travel England, so that it can continue its strong work of ensuring that local authorities provide not tokenistic cycle paths that go nowhere, but the highest quality infrastructure to get us all walking and cycling. Innovation in retail systems to make it clearer where and when the cheapest fares are to be had has the potential to increase revenue yields.

As we found on a recent visit to the port of Dover, there is great electrification potential for the Dover-to-Calais route, which is one of the shortest and busiest shipping corridors in the world. French ports are ready for rapid charging of battery ships, but we were told that Dover needs power supply and grid capacity upgrades. No plans are in place for those, which means that we are missing an opportunity to achieve a global first: fully decarbonised freight.

Noah Law: The hon. Member is making a detailed and impassioned speech about the possibilities for transport investment throughout the country. Does he recognise the value of electrification of the Cornish main line? The benefit would be in the region of 10 times the cost, and there would be potential for a grid upgrade of the kind he mentioned.

Olly Glover: I agree that full electrification is the best solution for the Devon and Cornwall main line, and we can use battery trains on the branch lines once that has been done. I would welcome a longer conversation with the hon. Member, because I understand that the current thinking is for discontinuous electrification with batteries, which is not the right solution for that critical artery across Devon and Cornwall, given that there are dual carriageways, but the railway has had very little investment in the past 40 years.

Integrated transport is key to growing confidence in and therefore use of public transport. It improves interfaces between modes, as well as easing pressure on our creaking road network. The forthcoming Government integrated transport strategy is welcome, but it must address disintegrated timetables for the railways, buses and other forms of transport, baffling and expensive fare structures, unwelcoming bus stations, and the lack of walking and cycling routes. Integrated transport is how Switzerland achieves the highest rate of public transport use in Europe.

The key question for our transport system, which is so critical to our economy, our environment and social inclusion, is whether we want more of the same, or whether we want to create a transport system that really enables access to jobs, social mobility and economic change. Current plans suggest a little too much of the same, rather than a real change of course.

5.33 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank speakers who have taken part in the debate, and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), the Chair of the Transport Committee, for her comprehensive speech.

Transport is a huge priority for residents of Dartford. The constituency contains the only Thames crossing east of London, as well as a stop on High Speed 1. My constituency has several key railway stations and bus services that need major investment. It is fair to say that Dartford provides some good examples of Government policy starting to get it right, as well as of challenges that we all face.

I will start with roads, and I put on record my appreciation for the announcement in the spending review that the Department for Transport will create a £1 billion structures fund to repair the rundown transport infrastructure—roads, bridges and the like—that this Government inherited, and for which there is no other available funding. Nowhere will that be more welcome than in Swanscombe, where the collapse of Galley Hill road more than two years ago has left residents unable to use the main road out of their town. They are also blighted by heavy goods vehicles that are using roads that are far too small for them. I particularly thank the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), for visiting soon after her appointment following last year's election. I look forward to more information in

the coming months about how Kent county council, and other councils across the country, can apply to that structures fund.

I warmly welcome the development consent order, and the funding announced for vital work on the proposed Lower Thames crossing, which, when finally built, will relieve the traffic overspill that regularly brings Dartford to a complete halt. Residents in Dartford and beyond eagerly anticipate further news on the funding package. We saw £690 million announced in the comprehensive spending review, but they want further funding in the months ahead—private sector funding, as well as more public sector funding. I look forward very much to working with Ministers to make that happen. The jobs, training and new business opportunities that the construction and operation of the crossing will offer will help to drive economic growth across the Thames estuary, and in the wider region beyond.

Money for potholes, including £54 million for Kent this year, is incredibly welcome, after our roads in Kent became a visible sign of decline under the Conservative party. Residents will be looking to the new Reform county council to make a real improvement to our roads with that money, so let us see it properly spent.

Joe Robertson: It sounds as if the hon. Member is placing his faith in his new Reform county council. Is that really the case?

Jim Dickson: Having seen the DOGE unit turn up in Kent on day one—people with no knowledge of Kent, wearing baseball hats—I am not hugely confident that the council will spend the money well, but let us give it a chance. I throw that challenge out to them. Our community needs Kent county council to put the £23 million of funding that the Government have provided to good use. It must also use the new franchise powers that will be available through the Bus Services (No.2) Bill to improve bus services in Dartford and across Kent. Again, we will be holding the council to account. I also want to say a quick word about welcome developments in rail.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Up north, we are chuffed about the record investment in the trans-Pennine route, and chuffed about Northern Powerhouse Rail. Will my hon. Friend back my calls for better train wi-fi, so that our constituents can check their emails speedily, and my little boy Robin can stream “Paw Patrol”?

Jim Dickson: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Wi-fi not only enables people to work on trains and maintain the connectivity that they need to live their life while using public transport, but provides huge opportunities for entertainment. I know there are many “Paw Patrol” fans out there who will want improved wi-fi on my hon. Friend’s services.

The other equally important rail development that we want in Dartford is further improvements to the reliability of services provided by the Southeastern and Thameslink lines. It is encouraging that on Southeastern, which has been Government-owned for some time, we see an early example of integrated management—the track was previously run by Network Rail—and train operations of the kind that will become the norm under Great British Railways. We are pioneering that in the south-eastern part of Network Rail in Dartford. If we

only had more stations with step-free access, including at Swanscombe, where that access is particularly badly needed, that would be incredibly welcome.

On high-speed rail, I note the welcome development mentioned by the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover): new entrants to the international rail services routes have signalled their intention to stop at one or both of Ebbsfleet and Ashford in Kent, restoring international services to our county. We welcome continued support from Ministers for that new international rail connectivity.

Finally, Dartford residents want a couple of extra things to come down the line. We want the highly successful Elizabeth line—or Crossrail, as it was originally known—to reach Ebbsfleet and beyond, rather than terminating at Abbey Wood. I appreciate that funding is not on the table for that project, but given the size of the growing community in Ebbsfleet and the need for sustainable transport links to our capital, I hope that over the course of this Parliament, we may be able to look at how an extension of the Elizabeth line from Abbey Wood to Ebbsfleet might be funded.

Residents in my constituency will warmly welcome these estimates, the Government policy set out in them, and the action that the Government have taken so far to improve transport infrastructure and connectivity. As I have said, I very much look forward to continuing to work with Ministers to get Dartford moving.

5.41 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I rise to thank the Government for the emphasis that they have placed on transport and critical national infrastructure in their agenda so far; to urge them to go further; to dangle before them the very exciting prospects offered by my constituency, which has economic potential to unlock; and to draw attention to the unmet needs of my constituents.

Along with the rest of south-east England, Surrey Heath is often seen as a well-connected and prosperous part of the country, but that perception has allowed a troubling complacency to take root. Beneath that surface impression lies a set of worsening transport challenges that limit opportunity, stifle growth and place a daily strain on residents across the towns and villages of my constituency. We are the second most car-dependent constituency in the country, with 1.64 cars per household—well above the national average. That figure is the result not of convenience or affluence, but of necessity. Public transport is patchy, unreliable and poorly integrated, and in some areas it is absent altogether.

That car dependency comes at a huge financial cost to my constituents and places a huge pressure on our road infrastructure. Junction 3 of the M3 is frequently overwhelmed and is a daily staple of the morning and evening traffic reports. Any listener to LBC or BBC Radio 2 will know the otherwise wonderful village of Lightwater by its association with congestion and long delays. That is terribly unfair, because it is a rather lovely place. The A322, our principal arterial route connecting several villages, is frequently at a standstill. Frustrated drivers bail out and cut through nearby villages such as Windlesham, which is equally lovely, turning residential roads into rat runs. The Lightwater bypass, which is designed to ease traffic flow, regularly grinds to a halt. This issue is not only congestion, but safety and liveability for those communities. Residents

[*Dr Al Pinkerton*]

along the A322 report frequent speeding, dangerous driving and noise. There have been serious accidents, some of which have tragically been fatal, but calls for basic safety measures such as speed enforcement remain unanswered.

Jess Brown-Fuller: My hon. Friend mentions safety measures. In my constituency, we have the Fishbourne roundabout on the A27, which many of my constituents avoid like the plague. I was on that roundabout in my car just the other week with a staff member, and we had a very near miss. Does my hon. Friend agree that dealing with the problem once there has been an accident or a fatality is absolutely the wrong way to ensure protections on these roads? We need to fix the problem before deaths occur.

Dr Pinkerton: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I entirely agree with her. We have had several fatalities, and very often our local county council makes the same claim—that it cannot, or will not, do anything until there is greater evidence of safety need. Tragically, the ultimate expression of that need is often a fatality.

Bus services in my constituency are sparse, and are non-existent in some areas. In villages such as Chobham, there is no regular bus service at all, and where buses do run, they are often poorly timed with train connections, leaving residents waiting or missing links. For many, the only option is costly private transport. That disproportionately affects the elderly; young people who have not yet learned to drive, or have not been able to access driving test appointments because of the current crisis in that particular part of our civic life; and lower-income households. In 2025, the simple act of attending work, school or hospital should not be dependent on car ownership or on expensive taxi journeys, often costing more than £50.

Those pre-existing challenges now collide with demands for rapid additional development. With the Government's commitment to build 1.5 million homes, Surrey Heath is expected to deliver a 113% increase in housing over the coming years, but 74% of my constituency is already constrained by green belt or other planning restrictions. For example, in the village of Deepcut alone, the former Army base that has become notorious in the public imagination has already delivered new homes, and will continue to deliver 1,200 new homes over the next couple of years. That is good, but it places thousands more vehicles on roads that are already under pressure, because no public transport has been introduced alongside those housing increases.

Meanwhile, our rail infrastructure has not only failed to keep up with the times but gone backwards. Camberley, our largest town and the home of Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, is just 28 miles from central London, yet journeys regularly exceed 75 minutes in duration. There are only three direct trains per day, none of which is aligned with standard commuting hours. It now takes longer to travel from London to Camberley in 2025 than it did in 1925. Commuters are often forced to jump into their cars and travel to Woking, Brookwood or Farnborough, adding to road congestion and hindering any meaningful move towards the realisation of sustainable transport aspirations.

We need a long-term, strategic approach to infrastructure. That means faster, more direct train links, dependable and integrated bus routes, and delivery ahead of—not after—major housing developments. For that reason, I call on the Government to commission a national survey of local connectivity, in order to build an accurate picture of travel times within and between our communities and regional economic centres. We must identify the areas that are most underserved and ensure that investment is guided by evidence and lived experience, not just assumptions of affluence and connectivity. Such a national review would enable a more coherent strategy to emerge.

In an era in which I think we all recognise that every single pound matters, that kind of connectivity mapping would provide a valuable guide for critical investment decisions, which must unlock latent economic potential in areas that have been left behind. Without anticipating the results of such a survey, I have every belief that it would show communities such as mine in Surrey Heath to be ripe for that kind of economic investment. If we are serious about building sustainable, connected communities and making every pound of investment count—which surely we all are—we must begin by listening, identifying the gaps, and acting to close them.

5.48 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place. I very much welcome the investment in transport—especially public transport—in the spending review. The commitment is really clear; for example, there is £2.3 billion for the local transport grant, which will support local transport improvements such as bus lanes, as well as £616 million to build and maintain walking and cycling infrastructure and £2.6 billion to decarbonise transport, which is all very important.

Investment in public transport, particularly in buses, brings multiple benefits. First, it reduces congestion.

Catherine Atkinson: In the east midlands, we saw our bus routes cut by 60% under successive Conservative Governments. Does my hon. Friend agree that buses have a huge impact upon people's lives and their ability to access opportunities in training and work, to get to health appointments and to connect with family and friends? Does my hon. Friend agree and welcome this Labour Government's focus on enabling better bus travel, which is the right direction to go?

Alex Mayer: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I know she is normally a champion for trains in her constituency, so I welcome her branching out into buses. The Campaign for Better Transport says that £1 of investment in buses brings £4.55 in benefits, and I am absolutely up for that. While we are on the subject of better buses, where we have good public transport, such as busways in my constituency, people come to them. That is why I back the campaign to extend the Dunstable busway west towards Leighton Buzzard and then ideally on to Bletchley.

In her opening remarks, the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) talked about fees, particularly for driving tests, which we have been discussing in Committee. Will the Minister consider looking at fees

as a way to change behaviour? I have been contacted by constituents who have been told they will have to wait up to nine months to get a driving test slot, which is utterly ridiculous. People are putting their lives on hold for such things. One issue we found when we gathered evidence in the Committee is that people are booking up tests, regardless of whether they are ready to take a test. As my hon. Friend said, it is cheaper sometimes to book a driving test than to book a couple of lessons, and that cannot be right.

I cannot imagine any Government out there would relish putting up the price of a driving test. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) was challenging us to find policies that are both popular and free, but we could think about driving tests a little bit differently. For example, how about putting up the fee, but giving everybody one free go at it? Basically if someone passes their driving test, they would get a refund. That would encourage everybody to only go for it when they really thought they would pass. We could probably make it cost-neutral, and it would free up slots, because only those who thought they were definitely ready would go for it, and it would be offset by putting up the charges for everyone who fails again and again. That probably would not have done me any good; I failed my driving test about five times, but I eventually managed it.

Moving on, local roads make up 98% of the road network and carry 60% of all traffic. Every journey, however it starts—whether by foot, by bike, by bus or by car—starts and ends on a local road, and local roads are managed by highways authorities, but highways authorities are not always transport authorities. This will become an increasing issue as the Government roll on with their devolution agenda, which I welcome, and more strategic transport authorities are established. With buses, for example, whether it is an enhanced partnership agreement between a local transport authority and a bus operator, or franchising carried out with a transport authority that is not the Highways Authority, there are things that it is difficult for the transport authority to do to keep a bus running on time, because that is dependent on the road on which it is running.

As we all know, roads can be blocked by roadworks, they can be in a poor state of repair and a bus lane can be obstructed, yet a stand-alone transport authority does not have control over any of that. Such authorities do not manage the planning system, do not collect the community infrastructure levy, do not own the bus stops and do not get any cash from bus lane enforcement—none of that comes their way. However, they are the authorities expected to get on with delivering the funding, such as the £15.6 billion transport for city regions settlement.

May I ask the Minister what lessons have been learnt from CRSTS in respect of delivery? I am thinking especially of any blockages that may have been encountered because of the split between transport and highways, and indeed the lack of passenger transport executives or their equivalents. I have talked to other Ministers about that, but I am delighted to see this Minister on the Front Bench, and it would be interesting to hear anything from him on the subject of passenger transport executives.

As I have said before, we could have a much more cost-efficient system. The Government are rightly bringing track and train together, and I think we now need to have a conversation about bringing bus and bus lane together.

5.55 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): When we talk about national renewal and about building a fairer country, that promise must be visible in places such as Cornwall. I am speaking today not just as the Member of Parliament for St Austell and Newquay and the clay country, but on behalf of a nation and region that has for too long been overlooked when it comes to transport infrastructure. While urban areas receive wave after wave of capital funding, Cornwall—despite its strategic economic potential—has to fight for anything more than basic improvements.

The Mid Cornwall Metro was billed as a flagship rail project for regional regeneration, but this summer we face the real possibility of reduced services, delays in driver training, and a fractured promise to towns such as Newquay that rely on connectivity to survive and thrive. That is not fairness; it is failure. We must move beyond piecemeal, incremental improvements. A “real” Mid Cornwall Metro would link St Austell to Newquay via the western clay country, and is about as shovel-ready as is possible with a major project of that scale in Cornwall. It is backed by rigorous analysis and an albeit outdated feasibility study, and has a cost-benefit ratio of 2.3. It would connect our critical minerals industry with global opportunity, it would help our young people gain access to jobs and training, and it would breathe life into some of the most under-invested communities in the south-west.

We know there are still announcements to come, but Cornwall cannot sit at the back of the queue any longer. Over the period covered by the spending review, the south-west will receive £201 million in local transport grant funding. I think that is about a quadrupling of the present amount, which is extremely welcome, but just £24.4 million of it is allocated to Cornwall. In the same period, the West of England combined authority, despite its similar population, will receive £752 million. We should like to see the same progress on investment in transport as we have seen in so many other areas, such as local government—with its fair funding—and health, given today’s announcement about the Carr-Hill formula. What we need is a Department for Transport that works with us in Cornwall, not around us. We need proper devolved authority over our local rail system to optimise transport integration and to serve forgotten communities such as Foxhole, Nanpean, Treviscoe and St Dennis, where our track turns to trackbed; we need investment that reflects our economic and industrial ambition; and we need decisions that are based on public good, not on postcodes.

The Green Book review, in proposing place-based approaches to investment, sets our Government a clear challenge. Cornwall is ready to step up to that challenge. Much of the shadow of what we now see as our infrastructure was cast in the last industrial revolution, but with the right investment in Cornwall, we can lead in the next.

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

5.58 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): As we all know, strong connectivity is vital to economic growth and social prosperity. It is not just about convenience; it is key to boosting productivity, attracting regional investment and raising living standards. Central to that is making public transport more available, affordable and accessible.

The transport crisis in this country is clear. Since 2015 the number of local bus journeys has dropped by more than 1 billion—a quarter of all trips—with many routes cut and fares up by more than 50% since 2013. Rail use remains below pre-pandemic levels, while Government rail subsidies have surged to over £22 billion, 65% higher than they were before the pandemic, despite repeated above-inflation fare increases. So what is the plan? The estimates offer us some hope, but the picture is mixed.

Let me begin with the positive aspects. The 4.4% rise in capital spending is welcome, especially the boost for Transport for London and High Speed 2, which shows much-needed recognition of the transport network's capital needs. The continued support for East West Rail and the trans-Pennine route upgrade is also welcome, as they are vital to connecting communities and driving growth—exactly the kind of strategic investment we need.

Sadly, although the Conservative Government claimed to back motorists, they did the opposite, and fewer than half our roads are now in good condition. The new road funding settlement is good news therefore, but it clearly falls short of what is needed. The support for devolution is also encouraging. Local leaders are best placed to deliver for their areas, and increased autonomy for transport in city regions is positive, even if not all the new money is in fact new. However, areas outside combined authorities must not be overlooked.

Of the negatives, the most concerning is the £150 million cut to day-to-day spending this year and over the spending review period, which will affect subsidies for trains and buses. The reductions threaten already fragile services and the efforts to promote walking and cycling, and raise serious doubts about the Department's ability to achieve its stated priorities.

There is a clear mismatch between the Government's ambitious transport goals and their budget priorities. An £81 million rise in central administration costs, largely to cover the higher employer national insurance contributions that the Government introduced, raises questions about whether resources are being prioritised towards administrative overheads, rather than directly supporting frontline transport improvements.

Despite pledges to address climate change, the budget lacks detail on funding for green infrastructure, public transport decarbonisation and active travel, leaving the DFT open to accusations of setting green ambitions without a clear financial or operational pathway—greenwashing, effectively.

The £50 million in costs tied to the closure of phase 2 of the HS2 programme further reflects issues with long-term strategic planning. Not only does the expenditure represent sunk costs, with no return on investment; it casts doubt on the Department's ability to deliver the major infrastructure projects that are so vital for national connectivity and economic growth.

The Liberal Democrats propose simplifying ticketing, improving accessibility and boosting connectivity, and also increasing usage and income by freezing fares. We also advocate a 10-year rail electrification plan—investing in zero carbon by ensuring that all new lines are fully electrified.

Buses, the nation's most popular form of transport, get little support from the estimates. The franchising reforms in the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill are welcome, but they will not restore regular, affordable services without funding and expertise. We need more than just three people in the bus centre of excellence. Years of neglect following Tory deregulation have destroyed much of our national bus network, isolating communities and holding back growth. Clearly, the Chancellor's hike of the fare cap from £2 to £3 should be reversed, as it is causing real hardship for some of the poorest in society, yet the estimates reveal continued cuts to bus subsidies, which is precisely the wrong approach when communities desperately need reliable, affordable bus services.

The Liberal Democrats believe that active travel infrastructure must accompany public transport reform, but the Government's approach is disappointing. Although £246 million is currently allocated to Active Travel England, funding is set to be cut by more than £90 million next year, undermining Labour's earlier promises of unprecedented investment. The Liberal Democrats propose a different path: a nationwide active travel strategy to build new cycling and walking networks that are better integrated with existing transport. This cost-effective, ecofriendly approach would connect homes, schools, high streets and transport hubs.

These estimates show a Department and a Government who lack ambition. While increasing capital spending and investing for the future are positive, cutting day-to-day spending is a poor decision from a Government who say economic growth is their highest priority. We need a transport system that works not just for the next decade, but for the next bus, the next train, the next school run and the next hospital visit. This means funding day-to-day services properly, empowering local authorities and putting passengers at the heart of every decision, for which the Liberal Democrats will continue to fight.

6.5 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. I thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for securing this important debate.

Transport has always been about more than how we get from A to B. Infrastructure is the connective tissue of our economy, and investment in infrastructure can propel economic growth. I think the whole House would agree with that statement. In that light, I welcome the fact that the spending review confirmed that capital investment, excluding spending on HS2, will increase at a real-terms annual growth rate of 3.9% between 2025-26 and 2029-30. The Government have outlined where much of this capital will be directed in the spending review and the 10-year infrastructure plan, and I am pleased that many of these projects align with the commitments set out in the previous Government's Network North plan. I look forward to the publication of the infrastructure pipeline in July to see further information.

Wendy Morton: Although some projects in the Network North plan have been transferred over and continued, Aldridge train station was not one of them. It was funded through the city region sustainable transport settlement, so does my hon. Friend share my disappointment for my communities that it has been scrapped by Mayor Parker in the West Midlands?

Gareth Bacon: My right hon. Friend is a doughty champion for her Aldridge constituents. I share her disappointment. It is not the first time I have heard her raise that disappointment in this Chamber in the past few months and—

Wendy Morton: It will not be the last.

Gareth Bacon: No, I suspect it will not be the last time I hear it.

There will be occasions when Labour Members fail to read the previous Government's announcements, so for their benefit let me point out how the funding sums promised to authorities by the previous Government have been closely replicated, in some cases identically replicated, by those promised in this Government's spending review announcements. For example, for West Yorkshire, £2.115 billion was promised in 2023, and £2.115 billion in 2025; for Greater Manchester, £2.47 billion was promised in 2023, and £2.47 billion in 2025; for the Liverpool city region, £1.58 billion was promised in 2023, and £1.58 billion in 2025; and for West Midlands, £2.65 billion was promised in 2023, and £2.4 billion in 2025. I could go on, but Members will recognise the point. The estimates and the spending review are not new and they are not innovative.

Turning to the substance of the Government's plans, I want to take this opportunity to examine some of the assumptions underpinning this spending review. I am afraid those assumptions are flawed. The first relates to the supposed benefits of nationalisation. The spending review anticipates that the Department for Transport's resource departmental expenditure limits, which is its day-to-day revenue spending, will fall by 5% in real terms during the next three years. I do not dispute that it is possible to make savings in the Department for Transport, but I do question the means by which the Government expect to deliver those savings. The spending review claims:

"Resource DEL funding falls in real terms over the period, primarily driven by a declining rail passenger services subsidy as passenger ridership and revenue continue to recover post COVID-19 and efficiencies and savings are made through public ownership."

This is another entry in the ever-growing list of benefits that Labour claims nationalisation will deliver—lower fares, no strikes, better services and now lower spending.

Let us be clear: this is political daydreaming, not economic reality. The first train operating company to be brought into public ownership by the Government was South Western Railway, and we have already seen unexpected costs with its rolling stock. Credible reports show that mistakes made by the Government will cost the taxpayer an anticipated £250 million more. The Transport Secretary herself has admitted that nationalisation is not a silver bullet. She is right, but the narrative presented in the spending review and these estimates continues to rely on assumptions that remain unproven.

Labour's ideological plan to nationalise even the best performing rail operators will benefit neither passengers nor taxpayers. Beyond the loss of private sector investment, nationalisation also poses a deep structural risk, because under a single nationalised employer, there will be enormous pressure to harmonise terms and conditions across the entire railway workforce. That may sound harmless or even desirable, but in practice it means the trade unions openly calling for levelling up pay, benefits and working practices to the most generous standards currently found in the system, and they have wasted no time in doing that. I am sure that their members will be delighted by that, but for the Government, the taxpayer and the fare payer, that has one inevitable outcome: rising costs, almost certainly with no corresponding rises in productivity. Far from delivering savings, this sets the stage for spiralling costs, renewed industrial action and even poorer services for passengers.

Turning to the wider economic picture, the Government claim their infrastructure plans are

"creating the conditions for sustainable economic growth in communities throughout the UK."

However, the truth is that the greatest barrier to growth in this country is not a lack of spending. How could it be when current levels of spending are just about the highest in our entire peacetime history? No, the greatest barrier to growth is the economic mismanagement of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and this Labour Government.

We know that to fund this increased spending, Labour has not got control of the welfare bill, or reduced the size of the state, but simply changed the fiscal rules to allow billions more in borrowing. More borrowing is certainly not the long-term answer—this is not free money. Britain already spends almost £106 billion a year just to service its debt. For context, those payments outweigh what we spend to protect our country not just from foreign threats, but from crime at home, because our debt-servicing payments exceed the combined amounts allocated in the spending review to the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. That is not just unsustainable, but irresponsible.

Higher spending and higher borrowing fuels inflation. It undermines growth and it blows a hole in the public finances. Of course, we all know how Labour plans to fill that hole—with higher taxes. Will the Transport Secretary urge the Chancellor to restore discipline to the public finances? I hope she does. Will she set a credible strategy to deliver efficiencies within the Department for Transport? I hope she does, so that come autumn we are not hit with yet another round of tax hikes.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions to this estimates debate, exploring their priorities for Government spending, including those Members who presented a vision with which I might disagree. We must acknowledge that the Government continue to offer more questions than solutions. In transport, we are presented with legislation to change bus policy without the funding that we know will be required to implement it properly. We await pipeline plans, railway reform papers and road investment strategies. When I was appointed shadow Secretary of State, I was initially faced by the former Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh), who constantly declared that she wanted

"to move fast and fix things."—[Official Report, 10 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 446.]

[Gareth Bacon]

But nearly a year into this Government, it feels as though things are moving at the speed of a canal boat in reverse—very slowly and taking the country backwards.

The problem is not the current Transport Secretary, or the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), who is responding to the debate today. The problem emanates from No. 10 and No. 11 Downing Street, because when the captain and the first officer of the ship have no ideas of their own, refuse to scan the horizon and see it for what it is, rather than what they would wish it to be, the journey ends up lost and directionless. For the good of the country, I hope that the Government will come to understand that real change means supporting British business and backing the everyday commuter. In the meantime, I fear these estimates are indicative of a Government who are not listening, failing to heed the warnings and will continue steering the ship of state straight towards the iceberg.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Minister.

6.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. As you cannot speak from the Chair, may I say what a doughty champion you are for the reopening of Manston airport, in your constituency?

First, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) for securing the debate and for the work they have done on the Transport Committee. I am grateful for all Members' important, interested and varied contributions, and will try to address as many as humanly possible—there were an awful lot of questions in many of them. I know that Members are anxious for news on specific schemes in their local areas, but I will not be able to announce any new decisions today. We will make announcements in due course through the usual processes.

Let me address the comments made by the Transport Committee Chair about how spending is linked to the Department's strategic objectives. Our spending is wholly orientated towards delivering this Government's missions and our plan for change. At the heart of our approach is harnessing transport to drive growth, as better transport will connect people and opportunities and ensure that businesses can grow and thrive. That is why we are investing in vital public transport services, repairing our road networks, transforming our railways and providing unprecedented investment for local leaders to invest in their priorities. Five out of the first 10 Bills in this Session were on transport—we did not have five transport Bills in 14 years under the last Government. We are moving at pace.

In the financial year 2025-26 alone, we are delivering £1.6 billion for local road maintenance, £1.3 billion for local transport in our big city regions and over £1 billion for bus services. We are also providing more than £420 million for our smaller cities, towns and rural areas, as has been mentioned today. Our investments will help to drive growth in every part of the country and raise living standards for everyone.

We are supporting the transition to net zero and an economy powered by clean energy, with more than £200 million to accelerate the roll-out of electric vehicle charge points this year. We are investing in active travel infrastructure to improve the health of the nation, with an additional £150 million of investment in cycling and walking infrastructure in this financial year alone. We are supporting bus services and capping fares to connect people to jobs and to boost opportunity. We are also supporting safer streets by making public transport safer—including, most importantly, for women and girls. Across our work, we are making sure that every penny of taxpayers' money is put to good use, from greater efficiency within the Department to getting to grips with the spiralling costs of HS2 and bringing that project back on track.

Although this debate concerns the estimates for 2025-26, I note that only two weeks ago, the Chancellor set out how our ambitions for the transport sector will last the whole of this Parliament. With the settlement we have received for 2026 onwards, we will deliver increased local transport investment in England's towns and cities, prioritising funding in the north and the midlands and giving local areas more control over how the money is spent. We will improve everyday journeys across this country and invest in the critical national infrastructure needed to connect our cities and our towns in the long term, enabling economic growth. This will ensure that transport plays its part in delivering the plan for change and a decade of national renewal.

I thank the Chair of the Transport Committee for her speech. She asked me a number of questions about when we will publish the outcome delivery plan. This will be done by all Departments, co-ordinated through the Cabinet Office, later this year. She asked about subsidiarity, and what happens if mayors do not use the money and new powers we have given them on the things that we want to do, citing active travel as an example. Even with subsidiarity, mayors have to deliver against Government outcomes and objectives, and we hope to work with them in a spirit of co-operation to ensure that that is done right.

My hon. Friend asked what our bus reform and £1 billion investment was meant to achieve. We introduced the new £3 fare cap on single bus fares in England outside London, which has had the cap for a long time, ensuring that millions of people have access to affordable fares and better opportunities to both go to college and work and to see friends and family.

With UK SHORE, we have moved fast with the decarbonisation plan, and the research and development funding for this will continue. We have worked internationally with the International Maritime Organisation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions across our planet. We have also announced £185 million through safer roads funds to invest in the 99 most risky A roads, and we have made clear commitments on rail cost base and subsidy.¹

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the former Rail Minister, is a doughty champion for Aldridge station—well done to her for that. The money was reallocated by the current mayor to cover the costs of schemes implemented by the former mayor that did not have the funding. She also talked about buses; I have already mentioned the £1 billion that we have invested in better buses.

1.[*Official Report*, 30 June 2025; Vol. 770, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who cannot be in his seat at the moment, is an astonishing champion for Bradford. May I pay tribute to him and to Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, the leader of Bradford city council, for their work in this area? The £2.1 billion train line and bus station investment is transformative. Some £35 million of Government money will see an additional five daily services to London, and we will be making announcements in the next few weeks regarding Northern Powerhouse Rail and how important it is to connect the cities of Leeds, Bradford, Manchester and Liverpool.

Wendy Morton: While the Minister is still talking about rail services, I just want to ask about Aldridge station to be absolutely clear about the situation. When the money for the station was allocated, it was ringfenced. It was his Government who decided to move the money from capital to revenue, so it is simply unfair to blame it all on Andy Street; it is not right.

Mike Kane: I thought the former mayor was quite a talented individual and he was succeeded by another talented individual, who has had to make tough choices around funds that were committed but never implemented under the previous Government. Promise after promise was made, but with no delivery whatsoever. None the less, the right hon. Member should carry on campaigning.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) rightly talked about buses. I have already mentioned the amount of funding that we are putting in there, and the £616 million for active travel, which has been mentioned by a number of Members, on top of the £300 million that was allocated last year. I had a great time last Easter cycling with my wife around the hon. Member's constituency on Rebellion Way, which is a wonderful piece of Sustrans infrastructure.

Steff Aquarone: I thank the Minister for coming to North Norfolk; he is welcome at any time. Having experienced at first hand the reality of rurality in my constituency, does he agree that we need to look at alternative models for rural public transport?

Mike Kane: We are giving back control of buses to local authorities—as difficult as it is in some circumstances. It is a £1 billion commitment. People in rural economies need to get about just as much as people in cities and we are committed to making sure that that happens.

Let me turn to my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes). I cannot wait to visit and to ride on the No. 65 bus. She is a doughty campaigner for her constituency. She also talked about two Labour Governments working hand in hand to bring rail investment to Magor and Undy station, and I am glad that she has had correspondence with the Roads Minister on the safety of the M48.

The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) rightly talked about HS2. He highlighted the need to connect our maritime industries on the south coast with the rail network, so that we can take maximum advantage of both maritime and rail to get that freight off our roads.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) summed it up when he spoke about the collapse of Galley Hill Road, which I thought was a metaphor for transport under the last Government. We have committed

to the Lower Thames Crossing, with an initial investment of £590 million, and we will be making announcements on that in due course. We have also put in £54 million to fix potholes in Kent. The Government are showing that we are committing to the Lower Thames Crossing, with announcements to come, and are fixing the roads, and yet not one Reform Member came to this debate. Let us remind the people of Kent day in, day out about Reform's lack of commitment to improving their lives compared with what we are doing.

I was with the predecessor of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) at the British Ports Association. Do they only elect Scottish Members to the Surrey Heath constituency? I noticed that even some of the mannerisms were the same. The hon. Member made some important points about evidence-based transport systems. I think we are demonstrating that we are not a cultural, woke Government but are looking policy data to drive our decisions about how we best connect this country up. He also talked about road safety. Our manifesto included a commitment to long-term connectivity for transport across the country. That will be coming, so I hope he gets involved in the debate when it comes forward.

The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage talked about HS2. We have accepted James Stewart's recommendations about the cost overruns, although the hon. Member was right to highlight them. He also asked about how our railways and maritime industry can work together. Green shipping corridors will be key to the future of shipping, but the grid capacity in our coastal communities is not up to scratch. He knows that and we know that, and that is why we made manifesto commitments on our grid capacity. I note that we have already made announcements about greater European train connectivity, but I understand the point he makes about depot constraints; the Government are looking at that as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) is a real champion for Cornwall. I was glad that we could announce £4.1 million for Cornwall alone in 2025-26 in addition to the £201 million—which, as he mentions, is four times greater than the last settlement. We hope to see things improve in that wonderful part of the country.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) always astonishes me. He is like some latter-day Hilaire Belloc in his pinstriped suits and polka-dot tie. He was so positive about the Government that I thought he was going to cross the Floor for a second; we will give him time. He mentioned being disappointed about some areas, but we have done more to decarbonise transport this year, more for buses than any Government have done for a generation, and more for active travel in one year than any Government for a generation.

Mr Kohler: I thank the Minister for his compliments. Does he accept that Active Travel England will get £100 million less next year, and does he think that is a sensible way to move forward?

Mike Kane: Under this Government, Active Travel England gets settlements that go forward. I have to say that I thought the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip—the former Prime Minister—was actually very good in this space, but the announcements he made were then all pared back. Local authorities need to have long-term continuing investment to connect routes and

[Mike Kane]

get people walking, wheeling and cycling. My constituents die of type 2 diabetes, hypertension and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—all things that can be fixed by more of us walking, wheeling and cycling. Active travel is key to the Government's health mission as well as to our transport mission.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), for his contribution. He mentioned that the settlements for West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and the west midlands were similar to those from 2023. Yes, they are, but this Government are delivering on these settlements. We had so many promises from the last Administration, but we are delivering.

We will take no lessons from the Opposition on the costs of Great British Rail, which I think the nation is proud of, given that we were left to clear up the debacle of the overrun costs of HS2—a project that was cut by the previous Prime Minister while he was at the Tory party conference in Manchester. It was the most astonishing decision, and the most astonishing place to announce it. As a proud trade union member, I am glad that the trade unions have come to the table this past year. After years of industrial strife, we are solving the disputes, particularly in the railway industry, and services are beginning to improve.

On long-term investment, I gently remind the shadow Minister that he voted for Prime Minister Liz Truss's Budget, which left us with a £22 billion black hole. We have been tackling that as well as setting out our ambition for the future. We are fixing the foundations of our transport system to deliver the Government's priorities. Our funding settlement for 2025-26 enables us to press ahead with reforming our bus and rail services, to get to grips with the maintenance backlog, to empower local leaders to deliver, and to build transformative new routes for the country. The settlement announced earlier this month will build on that; it will drive progress on the Government's missions, and improve transport for people and businesses across the country.

I thank hon. Members for contributing to the debate. I am grateful for the important work of the Transport Committee, and look forward to continuing to work with it. I commend the estimates to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call Ruth Cadbury to wind up.

6.31 pm

Ruth Cadbury: I will do what I omitted to do at the start of the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for awarding us the opportunity for this debate. I also thank all hon. Members who contributed to it.

I was thinking about the themes of the debate, and the most common issue, mentioned by hon. Members from across the country, was the need for a new station, or even stations, in their constituency. All gave really coherent and rational reasons why those stations are needed. When I was growing up in Edgbaston in south Birmingham, we did not have a Five Ways station or a University station. Those stations were installed about 30 or 40 years ago, but it is unbelievable to think that they were not there, because the amount that they are used is incredible. There is a really fast service to New Street

station, as the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) probably knows, although she represents the other side of Greater Birmingham.

I also want to mention the new mid-Cornwall metro that my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) spoke about. He made a powerful case for the needs of communities that are, in many places, quite deprived. Many people go on holiday to Cornwall, but we must remember that there are economically deprived, left-out places, and they need new lines, whether full rail lines or light rail. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills made an important point that we picked up in our buses inquiry about the need for decision-makers to remember outer areas, which are as important as core city areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) not only made a passionate plea for a new station, but thanked the Government for at last funding a tramline and bus station. That is a really good example of what the Government are already achieving, and it shows how long the community has been fighting for those services.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), who is on the Transport Committee, gave a strong speech about the issues facing very rural constituencies, for which public transport solutions are not easy. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) mentioned the downsides of high rates of car dependency. In a very rural area, there is literally no way to get about unless one can drive a car, and that often decimates the population of rural villages and hamlets. In the London hinterland, high rates of car dependency have implications for congestion. I do not often drive outside London—or in London—but I recognise the issues well. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath also raised an important point about the inadequate alternatives to car travel for those living in new developments. The Government's new planning policies seek to address that gap in policy; if that does not happen, we will just build car dependency into new developments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) made an important point about the implications for the local economy and local people when a major piece of infrastructure is closed. I hope that the M48 bridge is opened before too long. The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), another member of the Committee, made, as ever, many expert points about rail. If anybody has any questions about rail, they can just ask him. He was possibly the only Member here today—or almost—who mentioned freight. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) mentioned the importance of accessibility. I urge those who have not read the Transport Committee's first report of this Session to pick it up, though the work was done in the previous Parliament. It is called "Access denied: rights versus reality in disabled people's access to transport", and it is about the experiences of people with disabilities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford mentioned a subject that comes up for us again and again: potholes. Our second inquiry is on street works, the damage that potholes cause to vehicles, and the disruption caused when utility services do not repair potholes properly and repairs are outstanding for a very long time. My hon. Friend also mentioned the importance of the Elizabeth line extension. Despite criticisms over the

years about the cost of Crossrail and the delays to it, now we can only look at the massive success of the Elizabeth line. It has so many huge benefits for growth; it enables new developments; and it takes pressure off underground lines, such as the Heathrow branch of the Piccadilly line in my area. That set of benefits comes from extending lines or bringing in new ones. The Elizabeth line being in London and the south-east is an example of how cheques from the Treasury are not necessarily needed to fund such projects. That is a good example of how land value capture could fund these projects.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) talked about the value of buses and the bus fare policy. She also made an innovative suggestion around the charging for the driving test, which should be noted by the Minister. I hope, as I say, that the Government look at fees and charges, and that is a new suggestion.

Turning to the Front Benches, there was nothing wrong in any of the individual projects in themselves mentioned by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), but as often happens with Liberal Democrat ideas, it would be financially unachievable as a programme. The Labour party is in power already delivering strategies and specific changes, but it is doing so within the financial constraints that this Government inherited.

The shadow Transport Secretary omitted to mention his Government's lack of coherent transport policies while also trying to criticise our Government's policies. He omitted to mention that the criteria for funding local schemes under their Government was decided more on the basis of the marginality of their Members' seats than the rationality of those transport proposals. He also omitted to mention that cutting then stopping HS2 cost billions and billions of pounds.

Finally, the Minister reminded us cogently of the importance of transport to the Government's missions, and that we cannot make unfunded promises.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

6.41 pm

Sitting suspended.

7 pm

On resuming—

The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54).

ESTIMATES 2025-26

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £50,874,837,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £17,317,202,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £66,974,384,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Department of Health and Social Care:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £102,988,518,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £7,761,339,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £116,089,479,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £22,916,388,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £5,004,997,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £19,023,317,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Ministry of Justice:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £8,221,872,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,367,223,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £8,813,378,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Ministry of Defence:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £28,705,830,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £13,278,878,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £36,416,759,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026, for expenditure by the Department for Transport:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £13,913,148,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 871 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £12,296,785,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £20,121,455,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Question on the outstanding estimates (Standing Order No. 55).

MAIN ESTIMATES 2025-26

[Relevant document: Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission, Parliamentary Works Grant: Main Estimate for 2025–26: Comments from the Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission and the Treasury, HC 872.]

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2026:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £284,938,022,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 604, HC 808, HC 839, HC 858, HC 859, HC 871 and HC 909 of Session 2024–25,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £38,184,196,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £219,497,947,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Darren Jones, Emma Reynolds, James Murray and Torsten Bell bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

James Murray accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the year ending with 31 March 2026; to authorise both the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the application of income for that year; and to appropriate the supply authorised for that year by this Act and by the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2025.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 274).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMPETITION

That the draft Enterprise Act 2002 (Mergers Involving Newspaper Enterprises and Foreign Powers) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 15 May, be approved.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 2 July (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Combined Authorities (Adult Education Functions) (Amendment) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 19 May, be approved.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMPANIES

That the draft Protection and Disclosure of Personal Information (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 14 May, be approved.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

NUCLEAR ENERGY

That the draft Nuclear Installations (Compensation for Nuclear Damage) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 19 May, be approved.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

Question agreed to.

Haemochromatosis Screening

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Kate Dearden.)

7.3 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I ought to begin with an explanation of what is a very long word. Put simply, haemochromatosis is too much iron in the blood—haemo, blood; chroma, iron; and tosis, too much of it. To save time and the good offices of *Hansard*, I will refer to it occasionally as HCT in this debate. It is an inherited genetic condition, a disorder often known as the Celtic curse, because it is particularly prevalent in Celtic bloodlines and is common in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I think it is more probably a Viking phenomenon—an old genetic response to times of famine that we carry into modern times.

Untreated haemochromatosis can lead to several common conditions that we might describe as Scottish diseases of ill health: cirrhosis of the liver, heart disease, arthritis and so on. Once spotted, HCT is easily treated by venesection—another long word—which simply means bloodletting. About 450 ml of blood is taken off the patient at each session to chase down the iron levels in the body to normal levels. Generally haemochromatosis is asymptomatic, and without a test to measure for ferritin levels, it can be easily missed.

I have a bit of knowledge of the bloodletting side of the business, because for the past 17 years, I have been attending the Knutsford ward at the Royal London hospital on a regular basis for venesection. I am grateful to the staff there for the incredible treatment they have given me, including consultants such as Richard Marley. I am also grateful to my younger brother, Donald, who was tested and found he carried the gene in 2008.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman—I am not going to pronounce his constituency, as I would get that all wrong with my Ulster-Scots—for bringing this debate forward. He and I spoke last night about HCT and its prevalence. He is right that it is called the Celtic curse. Some might say that maybe I am a curse on some people. I am sure nobody would come to that conclusion. However, one in 10 people have this disorder, which features strongly among the Northern Irish, the Scots, the Welsh and even Cornish communities—all the Gaelic cousins and people. However, even with that prevalence, screening does not naturally take place and quality of life is impacted for years before someone even goes to their GP. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it is unnecessary to live with something that can be easily treated?

Torcuil Crichton: The hon. Gentleman's interventions are always a blessing, never a curse. I have some information of particular interest to his part of the world later in my speech.

I have declared my interest, as I have haemochromatosis, but it is not just my experience, but that of my constituents and the make-up of my constituency in Na h-Eileanan an Iar that have spurred me to secure this debate. It is not all about me.

A groundbreaking DNA study headed by Professor Jim Flett Wilson of Edinburgh University discovered that the Western Isles are a hotspot for haemochromatosis,

this genetic mutation that the body at some stage adopted for survival. People are at risk of developing the condition if both their parents have the faulty gene and they inherit one copy from each of them. They will not get haemochromatosis if only one of their parents carries the gene and they only get one copy, but there is a chance they could pass the gene on to their children. If people inherit two copies—that is, both their parents are carriers—they will not necessarily get haemochromatosis. About half of people with two copies of the faulty gene develop the condition, and it is not known exactly why.

What is known is that the Viking genes DNA study by Professor Jim Flett Wilson took DNA samples from islanders in Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles, and it threw up some amazing discoveries. People wanted to find out if they had Viking heritage, and many sent in swab samples and filled in the questionnaires in sufficient numbers for the scientists to crunch the numbers. I did not do that myself. Feeling Viking by name and by nature, I did not think it necessary.

Analysis of the data, and cross-examination with other gene studies, showed that in Orkney and Shetland, participants in the study had rare and unique cancer genes, which led to them being alerted to their condition. The study saved lives and is credited with doing so. The good news for the Western Isles—for Na h-Eileanan an Iar—is that no rare cancer genes were found. While the results are still being finalised, it is clear that the Western Isles are a hotspot for haemochromatosis and inherited high cholesterol, which can lead to heart disease.

According to Professor Flett Wilson, the numbers in the Western Isles are sufficiently high to justify population-wide screening. For instance, one in 212 people in the south and east of England carry two copies of the faulty gene, as opposed to one in 62 in the Outer Hebrides.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on genetic haemochromatosis, and my constituent Lorraine asked me to attend the debate. She suffers from the disease, and has found a way to manage it by donating blood regularly. She is pleased that genetic testing enabled her to know about her condition so she did not suffer severe organ damage, which can affect many people with the disease. Does my hon. Friend agree that genetic testing for those who are more likely to be diagnosed is essential if we are to help people lead healthy lives without the need for medical intervention?

Torcuil Crichton: I do indeed agree. Haemochromatosis, although widespread, was not widely known about until very recently, but genetic testing, as well as simple ferritin level tests, will inform many more people. Early intervention is vital to preventing people from developing crippling illnesses which might otherwise be wrongly ascribed to a condition other than haemochromatosis.

It is not just people such as my hon. Friend's constituent who are affected. In Northern Ireland—or the north of Ireland, depending on how we view our maps—the situation is even more stark than it is in the Western Isles. Among the population of “Ulster Scots”, if I can call them that, there is a one in 123 occurrence of two faulty copies of the gene, which is similar to the incidence in mainland Scotland. The Catholic community in the north-west of Ireland have the highest concentration in

[*Torcuil Crichton*]

the British Isles: one in 54 carry two faulty copies. On the basis of Professor Flett Wilson's work, we can predict that one in 94 men in the Western Isles will develop HCT, and one in 80 men of north-west Irish ancestry—and the Irish diaspora is present in constituencies in Scotland, in London and across the United Kingdom—may have the condition, perhaps undetected and perhaps mis-diagnosed, and are possibly suffering from the long list of illnesses associated with an iron overload.

In Orkney and Shetland, analysis of the Viking genes study uncovered rare cancers and lives were saved. In my constituency, people who were found to have the HCT gene have been alerted by letter. The figures for the Western Isles do not include people who did not take part in the study, but they constitute a timely warning about the advisability of screening, a procedure that is not expensive. In the Hebrides, it looks as though we should act on the spike in iron overload. Professor Flett Wilson has recommended islands-wide screening for this common blood condition, but I want to go further: I think that everyone in the Western Isles, or Na h-Eileanan an Iar, should be screened for too much iron in their blood, but I think they should also be offered DNA tests across the board to show what other inherited conditions they might have.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Torcuil Crichton: I will.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Briefly, Mr Shannon.

Jim Shannon: I will be brief, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am descended from the Stewarts of the lowlands of Scotland, and I am probably the hon. Gentleman's Gaelic cousin. This screening needs to be carried out in Northern Ireland as well as Scotland.

Torcuil Crichton: I do not disagree with that. Screening would be revolutionary. It would save money for the NHS in the short term and the long term, and, more important, it would save lives and put us two decades ahead of the rest of the world in preventive medicine. It would be transformative for my constituency. It would be radical, but only as radical as plans to offer every baby in the UK whole genome sequencing within a decade, a plan backed by the Health Secretary. Genomics, like these tests, would put us on the front foot in preventive medicine, as the Minister well knows. Of course it would cost money—£650 million is earmarked for the boost to genomics by the Department of Health and Social Care—but a smaller and more defined pilot scheme to lead the way in preventive medicine is to hand with the samples of high levels of HCT in the Western Isles. Given the given the cost per head of screening, it is logical that starting in the places with the highest rate of faulty genes would be the most cost-effective option.

Initially at least, the Bill ought not to go to the national health service. The bill for gene testing in the Western Isles should be part of the community payback for the large-scale wind farm developments that are planned for the islands. There are already negotiations for community benefits, community funds and community shares in the many planned wind farm developments in

rural Scotland. The renewables revolution is about saving the planet, but right now the consumer offer is simply to reduce bills. By properly harnessing the wealth of wind, we can not only make communities better off but transform the life chances and health chances of people and their children.

The Viking genes results are not limited to haemochromatosis; they also showed high levels of hypercholesterolaemia in the Western Isles. That is simply inherited high cholesterol—a gene fault—that leaves many islanders, and many of my constituents, with high cholesterol and many with heart conditions, which again could be avoided with predictive medicine and early lifestyle and diet changes.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the need to test in the Western Isles, and his solution of using the community payback from wind farms is an excellent idea. Would he want to go further thereafter and test more widely? My brother has haemochromatosis, and it was discovered completely by accident. The rest of the family were then tested, and one or two cousins were found to have it, although I fortunately do not. It is much more prevalent than any of us ever imagined, and I had never heard of it until my own brother was diagnosed.

Torcuil Crichton: My hon. Friend anticipates much of the remainder of my argument. As I said, the research and DNA testing in the islands could and should be paid for by community funds from large-scale renewable projects, just as similar screening projects proposed for Orkney and Shetland could be paid for by funding from wind farms there. From those discrete samples, much learning could be had, and then sampling and testing could be rolled out across not just the rest of Scotland but the rest of the UK.

Luckily for me, my siblings and I were spotted early but, as I said, if left untreated and undiagnosed this gene can lead to serious arthritic symptoms, liver cancer and heart disease, the consequences of which are often attributed to other conditions and lifestyle factors but could have been easily prevented by testing. Given the resources, we could test for a wide range of conditions and help this generation and future generations of islanders to live healthy lives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) said, if it works for a small, discrete population—there are only 21,000 adults in the island chain—the experience and lessons learned could be rolled out across the UK.

I know, as we all know, that health services in Scotland do not fall within the ambit of the Minister, but the future of healthcare is in all our hands, and I urge UK Ministers and their counterparts in Holyrood to seriously consider a pilot screening study in the Western Isles. There is a clearly identifiable risk from haemochromatosis, and we should use the lessons from that screening to roll out haemochromatosis screening across the rest of the UK.

7.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) for securing this debate and for sharing his personal connection as someone who has haemochromatosis.

In honour of World Haemochromatosis Week earlier this month, from 1 to 7 June, I pay tribute to the important work that my hon. Friend and our colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group are doing to raise awareness of genetic haemochromatosis.

As we have heard, genetic haemochromatosis can have debilitating consequences, including arthritis, joint pain, diabetes, fatigue, psychological or cognitive difficulties, skin conditions, menstrual problems, impotence, breathing and heart problems, abdominal pain, liver problems and hair loss. This genetic condition, which allows iron levels to build up in the body, particularly affects people of white northern European backgrounds.

It is estimated that as many as one in 150 people in England and Wales, one in 113 people in Scotland and one in 10 people in Northern Ireland are affected. Health is a devolved matter, and I am delighted to see Members from the devolved nations represented in this debate. I note the interventions from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), who is the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

All four nations in the UK are advised on screening matters by the same independent scientific advisory committee. The UK National Screening Committee is an independent scientific advisory committee that advises Ministers and the NHS in all four countries on all aspects of population and targeted screening, and supports implementation. Using research evidence, pilot programmes, economic evaluation, expert stakeholders and consultation, the UK NSC assesses the evidence for national screening programmes against a set of internationally recognised criteria. These cover the condition, the test, the treatment options, the effectiveness, the ethics and the acceptability of the screening programme. It is only where the offer to screen provides more good than harm that a screening programme is recommended.

The UK National Screening Committee reviewed the case for screening for genetic haemochromatosis in adults in 2021. After consideration, it recommended on balance against a national screening programme at that time. That was because although a faulty hereditary hemochromatosis protein gene—the HFE gene—is known to cause iron to build up, that does not happen to every person with the faulty gene. Screening could therefore result in people being told that they have a condition that would not go on to impact their lives, which may cause undue worry. Screening would identify people who may never experience symptoms.

A screening programme would be most relevant for this condition if pre-symptomatic treatment showed significant improvements in an individual's prognosis.

However, there is limited evidence on whether treatment is more effective in individuals without symptoms compared with those who have symptoms. Currently, there is no evidence that a screening programme is the best way of helping people with the condition.

However, the UK National Screening Committee keeps its decisions under review. It welcomes any new published peer-reviewed evidence that suggests the case for a new or modified screening programme via its annual call. Any individual or organisation can submit a topic to the UK NSC to consider a new screening programme or modification to an existing programme.

Haemochromatosis is one of the most common genetic diseases, and genetic testing is available. For patients in England who show unexplained iron overload suggestive of hereditary haemochromatosis, genetic testing is available at one of the seven genomic laboratories. Any healthcare professional who suspects their patient may have haemochromatosis can refer their patient for testing via their local NHS clinical genomic service.

As we have heard, the main way to treat the condition is venesection, which is a procedure to remove some of an individual's blood. This may need to happen every week at first, but only two to four times a year once the condition is stable. For those who cannot have blood removed, chelation therapy is an option. This medicine reduces the amount of iron in a patient's body. I know that the NHS Blood and Transplant service works with many patients who have genetic haemochromatosis. While some genetic haemochromatosis sufferers will not be well enough, many of these individuals are well enough, and like Lorraine, the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), offer to give blood as an alternative to venesection. Turning a life-altering condition into a lifesaving opportunity is to be commended. I take this opportunity to thank each and every patient who is able to do so and has opted for that route.

To conclude, I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar for bringing forward this important debate and every Member who has contributed. Let this be the beginning of a conversation about how we can best support people with haemochromatosis. The condition affects many in our constituencies, and this has been an important opportunity to highlight how we must support their diagnosis and treatment in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 25 June 2025

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH in the Chair]

GP Funding: South-west England

9.30 am

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered GP funding in the South West.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. GPs are the front door of the NHS. They diagnose and treat illness, prevent disease and provide vital mental health support. As Lord Darzi once observed, general practice displays “the best financial discipline” in the NHS family while constantly innovating to keep patients out of hospital. However, GP funding is complex, obscure and insufficient. The bottom line is that the amount of money GPs receive is insufficient to deliver the obligations they carry. That is a view held by every single one of the 28 practice managers I met in and around my district, who tell me the situation is unfunded, unsustainable and unsafe.

GP funding is broadly based on two elements: a so-called global sum for core service costs, and additional quality and outcomes framework payments. The global sum starts with a payment per patient per year of £121.79—that is less than we might pay for our dog to go to the vet for an annual check-up, or about a third of the cost of servicing a Renault Megane. It is no wonder that practice managers spend their evenings juggling spreadsheets simply to keep the lights on.

It gets worse. That paltry sum is then modified by something known as the Carr-Hill formula. Carr-Hill was designed for a different era. It weighs patient numbers and postcodes but underrates deprivation, multimorbidity and today’s population health priorities. The consequences are stark and deliver what is known as the inverse care law. In my constituency, the Buckland surgery looks after some 4,000 patients on its list but is effectively funded for 3,200.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): The hon. Member talks about the number of patients that GP practices have on their books. We have an ambitious plan for building more houses. Does he agree that we need to consider not just existing GP practices but funding the infrastructure for future practices, so that we have adequate services for people? There are places in Swindon that will be expected to take on thousands more patients, and the infrastructure is simply not there right now.

Martin Wrigley: The hon. Member is absolutely right: we have to consider these things. I have spent many hours persuading my local hospital trusts and the integrated care board to talk to the local authorities and work in the cycles of the local plan, so that they get their requirements into that plan. All too often they say, “A new housing development has just been built. We need a new GP practice with it,” and that is too late. The cycles do not add up. The system is broken, and we need to change that.

The Buckland surgery is underfunded by some 800 patients every year. It is part of the Templer primary care network, in which 2,500 patients are effectively treated for nothing. This means that the Buckland practice faces an annual shortfall of approximately £84,000—money that would cover another GP. If we then look at the changing number of patients per GP, in 2019 each GP was supporting 1,800 patients, compared with around 2,400 today.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): My constituents tell me of their difficulty in getting an appointment with their GP. Does the hon. Member share my view that GP practices should get a bigger share of NHS funding, which would enable them to improve the health of our constituents? And does he share my concern that much of the extra money allocated by the Government risks being swallowed by increased national insurance contributions, inflation and pay awards?

Martin Wrigley: Practice managers tell me that that has already happened and they are less funded now than they were last year.

On the changing numbers, each GP was supporting 1,800 patients in 2019 and is supporting 2,400 today, but safe care is often estimated to be closer to 1,400 per GP. So we are overloading GPs with patients. Practices make heroic use of pharmacists, physios and nurse practitioners, but the arithmetic does not add up. Meanwhile, the other part of their funding, the quality and outcomes framework scheme, has faced changes that have negatively impacted primary care. This meant that, nationally, £298 million was redistributed from the QOF into the global sum—we can see how bizarre this funding set-up gets; the names are just weird—and into cardiovascular disease prevention funding. Another £100 million of funding was repurposed but does not put extra capacity into the system. Rather than providing new money to support GPs, this felt to practice managers that the Government had been rearranging the deckchairs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He is right to address this issue—I spoke to him just before his introduction. We have great difficulty across all this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland when it comes to securing GPs for practices. In recent years, I have been trying to ensure, with the health service, that action can be taken regarding the student loans of young medical students, if they give a commitment to remain in a GP practice for a set period of, say, five years. That would enable more GPs to stay in the system. Does he feel that that is something the Minister and the Government should take on board?

Martin Wrigley: All those things help, along with things like bringing back nurses’ bursaries. On rearranging the deckchairs, it is no wonder that practice managers described this year’s settlement as unfunded, unsustainable and unsafe.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that the increase of over 7% in GP contract funding for 2025-26, which the Government put in place, represents the biggest investment in GPs for more than 10 years? We always want to get more money for GPs and the Government are committed to that, but does he think

[*Steve Yemm*]

that the largest increase in 10 years should make at least some difference for his constituents in Newton Abbot as well as mine in Mansfield?

Martin Wrigley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but sadly, I must disagree. That is not what practice managers are telling me. Their costs have gone up so much that all of the increase has been swallowed up, and they are not sure they can keep the lights on. They are really struggling. I have partners in GP practices who are paying themselves less than the minimum wage, which is not sustainable.

Patient demand has also increased post pandemic, and continued cuts have seen the removal of many services and social care that have supported what GPs do. On top of the cuts to Sure Start and a 40% drop in health visitors since 2015, carers already stretched thin face the prospect of losing personal independence payment support, which will inevitably rebound on general practice—the first line of defence. That is not to mention long covid and pandemic backlogs. All of those drive more people to want to see their GP. The cost of living crisis is compounding multimorbidity, where the most vulnerable in society with chronic illnesses are further pressured.

And then, we get the new requirement to run the appointment schedule from 8 am to 6 pm, filling every single slot. From October, practices must hold digital front doors, open all day, for non-urgent requests. With 100% booked appointments, there is no spare capacity for the person who falls in the care home or for the child who needs attention after school. Partners in the Albany surgery in Newton Abbot warn me that an unlimited invitation will flood a service that simply cannot be limitless. This is unsafe—unfunded, unsustainable and unsafe.

Talented doctors are leaving. The partnership model, still the cheapest and most community-rooted option, is no longer attractive when partners shoulder unlimited liability for premises, pensions and payroll, yet cannot guarantee safe staffing levels. The Royal College of GPs reports a 25% fall in GP partners over the past decade. The chair, Professor Kamila Hawthorne, put it bluntly:

“It makes no sense that trained GPs cannot find sustainable posts while patients wait weeks for appointments.”

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Patients in Lynton, one of the remotest communities in North Devon, will soon have access to a GP, but that only happened because of a spirited campaign by local patients. Does he agree that if we are relying on an active community to highlight gaps in provision, it will always be the marginalised communities who find it hard to see a GP?

Martin Wrigley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I commend him on obtaining a ministerial visit to his hospital in North Devon. North Devon district hospital is fantastic and we need to ensure that it gets the investment it needs—just so long as we can get some south Devon patients there as well.

In Teignmouth, the previous four practices have merged into one, mostly due to not being able to find new partners. In Newton Abbot, one practice was on the verge of

handing back its patient list due to not being able to replace retiring partners. We have not even talked about specific issues facing some of these surgeries, such as the unbreakable lease on a building that is not fit for use as a GP surgery, where the only possible course of action they could see was to declare themselves bankrupt. As doctors, that ends their careers.

And yet, these practices are doing amazing things. The Kingsteignton medical practice, partnering with the charity Kingscare, has created a model that is delivering for patients. Just think what could be done with a better funding model. Buckland surgery would like to link with the local school to tackle adverse childhood experiences before they turn into permanent ill health, providing better family support—much as it has already done with its links to a number of local support services through the Buckland hub.

Prior to the election, the now Health Secretary often quoted that a GP visit cost £40, whereas an A&E visit cost £400. I am not sure I agree with the absolute numbers, but the principle is fine: it is 10 times more expensive to put somebody through A&E than it is to put them through a GP. If we talk to Devon integrated care board on GP resilience and prevention, the evidence is crystal clear: prevention saves money. And yet, as Torbay and South Devon NHS foundation trust remains in NHS operational framework 4—we might perhaps equate it to “unsatisfactory” if it was a school—because of historical deficits, it is tasked with huge efficiency savings and is understandably risk-averse. Community services that once propped up primary and secondary care—the stroke recovery group, Devon Carers hospital service, the Torbay and Devon dementia adviser service—have vanished as funding evaporates. Closing gaps in prevention only widens cracks elsewhere. It is not getting better.

To sum up, the funding formula is broken. It delivers the inverse care law that the availability of good healthcare tends to be inversely proportional to the need for it within a population. We need to fix it. I am asking the Government today to: end the Carr-Hill formula, and make deprivation, rurality and workload properly weighted; invest in core general practice, not just peripheral schemes, so that partnerships remain viable; protect prevention budgets in the next spending round, as it is cheaper to keep people well than to rescue them later; support premises and digital infrastructure so that online access enhances rather than overwhelms safe care; and publish a workforce plan that retains experienced GPs, accelerates training and makes partnership an attractive career again.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called. I ask for some self-restraint, with speeches restricted to six or seven minutes, so that we can get everybody in.

9.45 am

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this important debate and for his contribution on this matter of long-overdue concern.

Cornwall faces some of the most severe health inequalities in the country. In January, more patients waited more than 30 minutes in ambulances outside hospital in Cornwall than anywhere else. That is not just a statistic; it is a clear sign that our health system is under serious pressure locally.

We know the reasons: our higher levels of deprivation, an older population, poor transport links that make it harder to recruit and retain the NHS and social care staff we urgently need, and the enormous impact of our visitor economy, which is finally going to be taken into account in local government funding, thanks to the fair funding review. Those deep-rooted structural challenges mean that many people across Cornwall struggle to access timely care.

For that reason, I welcome the forthcoming announcement by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that the Labour Government will top up the system with £2.2 billion to improve general practice in the poorest areas with the highest health need. That is the right decision and the right priority for communities like mine in St Austell, Newquay and the clay country. The impact is already being felt. In mid-Cornwall, Newquay health centre and Brannel surgery are already set to receive vital upgrades. That is part of the biggest investment in GP facilities for five years, even before today's announcement.

Steve Yemm: Last month, the Government announced the primary care utilisation and modernisation fund, which will deliver more than £100 million for upgrades to more than 1,000 GP surgeries. A number of GP surgeries in my constituency will benefit, including the Sherwood Medical Partnership surgery in Forest Town, Mansfield. Does my hon. Friend agree that that funding will make a huge difference? It will enable practices to boost productivity by seeing more patients and will improve patient care overall.

Noah Law: Yes, I agree. I am greatly relieved for my hon. Friend and his constituents that vital funding is already coming through and that the urgency has been recognised. In Newquay, for example, people have not even been able to sign up with a new GP. That is shocking, given that it is now Cornwall's biggest town and one of the fastest growing. The assertion should not be levelled that we are not doing enough to invest in infrastructure and services alongside house building, because we are coming forward with the needed investment.

Nationally, we are looking at 8.3 million more GP appointments a year, but it is not just about the numbers. It is about restoring trust in the NHS—trust that the infrastructure and services that we need will come together with growth, which will make care local, accessible and timely. We are fixing the front door of the NHS in our GP surgeries and, thanks to our Health Secretary's leadership, we are fixing the corridors, the consultation rooms and the care that happens before patients reach A&E, as the hon. Member for Newton Abbot mentioned. That should be the goal.

Cornwall must not be overlooked. We must be prioritised in the 10-year plan for health. How will the Government ensure that rural and coastal communities such as those in Cornwall are prioritised for once and receive their fair share of new investment, particularly considering our peninsula penalty—just as we are now starting to

see happening through local government? Will the Minister commit to delivering not just more appointments, but a long-term workforce plan that reflects the needs of our ageing population and the barriers to staff recruitment in rural areas? Cornwall's health inequalities have been ignored for too long, but with this new Labour Government we finally have a partner in Westminster that is listening and acting.

9.50 am

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this important debate on GP funding in the south-west, and for his passionate speech.

I want to shine a spotlight on a village in my constituency called Sherston, where the future of the local GP surgery hangs in the balance. I realise that Sherston may not be the centre of everybody's universe, as it is of mine, but in many ways it is a microcosm of the wider issues facing NHS-funded GPs in the rural parts of the south-west. For years, residents of Sherston and the surrounding villages have lived with growing uncertainty as to whether they will continue to have access to primary care close to home.

Here is the situation: the lease on the current building for Tolsey surgery expires in 2027 and, for a range of reasons, it cannot be renewed. A local housing developer stepped in and offered to build a brand new surgery at no cost to the NHS, in exchange for a modest increase in the number of homes in a proposed development. Understandably, the community overwhelmingly backed the plan. The only missing piece is a commitment from the integrated care board to fund the running of the surgery.

The issue has been running and running. It is not just the local residents who have been calling for action; the parish council, our county councillor and I have all repeatedly urged the ICB to commit to supporting this facility—not just the bricks and mortar, but the long-term operation of a much-needed service. After months of dialogue, however, no clear answer has been given.

The ICB relies on a toolkit to decide how to allocate resources. Early in our discussions, it acknowledged that the toolkit was designed with urban settings in mind and is not well suited to rural areas, yet the ICB has continued to defer to the toolkit, as if it is unable or unwilling to apply common sense to a rural context. It argues that there is spare capacity at the Malmesbury primary care centre, but anybody familiar with these places knows that that is simply not the case. Staff are stretched, appointment slots are limited, car parking slots are even more limited and patients are already struggling to get seen. Understandably, the people of Sherston are at their wits' end. This is not just about one surgery; it is about a broader failure to meet the healthcare needs of rural communities.

Access to healthcare in rural areas is closely tied to transport. Sherston has no regular reliable public transport to Malmesbury, which is five miles away. Many elderly residents no longer drive. For a sick or disabled person in significant need of a GP, or for a parent with young children, getting to a GP appointment in another town can be close to impossible. Once again, as in so many other contexts, we see rural issues—transport, healthcare,

[*Dr Roz Savage*]

infrastructure and resilience—being treated in silos, when in reality they are deeply interwoven. We must start recognising that in the system.

Following the Health Secretary's announcement in May of new funding for GP surgeries, I wrote to his Department to ask whether Sherston might benefit. Unfortunately, the reply was disappointing. I was told that the surgery did not meet the criteria and has

"not been selected for this year's funding."

Well, Sherston surgery does not have very many years left. This response reflects a deeper issue: a fundamental lack of understanding of rural life in our national decision making. A site visit and a short attempt to navigate the journey from Sherston to Malmesbury by bus—or, more likely, the lack of a bus—would speak volumes. I understand that not every village can have its own GP surgery, but when a brand-new, purpose-built facility is being offered, free, to replace a much-used existing practice, why would we say no?

It is not just Sherston. Across the south-west, rural GP surgeries are being overlooked in NHS investment planning. If we are serious about levelling up healthcare access, that has to change, so I have launched a petition to save Sherston surgery. I invite residents to sign and share it. Once we have gathered sufficient support, I will present it in Parliament to show the Government just how strong the feeling is.

I was impressed by the figures from the Health Secretary that my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot cited—that the cost for a GP visit is about £40, versus about £400 for an A&E visit. Failing to fund rural GPs adequately is a false economy. For economic reasons as well as for health reasons, rural communities should not be treated as an afterthought. Everybody, wherever they live, deserves compassionate, reliable and, above all, accessible healthcare.

9.56 am

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain.

GPs epitomise the NHS for us all. They support us from cradle to grave like no other part of the NHS. Although they represent 90% of the patient's experience of the NHS, they get less than 10% of the budget. To better understand these issues, I have spent recent months meeting doctors and practice managers, but I have also spent a morning shadowing a GP at Walford Mill medical centre in Wimborne to see the reality of their life at first hand.

I thank Dr Wright and every patient who kindly allowed me to observe often deeply personal and distressing consultations. I witnessed high-quality, compassionate care. Despite a busy schedule, the GP took time to liaise with hospitals, arrange tests, write referrals and fully support his patients. Almost every patient was supported with more than they arrived to discuss. He sensitively raised worrying comorbidities with them and encouraged them to come back and think about their wider life. I could not fault the care that he gave.

That brings me to appointment times. The British Medical Association recommends 15-minute appointments for GPs. Most surgeries allow only 10 minutes, but they

typically try to get away with five minutes. There is no way a GP can look after a person in that time, particularly given the emotional connection that they have with their patients. One minute they are telling a patient that they have cancer; the next, they are comforting a new mum who is worried about the health of her baby. How does a doctor download their own emotions in between, particularly when they are dealing with financial pressures and their own home lives too?

GP surgeries are also struggling with having to do things that they were not designed to do and not being reimbursed properly. One of the issues I witnessed was the reimbursement of blood tests. That practice recently negotiated a contract with NHS Dorset, which not only did not agree with the amount that the GP said they needed, but cut it dramatically. The GPs are being reimbursed at 25% of the actual cost to them, so they personally subsidise every blood test that they undertake, in a drive to push blood tests to hospitals where patients do not want to be and that they cannot get to. It is quite distressing for them. It is in the patients' best interests for blood tests to be taken locally.

On the flipside, NHS Dorset's pathway for cancer means that the follow-up investigations, including some very personal examinations, have to take place at a surgery with a GP who does not know the patient. The patient does not start their cancer journey by going to the hospital and seeing people who actually know about cancer. I found that quite worrying and distressing.

The other issue I experienced was the discrepancy between the electronic systems used by GPs and the paper systems used by doctors in hospitals, where letters were still being sent by post, causing delays and additional administration in surgeries. Bizarrely, paper prescriptions were still being issued by hospitals, meaning that patients were not able to leave to get their prescription elsewhere, and people rushing to get their family member home were having to get a new prescription, creating more delay and unnecessary work for GPs.

I have some examples with which the Government can perhaps help. I am grateful to the Minister for replying to one of these cases, so it may be familiar to him. The GPs at Wareham surgery are all partners, and they are working out of a building that was part of a hospital and ambulance station, but the building is falling down. The hospital was going to be rebuilt, but that was shelved long ago, and the surgery has finally found a new building. Unfortunately, the building comes with a 25-year lease, which extends beyond even the most youthful of partners, and there is no break clause. It also has a requirement that there be at least three GP partners, and if there are not, retiring GPs will remain personally liable until there are.

However, what we are finding in both Wimborne and Wareham is that people can no longer afford to be a partner in these surgeries. Bethan, my niece, is a GP in her early 30s, and she has probably accrued more than £100,000-worth of debt to get there. She probably has a £250,000 mortgage, because she lives on the south coast. How on earth can she, as a young woman, be expected to take unlimited personal liability on top of that? More people are therefore becoming salaried GPs. They are working their socks off in clinical terms, but they do not have any of the burden of running their surgery, taking that responsibility and subsidising patients.

The GP surgeries I mentioned are struggling to find people willing to be a partner, so that they can take up that lease. I did not hear from the Minister any real reassurance or understanding of the fact that the nature of being a GP is changing. What are the Government doing? Are we expecting the GP partner model to be phased out, and if so, what will replace it? How do we make sure that these organisations can remain?

I was most bothered when the chief executive of NHS Dorset said that GPs are independent contractors and are responsible for sorting out their own businesses. I find it absolutely appalling that we treat our GPs as if they are the local carpenter. GPs are the heart of our communities, and we need to start talking about them as an integral part of the NHS, not as an independent business that needs to make money. These people are not making money; they are saving our lives and keeping us well, and we need to treat them much better.

The population of Wimborne has doubled, and people are worried because the town has lost a GP surgery. They are constantly writing, "We need another surgery." The surgery in Wimborne, like most surgeries, wants to expand, but one of the problems with the funding model that GPs can access—I would be grateful if this could be looked at—is the requirement to bid, design, obtain planning permission and build within a financial year. With the best will in the world and the most efficient planning system, there may be a tiny district that can do that, but I do not know anywhere that can complete the whole process in a year. We need to find a way for GP surgeries to access funding over multiple years, so that communities know they have an NHS fit for the future.

I look forward to the Minister's comments.

10.4 am

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this important debate.

GPs are the front door of our health service, particularly in rural constituencies such as Yeovil and many others in the south-west. Despite their hard work, GPs in Yeovil are stretched thin because the necessary funding and support simply are not there. Everyone deserves access to safe and accessible local healthcare, and all of our constituents should be able to see a GP within a week. Unfortunately, 23% of patients in Somerset are waiting more than 14 days for an appointment, and over 7% are waiting more than 28 days. I have heard from too many constituents who have waited that long or even longer, which is also not good enough.

We need to ensure that everyone has the right to see a GP within seven days, or within 24 hours in urgent cases, and we need more GPs to deliver that. We should also ensure that everyone aged over 70 or with a long-term health condition has access to a named GP. Many of my residents and constituents are concerned that they do not know who their GP is, or that they do not have access to a named GP. They find it concerning that they regularly have to see different GPs or locums.

Many of our GP surgeries are struggling with their buildings. As I have previously said, I am grateful to have received confirmation from the Minister that Crewkerne health centre and Church View medical centre in Neroche are set to receive a share of the £102 million to deliver

upgrades to their practices, but other surgeries are seriously struggling and feel overwhelmed and overlooked. Ariel Healthcare in Chard urgently needs funding and support to upgrade its services to help local residents with urgent needs.

We cannot support our GPs in isolation. We desperately need to improve public transport in the south west so that people can get to their appointments. The cancellation of the No. 11 bus service in Yeovil highlights that issue, and residents, particularly those who are vulnerable, now struggle to access Preston Grove medical centre and Hendford Lodge surgery.

We also urgently need to fix NHS dentistry, because people are forced to go to their GP or hospital for help. Can the Minister provide a clear timeline and costed proposals for fixing the NHS dental contract? The British Dental Association has only had scoping meetings so far, so I hope the Minister and the Government will push that.

We also need to increase investment in public health. Somerset is 11th from the bottom in public health grant allocation despite having a growing public health crisis, particularly around addiction. I was a public health cabinet member for two years and we had only £100,000 to push dental health. It is just not good enough.

On average, we are £13.6 million short across the country, and public health desperately needs reforming. I hope the Minister takes on board our calls to ensure that GPs in the south-west get the funding they deserve and desperately need to support our residents. Without our fantastic GPs, there is no future for our NHS.

10.8 am

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this important and timely debate.

I will quote a GP in Melksham and Devizes who also covers part of the neighbouring constituency. He wrote in an email to me this week:

"Without a significant improvement in GP contract payments, the ICB will push us into a position where we have to reduce the hours our surgeries are open. This for us at best means closing sites 1-2 days per week to try to minimise our staff wage bill which is our largest expense. Depending on what happens in 1-2 years, one or more sites would have to close."

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a strong case for Three Shires medical practice, which has three surgeries in my constituency. Does he agree that if any of the surgeries were to close, it would be a disaster for patients because of the poor public transport links? Does he agree more generally that it is more expensive to deliver GP services in rural areas because we cannot centralise to save money without dramatically reducing patient access?

Brian Mathew: I totally agree with my hon. Friend.

On funding, although the general medical services baseline is around two thirds of our income, it has gone up by 7.2%, with 6% eaten up by the increases in employer national insurance contributions and the national living wage. Our other income streams—dispensing, QOF and enhanced services—have gone up very little.

[*Brian Mathew*]

Our emergency section 96 one-off funding has helped us to postpone that decision, and further tightening our belts has stabilised our financial position. However, partner income remains lower than it was two years ago, and it is little more than that of salaried GPs, making reappointment difficult.

Most of the new money is tied to the primary care network, so it is centralised, or it is delivered via the additional roles reimbursement scheme, which is mainly restricted to non-GP roles such as pharmacists. There has been a scheme to allow PCNs, not practices, to employ newly qualified GPs in a temporary capacity—for example, at a central hub practice. That arrangement disadvantages rural practices, as resources are centralised towards urban centres.

At Three Shires, we have reduced our use of locums to cover GP absences by about 60%, resulting in fewer appointments overall. We have allowed retiring nurses and salaried GPs to leave without replacement, or only be partly replaced, to make savings. That has meant offering fewer appointments and greater work for remaining staff. Our patient participation group has been amazing. It formed the Friends of Three Shires, which has fundraised for new equipment, such as ECG machines and examination couches, helping to keep facilities up to scratch for patients.

The integrated care board has effectively imposed a deadline at the end of September for us to demonstrate that we can continue. Would the Minister be prepared to meet me and GPs from my constituency to hear directly from them about the stark realities of rural GP practices, so that they can help?

10.12 am

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing today's important and timely debate. He is a tireless advocate for his local community, and I commend him for shining a spotlight on GP funding and the broader state of healthcare in the south-west. He spoke about the funding model for GPs, which is complex, obscure and outdated, and does not account for rurality.

As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for hospitals and primary care, I hear all too often from my constituents and from people across the country who are struggling to access the care they need. Our NHS is the pride of the nation, but years of underfunding and mismanagement under the last Conservative Government have left services in crisis.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in general practice, with patients facing increasingly long waits to see a GP, as highlighted by my hon. Friend's statistics. In 2019, the average GP had 1,900 patients on their books; today, they have 2,400, and some people cannot get an appointment at all. People rightly tell me that they are not included in the Government's waiting list statistics because they have not managed to get on a waiting list in the first place—or even speak to a doctor.

Those are not isolated complaints. I am sure many hon. Members will recognise those concerns from their own constituency surgeries, or from spending a morning with their local GP, as my hon. Friend the Member for

Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) described. We also need to be honest about the scale of the problem. In 2024 alone, more than 2 million people in the south-west waited over 28 days for a GP appointment, and that pattern is repeated across the country. Chichester is not in the south-west, but nearly 30% of patients in my constituency had to wait more than two weeks, and around 8% waited more than a month. That is not acceptable.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) made an important point about tourism. The population of my coastal communities such as Selsey, Pagham and the Witterings doubles over the summer months with holidaymakers, which can put additional stress on primary care services.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) made an important point about the role that planning and ICBs play. Too often, developers come forward with large site proposals that include a GP surgery on the site. However, unless they have buy-in from the ICB, so often those GP surgeries that have been specifically designed for that purpose sit empty without a GP practice to go into them.

My hon. Friend also spoke about her village of Sherston. It might not be the centre of my universe—that is my little rural village of Westbourne—but both Sherston and Westbourne face the exact same problems. My village of Westbourne is about to lose its rural surgery; we are waiting for the ICB's final decision. Residents of Westbourne do not have a public transport link to the GP that they are being asked to go to, across the border in Emsworth.

The Liberal Democrats believe that everyone should have the ability to live a healthy and fulfilling life, which means they must have timely and local access to healthcare, whether that is from a GP, a dentist, a pharmacist or a mental health professional. We must invest in early access to community care, in order to relieve the burden on hospitals and fix the social care crisis that leaves too many people stuck in hospital beds waiting for help that never comes.

Research by the House of Commons Library that was commissioned by the Liberal Democrats found that funding for GP practices was cut by £350 million in real terms between 2019 and 2024. Those cuts have hit communities hard, and the impact is being felt not only by patients but by the hard-working professionals trying to keep the system going. GPs who I speak to are burnt out and overburdened, and GPs in general are leaving the profession in record numbers. The result is a vicious cycle, with fewer staff, longer waits and growing public frustration. I know some incredible GPs, and New Zealand is really lucky to have them, but I would rather they were here. Despite a 2019 Conservative pledge to hire 6,000 more GPs, by the general election last year there were 500 fewer GPs than when that pledge was made. In fact, the UK has 16% fewer qualified GPs per capita than comparable high-income countries.

It does not have to be that way. Healthcare is not a luxury. It is a fundamental right and not a privilege. Everyone should be able to see a GP when they need to, and that is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for a legal right to see a GP within seven days, or within 24 hours if the situation is urgent. To make this a reality, we are calling for the recruitment of 8,000 more GPs. We would achieve that by supporting junior doctors

to specialise in general practice and by introducing new schemes to help experienced GPs to return to the workforce.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) said, we also believe that everyone over 70 and those with long-term conditions should have access to a named GP. Such continuity of care is not only vital for building trust and supporting staff morale; it also improves health outcomes and saves money in the long term. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who is the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, has said, continuity of care is key. Patients who have had the same GP for more than 15 years have a 25% lower chance of dying compared with patients who change GPs regularly. Continuity of care builds trust, improves outcomes and reduces hospital admissions. It is good for patients, good for staff and good for the system as a whole.

We must also address the broader picture. Community pharmacies are closing at an alarming rate when they should be playing a bigger role in delivering frontline care. Fairer and more sustainable funding is needed to keep these services open, to relieve pressure on GPs. I am a big fan of Pharmacy First and I know that the Minister is, too; I have heard him talk about his passion for it. But pharmacists in my constituency tell me that with the regular increase in targets, they are struggling to keep up.

Adam Dance: I spent an evening with one of my local pharmacists, and it was so shocking that people were coming 20 or 30 miles to his pharmacy, because it was the only one open near my village of South Petherton. He was struggling so much because he could not get the medication that people needed, despite the fact that they were travelling so far to try and get medication from him. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is just not good enough and that the Government need to support pharmacies a lot more?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I am sure the Minister will talk about the hub and spoke model that the Government are championing, but my hon. Friend is right about the difficulties in rural areas especially. Many constituents have talked to me about the distance they are having to travel to get basic medication that means they can function, go to work the next day or get their children to school.

This is why we have been calling for a fairer and more sustainable long-term funding model for community pharmacies. They play a vital role in relieving pressure on GPs, yet they are being squeezed out of existence. Since 2017, 1,200 pharmacies have shut their doors. Community Pharmacy England has warned of real-terms funding cuts of at least 25% since 2015, leaving the network on the brink of collapse.

This is not just a failing system; it is a broken one. This Labour Government have a responsibility to act. They were elected on a promise of change, but that change must begin with fixing our NHS. I am sure the Minister will celebrate the budget increase, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) said, this has been swallowed by the increased costs and national insurance contributions. That is why the Liberal Democrats tabled an amendment to exempt healthcare services from the NICs rise, which the Government chose not to accept.

General practice is the front door to our health system. If we do not invest properly in GP services, everything else suffers. We must not let that door remain closed to so many. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot rightly said, we do not have to accept broken systems—we can fix them, and now is the time to prove that we will. Will the Minister commit to the Liberal Democrat proposal of a legal right for patients to see a GP within seven days, or within 24 hours in urgent cases? Does he agree that everyone over 70 and those with long-term health conditions should have access to a named GP?

10.21 am

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Dame Siobhain, and to be here. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this debate on a topic that I am all too familiar with, having spent time as a GP. This place may not be so familiar with the inner workings of GP practices, so it is fantastic to have the chance to discuss it. I declare an interest: many of my immediate and wider family are GPs, and it is important to put that on the record.

This debate has allowed us to discuss a huge variety of things, including the Carr-Hill formula and the QOF. We did not touch on DES and LES—directed enhanced services and local enhanced services. Rural dispensing practices are a really important funding stream. We have talked about the partnership model, retention, joining up services, ICBs and their toolkits, the interaction with the planning department and rurality, which has a particular impact on services in my area.

I want to pick up on the comments made by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade). Fair play to her for going out and shadowing a GP to see what their life is all about. At the heart of what she said was the good care that goes on. If we were to believe the *Daily Mail*, every GP is on the golf course and only cares about the money. The money is important, but GPs care far more about the patients and the quality of care they give. That is what drives them and gets them out of bed each day. We in this house must not forget that when we discuss healthcare, because it is important. We will get far better healthcare than ever before in the last few decades, and we must not lose sight of that.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Newton Abbot for giving me my first chance as a shadow Health Minister to debate general practice and ask the Minister some questions. Without further ado, I will turn to those questions. First, what is the Government's current position on primary care and its models? In an interview in *The Times* in January 2023, the current Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said:

"I'm minded to phase out the whole system of GP partners altogether and look at salaried GPs working in modern practices alongside a range of other professionals."

He went on to speak at events held by the King's Fund and the Institute for Public Policy Research, where he acknowledged that he has

"observed a GP partnership model in decline where very soon we're going to have more salaried GPs than partner GPs"

and that the

"status quo is not an option".

[Dr Luke Evans]

Then 18 months ago, just six months before the election, the Secretary of State stated,

“What we were minded to do is to sort of phase it out over time. I’m still not sure whether or not the GP partnership can survive in the longer term. But I haven’t reached a sort of firm conclusion that says that it shouldn’t.”

In the light of that, and given the importance of the partnership model, could the Government clarify their position with regard to the partnership model and any other models that are being considered?

Vikki Slade: I thank the hon. Member for his comments about my visit to the GP, because it was an absolutely wonderful experience. If the proposal is to phase out the partnership model and move to a salaried model, how would that work, given the severe cuts that ICBs are facing? With 50% cuts to most of the ICB funding, somebody will have to pick up the costs of running these organisations, rather than the clinical side of it.

Dr Evans: The hon. Lady is spot on. I posed my question to the Government because we know that primary care is one of the most efficient parts of the NHS. Why? Because the people running those businesses—they are businesses, and we have to be open and honest about that—pay attention to where the money comes in and goes out. They take full pride in it, first, because they care, and secondly, because their salaries are paid from the profit that comes out of that. Again, “profit” is a dirty word that people do not like to use, but it is the reality of what we are dealing with when it comes to how we break down the funding.

The Government have proposed to get rid of NHS England, and it is still unclear not only how much that will cost, but how much it will save and where the administrative burden will fall. On top of that, we do not know what will replace the partnership model if we lose it, and this is the question to be asked. Given that it was only six months before the election that the Secretary of State stated his intent, I too am keen to find out the answer.

I have a second question to pose to the Government. There are concerning reports this month in the *Health Service Journal*, which has had sight of a leaked version of the Government’s 10-year plan to improve the NHS. It says that the plan will push back the Government’s ambition to increase the share of NHS spending on primary and community care to 2035, rather than 2029 as originally promised. Can the Minister confirm or deny those reports?

When it comes to funding, the Government raised taxes directly on GPs as part of the national insurance increase. Has the Department made any assessment of how much of the £886 million uplift that has been allocated to GP practices will be needed to meet the increase in employer’s national insurance contributions?

I turn to the figures for the ARR scheme. The Government announced in April that they thought they had reached 1,500 new GPs, but as the RCGP pointed out at the time, although having

“more GPs employed in the workforce is encouraging, when considering full time equivalent GPs—which gives the most accurate picture of the GP workforce and the care and services GPs are able to deliver for patients—the numbers published today are lower, at 851 GPs”.

The increase is encouraging, but when we dig into the data, it appears that we are simply seeing more locum doctors coming back into the scheme. I would be grateful to understand exactly how the numbers are made up, and where the inference of 1,500 GPs comes from.

More importantly, where is the scheme going in the future? Is it time-limited? Will it continue? Will it be expanded and, if so, what does that look like? Although it is an important part of addressing provision, we also need to understand exactly what is going on. Initial reviews of the data suggest that appointments have not kept up with the pace of the introduction of GPs, so I am interested to understand from the Minister why, despite the supposedly new GPs coming in, the number of appointments has not increased proportionately. I would be grateful for any comment on that.

Finally, I turn to recruitment. Training new GPs has understandably been seen as the priority when it comes to solving the long-term workforce problems in England. As *Pulse* magazine puts it:

“This is probably one of the areas of workforce planning that could be considered a success. Health Education England, which has been incorporated into NHS England, has been able to meet its target of over 4,000 new GP trainees a year.”

The NHS workforce report, launched under the previous Government in 2023, made commitments to increase that. It set goals to increase the number of GP specialist training places to 6,000 by 2031, ensure that all foundation-year doctors do a rotation in general practice, and require GP registrars to spend the full three years in general practice.

There has been progress, but along with progress come new problems. The British Medical Association has warned that up to 1,000 GP registrars could face difficulty when qualifying in summer 2025 without funding for GP practices to recruit newly qualified, unemployed or underemployed GPs. What active steps are the Government taking to avoid that, and what support will they be offering newly qualified GPs?

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): The ARR scheme in my practice at May Lane surgery in Dursley is employing newly qualified GPs who provide a lot of extra appointments for the surgery, so the scheme is working quite well for newly qualified GPs.

Dr Evans: I am pleased to hear that the scheme is working well, but the question is—as the hon. Member would know if he had been here for the start of the debate and all the way through it—what does it look like going forward?

In other places, are locums simply being stepped into the ARR scheme because there has been a shift in the way that GPs commission their work and PCNs are looking to deal with that? That is the question at the heart of it. We seem to be training more GPs than ever, yet at the same time, we have a disproportionate number of people at the top end who are not able to find work.

It is important to build up multidisciplinary teams that take account of the pharmacists, nurses and mental health workers around GPs, and I welcome the fact that the ARR scheme allows that. It has been widened to get more funding but, as the hon. Member will know, there is a discrepancy in how much doctors are funded for and there are limitations on how long they can work in

the scheme. If I were to return to practice, I would not qualify under the scheme. The Government need to pose these questions; although the scheme is welcome, does it solve the whole problem? I do not think so, and my final set of questions relates to that.

We have seen a trend in international medical graduates coming to work in the UK, with the number of international medical graduates overtaking domestically trained medics for the first time in 2023. Have the Government considered something similar to the Australian scheme? Australia classifies locations using the modified Monash model or the Australian statistical geography standard to rank areas from major cities to remote regions, and then prioritises overseas doctors into the areas of most need. That could help to deal with the disparities across different parts of the UK. Will the Government consider that model in attempting to address those disparities? Whether it is right for the UK is for the Government to decide.

Hospitals might save your life, but your GP has been quietly guarding it for decades. That fact is often lost in our debates, so it has been a privilege to remind the Government, the House and the public of that fact today. I look forward to the Government's response.

10.32 am

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this debate and raising this important issue. I pay tribute to every hon. Member who has taken part in the debate for their insightful contributions.

The health and wellbeing of constituents across the south-west remains a top priority for us all; I welcome the opportunity to address the concerns that have been raised today. The issue strikes at the very heart of the NHS and its ability to serve our communities effectively. General practitioners are the cornerstone of the NHS. They provide the first point of contact for millions of patients, enabling access to specialist services, managing long-term and chronic conditions, and delivering preventive care.

The south-west is a unique part of our country with a population that faces distinct challenges, from its rural geography and dispersed communities to an ageing demographic and areas of health inequality. The dedication of GPs and primary care teams, often working under difficult conditions, is a testament to the NHS's commitment to accessible healthcare. I thank those professionals for their invaluable service.

I was pleased to see the fantastic interest and engagement that we had from the south-west in our 10-year health plan consultation. The hon. Member for Newton Abbot and his colleagues from the area will be pleased to note that the south-west had a higher than average response rate compared with the rest of the country on our change.nhs.uk platform. We also saw that 126 community-led events were run in the south-west using our "workshop in a box" toolkit, which demonstrates just how important reforming the NHS is to people in the region.

The Government recognise that GP practices in rural and remote areas face specific pressures, including recruitment difficulties and population fluctuations due to tourism. We also acknowledge the demographic reality.

The south-west has a higher proportion of older residents, which increases the demand on primary care for managing complex, long-term conditions. These challenges require tailored and effective responses.

Since taking office, the Government have made primary care a central pillar of NHS reform. We have committed to strengthening GP services nationwide through a series of measures designed to increase funding, support workforce growth and improve patient access. These measures support progress towards a neighbourhood health service, with more care delivered locally to create healthier communities, spot problems earlier, and support people to stay healthier and maintain their independence for longer.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The Minister mentions the ageing demographic of the south-west. I do not know if it is actually a fact, but one of my favourite things that I have ever been told about the population of West Dorset is that if we were a country, we would have an older population than Japan—we would be the oldest country in the world. The only things older than our population are some of our GP buildings; about one in five predates the NHS itself. Can the Minister outline how the Government intend to help GP surgeries to upgrade their facilities?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for that fun fact. I will come on to it a bit later in my speech, but the £102 million primary care utilisation fund will make a major contribution to upgrading the creaking primary care estate. He is right to identify that as a major challenge. It is also a major drain on productivity. We must ensure that our GPs have the tools at their disposal to do the work they need to do.

Adam Dance: Will the Minister visit Ariel Healthcare in Chard in Somerset, where the building is really not fit for purpose, and meet the GPs to talk about their concerns?

Stephen Kinnock: I am impressed by the way the hon. Gentleman did that and I congratulate him on it. If he would care to write to me to set that out, I will have a look at it and get back to him.

I want to take this opportunity to briefly outline what we have done since July 2024, and what we intend to do, to ensure that GP funding and services in the south-west are fit for purpose and capable of meeting the needs of the local population. In February, we concluded the annual consultation between the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and the general practitioners committee of the British Medical Association. For the first time in four years, GPC England voted in favour of the GP contract package, which illustrates the progress we are making to rebuild our relationship with the profession.

The 2025-26 contract is already improving services for patients and making progress towards the Government's health mission. It supports the three key shifts the Government want to achieve: from analogue to digital; from sickness to prevention; and from hospital to community care. Patients across the country can expect online GP services to be available throughout the day, and better continuity of care for those who would benefit most. Patients can also expect a stronger focus on prevention, in particular to tackle the biggest killers, such as cardiovascular disease.

[Stephen Kinnock]

In 2025-26, we are investing an additional £889 million into the core GP contract to fix the front door of the NHS. Despite the difficult financial situation this nation faces, we are backing our health workers with above-inflation pay rises for the second year running. We are accepting the Doctors and Dentists Review Body's recommendation of a 4% uplift to the pay element of the GP contract on a consolidated basis.

Dr Luke Evans: The Minister talks about contracts, which is an appropriate point to question him again on his Government's position on the GP partnership model. It is not clear what that looks like from any of the documentation, so I would be grateful to understand that or, if the Secretary of State is considering new models, what they are and when we can see them.

Stephen Kinnock: We recognise that the partnership model has many strengths. It is a very important part of the system, and it helps to drive efficiency, innovation and a kind of go-getting approach to general practice. That is what we want to see—innovative approaches.

We are committed to substantive GP contract reform. We see the partnership model as a really important part of that, but we also recognise that fewer GPs are interested in going into partnership. The partnership model is not the only model delivering general practice; GP practices can and do choose to organise themselves in different ways. Many practices cite evidence of good outcomes on staff engagement and patient experience through the partnership model. I do not think it is right to say that there are any specific plans to change the partnership model, but we recognise that there are a number of other ways, and we will always keep the way in which the contract is delivered under review.

Vikki Slade: For some leasehold properties, there is a requirement that practices have partners. How is the Minister ensuring that such practices can be taken on, either by the ICB or the DHSC? Somebody has to take responsibility for those practices, and if we are moving to a model of having more salaried people, who will do that?

Stephen Kinnock: In debates about how we deliver health and care in our country, the question often comes up about the balance between the role of the DHSC at the centre, the role of ICBs and the role of those who are at the coalface delivering services. I do not think there is a single answer to that question. What is important is that we commit to devolution and to empowering those who are closest to their communities, because they are in the best position to make the decisions that work for their communities.

It is vital that we at the centre agree on and set desired outcomes for health, access and quality that the entire system is expected to meet. We have to set a framework, and it is then up to those at the coalface to decide how best to deliver it. It would not be right for me to say, on specific leasehold cases for example, that case A should go this way and case B should go that way; to try to dictate that from the centre would be a recipe for disaster. We do need to hold the system to account, however, and the system needs to hold us to account. That is the way to deliver true political and strategic leadership.

Jess Brown-Fuller: It is interesting that the Minister mentioned devolution, because the effect of the cuts to ICBs has meant that Sussex ICB is now having conversations with Surrey ICB about a merger. The cuts are therefore achieving the exact opposite of devolution, because such a merger would move power further away from communities. Does he have any thoughts on that?

Stephen Kinnock: Integrated care boards in the south-west have received almost £1.3 billion in their primary medical care allocation for '25-26, which is an increase of nearly 13% compared with '24-25, so I am not quite sure where the hon. Lady is getting her figures. For me, a 13% increase is not a cut.

That growth in local resources includes the south-west's share of the additional £889 million agreed for the GP contract, as well as the transfer of some additional roles reimbursement scheme funding that had previously been held centrally by NHS England. Those funding allocations will be further uplifted to fund in full the pay recommendations of the DDRB and the NHS Pay Review Body.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I appreciate that recruitment, including of GPs, is extraordinarily difficult in the south-west. In Minehead, there is one GP practice and just one doctor. He is outstanding, and everybody knows him—to that extent, he fits the named GP pledge—but he serves 11,000 people. Rural premium or not, would the Minister agree that that is simply unacceptable and unsustainable, irrespective of where in the country one might be?

Stephen Kinnock: That is an extraordinary statistic. There are clearly major imbalances in the way the system works and general practice is funded in our country. A little later I will come to the Carr-Hill formula; I am sure hon. Members will have seen announcements trailed in the media today about what my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary will say shortly in a speech in Blackpool. The issue raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) is directly pertinent to the work we are doing around the formula for funding GPs, to ensure that it is needs based, unlike the current, deeply anachronistic and dysfunctional funding system.

On funding, general practices are funded through a range of streams, the majority from core payments known as global sum payments. The rest is made up of incentive schemes, premises payments and enhanced and additional services. The Carr-Hill formula is applied as a weighting of 50% to 60% of GP funding allocated through the core contract, and is a workload-based formula designed to reimburse practices for their expected workloads.

The formula takes into consideration patient demographics, such as age and gender, and factors such as morbidity, mortality, patient turnover and geographical location. I am truly proud that today my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is in Blackpool to announce that we are reviewing the Carr-Hill formula, which is outdated and not fit for purpose. Currently, GP surgeries that serve working-class areas receive on average 10% less funding per patient than practices in more affluent areas, and that needs to change.

Politics is about choices. For 14 years, the Conservatives—propped up for five years by the Liberal Democrats, I am afraid to say—chose to favour the richest. Who can forget the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) boasting about how he had deliberately redirected funding from deprived urban areas to leafy suburbs? This Labour Government are reversing that ethos. Our decision to reform the Carr-Hill formula is a clear example of how we are putting our Labour values into practice.

We recognise the importance of ensuring funding for core services is distributed equitably between practices across the country. In our upcoming 10-year health plan, that is what we will do, through our review and reform of the Carr-Hill formula. Alongside that work, the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation—ACRA—will be asked to advise on how the setting of ICB allocations can better support the reduction of health inequalities, to ensure that resources are targeted where they are most needed.

On workforce and recruitment, we recognise the difficult situation whereby patients have been unable to get GP appointments and recently qualified doctors have been unable to find jobs. That is why, in August last year, we announced £82 million in ringfenced funding, allowing primary care networks to recruit newly qualified GPs through the additional roles reimbursement scheme. More than 1,700 GPs have now been recruited through that scheme.

As part of the 2025-26 GP contract package, we made the additional roles reimbursement scheme more flexible, to allow PCNs to accommodate local workforce needs better. That includes removing restrictions on the number or type of staff covered, including GPs and practice nurses. When I took up my ministerial responsibilities in July, I was astonished to find that it was not possible to recruit GPs through the ARRS. We have bulldozed that red tape, which has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of GPs on the frontline.

Dr Luke Evans: On that point, what would the Minister say to junior doctors, now coming to be registrars, who will be looking for a job? Should they look to the ARRS as the way forward when they qualify? What will he say to them if they do not get a job? Should that be the route they look to? Is it an expansion he is asking for? What are the alternatives for those graduating in August?

Stephen Kinnock: We have been really pleased with the take-up under the ARRS. It is a rapid and clear way of recruiting, particularly because it has the ringfence and the reimbursement system underpinning it. We absolutely encourage newly graduating GPs to take up opportunities through the ARRS; it is an important tool for bringing more GPs on to the frontline. The challenge is not so much the number of qualifying and graduating GPs in the pipeline, but getting them to the parts of the country that need them most. That variation in provision is the No. 1 priority. The review of the Carr-Hill formula will also have important synergy with the issue of recruitment and workforce.

Dr Luke Evans: It seems pertinent to ask this question now: the Australian scheme I mentioned is one way that another country has dealt with the issue. Would the Government consider placing overseas doctors in the areas of most need? Is that something under consideration?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Member raises an interesting point. We are thinking strategically about the whole way that recruitment and workforce function. Similarly, on another part of my portfolio, we have several thousand international dentists who are waiting to do the overseas registration exam. We need to get that sorted out, because we have issues with capacity and there are ways of addressing them. We are absolutely committed to prioritising the training and appointment of our home-grown talent, but we also need to look at other options and solutions. We are going into this with eyes open, and I thank the hon. Member for that suggestion; it is definitely something we are looking at.

In addition, the newly launched £102 million primary care utilisation and modernisation fund will help create much-needed additional clinical space in more than 1,000 GP practices across England. The investment responds directly to findings from Lord Darzi's independent review of the NHS, which highlighted how outdated, inefficient premises can hinder the delivery of high-quality patient care and negatively impact staff productivity and morale. This is the first dedicated national capital funding stream for primary care since 2020, and a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to strengthening primary and community care infrastructure.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Newton Abbot for securing this debate and thank all Members who have spoken for their passionate and insightful contributions. The Government remain fully committed to ensuring that GP funding in the south-west reflects the region's particular challenges and needs. Through investment in the workforce and infrastructure, we aim to deliver a sustainable, high-quality primary care service for all. We also remain committed to delivering a neighbourhood health service that will improve people's experience of health and social care and will increase their agency in managing their own care, health and wellbeing.

As we get our NHS back on its feet, and as we build an NHS fit for the future, we need more care closer to people's homes and in people's homes. For too long, NHS resources have been tilted towards hospitals and away from communities. The result is poorer services for patients who would benefit from care closer to home and in their communities. Moving care from hospitals into the community will be at the heart of the 10-year health plan, which will set out how we will continue to transform the NHS into a neighbourhood health service. The full vision will be set out in the plan, which we will publish very shortly.

We recognise the pressures on GPs and the impact on patients, and I assure hon. Members that addressing those challenges is a top priority for the Government. The NHS is evolving, but its founding principle remains: healthcare free at the point of use, accessible to everyone, everywhere.

10.54 am

Martin Wrigley: I am not quite sure what to say now that the Minister has actually said that my prime ask will be delivered. That is fantastic, and shows the emphasis of these debates.

I thank colleagues from across the House for their contributions. We all agree on the importance of GPs and the need to fix their funding. It is vital to recognise

[*Martin Wrigley*]

the many good things that GPs and GP practices have been doing in what have been difficult circumstances for a good number of years.

It has been delightful to hear that MPs have been interacting with their local GP practices to understand the problems with the funding formula. Delighted as I am to hear the Minister announce changes to the Carr-Hill formula, GP funding is still complex. I tried to show how complex it is by focusing on just on two of its elements, but we have heard from other hon. Members that the extra funds are even more complex. The fact that the 7% increase is eaten up by the 6% increase in wages, NICs and so on shows that it is not simple.

I thank the Minister for being here—

Stephen Kinnock: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Wrigley: I have never been interrupted by a Minister before—I would be delighted.

Stephen Kinnock: I do not even know whether an intervention is allowed here, Dame Siobhain—this is a revolutionary step—but the hon. Gentleman raised some concerns about the quality and outcomes framework, and I wanted to say that we have retired 32 out of the 76 quality and outcomes framework indicators, reflecting the fact that we agree with him: it was way too complex and there were too many indicators. By retiring those, we freed up £298 million, £100 million of which will go into the global sum, maximising the flexibility for practices to do what is right for their patients. The remaining £198 million will be repurposed to target cardiovascular disease prevention.

Martin Wrigley: I thank the Minister for the intervention. I am not quite sure what the protocol is; I do not think that that has ever happened. This is a most fantastic debate.

Capital investment in GP practices and buildings is welcome, but we have heard from across the Chamber that we need more. The problems with ICBs and the difficulties with trusts that are in NHS oversight framework segment 4 still impact GPs and how their funding works.

I will push my luck, because the Minister has been very generous with his time and very patient with us all: will he meet me and some practice managers to talk about the complexities of managing the practices with such a level of complication in funding, and to see whether the Government can identify further ways of making it easier to run these businesses, so that they can get on with delivering what they are there to deliver: healthcare for the greatest number of people with the maximum possible benefit? That would be helpful. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I respectfully say to Members that, while I do not have the power to stop interventions from people who turn up 45 minutes, an hour, or an hour and three quarters into a debate, speaking on a personal level—I am not the most formal of Chairs—I think it very impolite to make an intervention when you have not had the opportunity to hear from other Members. I do not have the power to enforce that, but if I could, I would.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered GP funding in the south-west.

English Wine Production

11 am

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered English wine production.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I am grateful for the opportunity to bring forward this debate at a timely moment: the middle of English Wine Week. The theme this year is creating new traditions, and I cannot think of a more fitting description for the English wine industry as it stands today. It is a sector that combines modern ambition with rural heritage, and world-class expertise with local entrepreneurial spirit. It is a sector that is growing, not only in economic potential but in the public imagination.

As one of my local winemakers puts it, English wines tend to have a steely, citrus backbone. I like to think that this is an apt description of our nation's character too: resilient, bright and quietly distinctive. English wine is increasingly a source of national pride, and we should be doing everything we can to support and protect it. The industry is growing fast, and the Government should be helping rather than hindering.

In 2023, UK vineyards produced over 21 million bottles of wine—a new record—and it is exciting that sales of English wine continue to buck wider market trends. Domestic wine sales were up 10% in 2023. Sales of UK sparkling wine have nearly trebled since 2018, from roughly 2 million bottles to over 6 million. Similarly, sales of still wine have more than doubled over the same period. We should all be toasting that success.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Northern Ireland does not produce any of its own wine; we do not have the necessary climate. We could use European Union grapes to make wine, due to Brexit regulations—but that is by the way. What can we do in Northern Ireland to ensure that English wine is something that we like to have? How can it be promoted, not just in England but in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? Why not buy British, as we should?

Katie Lam: The hon. Gentleman is a fantastic champion of our Unionist and one nation principles. The best thing that our friends, brothers and sisters in Northern Ireland can do is to purchase English wine and drink it. That is a win for all concerned.

British wines are now exported to 45 different countries. There are healthy markets in Norway, Japan, America, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Hong Kong and South Korea, to name but a few. We now have over 1,100 registered vineyards and more than 240 wineries.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): One of those many vineyards is the Oatley vineyard in my constituency, run by Ned Awty and his family. Mr Awty raised with me, on a recent, pleasant visit, that small brewers and cider makers benefit from a duty relief scheme to encourage production. Would my hon. Friend join me in asking the Minister to extend that scheme to small vineyards?

Katie Lam: I will discuss later in my speech what support I think would be appropriate, so my hon. Friend will hear my thoughts on that in due course.

I am incredibly proud that the Weald of Kent boasts some of the best vineyards and wineries in the country. Across the nation, 4,200 hectares of land are under vine—more than double the area just a decade ago. It is no coincidence that even French producers are quickly buying up land in southern England. They recognise the opportunity here, and so should we.

Our English vineyards are not centuries-old family estates, handed down through the generations, like on the continent. They are new businesses, built on entrepreneurial risk, with eyewatering start-up costs, and land that is among the most expensive in Europe. The vineyards springing up in Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire and beyond are often founded by families who have risked everything: buying land at a premium, planting vines in an uncertain climate—that we all experience—and investing in years of training, equipment and marketing before even a single bottle is sold. Many vineyards are warning that rising national insurance contributions, and the recent increase to minimum wage payments, have left them unable to reinvest in their businesses.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate during English Wine Week. I could not allow her to list the places where we produce wine without mentioning beautiful West Dorset, which has 11 small wine producers, many of whom have been in touch with me about what this Parliament can do to help small producers in England. Dorset Downs Vineyard suggested that draught relief and small producer relief could be raised from 8.5% to 14% because most English wine sits between the 11% to 14% marks. Currently, beer and cider produced locally get all the benefit, but English wine producers do not. Does she agree with that suggestion?

Katie Lam: That is a similar point to the one made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox). It is not uncommon for vineyards and wineries to produce both types of drinks, and so have to operate under two different duty systems, which is also additional bureaucracy. I think that change would make a substantial difference.

Our producers represent the future of winemaking. They certainly should not be hindered by rising costs. We need long-term policies that will support their continued growth. WineGB estimates that there are 16 million potential visitors to the UK wine tourism sector: a huge untapped market. In my constituency, the excellent Chapel Down welcomes over 60,000 visitors a year for winery tours. It continues to be a major contributor to our local economy, and that is just the beginning. Producers such as Gusbourne, Westwell, Biddenden, Balfour, Dingleton, Ham Street, Warehorne, Woodchurch, and Domaine Evremond all play a part. We are so fortunate in the Weald that I could not even attempt to name them all in the time I have in this debate. It is, of course, a tremendous chore to visit them all, but my commitment to public service remains unwavering.

Many vineyards now make up to 50% of their sales directly to consumers, in so-called “cellar door sales”. That is often the only way for small producers to avoid the razor-thin margins created by intermediaries, excise duties and distributor fees. The potential is enormous. Wine tourism helps to create skilled jobs in rural constituencies like mine. It supports regional identity

[Katie Lam]

and allows producers to build a direct relationship with their customers. A targeted duty relief on direct-to-consumer or tourist cellar door sales would help wine producers, in the way that beer and cider receive help from draught relief and small producer relief, as we have heard from hon. Members in this debate.

Will the Government consider implementing a wine tourism relief, to recognise this youthful industry's potential and give small producers the boost they need to truly thrive? More broadly, visits to UK vineyards and wineries were up more than half in just two years. That is extraordinary growth by any measure. What plans does the Minister have to support one of the few industries in the UK that is demonstrably expanding, creating rural jobs, driving tourism and building our export potential from the ground up?

If we are serious about backing British agriculture and business, this is exactly the kind of sector that deserves targeted support. Yet, as is too often the case in the UK today, the more businesses grow, the more they seem to be penalised by heavy-handed regulation. Take the extended producer responsibility—EPR—scheme, which affects businesses, including winemakers with a turnover of £1 million or more—a threshold that many of our leading vineyards are proudly surpassing. That success comes at a cost. EPR imposes disproportionately high fees on glass packaging, but glass is the only viable material for sparkling wine. On top of all that, winemakers now face hours of additional paperwork collecting data on the type and weight of materials used, simply to remain compliant with opaque packaging rules.

That is not the only example of over-regulation choking the industry. The previously flat wine duty has now been replaced by 30 different rates based on tiny, 0.1% increments of alcohol content. In the context of wine, that makes no practical sense. As has already been pointed out in the House by the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), ABV varies naturally by vintage and by vat. It is hugely difficult to predict and the system causes confusion, not clarity. Although I accept that the Minister did not create that system, will he take the opportunity to outline what steps the Government might take to ensure that our wine producers can spend more of their time tending their vines, rather than filling out forms?

While the previous Government may have implemented some regulations that caused challenges to wine producers, they recognised the need for active investment in the UK wine industry. I was pleased to see them establish the future winemakers' scheme, with £1.5 million set aside for training opportunities for the next generation of viticulturists. Will the Minister recommit to the scheme today, ensuring that the UK wine industry secures the future talent it needs to reach its full potential?

Though welcome, deregulation and training schemes alone are not enough. If we allow the definition of English wine to be blurred or co-opted, the industry risks dying on the vine. There is serious concern among winemakers that third-country producers could ship foreign-made still wine in bulk to the UK, carbonate or transform the product here, and market it in a way that implies it was locally made. That would be misleading to consumers, would undermine the integrity of the

English wine label, and would make a mockery of the investment our producers have made in their land, climate and local communities.

I want to press the Minister on a simple point: will he commit to ensuring, particularly as the Government restart their third round of post-Brexit wine industry reforms, that wines sold as British or English must be made exclusively from British-grown grapes? He knows as well as I do that the majority of UK wine is sparkling. I am sure he would agree that English wine deserves the same protected designation of origin—PDO status—that champagne and prosecco receive in their respective markets.

There are few products that bring together so many public goods: rural jobs, tourism, export potential, environmental stewardship and national pride. English wine is not a nostalgia project or a romantic curiosity; it is a viable, growing industry—one that sits at the intersection of agriculture, manufacturing, hospitality and culture. To support this fantastic product is to invest in our countryside and our brand as a country. We have the chance, as English Wine Week says, to “Create new traditions.” I ask the Minister to seize that opportunity: let us support wine tourism and, above all, ensure that the label “English wine” means what it says—wine made from English grapes on English soil.

11.12 am

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), a fellow Kent MP, for securing this absolutely critical debate on a sector that, as she has admitted, has fizz, body and character. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on GB wines, an area of significant passion to me. As mentioned, it is English Wine Week, an annual celebration of English wines, during which growers, merchandisers and wine consumers—including me, and probably many in this room—will shine a spotlight on some of the excellent English wines.

This sector is one of our most successful agricultural growth areas at the moment—not only because of the changing climate, but because of the quality and long-standing tradition of wine growing that we now see across parts of Kent and elsewhere in the country. I would suggest to other hon. Members that it is not just in the south of England that vineries are growing; we are seeing increasing numbers in Scotland, north-east and north-west England. So be very careful: I suspect we might see vineries in Northern Ireland very soon as well, especially as the way grapes are grown has changed. It is a universal success story, and I am very glad that hon. Members agree.

We know that vineyard registrations are up by 7.1%, as has been mentioned, and 21 million bottles of wine are now produced annually, with over 241 vineyards across the country and 4,300 hectares under vine. We are also seeing significant export success—net exports are up 8% per year. This is one of those sectors that, if nurtured, can grow to success. It is a cyclical industry; we know that 2023 saw a record harvest and a blossoming sector, but some years it is not as successful. It is inherently risky, and we have seen a lot of people starting up in vineries who need extra support when launching, because it can take up to five years before they see a return.

The sector has some unique challenges—not least the climate and the way the Government work. Both parties and both Governments need to do more to support this sector. I welcome the fact that, over the last 14 years, vineries and the wine industry have grown significantly. That is the result of a real focus in that space. However, we are up against significant headwinds and risks—not least that our main European competitors have state-based subsidy and sponsorship of their wine industries. In parts of Europe, up to €1 billion is set aside just to support the culture of wine consumption and production. That is not something we do here. We are also up against the headwinds of an increasing diversity of different alcoholic products. As the chair of the APPG, I echo some of the statements that have been made today.

I will ask the Minister about three things in the brief time that I have. What can we do to promote the export markets here? WineGB has specifically said that it is after very small amounts of money to ensure that we present a professional approach to our exports, so that when we visit trade fairs around the world, our presentation does not put us at a competitive disadvantage compared with other nations. This market is growing in Japan, the USA, Switzerland and South Korea. We know that our wines are very much in vogue and we can successfully market them for very little investment. What can the Government do to promote those exports and create the global Britain that we promised?

I absolutely agree on wine tourism relief. What more can we do to promote tourism in this sector? Vineyards are now diversifying their businesses into restaurants, hotels and other markets, so what can we do to support that?

Also, what can we do to provide support for energy and other production costs? The Government have this week announced energy provision support for some sectors. Wine production is an energy-intensive industry. Is there any consideration of offering start-up energy cost reductions to such businesses? This industry can be an extremely successful driver of agricultural growth at a time when rural economies are struggling, so what can we do to promote the industry, to ensure that it continues to grow and to be the success it is today, and also in 10 years' time to be double or triple the size?

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD) *rose*—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I think the hon. Member has finished speaking. The hon. Member for Winchester might want to intervene on the Minister at an appropriate time.

11.17 am

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) for securing this very important debate. As she said, this is English Wine Week, so it is a timely and fitting moment to celebrate the remarkable achievements and growing global reputation of the English wine industry. Wine events and regional showcases taking place across the country this week demonstrate the increasing breadth and variety of domestic wine production. It is an industry that not only carries historical and cultural significance, but is also a modern success story of innovation, investment and rural regeneration.

The Government absolutely recognise and celebrate the rapid growth of the English wine sector. It is one of the fastest growing agricultural industries in the UK, with production, exports and consumer demand all on the rise. For example, exports of English wine doubled from 4% of production in 2021 to 8%, as was celebrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), whose contribution as chair of the all-party parliamentary group I welcome. It is imported by 45 different countries across the world, and that growth is a testament to the hard work, vision and entrepreneurial spirit of those working across the sector.

The area represented by the hon. Member for Weald of Kent is home to some of the most distinguished and pioneering vineyards in the country. Chapel Down, Balfour and Squerries Winery are shining examples of excellence in English wine production. They not only produce award-winning wines, but contribute significantly to local employment, tourism and rural development. Their success reflects the broader momentum of the English wine industry and the exciting opportunities that lie ahead.

English wines have built a well-earned reputation for quality and high standards, and the Government are committed to working with the industry to champion and protect that reputation both at home and abroad. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford asked how we can help to boost those exports. We have an excellent group of agricultural attachés who work very hard across the world to boost our exports and products. I am conscious that they are working very hard to make sure this brilliant British product is exported across the world.

The Government are steadfast in their commitment to support rural economies. We are determined to ensure that the UK has a thriving and diverse economy that promotes local jobs, boosts growth and supports communities across the country. The English wine sector is a really good example of that vision in action.

Dr Chambers: I am sure that all hon. Members would agree that Hampshire sparkling wine is the very best in the country, and the awards prove it. On supporting the wine industry in rural economies, Sparsholt college in Winchester—an agricultural college—has recently started vineyard curating courses as part of its horticulture courses so that the local wine industry has a trained workforce. Can the Minister look at rolling that out to the rest of the country, in areas that are appropriate?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: it is really important that we get the skills in place for the future. I recently had the pleasure of visiting Domaine Evremond and the Simpsons' Wine Estate, and I was knocked out by them, frankly. They are not just vineyards, but symbols of confidence in the UK's wine industry. They export half their produce to international markets, with Norway being the top destination. The scale of investment and the ambition are inspiring and yet, exactly as hon. Members have said, we are probably only scratching the surface of what is possible. The opportunity for growth in relation to both domestic and international investment is enormous and absolutely aligns with the Government's broader mission of boosting economic growth and global trade.

[Daniel Zeichner]

We are committed to working together with the sector to support the ambitions for growth and exports. We are also focused on ensuring that the growth translates into high-quality, sustainable jobs in rural communities, exactly as the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) suggested. I am talking about jobs that support families, strengthen local economies and preserve our countryside.

We are working closely with stakeholders to improve the English protected designation of origin and protected geographical indication schemes. One exciting possibility under consideration is the creation of a separate sub-category to allow alternative production methods under the PDO scheme, which would further broaden the appeal of our wines and open up new market opportunities. My officials are engaging with local producers, including those in the constituency represented by the hon. Member for Weald of Kent, to support an application for formal recognition of distinctive regional areas such as the Kent Weald. This initiative aims to highlight the region's unique geological and agricultural characteristics, which contribute to the exceptional quality of its produce. By talking with stakeholders on the ground, the Government are ensuring that the application reflects the authentic identity and heritage of Kent's landscapes. Such recognition not only promotes regional pride, but enhances market opportunities for local producers, reinforcing the area's reputation both nationally and internationally.

A number of questions were asked, and I will try to address them. The hon. Member asked about the possibility of a wine tourism relief. We are very interested in linking the production to the tourism offer, and I understand that WineGB is about to launch a campaign for a wine tourism relief. I cannot make any commitments today, because it is a Treasury issue, but certainly, it is something that we are interested in looking at. On my visits, I was very struck by the ingenuity and entrepreneurial zeal of the winemakers in linking it to a really sophisticated tourism offer—I think that when I visited, they were hoping they would not get too much rain over that weekend; it now seems extraordinary we should even be thinking about rain. But this shows how it is possible to transform not just the wine production area itself, but the local economy: the local pubs, hotels and so on. It is really exciting.

The hon. Lady also asked about packaging and the extended producer responsibility, which has been a long-running issue. I can tell her that the latest set of fees will be announced on Friday, so that should bring some certainty, I hope. She also asked about transformation. That is a complicated issue, which we will look at when we come to the third phase of wine reforms. However, I can assure her that any wine that is imported into the UK but not transformed—if it is shipped in bulk and only bottled in the UK, but not transformed—cannot be marketed as being made in England, or similar. We are very clear about that.

Sir Ashley Fox: Small cider producers in Somerset benefit from a duty relief scheme. I realise that the Minister is about to conclude his remarks, but he does not appear to have touched on the subject of duty relief for small vineyards. Will he at least give a commitment that he will talk to the Treasury about that, because it seems illogical that small brewers and small cider producers benefit from duty relief but small vineyards do not?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to stray into Treasury matters. What I will observe is that the 8.5% limit is part of the health approach, and I think we will stick to that.

To conclude, the UK wine sector is a source of confidence, growth and success. I am committed to working with it—and have very much enjoyed working with it so far—every step of the way to drive growth, boost exports and ensure that rural communities across the UK share the benefits of its success. When we see the climate being transformed before our eyes, that produces a lot of challenges for the food sector in general, but this is an opportunity that, it seems to me, we should really seize.

I again thank the hon. Member for Weald of Kent for securing this debate. In English Wine Week, it is especially important that we recognise the passion, progress and future of this vital industry. We are committed to supporting the English wine industry by listening to its concerns and acting upon them, and by working collaboratively towards common goals.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Armed Forces Recruitment: North-east England

[DR ROSENA ALLIN-KHAN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered armed forces recruitment in the North East.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. It is an honour to lead this debate in Armed Forces Week, as we take time to mark the huge contribution that our service personnel make to the security of the UK and our allies. As we celebrate their public service, in this debate we will discuss how to recruit the next generation of warfighters that our country needs.

There has never been a more important time for this discussion. The recent strategic defence review called for

“a landmark shift in our deterrence and defence...moving to warfighting readiness to deter threats and strengthen security”.

A step change in how we recruit must be a fundamental part of that. As a region with a proud history of supporting our armed forces, the north-east can make a significant contribution in the future.

I will make three points today. First, I will talk about transforming armed forces recruitment to meet the rapidly evolving threats that we face. Secondly, I will explain how we can attract the high-tech warfighting skills that we need for the future. Finally, I will discuss how we can modernise recruitment to harness our armed forces as an engine of social mobility.

Let me start with transforming armed forces recruitment to meet the rapidly emerging threats. From the many visits that I have made to RAF bases at home and abroad as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and having met service personnel in my constituency, it is clear that our armed forces' greatest asset is their people. They demonstrate extraordinary commitment, resilience and professionalism day in, day out, and I am sure we can all agree that our men and women in uniform represent the very best of British public service. But as the Defence Secretary said:

“The world has changed. The threats we now face are more serious and less predictable than at any time since the Cold War”. That means we need to look again at how we make sure we have the right people in the right numbers, and with the right skills, across our armed forces.

How do we do that? First, we need a step change in the number of people joining the regular forces and the reserves to give us the mass that we need to meet evolving threats. In doing so, we need to tackle the recruitment crisis that Ministers inherited from the last Government. It is incredibly disappointing that in the last four years, the number of people joining the regular forces fell by 40% in the north-east region. Across the country, it fell by just under a third. Over the last year, we have seen a welcome 19% increase in recruits, but as Ministers have made clear, there is much more to do.

To improve the scale of recruitment, we must transform its speed. It is vital that military recruitment, like all other aspects of UK defence, quickly starts operating at a wartime pace. For too long, new entrants have faced

bureaucratic barriers, delays to medical screening and outdated restrictions on pre-existing conditions. This has meant that the length of time between filling in an application form and donning a uniform has often been too long.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on this crucial issue. Does he agree that the system used to apply to join the armed forces is outdated and often cumbersome? I am very happy to say that a constituent of mine has successfully been able to submit an application, but this was after finding that she did not get a notification to say that she had missed some bits of her original application, so she had been waiting indefinitely. She is a keen young person from Darlington who really wants to serve the country, and we absolutely need to take advantage of having people like that.

Alan Strickland: I thank my hon. Friend for her helpful intervention, and I entirely agree. I, too, have had casework in my constituency involving people who are keen to join the forces, but whose applications have been lost or delayed. In other cases, medical checks have never been booked. I hope that the Minister will set out some of the practical steps that will be taken to speed up the process.

The problems that we are discussing have hampered recruitment efforts and led to the loss of highly skilled applicants, and we must tackle that. The top priority must be to deliver faster, more flexible and more dynamic recruitment that delivers at pace the new generations of talented servicemen and women that we need.

I turn to attracting the high-tech warfighting skills that we require. As we know, the nature of warfare has changed dramatically in the last few years, and in the appalling conflict in Ukraine, we see it evolving rapidly every single day. In response to that, the strategic defence review makes it clear that our warfighters need a broader range of skills across a wider range of professional and technical specialisms. That is because we need to defend and deter across the five domains of modern warfare—air, land, sea, cyber and space—all of which are developing at pace. I see that clearly in my constituency and across the north-east, where, alongside the manufacture of conventional defence supplies, we have a growing cluster of world-leading space and satellite businesses, many of which are involved in defence.

This rapid innovation means that our military personnel not only need to be skilled in deploying the latest technologies, but must be able to use the full range of defence capabilities in a seamless and integrated way to project maximum force. How do we make sure that people with this evolving and sophisticated range of skills can be successfully recruited into the armed forces?

First, we need to find ways of making roles in the regular forces attractive to those who might not have traditionally seen defence as a career option for them. That means convincing cyber experts, satellite engineers, drone operators and those from a range of high-tech industries and jobs in science, technology, engineering and maths that a career in uniform could be a valuable use of their talents.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on his fantastic speech. To take a slightly

[Mary Glindon]

different angle, does he agree that our many cadet units across the region, which are often based in very deprived areas, provide wonderful opportunities for young people to gain many life skills and get high-skilled qualifications, leading to good jobs, and that they promote opportunities for young people to consider a career in the forces? Does he look forward to hearing about the Government's plans to boost cadet forces by 30% over the next five years?

Alan Strickland: My hon. Friend is right to set out the vital role that our cadet forces play, not only in encouraging young people to think seriously about the armed forces, but in developing their skills, teamwork, leadership and a range of really valuable things that we want young people in the north-east to be able to access.

In addition to the cadets, we need to be innovative in rethinking how we recruit to our reserve forces. There will be many in the north-east and across our communities who have specialist skills that are of huge value to the armed forces, but who may not be able to serve full time. By establishing the digital warfighter group recommended in the SDR and promoting a range of other opportunities, we could provide flexible and fulfilling part-time roles for those with the skills that we really need. Also, let us look at the opportunities to retrain and reskill our existing personnel, so that our modern warfighters evolve as quickly as modern warfare.

Finally, I will talk about how we can better harness our armed forces as an engine of social mobility.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, for securing this debate in Armed Forces Week and for the fantastic speech that he is making. Proportionally, the north-east sends more of our young people into the armed forces than any other region in the country. I am proud of that contribution, yet relative to other regions, we have fewer armed forces personnel stationed in the region, and the Ministry of Defence spends less with businesses and industry in the region—in fact, I think it spends the least there. Does he think that the Ministry and the armed forces could be more visible and do more to champion the contribution of the armed forces to our region?

Alan Strickland: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, for that intervention. She is right that as well as making sure that we recruit from the north-east and that there are opportunities there, through the work that is happening on the defence industrial strategy, there must be an opening up of procurement opportunities not just across our region, but particularly for high-tech small and medium-sized enterprises. We know that, for too long, they have been excluded from defence contracts in our country.

Just as our renewed defence industries can be an engine for growth across our country, our efforts to transform recruitment can be a powerful engine for social mobility, spreading opportunity more widely across our nation. When meeting RAF personnel as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have been struck by the extent to which careers in our military can genuinely transform lives. On one of my first visits to a base, I met a young recruit from Tyneside, who said that

being in the RAF had given him opportunities he could never have dreamed of. He was a working-class lad and he said that many from his family had struggled to find and secure jobs. He proudly told me that the RAF had trained him, trusted him and invested in him. The Air Force gave him the chance to train as a world-class engineer, broadened his horizons and allowed him to work all over the globe—all by his early 20s. I have had inspiring conversations like that at base after base. It has been brilliant to hear at first hand just what a difference military careers can make.

In the north-east—a region where, for too long, opportunities have not been spread as widely as talent—the routes our military provides into world-class skills development are all the more powerful and all the more needed. I would be grateful if the Minister can set out how we can show more young people in the north-east that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) mentioned, supporting our armed forces—whether that is through the cadets, reserves or regulars—could not only make a huge difference to our collective defence, but have a transformational impact on their lives.

Lola McEvoy: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous with his time. He is making an excellent speech in Armed Forces Week. Does he agree that the important incentives for joining the forces include not just pride in the country but a secure career afterwards? Does he also agree that the work the Government are doing to ensure people have decent careers in sectors that really need those with resilience, excellent teamwork, good discipline and grit is a great way to ensure that people think about joining the armed forces, as well as about what they do afterwards?

Alan Strickland: My hon. Friend is right that the range of skills that our servicemen and women develop, particularly as we move into a rapidly evolving technical warfighting age, set people in good stead for their future careers. On my RAF visits, station commanders often complain that because they have trained people so well, their personnel are snapped up by the private sector.

One of the things the review mentions is that this does not have to be a binary choice. As my hon. Friend said, there could be better opportunities and more sophisticated ways of encouraging people to get trained in the military and contribute. If they move into the private sector for a while and come back into the military full time or go to the reserves, or take part in defence manufacturing, they stay within the defence family, but move around. We actively support that because it means keeping those skills in the wider sector.

I would be grateful if the Minister can set out what more we can do to ensure that schools, colleges and universities do not shy away from talking about military careers, but actively encourage and embrace them. What message will he send to people in the north-east, of all backgrounds and ages, about why they should seriously consider lending their time to UK defence?

As I draw my remarks to a conclusion, let us in this Chamber send a very clear message. If you are a young person looking for an exciting and challenging career, get involved in your local cadets. If you have the specialist skills that Britain needs for defence in a highly technological age, why not share them through the reserves? Be one of our new cyber warfighters. If you are an employer with

staff who want to lend their talents to our armed forces, back them, support them and encourage them. And if you are considering how you might have a fulfilling career that develops the skills that my hon. Friend mentioned, why not consider becoming a regular and joining the forces?

Of course, the fundamental reason that this is so incredibly important—the reason why we must think so hard about these opportunities and challenges—is that our final message from this Chamber should be this: if you are a hostile nation, if you are an adversary of the UK and our NATO allies, we will in the next few years be taking major steps to recruit a new generation of world-leading warfighters who will provide world-class defence and deterrence.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

2.43 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland), not only on securing the debate but on his doughty championing of the armed forces in our region and around the UK.

Armed forces recruitment in the north-east is of regional and national importance, and matters very deeply to my constituents in Stockton, Billingham and Norton. Our armed forces community is a great source of pride, as hon. Members will have seen if they were with me on Stockton High Street on Saturday, when we had a flag-raising ceremony for Armed Forces Week. There were representatives of our local regiment, the Royal Yorkshire Regiment; the Royal Military Police, which has a base in Norton in my constituency; and our cadets—the sea cadets and RAF cadets based in my constituency, and Royal Marine cadets too.

Those brave members of the regulars and reserves deserve more than my words and the words of hon. Members in this Chamber; they deserve real action. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the reality is starkly different from some of those words. The British Army is now at its smallest size in 200 years. With due respect to the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who I know is personally a strong supporter of the armed forces, the last decade did not cover his party or the previous Government in glory on this issue.

The armed forces have been hollowed out. They have been underfunded, overstretched and undervalued. As we have heard, over the last decade the number of recruits in the north-east has fallen by a third. This in an area that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah) said, is proud of its commitment to the armed forces, and where people know that joining the armed forces provides a route of opportunity that is sadly lacking elsewhere in our economy.

Lola McEvoy: What does my hon. Friend think are the causes of the drop in recruitment in our area? I frequently speak to veterans and the aftercare for people

coming out of the forces has been really poor. Does he agree that the Labour Government have an opportunity to show not only that we are proud of people when they are serving, but that when they leave, they need to be looked after properly?

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend is right that aftercare is very important. On why recruitment levels have fallen, I would expand on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor made about the recruitment process and criteria, such as the medical requirements.

When Admiral Sir Tony Radakin spoke to the Public Accounts Committee in April, he clearly said that there is no shortage of people wanting to serve—as we know in the north-east—but too few of those applications are turned into recruits. The rigidity of medical standards is certainly an issue: 76,000 applications were rejected on medical grounds in the last five years, and the MOD's website makes it clear that even a minor or historical health issue that does not affect daily life could disqualify someone.

Sir Tony is far more qualified than I am to speak about this, but he made a very compelling point that we are assessing people for 22 years of service when most will serve only 10. In fact, if we could take a more flexible approach and think about a five-year service interval, that would open the door to thousands more capable recruits willing to serve.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for his kind personal remarks. He is absolutely right, and I will be saying more about this point in my speech, but would he acknowledge that whatever colour of party is in government, all armed forces across the western world are now struggling to recruit and, particularly, to retain personnel? The problem is not unique to the United Kingdom, or indeed north-east England.

Chris McDonald: The right hon. Member has a point. Many countries struggle with recruitment, and perhaps the cuts to the armed forces and the delivery of the so-called peace dividend have been an issue in some countries. In the north-east in particular, however, which is the subject of this debate, there is no shortage of committed people desperately wishing to serve. Ultimately, it is the systems in place that are preventing them from doing that.

We are clearly in an increasingly hostile world. We have war in Europe, an increasing threat from China, and, of course, what is happening in the middle east. People are seeing that on their TV screens each evening and they are wanting to serve. We should make it easier for them to do that. If the right hon. Member wants a more direct answer, I think that the outsourcing of recruitment, which was fundamentally a cost-cutting measure as part of austerity, has weakened not just our public services, but our national security.

When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence took office, he inherited a system that had missed its recruitment targets every single year for over a decade—we had more people leaving the forces than joining. That is why I welcome his commitment to modernisation. We need to cut red tape, to scrap these outdated entry requirements, and to make it fundamentally easier for people to serve.

[Chris McDonald]

The strategic defence review recognises the scale of the workforce crisis with plans to invest in infrastructure and people. That includes the award of a 4.5% above inflation pay rise for personnel, which is the beginning of proper recognition of the professionalism and sacrifices of our armed forces, and the commitment of £1.5 billion for armed forces housing. I am sure that many hon. Members have been appalled by the current housing conditions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) mentioned, if we want to retain talent, we need to think more long term about how people are treated when they leave, and how their families are treated while they serve.

Every day, our armed forces keep Britain safe at home and abroad. They deserve more than gratitude; they deserve a system that works for them. Service personnel in Stockton, Billingham, and Norton know that they are fully supported by our local community, and I am sure they also know that they are now fully supported by this Labour Government.

2.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) for setting the scene. I was here for his first debate in Westminster Hall; I am now here for his second, and I am sure I will be here for many more to come.

It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. Obviously, the title of the debate is armed forces recruitment in the north-east, but I want to speak about Armed Forces Day, as other hon. Members have, which we had last Saturday in Newtownards. I will also speak about the tradition of service in uniform in my family, including among my uncles, who fought in the second world war, and my cousins. When I was an eight-year-old boy—which, by the way, was not yesterday; I am long past that—I wanted to be a Royal Marine commando.

I never made it to a Royal Marine commando, though not because I did not try—go for the highest!—but the Minister for Veterans, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), did get that job. I always liked the look of him; he achieved that goal and we all have great fondness for him. I think of him climbing Mount Everest—wow, if you are not impressed by that, you should be.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): As we all know, the tagline for the Royal Marine commandos was “99.9% need not apply”. When it comes to parliamentary spoken contributions, the hon. Member is in top 0.1%, so he has achieved that goal.

Jim Shannon: That comment is on the record.

I always wanted to be in the Army and I joined the Ulster Defence Regiment as an 18-year-old. There were different rules back in the '70s—everyone will now be able to judge my age—and I served for three years as a part-time soldier in that regiment. It was clear that that was an anti-terrorism role; those were incredibly difficult times for all of us in Northern Ireland.

I later left the Ulster Defence Regiment and joined the Royal Artillery as a Territorial Army soldier, where I served for 11.5 years. Altogether, I served for 14.5 years,

and they were some of the most exciting times of my life. I used to make a silly joke: people would ask me what I was in, and I would say, “The SAS”. Of course, their ears would perk up and they would say, “The SAS?” I would reply, “Yes, Saturdays and Sundays.” Those were the days when we did our training and our competitions, and made ourselves try to be soldiers in whatever role we were playing.

Last Saturday, as hon. Members have already said, we hosted Armed Forces Day for Northern Ireland in Newtownards in my constituency of Strangford. What a day that was: the sun was shining and the children were laughing, but most importantly the armed forces were honoured, with an estimated 60,000 people coming to Ards to enjoy the host of food stalls and armed forces stalls, as well as all the different charities and regiments that were able to be there. There was also the chance to see—as we all wanted to when we were small, and not because we are from Northern Ireland—the guns, the helicopters and the other things up close, as well as the dancing and the fun on the fields. Those things were all part of last Saturday.

The Falcons started off the aerial events, and I could hear the gasps and the comments from the watching public. Those guys were coming out of the sky, and people were pointing at them, but my eyesight is not what it was and I am afraid I could not even see them until they were almost there. We saw what they did, and how precise they were in landing exactly where they needed to on the airfield—if it were me, I would probably be in Strangford lough somewhere. We learned about the regiment and wondered at their skill. The drumhead ceremony was respectful, and the sounds of the crowd singing the national anthem will stay with me for a long time.

Of course, the highlight of the day for many were the incomparable Red Arrows, whose skill and showmanship reminded us all of the strength of the armed forces in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—undoubtedly the best in the world. The beating of the retreat was the perfect end to the day, and I thank the Royal Irish Regiment bands for their world-class performances.

I am sure that the event has given many young people the desire and opportunity to see how they can join the best in the world, as hon. Members have referred to, in particular the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor. We need to encourage more local authorities to highlight those opportunities in their area, including in the north-east and across the whole United Kingdom.

Northern Ireland has historically given a higher proportion of service than any other country in the UK, and that remains the case. In the latest recruitment year, Northern Ireland has again contributed a large number of individuals to the UK armed forces. That figure represents recruitment to the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the Royal Airforce and the British Army. Overall, UK armed forces saw a 19% increase in recruitment in the 12 months to 31 March 2025, with the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines experiencing the largest percentage increase. That is great news, but it is obvious that more needs to be done, which is why we are having this debate.

I apologise for not welcoming the Minister to his place. He is a good friend of the armed forces—I do not say that to give him a big head; I mean it. Whenever he faces issues that refer to Northern Ireland, he asks all

the Northern Ireland MPs for their input. That shows his interest, and that he wants to hear what our constituents are telling us and feed that into the process. I very much look forward to his response; I do not think anybody in the Chamber will be disappointed by it.

There are things we should do. First, we could do more with the cadets. I understand there are issues for the cadets, and I am anxious about those; the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) referred to the cadets in her constituency. I visited Ballykinler three months ago and met the cadets from County Down who had their weekend camp there, and I was greatly impressed.

I understand that the role of the cadets is not to make people want to join the forces—and I understand the reason for that; they are at a young age—but I am keen to get the Minister's thoughts on how we can do better. When I talk to the officers and those who train the cadets, I say, "You've got a potential recruitment pool here. Can we do more?" I know that some of those cadets will go on to join the Army, particularly the Royal Irish Regiment or the RAF, but we could do more. I leave that question for the Minister.

Secondly, on Saturday, I also spoke to some people who hold ranks in my old regiment, the Royal Artillery, including the commanding officer. I asked him how recruitment was going with the TA, and he told me, "Jim, it's not as good as it used to be." I said, "Is it not? I thought we were recruiting well in Northern Ireland." He said, "Yes, we're recruiting above the quota in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, but here are some ideas." I said, "Tell me what your ideas are." He said, "We need to promote more of the skills that can be learned in the forces." I understand that the Government, and the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy and the Army, enable people to do skills courses that give them better opportunities for recruitment.

Thirdly, the commanding officer also said, "Employers need to be more flexible." I said, "What do you mean by that?" He said, "Maybe with getting time off, for instance, at the weekend." Is there a job to be done with employers to ensure that we do something better? Those are three positive ideas for the Minister—that is always how I do things—and if we can do them, I think we will encourage people.

There is no doubt that the 60,000 people who were at the Armed Forces Day in Newtownards last Saturday felt pride in the country, pride in the flag and pride in the uniform. Pride in the flag and uniform transcends both sides of the community, some of whom fought tooth and nail over 30 years of a terrorist campaign. Both sides of the community serve in uniform. For instance, the cadets in Northern Ireland come from both sides of the community, and percentage-wise it is equal. That tells me that the forces of today have appeal right across both the spectrum of political opinion, if that is what it is, and across the communities of Northern Ireland. There are good things happening, but there is much to do.

Lola McEvoy: I thank the hon. Member for his interesting outline of the differences in what is going on in Northern Ireland. On his point about good things happening, does he agree that this Government have taken direct action in their first year, with the Armed Forces Commissioner, to tackle some of the institutional

problems that have put people off joining the forces? Add to that the biggest pay rise in a generation, and those good things should hopefully see a boost in our numbers.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right to outline that. Clearly, the Minister should be in no doubt that I commend him and this Labour Government on their commitment to the armed forces. I am impressed by what has happened, and I am also impressed by the 5% commitment to GDP by 2035. How could anybody not be impressed by that? Today, on the Floor of the House, there was a clear commitment to new nuclear-certified aircraft and I welcome that. That is the right thing. The policies that have been carried out by Ministers, the Labour Government, and the Defence Secretary are to be welcomed and I wholeheartedly support them.

Moving on to the increase in spending to 5% of GDP, although we need increases in cyber tech, know-how and weaponry, we also need boots on the ground. We cannot fight all wars with drones; the cyber age seems to be taking over. The message needs to go out that all skillsets are needed and wanted in the Army. I wrote the next sentence before the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) intervened, by the way: this Government are committed to strengthening the armed forces across this United Kingdom.

I hope the Minister will agree that the greatest fighting men hail from Ulster, with great respect to everyone else in the rest of the United Kingdom. One of my favourite quotes on the world war is from Wilfred Spender; I know the Minister will remember it, and perhaps others will, as well. It was spoken after the battle of the Somme:

"I am not an Ulsterman, but yesterday, the 1st July, as I followed their amazing attack, I felt that I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world. My pen cannot describe adequately the hundreds of heroic acts that I witnessed... The Ulster Volunteer Force, from which the Division was made, has won a name which equals any in history. Their devotion deserves the gratitude of the British Empire."

What I love about the British Army is that it is a British Army of us all in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is the Scots, the Welsh, the Northern Irish and all the English, all together as one. That is how it should be. This is the courage that flows through our veins. It is this courage and expertise that makes us—British soldiers, the Air Force and the Royal Navy—simply the best in the world.

We need to get the message out to people throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that we are better together—and we fight better together. What people might associate with Ulstermen is that whenever they are not fighting somebody else, they are fighting themselves. I am not quite sure if that is true, but I know this: boy, do we fight better together.

3.4 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan.

It is a privilege to participate in this debate in Armed Forces Week, given Sunderland's proud tradition of military service and as a member of a serving armed forces family. My good friend Dr Dan Jackson, in his excellent book "The Northumbrians" on the history of the north-east, outlines in some depth the martial tradition

[*Lewis Atkinson*]

of our region. His central thesis is that for a significant part of our history we were a border region and that over the centuries the north-east, through a range of different conflicts and wars, has contributed significantly to our nation's defence.

Men from Sunderland were traditionally recruited to the Durham Light Infantry, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) will speak about. Of course, Bernard Montgomery, having served alongside the DLI throughout the second world war, said:

"There may be some regiments as good, but I know of none better."

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend is giving an excellent overview of regiments in the north-east. He mentions "The Northumbrians", so will he join me in welcoming to the Public Gallery Ammar Mirza CBE, an honorary colonel of the 101st (Northumbrian) Regiment Royal Artillery? Does he agree with me that he is doing an excellent job by attending this debate, demonstrating the commitment in the north-east to our regiments not just from politicians, but from our honorary colonel?

Lewis Atkinson: I will absolutely do that. I commend the gentleman in the Public Gallery and all those who serve. The tradition of connection between place and service is so important and an asset that we must continue to use as we consider recruitment in the future.

One in 20 of my constituents are veterans, probably one of the highest percentages in the UK. Sunderland as a whole—not just my constituency, but the local authority area—has 11,000 veterans. That is partly due to that proud military tradition, but also because, particularly in the '80s during the period of deindustrialisation when the pits and the shipyards closed, young people lacked work opportunities and, naturally, they joined the forces. There are veterans alive today in my constituency who made incredibly significant contributions in the Falklands, Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflicts. As other Members have mentioned, the forces offered apprentice-style careers that gave people great life chances, apprenticeships and opportunities to travel around the world. They opened up opportunities and horizons for working-class men and women in the north-east.

Our cadet units play a key part in that tradition. I will not repeat the points that my hon. Friends have made, but I want to pay tribute to the units in my constituency. For example, the excellent Southmoor academy, a local community school, has a combined cadet unit embedded in it, enriching the curriculum for those who participate and those who do not. It provides a pathway to options for further recruitment. There are also Territorial units and facilities in my constituency, in particular the Territorial Army centre in Seaburn, which is a base for the Rifles and a medical regiment.

I will, however, refer mainly to issues regarding our regular forces. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on securing the debate and opening it, and, as he said, there has been a recruitment crisis in the wider country and particularly in the north-east of England. The most recent statistic available for Sunderland Central is that around 10 people per year have joined each of the services. If we contrast that with the 11,000 veterans across Sunderland as a whole, we can see the drop-off.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for the speech he is giving. I am very proud that the Royal Naval Reserve is based in part on the banks of the Tyne, on Gateshead quays. Does he agree that visible representations of armed forces bases in our communities is incredibly important in encouraging people to know that such careers are available to them?

Lewis Atkinson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are occasionally differences between the Tyne and the Wear, but this is absolutely not one of them. I think of the Royal Naval Association on Roker Avenue in my constituency, another representation of the community and the service of generations of seafarers and those who have served in the Navy, and I know that in his constituency HMS Calliope fulfils that role.

As the Secretary of State reflected recently, the fact that three in four recent applicants for the forces gave up before they reached even the medical element or were rejected for any other reason is just not good enough. I am sure that the Minister will say more about the mobilisation of the new recruitment service, which I welcome. I understand that it will operate on a tri-service basis, which will be increasingly important as we seek to have multi-skilled forces that are able to work on that basis. It absolutely makes sense—including, presumably, economic sense—for recruitment to occur on a tri-service basis, so that different forces are not competing. Will the Minister say something about the mobilisation period, which I understand extends to 2027? How quickly does he expect the delivery of the training start date within 30 days of application?

Terms and conditions are important for both attraction and retention, but when we talk about retention we sometimes miss the link back to attraction. There should be no better advert for joining the forces than current service personnel. If they are having a good experience, they are the best recruiters for others.

Lola McEvoy: As it is fresh in my mind, I wanted to mention that I was recently at park run in Darlington where two young men won in record time—unbelievably, intimidatingly quickly—and it turned out that they were armed forces personnel who were stationed at Catterick. They were great adverts for the health benefits and discipline of being a member of the armed forces. Does my hon. Friend agree that that level of fitness has wider mental health impacts?

Lewis Atkinson: I absolutely do, and that applies to both the regular forces and, for example, the cadets and reserves, as others have mentioned.

The 6% pay increase last year and the 4.5% increase this year are hugely important to ensuring that serving personnel of all types receive above the national minimum wage, but equally important is action on housing, not only for serving personnel but for their families. We are talking about serving men and women. Historically, of course, personnel in the north-east and across the country were men, but the recruitment of talented, patriotic women into our armed forces is critical.

We should not apologise for saying that for anyone, men or women, serving needs to be compatible with family life. Everyone who is inspired to serve understands that, at moments of conflict and crisis, they must be

willing to go wherever our nation needs them to go, without notice and at significant cost to their families. The psychological bargain, as it were, is that in times of peace and for planned activities in the UK—for example training—the more certainty that we can give serving personnel about where they will be, the better. That allows them plan their lives, increases retention and, critically, increases attraction into our armed forces in the first place. I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on that.

Finally, at the end of that cycle through from recruitment to retention is aftercare and care for our veterans. The veteran population in Sunderland is fortunate to have a fantastic veterans' charity, Veterans in Crisis—it was an honour to host the Minister for Veterans and People there recently. Ger Fowler, the founder of the charity, says that people feeling they will be looked after when they leave is another advert for the forces.

Mary Glindon: My hon. Friend is giving a marvellous speech. On that subject, will he commend all the veterans' charities that work across our region and the support provided by volunteers, particularly with mental health and finding homes—all the social issues that affect people who come out of the service back into civvy street? They work tirelessly, and our well-deserving veterans would have many more problems if those charities were not in our communities.

Lewis Atkinson: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's sentiments. The strength of the veterans' charities network also speaks to the wisdom of the Government's approach to veterans. It is about building a network of support for veterans—on top of the fantastic work that our veterans charities do—through Operation Valour and the £50 million that the Government are investing, recognising the strength of community that already exists.

It has been a really good debate this afternoon, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute. I hope that by giving people in our communities the opportunities that they need while strengthening our armed forces, we can make some changes in the coming years to strengthen recruitment under this Government.

3.15 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on securing this important debate, and all hon. Members on their contributions. It is quite tough to follow them and to add anything, given the quality of the speeches that we have already heard.

It is very appropriate that we are having this debate in Armed Forces Week, and it was a pleasure to speak at the Armed Forces Week flag-raising event that was held in Stanley Front street on Sunday. Such is the passion for the armed forces in North Durham that Stanley gets two bites at the cherry, as there is also a ceremony this Sunday to mark the end of Armed Forces Week. Front street will be full of gazebos from different military units, cadet forces and veterans' organisations.

As has been flagged already in the debate, North Durham is closely associated with our historic county regiment, the Durham Light Infantry—the DLI, known as the Faithful Durhams—whose record of service in the two world wars and further back in British military history is incredible. I pay tribute to the individuals

involved in that, but also to the many others who answered the call to duty across all branches and units. When I go door to door or meet people in the street, it is like a quiz: do I recognise the cap badge or know something about the history of the different units that people have been involved in?

As other hon. Members have said, the north-east has contributed immensely to the defence of the UK. At the 2021 census, there were over 100,000 veterans in the north-east, and the statistics for my constituency are similar to those for the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson): one in 20 individuals in North Durham is a veteran, and one in 10 households has a veteran in it. I am so proud to represent the many veterans, serving personnel, reservists and their families in my constituency, as well as what will hopefully be the next generation. I will just name-check the combined cadet force at Park View school in Chester-le-Street, where the headteacher was really proud of the pupils' involvement.

As we rightly renew our nation's defences in the face of a much more unstable and uncertain world, we must recognise that the most important element of our defence is its people. Sadly, the number of people serving in the UK regular forces decreased significantly under the previous Government, and the headcount at the end of April 2024 was down by over 15% compared with a decade earlier. As armed forces recruitment has fallen in recent years, the impact has been particularly acute in the north-east compared with other regions, perhaps because recruitment was disproportionately high in the north-east. Between 2015 and 2024, untrained intake into the armed forces reduced by 14% across the UK as a whole, but the reduction in the north-east was 34%.

I welcome this Labour Government's commitment to tackling not just recruitment in the armed forces, but retention. As hon. Members have mentioned, we have seen the largest pay rise for personnel in over 20 years, as well as recruitment reforms to scrap outdated policies and make the process more straightforward for those who wish to join our armed forces. We also now have the Armed Forces Commissioner Act, which is a key part of renewing the nation's contract with our armed forces. It was a privilege to serve on the Public Bill Committee alongside the Minister and the shadow Minister.

Mr Francois: I am ever so sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but technically it is still a Bill. We are debating it in the main Chamber next Wednesday.

Luke Akehurst: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for correcting the record. It is indeed still a Bill, but soon to become an Act.

The introduction of a new independent armed forces commissioner is a key part of the Government's plans for improving service life for personnel and their families. For too long, morale and satisfaction with service life among our armed forces have been falling, as measured in the continuous attitude survey.

I also welcome the Government's action on military housing, which has shamed our country for too long and has often been a factor in people leaving or being put off joining in the first place. Bringing the armed forces housing estate—more than 36,000 service family homes—back into public ownership is a decisive break with

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the past, reversing the privatisation made by Conservative Ministers in 1996, which failed British taxpayers, British service personnel and their families.

The members of our armed forces, who put their lives on the line for the safety and security of our country and people, give the greatest service possible. I pay tribute to every one of our men and women in uniform, including the many hon. and gallant Members, the veterans who serve on both sides of the House, whose contributions I have heard today. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) brings insights as a former member of the RAF. On that note, I will conclude and once again thank you, Dr Allin-Khan, for so ably chairing the debate.

3.21 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): It is as pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on securing the debate.

Few topics are more important for the armed forces than recruitment and its partner, retention, which the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) ably articulated. I am the Liberal Democrat spokesperson today but I am also a proud former soldier. I will try to encompass the whole of the armed forces in my remarks, but my natural tendency is to substitute the word “Army” because that is where I was shaped as a young man.

The Army is on its knees. The cuts it faced under the previous Government were as merciless as they were reckless: 10,000 soldiers were cut from the Army, in addition to failing recruitment. The latter has continued and we have lost 2,000 members of the Army since the general election. We are left with the smallest Army since the 1790s. As we know, that is while a war is happening on NATO’s border in Ukraine. I would argue that that decline in our Army has left us dangerously exposed.

In addition, only 75% of our troops are medically deployable. When we look at the size of the recruited Army, that is a deployable force of only 52,000, which is incredibly small when one considers how dangerous the world is at the moment. Depending on which figures are to be believed, Russia, by contrast, has 750,000 troops in Ukraine. There is a glaring mismatch.

We saw some of that play out in conversations around the coalition of the willing, and whether we could put troops alongside allies in Ukraine. As some other hon. Members have mentioned, it is not just the UK; other European forces also suffer from smaller armies than they should have and problems with recruitment. I am sorry to repeat the words of the Minister back at him, but recently he told the Defence Committee that “more work is needed” to ensure that the UK is ready to fight an enduring war. I would contrast that with the national security strategy published yesterday, which says that we need to be ready to defend our homeland now. I encourage the Government to take away the juxtaposition of those statements and respond.

We often hear people say in the media, “Do we need soldiers in an age of cyber, information and space? Perhaps we don’t need people anymore.” This is the siren call about how technology will solve our military problems,

but the answer is: yes, we do need those people. There are no alternatives to having boots on the ground. It is only troops that can take and hold territory—and the last time I checked, land is where everybody lives, so that is the decisive domain in warfare. Perhaps more importantly, when we look at how dangerous the world is at the moment, ground troops are what deter, more so than any other type of force—and I for one can think of nothing scarier than a division of Northumbrians, Mackems and Geordies facing me. [*Laughter.*]

That is why—from jokes to serious policy—the Liberal Democrats are proposing to reverse the Conservative cuts of 10,000 to our Army. I note that the Government hinted in the strategic defence review recently that they might increase the size of the Army at some point—I think the wording was that it would be desirable—but that this must of course fit within our financial envelope. With the new announcement of 3.5% on core defence expenditure, perhaps we could accelerate some of that increase in the size of the Army, because although the SDR was a very good document, I think it represents jam tomorrow, and I would argue that the threat is today—as I think the Government would also accept.

In addition to reversing those cuts, the Liberal Democrats would focus on the recruitment problem. Although the pay increases are welcome to our hard-working armed forces—indeed, we also welcome that as Liberal Democrats—we would argue that specific recruitment and retention bonuses would help to accelerate recruitment into the forces. We therefore propose a £10,000 bonus for new recruits who complete their phase 1 and phase 2 training and then serve for two years—that is, their initial commitment. We would also pledge a further £20,000 bonus for those who have left the forces and then return. We could then get them in already trained, so to speak; they would just need to do their annual training to get back up to speed. Those two things, coupled with some of the pay increases that have come through recently, would help with the recruitment pipeline.

As hon. Members have said, recruitment into our armed forces in the north-east accounts for a disproportionate share of the total, with the region contributing 7.3% of new recruits despite accounting for only 4.6% of the working-age population. It is also the region with the highest rate of per capita recruitment in the country. This reflects a deep sense of pride and patriotism, which I saw for myself when serving in Afghanistan alongside members of the 2nd Battalion, the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, who are so distinguishable by their headdress—a red hackle, in Labour colours, appropriately for today.

But we cannot rely just on the north-east, nor can we ask more of our forces without giving them the support that we need, and this is where we come to retention. So many forces personnel are leaving because of the conditions they face. I would like to focus on two things. The first is an issue that we have explored repeatedly, but where things have perhaps not improved as quickly as we think they should have: bullying and harassment, particularly—almost exclusively—of female recruits and women in the armed forces. This was laid out comprehensively in the Atherton report, and recently we had the service chiefs in front of the Defence Committee, which I sit on. I questioned General Sir Roly Walker, the Chief of the General Staff, on this, and I read out to him some accounts.

One woman described being pinned down and assaulted in front of a senior officer, yet nothing was done about it. That was just one example. How can we expect women to remain in the armed forces when they are not respected for the important contributions that they make? Obviously, this is a cross-party issue; no party would seek to make political capital out of it. We all agree that it is completely unacceptable. But I urge the current Government to continue to push hard on it and to make sure that the service chiefs understand that it is a political priority and a leadership issue.

I will conclude now. We have discussed a plethora of issues and there have been many good suggestions from across the House today. Some of the failures reek of apathy, which I hope is being corrected. I hope that we are going forward into a new era of better funding and greater focus on some of the recruitment and retention problems that the armed forces have faced. Unless we take action, we will fail those people who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf.

3.31 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Dr Allin-Khan, and to sum up for His Majesty's Opposition on the important subject of armed forces recruitment from the north-east of England.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on securing a debate on such an interesting topic, in Armed Forces Week to boot, and, if I may say so, on introducing it so very ably.

The British armed forces have a proud tradition of recruiting soldiers, sailors and, more recently, airmen from the north-east of England. I will take the Army as an example; being a former infantry officer, I hope that the hon. Member and the Minister will forgive me if I concentrate on infantry units. There are many proud regiments across the Army, both the teeth arms and those who support them, that historically have recruited from this corner of England.

To begin with, the Coldstream Guards, which is the oldest continually serving regular regiment in the British Army, takes its name from the village on the English-Scottish border where it was first formed in 1650. It was originally Monck's Regiment of Foot, before becoming the Coldstream Regiment of Foot Guards following Monck's death in 1670. It was, of course, instrumental in restoring royal rule after the civil war and proudly remains part of the Household Division to this day.

However, there are others. For instance, the Northumberland Fusiliers was first raised as an infantry regiment of the British Army in 1674. In 1751, it became the 5th Regiment of Foot and in 1836, after the Napoleonic wars, it was designated a fusilier unit and became the 5th (Northumberland Fusiliers) Regiment of Foot. This proud name is now incorporated into the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, the deputy Regimental Colonel of which is now Colonel Jez Lamb, an excellent officer with whom I had the privilege of serving in the Ministry of Defence.

There are other proud names, too. For instance, there is the Durham Light Infantry, which was formed under the so-called Childers reforms in 1881 and is today part of The Rifles, one of the largest regiments in the

British Army. The hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) paid handsome tribute to the Durham Light Infantry and he was absolutely right to do so.

Of course, both the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines have also actively recruited from the north-east of England in the past. The RAF has maintained an active presence in the north-east of England, not least at RAF Boulmer in Northumberland, which I visited when I was a Defence Minister and which plays a vital co-ordinating role in the air defence of the United Kingdom. In short, the north-east has always played a part in the defence of these islands and no doubt always will.

As I am sure the Minister will go on to agree, armies across the western world find it difficult to recruit and especially to retain regular armed forces personnel. Given modern lifestyles, it is increasingly challenging to find enough people who wish to undergo the rigours of service life, including the pressure that it puts on their families. Indeed, we know from the armed forces continuous attitude survey, or AFCAS, that although there are often a number of reasons why people leave the armed forces, the pressure of service life on family life is the greatest determinant of that decision and has been for several years now.

As the Minister may recall, this is a subject I know a little about. After I left the MOD, where I served as the Armed Forces Minister, in 2017 I was commissioned by the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, to write a report about how to improve recruitment into the armed forces, which was submitted to No. 10 in 2017. It was entitled "Filling the Ranks", and it is still available on my parliamentary website. Following that work, I was recommissioned to do a further study on retention. Even when looking at recruitment, we soon become involved in discussions about retention, because in effect they are two sides of the same coin. To put it another way, there is no point widening the aperture of the recruitment tab if we cannot put a retention plug in the sink. Partly as a result of that work, I was recommissioned by the same Prime Minister to write a second report on retention, entitled "Stick or Twist?", which was submitted to No. 10 in February 2020, albeit to a different Prime Minister and just a month before the country went into lockdown because of covid.

I am pleased to say that the previous Government actioned the vast majority of the recommendations in both reports, including those designed to help recruiting by taking a more realistic attitude to minor medical ailments that previously disbarred some enthusiastic potential candidates from joining the armed forces. However, as the hon. Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) ably pointed out, there is still much further to go. As the Minister knows, one of the principal challenges to speeding up the recruitment process is gaining access to candidates' GP medical records. I have to say that it has at times been like trying to cut the Gordian knot. There must be more that can be done in this area, even if it means—and I do not say this lightly—amending the GP contract.

As the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor correctly pointed out, the challenges faced by people living in the north-east of England who want to join the armed forces are not so different from those around the rest of the country. In 2012, the Army decided to outsource its recruiting to a consortium led by Capita. At the same time, the Royal Navy and the

[Mr Mark Francois]

Royal Air Force decided to stick, as it were, and retain their recruitment in-house. Although I admit that it happened under a previous Conservative Government, the outsourcing contract was not an outstanding success. The number of soldiers actively recruited into the Army, including from the north-east, began to fall dramatically shortly after Capita took responsibility for that function, and it has hardly ever hit its recruitment target since. Before the Minister leaps to his feet to intervene on me and point out that that happened under a Tory Government, I would simply offer that I served on the Defence Committee for seven years, during which there was no fiercer critic of Capita than me.

We now have a situation in which personnel, including those from the north, are leaving the armed forces faster than we can recruit them. Indeed, Ministers have said several times in the past few months that for every 100 who join across all three services, 130 leave. Against that background, the MOD has recently decided to relet the recruiting contract to a new consortium led by Serco. However, that does not fully go live until April 2027, and there will be a transition period during which Serco will prepare to take over from the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, and will work in tandem with Capita as it runs down the current recruiting contract. In a very knowledgeable contribution, the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) rightly touched on that point.

I want to take the opportunity to express real concern about the process and, in particular, the period of joint working between Capita and Serco. All experience suggests that if Capita is unable to hit its targets during the interregnum, there is likely to be a great deal of finger-pointing between the two companies. But it will be the strength of the regular Army, including recruitment from the north-east of England, that suffers, so I very much encourage Ministers to be alert to that.

There is a further challenge to recruiting, including in the north-east, and it is one for which a previous Conservative Government cannot be blamed: the current Government's plans to use a remedial order to excise parts of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. As of 15 minutes ago, 137,953 UK citizens have signed a parliamentary petition entitled "Protect Northern Ireland Veterans from Prosecutions", which we will debate in this Chamber next month. Suffice it to say that I believe all the contributions made by Labour Members have been entirely genuine—indeed, passionate—and I have to believe, therefore, that they would be very reluctant to go through the Lobbies this autumn to vote for a proposal that not only opens up our Northern Ireland veterans to prosecution, but would make it easier for Gerry Adams to sue the British Government.

Although I am an Essex Member of Parliament, I am also a bit of a military history buff, so I know that there are counties in the north-east of England that have a proud tradition of providing personnel for what are now His Majesty's armed forces. I conclude by congratulating again the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor on securing such a timely debate. I look forward with genuine interest to what the Minister has to say to us.

3.40 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): It is very good to see you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. You and I being in the same room will probably alert the Whips—they will be keeping an eye on us both very shortly. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) for introducing this debate, putting this on the record and being a proud champion of the north-east and of the men and women from the north-east who serve with such distinction in our armed forces. He has done his constituency and his region enormous credit with the way that he introduced the debate. I will turn to some of the points he raised in just a moment.

Let me say how warmed I am by the contributions to this debate from all parts of the House in Armed Forces Week. It is so important at this time that we take a moment to thank the people who serve, celebrate their service and highlight that a career in the armed forces not only provides the opportunity to keep our country and our allies safe, but provides someone with a lifetime of skills that, as we know, are in demand in the private sector and will give them pride in what they do. One of the members of the armed forces that my hon. Friend spoke to said that the armed forces had trained, trusted and invested in him. That is exactly what we seek to do for all the members of our armed forces.

I must declare an interest as the son of a Royal Navy submariner, albeit one based in Devonport in Plymouth rather than in the north-east. I am confident that, wherever we are in our proud United Kingdom, we can all feel a sense of pride in the service of the people in uniform and, importantly, the families that stand behind them. The people of the north-east have a long and proud tradition of doing just that—a tradition captured by the permanent exhibition at Newcastle's Discovery museum, reflected in the annual military parade in Sunderland, which is traditionally the largest outside of London, and honoured earlier this month by 100 soldiers from the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards, who departed King's Cross in their scarlet tunics and bearskin caps to make the symbolic pilgrimage to Berwick-upon-Tweed, where they were formed 375 years ago and where they were received today with great pride.

Service personnel from the north-east have been and continue to be central to the history of our armed forces. They are central to the missions we deliver today to keep our country safe and central to the future of our armed forces. As Britain moves to warfighting readiness through the commitments set out in our strategic defence review, we have placed defence personnel at the heart of our plans.

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for his warm speech about the pride of the various regiments in the north-east of England, but there is a big gap at the moment. A number of years ago, the Durham Light Infantry lost their national memorial when the building that was housing it was no longer fit for purpose. That is a sad loss to our region. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in calling on the new Reform Durham county council to pick up the plans previously put down by local people to recreate a fitting memorial for the Durham Light Infantry in our area?

Luke Pollard: I commend and thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It is so important that we tell our story. We have not just accidentally arrived today—we are here because of the contributions of the generations that came before us. It is right that we acknowledge and remember the sacrifices of the people who served in uniform in countless battles and wars in the past. To have a permanent, fitting memorial where people can see that contribution seems a very good campaign, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman and all Members present to get behind it. I hope that the council he referenced will understand its value.

Since coming into office, we have taken a number of decisive steps to deal with the serious retention and recruitment crisis that we inherited from the previous Administration. We have sought to make recruitment more efficient. We have eliminated over 100 outdated recruitment policies already. We have slashed the time to access medical records from weeks to hours with a new digital pilot that we hope to roll out across all our services. We have restructured Army recruitment, and are moving towards a tri-service recruitment scheme, which will make recruitment easier, more efficient and, most importantly, faster for the people involved.

We have made a career in our armed forces more attractive by awarding service personnel the biggest pay rise in more than two decades. Importantly—this is a source of great pride not just to the Defence Secretary but to all Defence Ministers and, I imagine, all Labour MPs—for the very first time, every person who serves in uniform is now paid the living wage. That should always have been the case. It was not, but it is now. That is the difference that this Government are making.

I am pleased that many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), spoke about the importance of upgrading military accommodation. It was a national scandal that so many of our people and their families are being asked to live in housing that is, frankly, not fit for purpose. The £7 billion that we will invest in military accommodation, including an extra £1.5 billion to be spent in this Parliament, will make a substantial difference by upgrading military accommodation nationwide.

We are trying harder to keep the valued people who are most at risk of leaving. We have introduced a £30,000 retention payment for about 5,000 eligible aircraft engineers and an £8,000 retention payment for around 12,000 eligible Army privates and lance corporals. The results speak for themselves: year-on-year inflow of recruits is up 19% and outflow is down 7%. The Royal Navy has exceeded its yearly recruiting target, Royal Air Force applications are up 34% compared with early 2024, and the British Army has recorded a seven-year high in applications.

We are determined to go faster and further, starting with cadets. I was pleased to hear from hon. Members about how cadets contribute to their communities and provide people with opportunities to understand that a career in the armed forces is good not only for their employment, but for their mental health and their community. The cadet experience raises awareness of exciting careers and opportunities. Former cadets account for around 40% of officers and 35% of other ranks, and on average those who have served in our cadets serve six years longer than their peers. That is good for our armed forces.

The commitment to increase our cadet forces by 30% is an important SDR recommendation. I encourage all Members, whether or not they are in the north-east, to be part of the expansion of our cadet forces and to work with their local cadets, whether they are sea cadets, air cadets or whatever else—a number of varieties are on offer—to encourage people to get involved. Most importantly, let us tell the story for those communities that do not always access the cadets, especially those from some of our poorest and most deprived communities, where participating in the cadets could have a profound and positive effect for their entire lives.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive and helpful response. I had a conversation with the Minister for Veterans and People some time ago, and he told me personally that extra money would be available for the cadets in the Northern Ireland, specifically to recruit another 1,000 cadets. The cadet forces and others have told me that that money will ensure that the 1,000 other cadets can come in. I welcome that commitment by the Veterans Minister to Northern Ireland—which I think he told me before he announced it.

Luke Pollard: Don't be saying that we have been out telling people things before we announce them—we will get in big trouble for that, as the hon. Member will know. He is exactly right to talk about the possibilities that come from further investment in cadets and was right to raise those issues with my colleague the Minister for Veterans and People. We are not undertaking Operation Mountain Goat, climbing up Everest; the Minister is certainly powering the expansion of our cadets and activities in reserves.

Mark Ferguson: While the Minister commends the work of cadets, will he join me in commending 361 Gateshead air cadets for the critical role they played in remembrance services by leading the parade through the centre of Gateshead last year? Does he agree that the role of the cadets in remembrance is incredibly important in building a sense of community and a sense of the role that we all must play in remembrance, alongside the cadets?

Luke Pollard: I join my hon. Friend in celebrating the work of 361 Gateshead air cadets. What he has just done speaks to the critique, which I often hear, that young people are not interested in service. Nothing is further from the truth. Our young people are absolutely determined and feel a sense of pride, but as a country we have not provided the vehicle for them to be able to serve.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) gave the stat that three in four people leaving the recruitment process because it takes too long, but it is worse than that. In the situation we inherited from the previous Administration, 84% of people left the recruitment process because it took too long. The time of flight, which is how we categorise the period between the application form and donning the uniform, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor described it, is far too long—in some cases over a year. That is not an acceptable time of flight.

We are determined to cut that, which is why we have introduced the 10/30 policy. That means that we want all applicants across all forces to have an indication of whether they are acceptable within 10 days—have they passed the nationality check or do they have a criminal

[*Luke Pollard*]

record that would disbar them?—and to have an approximate start date at a training establishment within 30 days. That is so important because it provides people with the certainty to understand how long they will have to wait.

The targets that we are setting internally in the Ministry of Defence to reduce the time of flight are serious and substantial, because we know that we lose too many good people as the process takes too long. That is why we are working not just to enhance and cut the time taken to access medical records, but to do security vetting and to make sure that people know when they can start. That will make a big difference to our ability to help people to understand whether they can take a part-time job or go travelling, or whether they need to wait a bit longer or have time for additional study before they start. The lack of certainty poisons our recruitment process; we are taking steps to deal with that properly.

I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor spoke about digital warfighters because it is true that, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin), said, we need to have troops to hold ground, but we also need people with cyber and digital skills to deal with the threats we face every single day. Luckily, we are not under missile attack every day, but we are under cyber-attack every single day from hostile states, from those that wish to undermine our security, and from criminal networks that can be state-backed. The new direct entry into cyber that we have begun is a pioneering scheme. We have had a huge number of applications, including from people from the north-east. We will make further announcements about that success as the cohort starts its training.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor was right when he spoke about many of our people being snapped up by the private sector. That is what happens with austerity and pay pressure, which mean that our armed forces personnel have faced real-terms pay cuts—as many of them have for the last 14 years, under the previous Government—and their wages have not kept pace with their market value. That is why we have introduced two above-inflation pay rises for our people since coming to office.

That is also the reason why we are looking at zigzag careers, so that people serving in a regular role in our armed forces can undertake reserve work and apply for the reserves while they are serving—rather than having to leave and apply, as they do currently—so that they can then undertake work in our private sector, in our defence contractors, after which they will be able to rejoin. At the moment we zig, but we do not zag. We need to improve the system. That is what we are seeking to legislate to deliver. That will mean an increase in people being able to return.

Keeping people within our larger defence family is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah) was right to speak about the importance of investment in our defence industries. At the moment, we spend approximately £380 million in the north-east, which is not enough. It is the determination of this Government to make sure that we spend more of the Ministry of Defence's increased budget with British companies, creating

good, well-paid apprenticeships throughout the country and making sure that we can create the products that we can sell to the world, not just to ourselves.

Mr Francois: As the hon. Member is well aware, many of those who served on Operation Banner were recruited from what we would now call red wall constituencies, many of them in the north-east of England. As we have many north-east MPs here this afternoon, will the Minister give us an absolute assurance that the Government will not proceed with their totally counterproductive remedial order to throw those veterans to the wolves?

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Member has made his point; I am turning to the points raised by other Members, if he will forgive me.

We currently spend £380 million, but we want to spend more. To do that, we not only need defence companies to invest more in manufacturing facilities; we need many of the companies that already operate in the north-east to realise that they could be defence companies. They might be able to support the provision of gizmos and gadgets for our equipment, or they might be technology companies that could expand into providing new services. That is why the new defence industrial strategy, which we are publishing later this year, will help to direct more attention and more spending towards our industries in Britain, including those in the north-east.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham for talking about the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill, which is going through Parliament. I want it to achieve Royal Assent soon. The ping-pong needs to come to an end. We need to get it passed into law, complete the recruitment of the Armed Forces Commissioner and get on with providing an independent champion for the people who serve. It is vital to restore trust and confidence.

I am grateful to the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells, for talking about the need to address culture, because the toxic culture within our military is not acceptable. It is not acceptable in our politics and it should not be acceptable in our armed forces. However, I point out to him that the Fusiliers do not wear Labour colours. It is a proud hackle that came from their traditions—it just happens to be red. It is important that at this time we do not seek to politicise any of our armed forces, because they should enjoy cross-party support. He gave me a fair challenge, though, about whether we need to do more work or defend the homeland now. The answer, of course, is both. That is why the SDR sets out 62 recommendations, which we have accepted in full, to do more to defend our country, to develop new technologies to replace the old capabilities, and, perhaps most importantly, to invest in our people.

Finally, the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), raised a number of topics that are of concern to many people. I welcome the debate that will be taking place in this Chamber very shortly. That will be a matter for the Northern Ireland Office, as he is aware, but my colleague, the Veterans Minister, takes a great deal of interest in this matter as well; I am certain that he will be able to contribute further.

At this very moment, there will be people up and down our country, including in the north-east of England, wondering whether to join our armed forces—wondering

whether a career in uniform will support them and their aspirations, and will provide the opportunities for them to start a family and to buy their own house, and contribute to a lifetime of skills. Let the message go out clearly from this debate: whether you join the Army, the Navy or the Air Force, there are incredible skills on offer in our armed forces, and incredible opportunities to travel and to keep our country safe.

I am grateful to all Members across the House for contributing to the debate. They have made the case for improvements in recruitment, highlighted the armed forces as a great career to join, and supported Armed Forces Week.

3.57 pm

Alan Strickland: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part today, and you, Dr Allin-Khan, for your excellent chairing, which has kept us in good order. I also thank the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin). He said in his comments that he was slightly terrified of all the angry Geordies and Mackems coming at him in battle; I hope we were not too scary today. I am sorry to hear that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) did not make it as a commando, but his 14-and-a-half-year service to our country does us proud, as does the service of the shadow Ministers.

In Armed Forces Week, I thank everyone who serves in uniform to defend our nation, all veterans who have served, the armed forces charities that do brilliant work, and the armed forces families who sacrifice so much so that our nation can be so well defended.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered armed forces recruitment in the North East.

Flags: Public Buildings

4 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge and the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the flying of flags from public buildings.

Thank you, Sir Desmond, for calling me to speak in this debate about the importance of flying flags from public buildings across our United Kingdom. I have studied and campaigned on the subject for many years, even before I entered the House of Commons. In 2000, as a councillor in the London borough of Havering, I campaigned for the Union flag, also correctly known as the Union Jack, to be flown all year round from the main flag mast at our townhall in Romford. It was a great sadness to me that the then Labour council, supported by some members of the Havering residents association, voted against my motion to do so. That led to a public outcry, leading to the eventual backing down of the then administration, which accepted that the people of my borough wanted to see their national flag flown 365 days of the year.

I mounted a similar campaign when I entered Parliament in 2001, calling for our national flag to fly from the Victoria Tower throughout the year. But the tradition then was that it would only fly when Parliament was in session. After nine years of campaigning for this rule to change, I finally managed to persuade the powers that be that it was only right and proper that the Union Jack should fly all year round, during weekends, evenings and recess periods—at all times.

The idea of the flag flying only when the House was sitting originated, so I was told, from when the monarch looked out of their window at Buckingham Palace to see whether the flag was flying and know whether Parliament was in session. When Her Majesty, our dear late Queen Elizabeth II, visited Romford around the time of the golden jubilee, I was proud to sit with her over lunch in the Wykeham Hall of St Edward's church in Romford market and was able to discuss the matter directly with her. I was surprised to learn that Her late Majesty had never heard of that tradition. She told me that when she wanted to see whether the House was sitting, she would generally switch on BBC Parliament.

After much debate, following that revelation, the Union flag was eventually raised permanently above the Victoria Tower on 6 January 2010, where it has proudly flown every day ever since, for the millions of visitors to London to see and for everyone to take pride in.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, which intrigues me. Coming from Northern Ireland, we are a nation of flag fliers; I have flown a flag nearly all my life. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the only flag that should have pride of place on public buildings is the Union flag? We should take the opportunity to fly it to encourage a sense of national pride, and as a symbol of the things that unite us. We have different colours, creeds, genders, ambitions, qualities and skills, but we are all British,

[Jim Shannon]

and together we can make this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland a better place for everyone.

Andrew Rosindell: I entirely concur. I commend the hon. Member for his patriotism, his love of country and his understanding of the importance of being proud of being British. Flying the Union flag is an essential part of that.

I refer the House to early-day motion 1199 of 29 March 2010, signed by Mr Speaker himself, which records the significant moment in parliamentary history when the Union flag was raised permanently on the Victoria Tower in the Palace of Westminster. In 2007, I established the all-party parliamentary group on flags, which became the APPG on flags and heraldry, and which now forms a central part of the APPG on British heritage, which I am proud to chair.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It was in that guise that my hon. Friend came to see me on the subject when I was a Cabinet Office Minister. We had some success in that venture, as he will recall, and subsequently, thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden), we had further success. We worked together to ensure that flags were flown from Government buildings across Whitehall; no doubt my hon. Friend will tell us about that. He deserves great praise for his endurance, perseverance and determination.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank my right hon. Friend for his continued support for flying the Union flag and other national flags across the United Kingdom. When he was a Cabinet Office Minister, he was entirely supportive of the campaigns that I have been running for many years. I thank him for that.

The APPG on British heritage is meeting today at 5 o'clock to discuss issues relating to flags, heraldry, national symbols, historic counties, patron saints' days and all things important to the heritage of our proud island nation. I put on record my thanks to the president of the Flag Institute, Captain Malcolm Farrow OBE, and the institute's chief vexillologist, Graham Bartram, for their support and guidance over all these years on matters relating to flags.

I commend the work of the Flag Institute, the expert institute that understands the importance of flags and the protocol that surrounds them across the United Kingdom, the Crown dependencies and the British overseas territories. I also commend the College of Arms and Peter O'Donoghue, the York Herald, who has given us extremely good advice on the topic over many years. The College of Arms registers flags in its institution: they are there for all to see, admire and recognise as important parts of our national character.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Many towns and boroughs, such as Stockton and Billingham in my constituency, have achievements of arms featuring important emblems of the past of the town. In Billingham, we have a ship as our crest; in Stockton, there is an anchor and a sea lion, celebrating our shipbuilding and maritime past. Does the hon. Member agree that the flying of achievements of arms as flags over town halls

not only enables heraldists like myself to experience some joy, but enables people in the local area to have real pride in their town or borough?

Andrew Rosindell: I completely agree. I only wish that my own London borough of Havering would recognise that. I have tried for many years to ensure that the Romford town crest is displayed in Romford. Sadly, however, because of the corporate identities of London boroughs, my borough has steadfastly refused. I fought that battle against my own party, which governed the council for 20 years and failed to do anything about it, and I am still fighting against the current council, which is controlled by the residents association. Local patriotism, local town crests and local flags are also very important to the culture and make-up of our great British society.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Prior to my election to this place, I was provost of West Dunbartonshire council; "provost" is the Scottish term equivalent to "mayor". One of my civic roles was to have complete responsibility for which flags would be flown from our civic buildings across the whole of West Dunbartonshire.

My experience is that flying flags is often a source of division. Somebody would always object when I decided to fly the Union flag or to fly the saltire. Does the hon. Member agree that the authority to fly flags should never be used to stoke division or hate in our communities? It should always be used as a force for good, such as in the flag-raising ceremonies that we often had on national days across the United Kingdom? We had flags for international Holocaust Memorial Day, Merchant Navy Day, Armed Forces Day and Commonwealth Day. We would fly those flags on our civic buildings. Does the hon. Member agree that there is a purpose to that?

Andrew Rosindell: Yes, I do. I thank the hon. Member for his helpful intervention. I will refer to much of that later in my speech.

On the matter of flying flags from public buildings, I draw the attention of the Minister to my early-day motion 1452, which so far has been supported by my hon. Friends the Members for Windsor (Jack Rankin), for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford), for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) and for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and the hon. Members for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell). I also thank Ryan-Mark Parsons and George Bundock, the staff of the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), for their advice and amazing support for the campaign to uphold neutrality in flying flags from public buildings.

It is now more important than ever for this House to recognise and unequivocally support the importance of maintaining the institutional neutrality of Government and publicly funded spaces. That is particularly vital when seen in the context of a range of entirely new and overtly political flags or banners—as they should be correctly referred to—being flown not only by individuals, as is their right, but by publicly funded bodies such as local councils, town halls, civic centres, hospitals, schools, universities, police stations, railway and underground stations, bus garages and other institutions and organisations, as well as Departments of His Majesty's Government.

This innovation of recent years is not only alien to the civic traditions of this country. I believe that it is emblematic of a declining understanding of the importance of national unity and pride in our national heritage and constitution that is often alienating to many hard-working, law-abiding citizens of this great country who see themselves, first and foremost, as British and not part of a minority or a separate community. I believe that the British people firmly stand for upholding neutrality of the public square, enabling all to have their welcoming corner, but under one nation, one Union flag and one King.

The recently announced policy of Reform UK is actually the policy that I have long championed. I am glad to see it adopting that stance in the local councils that it now controls across England. I believe that all political parties should do the same. Our free society is one that I cherish, but all that we have in Britain today is founded on our forebears, embracing one cultural heritage based on the customs, traditions, conventions, laws and constitution of these islands. I am sure that some in this House may hold a certain reticence about the position that I am taking, but I say to them that it is abundantly clear that the flying of identity-based political banners, especially those representing what is sometimes only a slim, exclusive and often exclusionary subset of a particular interest group or social movement, is often seen as implicitly endorsing a specific viewpoint.

Some may ask why there is any problem with that being a permissible approach for public bodies to take. They may say that this great nation should accommodate freedom of belief and expression that finds voice in flying flags. I fully accept, and indeed endorse, the notion that free individuals and organisations on their private property may express their identities and customs in whichever manner they see fit, but a publicly owned building or a state-owned or funded institution must, I believe, maintain neutrality.

For example, if a town hall chooses to fly a banner for one group of people, it would surely be obliged to fly one for another group, and another group, and so on. In so doing, the council will inevitably appear to be endorsing every cause, identity and political campaign, of which there are absolutely no limits. Not only is that divisive to many who do not necessarily support the cause in question, but the costs and staff time spent on displaying a seemingly never-ending array of banners and flags to please and appease every possible cause—not to mention the organisation of individual ceremonies to go with them—is devaluing the significance of flying the flags of nation, country, county, city, village and town that unite and represent everyone in that community. Indeed, it is becoming unmanageable, as so many banners representing a multitude of groups and causes are being added to the list. It simply has to stop.

We must restore a flag protocol regime that upholds our national identity, which should always come first, followed by that which represents our country, boroughs, counties, cities, towns and villages. Of course, no flag of any kind should take precedence over the Union flag on a public building, apart from the royal standard when His Majesty is present.

Private expression of political sympathies, and other institutional expressions of political sympathies, are entirely different. Although individuals and communities must continue to be free to express their identities and customs, including by flying flags of public institutions,

they should exercise extreme caution and professionalism in order to remain inclusive to all British citizens regardless of their views. Quite contrary to silencing minorities, this age-old position ensures that everyone can pursue their expression and association, find a place and be represented in this country under our nation's official flags. That is the only logically defensible position, and it is the stance taken by the vast majority of British people, with whom I am in profound agreement.

Once we have accepted the importance of maintaining the neutrality of the public square, enabled by the local and national publicly funded institutions of this country, the particular rules for how that should be governed must be decided and expressed in plain English. There is guidance on flag etiquette and rules on flying flags, and the Flag Institute are the experts in this field. I hope the Minister will take advice from them in making sure that everything is handled in the correct fashion.

Flag protocol largely dictates how flags should be handled, including how they should be put up, taken down and illuminated. There are flags that require special consent to be flown, and others that do not and ought not, such as national flags, the Commonwealth flag and flags of the United Nations. They should, of course, be flown. There are also flags that are rightly and expressly banned from being flown, most notably those of proscribed terrorist organisations. These rules should strictly be enforced in their entirety. However, there is a grey area in the middle that has been not only occupied, but actively exploited by minority and sometimes extreme political factions—as well as their subscribers or sympathisers—in public institutions.

That is the area for which new guidance and rules ought to be implemented, published and enforced, so that we can prevent the domination of public institutions and the public square by overtly political interest groups. That would prevent the continuous vying for a position of institutional dominance by a range of sometimes extreme minority groups, of both the left and the right, which are unrepresentative of British people, culture or heritage, and enable freer expression and a sense of belonging for all British people.

I therefore call on all public bodies, especially those representing national and local government, to adopt clear and consistent policies limiting flag displays to flags representing the nation, country, county, borough, city, town and village or those representing the monarch, the royal family or officially recognised flags, to preserve neutrality, true freedom and toleration.

Douglas McAllister: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Rosindell: I am afraid I have to continue as I have very little time to complete my speech.

When representatives from other countries visit, it is of course right that, out of courtesy, their national flag should fly for the occasion. Alternatively, when there is a tragic event in a particular country, it is right for that nation's flag to fly for a strictly limited period out of respect and sympathy.

I firmly believe that we are reaching a point of broad consensus on the flying of flags, and it should be based on the principles of neutrality of public institutions, public buildings and the public square when it comes to

[Andrew Rosindell]

matters of deep political controversy, much like the position of Speaker of the House of Commons. That is needed now more than ever.

I have here a copy of the booklet on the approved flying of flags. It is available in the Speaker's Office. It explains the policy on flying flags on flagpoles on the parliamentary estate and outlines what I consider to be, with a few exceptions, a broadly correct approach. However, I strongly believe that the cross of St Patrick or the red hand of Ulster should be flown on 17 March for St Patrick's Day, in addition to the cross of St George, the cross St Andrew and the red dragon for St George's, St Andrew's and St David's Days respectively.

However, in many town hall and public buildings across the UK, political polarisation has reached a new height. Change in a variety of social and political principles is coming fast. Civic unrest is on the rise and I do not believe that ever more calls for diversity are the answer. We need a more unified approach, with the British people represented by national symbols, including flags, which bring us together and do not divide us further. One example is the so-called Progress Pride flag, which many believe promotes a contentious ideology that harms women and vulnerable children. It is clearly politically divisive and should not be flown from public buildings anywhere in the United Kingdom.

There is a clear and simple expression of the position that I believe we ought to adopt. We must recognise the importance of institutional neutrality in government and publicly funded spaces. We must acknowledge that the flying of political flags can be seen as implicitly endorsing specific viewpoints.

We must enable individuals and communities to freely express their identities and customs, while ensuring that public institutions exercise strict caution to remain inclusive to all British citizens. We must call on all public bodies, especially those representing national and local government, to draw up clear and consistent policies limiting flag displays to country, county, city, borough, town, village, military or those that represent the monarch, the royal family or officially recognised flags such as Armed Forces Day, VE Day, VJ Day, and for occasions such as the Royal Air Force flag for Battle of Britain Day, the red ensign for Merchant Navy Day, the Royal Navy flag for Trafalgar Day and the British Army flag on Waterloo Day.

We, the Parliament of the United Kingdom, must give a firm answer to the grey area filled with uncertainties and questions. It must be one of unifying patriotic neutrality. Finally, I commend His Majesty's Government for continuing the tradition of flying the flags of historic counties for one week in July every year. Our historic counties, my own being Essex, make up the genuine identities of peoples across these islands, separate from the administrative and council boundaries. However, I strongly believe that the display of county flags in Parliament Square each July for Historic County Flags Day should be strictly restricted to the historic county flags alone. Regional flags and other flags can be flown on other days, but it is important that only historic flags representing the historic counties are flown.

Sir Desmond, thank you for allowing me to speak at such length today. I commend the Minister for her interest in this subject. I also thank her for visiting the

Channel Islands earlier this year, where I am sure she was proud to see the flags of Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark for their 80th anniversary of Liberation Day. Pride and patriotism in our countries is something that all people, and all members of all parties, should be proud to uphold. I have no doubt that the Minister will not disappoint Members of this House today.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): I call the Minister, in the time that remains to you.

4.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I will do my best to do justice to this very important subject in the very short time I have. I begin, of course, by congratulating the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing this important debate, and on what was a thoughtful and passionate speech about an issue he has cared about for many years. I join him in thanking the flag institution, the College of Arms.

Flag flying is a very British way of showing joy and pride as regions, as communities and as a nation. It brings people together to express shared identities. The Union flag is the primary symbol of our nation and rightly takes central position in flag flying as a source of unity. It appears on the flags of many of the UK's overseas territories and our fellow Commonwealth members. The Union flag is a joint expression of our history, our national identity and the UK's place in the wider world. I was especially struck by its importance and meaning when I attended the Liberation Day event in Jersey on 9 May, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. I know he takes a really keen interest in that subject. Of course, that event marked 80 years to the day that the islands were liberated from Nazi occupation, with a re-enactment carried out by Force 135, the British liberating force of 1945, supported by the Royal Marines. It included the raising of the Union flag, as it occurred on Liberation Day on 9 May 1945.

In Wales and Scotland, flag flying on public buildings is a devolved matter. In Northern Ireland, the issue is subject to special regulations set out by Ministers at the Northern Ireland Office.

The Government support state and ceremonial events by helping London look its best for occasions, such as the recent commemoration of VE Day and Remembrance Sunday each year. They often involve flying flags on some of the most highly visible public buildings and spaces in the country. Every year, we adorn the Mall, Horse Guards Parade and Parliament Square with flags for state visits, trooping the colour and other occasions, visible to thousands of people each day. The Cenotaph is the public space where flag flying is at its most sensitive and poignant. It is the national war memorial and focal point for public mourning. Last month, to mark the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe, the Cenotaph was draped in two large Union flags, emulating the way in which it was first revealed to the public in 1920. As I am sure that Members would agree, the results were spectacular.

In addition to the events described, the Government take an active role in promoting public flag flying across Britain. We disseminate an annual list of designated days on which all UK Government buildings are required to

fly the Union flag. That ensures that it is flown on some of our nation's important cultural occasions, including to mark Remembrance Sunday and the anniversary of the King's accession.

The Union flag has its origin as a royal flag, developed first in 1606 by James I and added to in 1801. For much of its early history, it was flown solely above royal residences, aboard naval vessels and in other specific circumstances. By the 1920s, the practice of flying the flag had been formalised into the list of designated days—such as the sovereign's birthday, or anniversary of the coronation—on which Government buildings, in addition to royal properties, were expected to fly the flag each year. As a legacy of that practice, until 2008 Government buildings were expected to fly the Union flag only on specific dates. That was consulted on following the 2007 Green Paper entitled “The Governance of Britain”, which highlighted the importance of the Union flag and sought to broaden its use.

As a result, in 2008 the Labour Government, under Prime Minister Gordon Brown, allowed Government buildings to fly the Union flag on any day of the year, rather than solely on royal and ceremonial occasions. That was further expanded in 2021, at the decision of Ministers. Since then, Government buildings have been not only allowed but actively and formally encouraged to fly the Union flag every day. Consequently, more Union flags are now flying from Government buildings than ever before, actively fostering the sense of national unity and pride that we all value so highly. The hon. Member for Romford spoke movingly about the history of the flag flying over Parliament and the important change in 2010. Of course, another important Government duty regarding public flag flying is that in times of national mourning or tragedy, instructions are issued to require the half-masting of the Union flag on UK Government buildings.

The approach taken by Departments to flying flags more generally on their buildings has evolved organically over the last 15 to 20 years under successive Governments. With the approval of Ministers in government at the time, Departments have, in addition to the Union flag, increasingly flown other flags to show support for causes in Britain and throughout the world. For instance, many people will have seen on the way here the Armed Forces Day flag flying proudly from buildings along Whitehall in preparation for the day itself, which is this Saturday. I began this week by attending the flag-raising ceremony at Barnsley town hall to see our Armed Forces Day flag raised and flown as we pay tribute this week to our brave service personnel ahead of Armed Forces Day on Saturday 28 June.

I know that the hon. Member for Romford has long encouraged the Government to fly the flags of the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies to recognise their importance, and I am pleased that although they were not frequently flown in the past, that has become more common. Hon. Members will be aware

that those flags are currently flying in Parliament Square, alongside the flags of Commonwealth nations along Horse Guards, and Union flags along the Mall. This is since the 80th anniversary commemorations of VE Day in May, and with the upcoming state visit by President Macron of France, they will continue to fly.

The practice of Departments flying the Pride flag, which the hon. Gentleman referred to, or other LGBTQ+ representative flags, has increased since March 2014, when the Cabinet Office flew the six-stripe rainbow flag to mark the first same-sex weddings taking place in Britain. The then Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, said at the time:

“Raising the rainbow flag on Whitehall is a small symbol to celebrate a massive achievement.”

After that, more Departments have chosen to fly it. That does come from a conscious decision of the elected Government of the day, but I want to acknowledge that over time the Government approach to decision making for flag flying from Government buildings and the implementation of central guidance have developed organically, following the policies of successive Governments. That has enabled individual Government buildings to select and fly flags whose meaning is rooted in their Department's specific remit, or that have particular significance.

Although the Government's primary duty in relation to flag flying from Government buildings is to celebrate and encourage the Union flag as a symbol of the UK as a whole, we are working with officials to consider whether further central guidance to Departments regarding flag flying may be helpful to ensure that decisions and implementation by Departments are as consistent and transparent as possible. That would mirror the approach taken at local level. In the time that I have left, I want to echo the hon. Gentleman's comments on historic counties and how local decision makers do know best.

In relation to Government buildings, we acknowledge that the individual processes for decisions on flags will vary and could benefit from further accountability and transparency. I am a very passionate believer in the Union flag. I have it displayed in both my offices—here in Westminster and in the constituency. One of my formative memories is of drawing a St George's flag to fly when England were in the semi-finals of Euro '96, although sadly it did not have the desired effect. And as Minister for VE and victory over Japan commemorations, I have been encouraging local communities to display Union flag bunting as part of local events. I know the joy that it brings to many.

Flag flying on public buildings is an emotive subject, and we respect the strongly held views of people across the country who want to see it represent our unique strengths as communities, regions and a nation. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Romford for bringing to the House this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Access to Banking Hubs: Hertfordshire

4.30 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to banking hubs in Hertfordshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank Clementine Manning from my office for the extensive work she has put into researching for this speech and many of my other contributions to the House. I urge colleagues to be gentle with me; this is my first Westminster Hall debate, and I have yet to learn how to do these things properly. I am grateful that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is here to show me the way, with hopefully an intervention in due course.

Access to banking services is essential for everyone across the country, and more and more our rural and semi-rural areas are seeing their access to banking services reduced. That is a particular issue for those who are unable to use technology to access online banking, and I know that many who are able to use online banking still feel more reassured if they are able to carry out banking activities face-to-face. Having seen the immensely positive impact that increased access to banking services through the post office has had in Rickmansworth in my constituency of South West Hertfordshire, I am campaigning for the establishment of a banking hub in Abbots Langley, another area in my constituency, to ensure that as many of my constituents as possible are able to access these essential services. I appreciate that everyone else here wants the same.

Hertfordshire in particular has felt the impact of the withdrawal of banking services, as, despite there being over 160 banking hubs now opened, just four are in Hertfordshire, with none in my constituency. Rural areas are twice as likely to depend on their local post office for cash and banking services, and it is essential that people in those areas are not left behind. Post offices have always been, and remain, critical assets to our communities, providing essential services. I have had the pleasure of meeting local postmasters in Abbots Langley and Rickmansworth, as well as visiting a Royal Mail distribution centre, to learn more about the sheer volume of service provided by their hard workers. From speaking to those postmasters, the essential role that they play in supporting our communities in all ways is clear. With many people unable to use technology, or simply more comfortable with face-to-face provision, the provision of banking hubs is just one of those essential services.

In the UK as a whole, 99% of the population live within three miles of a post office branch, as do 97.9% of the UK's rural population. Post offices also make up more than 66% of all branch-based cash access points in the UK. That is particularly relevant because of the decline in the number of bank branches. This is not just an issue in Hertfordshire or my constituency; across the UK, we have seen 6,200 bank or building society branch closures since 2015. In my constituency of South West Hertfordshire, 89% of banks have closed since 2015, leaving us with only a Nationwide in Rickmansworth.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend is right that this is a problem felt across Britain, as banks abandon their customers and

close branches in my constituency in Crowland, the Deepings, Holbeach, Long Sutton and Sutton Bridge. The key thing about this issue is that it affects those least able to bank online; it also affects all of us who believe that banking should be an experience where people meet other people and personal service counts. I thank my hon. Friend for this debate. I call on the Minister to have more banking hubs, as the Payment Choice Alliance has requested—I hope she will say that when she sums up.

Mr Mohindra: My right hon. Friend has obviously had early sight of my speech, because I was going to get on to exactly that about human interaction, but I will let colleagues hold off for a few minutes while I carry on the main body of my speech. As my right hon. Friend said, the situation is deeply desperate, but sadly, not unique to South West Herts. I know other Members in this House will be feeling similar circumstances, as one in seven constituencies across the UK have only one bank or no bank at all.

Access to cash is essential, and it is important that we retain the ability to withdraw and deposit cash to support that, particularly as that allows those who do not use online banking to keep an eye on their personal finances. The post office supports this vital service and is essential for people in my area. On average, £1.6 million is withdrawn from post offices in my constituency every month, while £3.5 million is deposited. Although the post office provides an amazing service, a banking hub in a post office gives people proper support. We must prevent the closure of post offices, many of which are now run by a single person and are not necessarily profitable. It would be a great damage to all our areas if post offices were to close too.

Although post offices such as the one in Rickmansworth have stepped up to provide greater banking services than those normally available, we cannot expect our constituents to rely on post offices to replace the banks if there is no banking hub in place, as they do not provide the same level of service. Although Rickmansworth is fortunate to have some banking services available via the post office, as well as in the Nationwide branch, since I was elected in 2019 South West Hertfordshire has lost NatWest, Barclays and Santander in Rickmansworth.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point about the need for in-person banking services. In my constituency, we have experienced exactly what he has described in the south-east of England. My experience is that many who are vulnerable, or overwhelmed by getting into the town centre or have mobility problems are particularly affected, and so are many small businesses that deal in cash. Would the hon. Gentleman like to comment further on the need for those groups to be better served?

Mr Mohindra: Once again, an hon. Member has pre-empted part of my speech. As the hon. Gentleman alludes to, the issue is not specific to the south-east, but occurs across the country. I look forward to reassurance from the Minister in her speech.

The situation is worse in other parts of my constituency. Many of my residents do not have access to any banking services on their high street. That is particularly the case in Abbots Langley where, in 2021, the Barclays branch closed, leaving residents in the town and surrounding

area with no access to banking services. The issue matters greatly to people in my constituency. I joined forces with our local Conservative councillors, Vicky Edwards and Ian Campbell, to support a campaign to bring a banking hub to the post office on the high street. I met with the local postmaster and Vicky and Ian recently to discuss the value that would bring to constituents.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I have had similar challenges in my constituency in the Scottish Borders. Like him, I have been campaigning for banking hubs—in Selkirk and Eyemouth. Indeed, I presented a petition in the House of Commons a few weeks ago. The banking hub we have in Jedburgh is working very well, but part of the problem for getting new banking hubs is the criteria that Link uses to determine whether a community is suitable. Does my hon. Friend share my concerns, and will he put further pressure on the Minister to persuade Link to extend the criteria, so that more communities can get the benefit of banking hubs?

Mr Mohindra: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents. Part of my remarks today, and I am sure of others' later in the debate, concerns that exact point about increasing flexibility. We must not create criteria for banking hubs that do not necessarily solve the problem; we are trying to solve access to cash and banking services for all our constituents, irrespective of where they live.

More than 1,300 residents have already signed a petition in support of our campaign in Abbots Langley for a banking hub. I continue to push hard for that to be achieved, as that area in my community would greatly benefit from a banking hub as an obvious solution to the current lack of access those residents have.

Returning to the importance of access to cash, it is essential that the key service provided by banks continues to be available to people. I appreciate that we are moving increasingly towards a cashless society. It is rare now to find a shop that does not accept card payments, or indeed accepts cash at all. The idea of carrying emergency cash may, for many of us, seem less common. As someone with a background in small business, I understand the importance of cash for small and medium-sized businesses. Although ATMs make cash available to the wider population, it is not the same as the face-to-face interaction that a banking hub provides. I am glad that the major banks have recently signed a five-year access to cash deal with the Post Office to allow free withdrawals and deposit of cash, but that is a small step compared with the need for the services that banking hubs provide.

Of small businesses, 28% use cash at least weekly, and with more than 5,500 small businesses in South West Hertfordshire, banking facilities are not a service they can go without. Ahead of the debate, I thought it was important to speak to local businesses in my area. I contacted businesses across Abbots Langley, Rickmansworth and Kings Langley for their views on banking services and the role that cash plays in their everyday business. Many of the businesses I engaged with supported banking hubs, because they regularly need to deposit cash. Business owners in Abbots Langley told me that because they have no access to banking

services, they often have to travel long distances to Watford to deposit large amounts of cash, which is time-consuming and potentially unsafe. That would be solved if Abbots Langley had a banking hub.

Small business owners are not the only group affected by the digital exclusion that comes with the loss of high street banks. Nearly a third of people over the age of 65 across the UK say that they feel uncomfortable using online banking, particularly for large or delicate transactions. Some 19% of people in my constituency are over 65. Having a banking hub allows the elderly and vulnerable to feel more comfortable, because they can access and deal with their finances in person. It is great that people often feel that they can trust their postmaster. Again, this may be some of the only social interaction that many people have, and it benefits their mental health and wellbeing.

It is not just the elderly who are affected by the move towards a cashless society. I have long advocated ensuring that the infrastructure in South West Hertfordshire, including essential services such as banking, is accessible for everyone. Those with a disability or impairment are also being impacted by the move away from high street banks. In a recent survey of a group of 2,700 people who had a disability or impairment, more than half said they had been negatively impacted by bank closures. They struggle with security features, authentication checks and speaking to their bank over the phone. They are simply left with no other alternative, and should not be forced to travel to other towns, often on unreliable, infrequent public transport, simply to access their money.

More than 1 million people in the UK rely wholly on cash, and 8 million adults report that they would struggle in a completely cashless society. For the elderly and the vulnerable, the opening of local banking hubs reduces the risk of their becoming victims of financial abuse and allows them to remain independent. As I have said, post offices and the postmasters who run them are often more than just a post service. They see their regulars frequently, and will notice if someone has not been seen or does not look well. They are not healthcare professionals, but they are another set of eyes and ears that can tell how customers are doing.

The process of opening a banking hub is currently undertaken by Cash Access UK, Link and supporting banks, and I look forward to meeting with Link shortly to begin discussions about getting a banking hub in Abbots Langley. I previously discussed the process with other colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), who expressed concerns about the parameters that are used to determine whether an area qualifies for a banking hub.

Matt Rodda: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point about this issue. My experience is that the criteria appear to be drawn too tightly, and that there is perhaps a lack of appreciation of the scale of need in some areas. In my own area, although there is frequent public transport from the Reading suburb of Caversham to the town centre, Caversham falls 1 minute outside the minimum criterion for travel time, yet it has thousands and thousands of residents, as well as a significant older and disabled population. Surely it would be wise for Link to consider the broader context, not just travel time.

Mr Mohindra: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, which I think will be echoed in later contributions. The criteria feel too stringent. With the Minister's support, I hope that conversations with Link and others will mean that the criteria are a bit more flexible, so that banking hubs are accessible to all, rather than just fitting an arbitrary parameter.

I have already expressed my concerns about the parameters used to determine whether an area qualifies for a banking hub, and I will emphasise in my meeting the importance of ensuring that the proximity of Abbots Langley to Watford should not prevent it from getting a banking hub, for the reasons that I have already outlined.

The problem with semi-rural areas such as mine—and Reading, by the sound of it—is that the criteria established by Link for determining the need to set up a new banking hub are likely to miss areas such as Abbots Langley, because they focus on when the last bank branch in a town closed. Abbots Langley is a village that has not had a bank for a very long time. I will raise this with Link in my meeting, especially because villages and smaller communities have been disproportionately affected by bank closures, losing 70% of their banking network since 2015 compared with less than 50% in urban areas.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): After a long campaign, we have finally been successful in securing a banking hub in Ilkley, despite having to wait for the last bank to announce its closure. However, securing access to cash is not just about securing a banking hub; it is about securing an ATM that people can access when the hub is closed. We found that, unfortunately, Cash Access UK and Link, which decide applications for hubs, have determined that we should not need an ATM on the outside of the building. Does my hon. Friend agree with me about the importance of such an out-of-hours facility?

Mr Mohindra: My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for his community, and his point about access to cash outside of office hours is really important. One of my community's frustrations is that while they may have access to an ATM, the money runs out very quickly on, say, a Saturday morning, so if someone needed cash on a Sunday, they would have to travel further, because that cash machine would not be restocked until the following Monday. I agree with my hon. Friend and hope the Minister will take on board his point that it is about not just having a banking hub, but making sure that ATMs are available and stocked with cash at all times.

Link has deviated from its standard framework for approving banking hubs in around 32 locations so far, and I hope that that could be the case in my area. I am sure that the hon. Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and others will encourage it to consider the exceptional circumstances in their own areas. The alternative to the establishment of a banking hub is for Abbots Langley post office to get enhanced banking services, such as a deposit service, similar to the one that was set up in Rickmansworth following the closures there.

The Government should be doing more to ensure that all UK residents have access to adequate banking facilities. I will continue to work with local post offices,

banks such as NatWest and Barclays, and Link to bring more banking hubs to my constituency, and I know that others in the Chamber are doing the same. We cannot allow our high streets and residents to be without access to financial services, and I hope to see the Government do more to support this endeavour.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order. I suggest that Members limit themselves to five minutes.

4.47 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) for securing this very important debate.

In recent years, banking services have been withdrawing from my constituency. Every single high street has seen bank branches close, and we now have fewer of them, but Cheshunt has borne the brunt. Cheshunt is a busy town of 40,000 people, right in the heart of my constituency, but not a single bank branch remains. That simply cannot be right.

The lack of in-person banking facilities is depriving individuals and businesses of access to vital services and, for so many older and vulnerable people, causing huge difficulty and frustration as they are forced to use digital services and smartphone apps. My own nan is one of them, and she is not happy about it. Across Broxbourne, more than 3,000 people are living with sight loss, and that group is particularly reliant on in-person banking services. Many cannot use online banking at all, and they feel the pressure that not being digitally connected puts on them. That is why they like going into a bank branch, to get help from a real person to access their cash. They might specifically pick a bank with a branch on the high street, but if it closes, some banks now require customers to use an app to get a code in order to speak to the bank over the phone. That does not solve the issue.

It is the sensible view of me and my constituents that Broxbourne needs a banking hub and, in particular, that the town of Cheshunt would be the perfect place for one, as it is right in the middle of my constituency. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire mentioned, the process for securing a banking hub is far from sensible.

Link has told me that Cheshunt does not meet the criteria for a hub because

“there are already cash access services and facilities within a 1-mile radius which are suitable for the needs of the local area”

and “the deficiency does not” affect my constituents enough. Well, not having a bank really does affect my constituents. This is typical civil service protocol on where policies should be implemented and where they should not be. The rules simply need to change.

Link points out that my constituents can take a 15-minute bus journey to Waltham Cross, where a handful of banks remain for now, but do not get me started on the state of the bus services in Broxbourne. It is true that there are bus stops in the precise centre of Cheshunt and a few of my constituents will be able to get a bus—if it turns up and it is on time. In most cases, buses simply do not turn up on time or do not turn up at all.

However, the vast majority of the people of Cheshunt do not live on top of a bus stop. Link has told me that journey times of less than 15 minutes are deemed acceptable, but many of my constituents living in residential areas off the high street, in neighbourhoods of Cheshunt such as Flamstead End, Rosedale or Bury Green, or in the village of Goffs Oak have much longer journeys even to board a bus, let alone to travel to a bank. That is not acknowledged at all in the assessment process, which uses only an

“approximation of the centre of the high street”.

That is not acceptable; it does not reflect the wider catchment area of towns such as Cheshunt and the role that Cheshunt serves for my constituents.

The criteria need to change to ensure that any town that wants a banking hub can have one. Surely that is within the Minister's gift. I thank her for meeting me recently to discuss my campaign to get a banking hub in Cheshunt, but every time that I have asked for one, I have been told that we do not meet the access to cash criteria and that there is nothing the Government can do about it—they simply wash their hands of it. I was told in a written answer that it is all down to Link, or the financial services sector, or the Financial Conduct Authority. Well, I have met Link and it tells that it cannot help; I have met the Financial Conduct Authority and it says that it is up to the Government to change the law. Will it really take the closure of every bank in my constituency before we are even considered for a banking hub? It looks inevitable that that day will come.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about banking services in Hertfordshire, but I want to make a broader point about the criteria for allowing banking hubs. To be fair to the Minister, she has engaged well with me, too, but surely the point has come for Government intervention, to try to persuade—or tell—Link that the rules have to change, because they are no longer fit for purpose, and that those communities that desperately need these banking hubs should be allowed to have them.

Lewis Cocking: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and I completely agree. Now is the time to change the rules and it is up to the Government to step up, be accountable to the electorate they serve and change the rules, rather than hiding behind unaccountable bodies such as Link, which do not determine the rules but just sit in their ivory towers and say, “This looks good on paper,” when it does not work in reality. I hope that the Minister will commit to go away and change the rules so that we can get more banking hubs open, not just in Hertfordshire but across the United Kingdom as a whole.

4.53 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) for securing this important debate.

I begin by acknowledging that my constituency does not fall within the boundaries of Hertfordshire; it is slightly further north. However, as we have heard, the issue of access to banking hubs is an important one across the UK. My constituents, like those of the other hon. Members here today, understand the difficulties brought about by banks closing. Older constituents

who have no access to digital equipment or services are often the worst affected. For some, their family members step in to support them with things such as making NHS appointments, but for many, handing over control of their banking feels like a step too far and a loss of independence. Others have no family nearby to help. Being pushed to use complex online banking is not always appropriate for these customers.

In addition, as we have heard, the ability to deposit cash is crucial for many local businesses, and with the closure of more and more post offices, it is a growing problem. Despite having many elderly residents, Bearsden in my constituency has lost all its bank branches and it appears that there is no access to an ATM. There are also no plans for a banking hub there.

The Government have made assurances that by 2029 banks will have set up 350 banking hubs. The truth is that that is woefully inadequate and much too slow. The number of bank branches operating dropped from almost 15,000 in 1986 to just 5,745 by 2023.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady is making a powerful point and she is right about the number. The Payment Choice Alliance, to which I have already referred, estimates that if every community with a population of 5,000 or more were provided with a banking hub, there would be about 1,200 of them. Ministers want solutions, not just questions, and that is a solution. I invite the Minister to consider that: any community with a population of 5,000 or more that does not have a bank should have a hub. I think that would be reasonable.

Susan Murray: I thank the right hon. Member for making a good point for the Minister to consider.

The closure of branches and their replacement with only 350 hubs represents nothing more than big banks trying to increase their profits further at the expense of their customers. That is not just a mild inconvenience; it presents a serious accessibility issue, as we have heard. For the disabled, the elderly and those without technical know-how, bank branches are often a vital resource.

John Lamont: In addition to some customers not being comfortable using digital, some are unable to do so because they do not have broadband. I am sure the hon. Lady's constituency is like mine. For some communities, if the bank branch has gone, using the banking app is not possible because the broadband capability is not there.

Susan Murray: The hon. Gentleman is correct. Even in my constituency of Mid Dunbartonshire, we have dark spots where people cannot access wi-fi. That is an important point.

A vital local resource, banks allow people to deposit cash and cheques, withdraw their money or check their details, and get help from staff. To allow the closure of banks without suitable access to a replacement banking hub is not just inconvenient; it is a step backwards for equality. With that in mind, I urge the Minister to look at the Liberal Democrat proposal for a financial inclusion strategy that would ensure that the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority take into account financial inclusion. That would help to protect access to cash for those who need it, ensure that rural communities are not excluded from accessing resources and, importantly, support banking hubs.

4.58 pm

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) for securing the debate. Banking hubs are really important in his constituency, as they are in rural constituencies across the country, including mine.

My constituency is 700 square miles of the most beautiful towns and villages, which are a delight. With that beauty and tranquillity come remoteness and lack of connectivity for many people, who can feel isolated. We have seen the decline of the high street bank over years. Some services that we took for granted are no longer available, though they are still of huge importance to local communities.

We recently lost Lloyds banks in Bridgnorth and Ludlow, which is seen as a major loss to both towns. I was quick to launch a survey to find out what residents thought. They were overwhelmingly upset, because they still require face-to-face services and access to cash. We were fortunate that Dudley Building Society came to Bridgnorth recently, opening a branch just opposite my office, but it does not offer the full service of traditional banks, and setting up banking hubs, which is hard to do, is not viable at the moment.

I wrote to many organisations to see what support we could get on our high street. Link came back to me and said it had conducted an assessment—as many Members have said—but it did not recommend any additional services in any of my rural towns. It believed that there was adequate access to cash and banking services for local residents in all those areas. I disagree with that.

Bridgnorth is served by Nationwide and HSBC, while Ludlow has NatWest and Nationwide. However, if people are not with those banks, they are stuck. They might have been with Lloyds for years, only to find that they have to travel to Wolverhampton—or, if they are in Ludlow, to Hereford, which is probably 40 minutes away. That is not suitable for everyone. This is a reactive approach, just watching the decline of our high street. We should change the regulation so that we can be proactive and allow Link to put services into the high street. I do not want to wait for every bank to close before we can get a banking hub. That is not the right approach.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for his part in this largely harmonious debate—although I challenge him briefly on which is the most beautiful constituency. I represent a constituency similar to his in many ways. The hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) registered the point about flexibility and Link. When that situation arises, the impact falls not just on those living within the tightly drawn parameters that Link draws, but on the more rural towns and villages that lie just outside those one-minute, 10-minute or 20-minute commuting distances. A hub would help businesses there, including hospitality businesses. Prudhoe in my constituency has just lost a branch, meaning that businesses have to go often from the borders of County Durham into Newcastle to access their bank of choice. Adding to the flexibility would be incredibly valuable and would grow and benefit the wider rural economy.

Stuart Anderson: The hon. Member is right; I said that people have to go 40 minutes from Ludlow to Hereford, but some might take 20 minutes to get to Ludlow.

Given the inaccessibility of remote areas and rural towns, the system is not working. When the Minister sums up the debate, I would appreciate it if she could address the issue of how Link assesses access to banking hubs and the criteria used, and if she could tell me what support she can provide to get more banking hubs in South Shropshire.

5.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I commend the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) for securing this debate. He said that it is his first Westminster Hall debate; no doubt, now that he has the taste for it, he will be back next week for another one. I jest, of course, but I am sure that he will be back at some time in the future.

I am a strong supporter of banking hubs and offering communities the service that they deserve, so it is great to be present both to support the hon. Gentleman, and to ask the Minister for help constructively across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Banks are not closing just in South West Hertfordshire; they are closing everywhere else in the United Kingdom. Over the past six or seven years, 11 banks have closed in my constituency. We feel the pain of that even today.

Speaking locally, from the point of view of my constituency, local high streets in Northern Ireland have witnessed a series of banking closures over the past 12 to 24 months. The Ards peninsula, where I live, is a banking desert. All the banks that were on the peninsula have closed. In fairness, they have been replaced by two credit unions, and the post offices have been strengthened, so there are some things to fall back on—but the banks on the Ards peninsula are all away. They went to other towns and bigger cities, which do not have the same accessibility for those who need them, especially those who are vulnerable, elderly and isolated. The hon. Gentleman mentioned bus services, but they are not always available to get to the banks or even to the cities, so the accessibility of the services is limited.

Banking and post office services are used daily and are essential to the lives of our constituents. Northern Ireland has a range of banking hubs across the province. This year, it was announced that two are to be developed in my constituency. One has opened in Comber. It is in an excellent location, exactly in the centre of the town. The post office is there, and the four banks—two of which used to operate in the town—do a half-day each in the Comber hub. From the point of view of a potentially good service, the hub is a step in the right direction. The other hub, in Ballynahinch, is to open shortly as well. The same offer will be available there; the banks that were in the town will do a half-day each and the post office is available within that. Will that meet all the banking requests that people have? Probably not—but it does, by and large, give people access to the banks.

The problem I have with bank hubs is that, between when the banks closed and when the hubs were instated, there was a time of perhaps two years. Cash Access UK is delivering those hubs to support residents with the services that they require. We undertake a lot of discussion nowadays on digital inclusion and exclusion. While it is

great that we as a society are able to modernise, that does sometimes mean our elderly population, who are used to doing things a certain way, are left behind. Face-to-face services that are accessible for them are imperative. I hope that in future we can look to a greater scope of hubs across the UK, which will also increase employment in local areas.

I conclude with this comment as an example of the problem we are facing: last year one of my staff bought her first house, and her solicitor required a printed statement from her help to buy ISA for Barclays bank. The Barclays in Newtownards, where she lives, closed in 2023. The Barclays mobile service in Bangor, around a 15-minute drive away, could not carry out that function as it did not have the services available. She had to travel to the centre of Belfast, which is 40 minutes by car, to obtain a single, one-sided document. Banking hubs and mobile vans are great, but they must be accessible in terms of what services they can carry out for people; otherwise, in many cases, there is no convenience. Banking hubs delivers some things, but they do not deliver them all.

5.6 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) on securing his first debate, and securing such an important one. It is a pleasure for me to respond on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, and as a fellow Hertfordshire MP.

I have been particularly struck by the number of contributions from colleagues who have highlighted just how important access to cash is for so many people, particularly older people, small businesses and people with disabilities. I know from my own experience supporting somebody who is learning disabled that, even in a physical bank, the design and signage can be incredibly confusing and put people off—let alone when banking online, even if they have the internet to do so. We would all welcome comments from the Minister about what more the Government can do to support people who are not digitally confident, and in areas where people are digitally excluded.

We Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's move to introduce more banking hubs and their promise to set up 350 banking hubs by 2029. We continue to call on the Government to do more to protect access to cash and face-to-face banking services. I know that the Government will shortly be introducing a national financial inclusion strategy, so I repeat the calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) and ask the Minister to confirm today whether that strategy will include measures to ensure that both the Financial Conduct Authority and Prudential Regulation Authority will be required to have regard to financial inclusion. I also ask the Minister whether the Government are able to guarantee that they will at least consider expanding the roll-out of banking hubs beyond the 350 target if they consider that that is needed.

We Liberal Democrats welcome the changes made last September to the eligibility criteria, which previously excluded towns and villages with a building society, even if that building society did not provide business banking services. That change has enabled Liberal Democrat-led Harpenden town council to open a new

banking hub in the town hall. I give credit to local resident and campaigner Derek French, who has been a real driving force in that constituency. I know that colleagues in the town, which is very near to St Albans, are working with the Post Office, Cash Access UK and other partners to find a permanent home for that well-used hub. I congratulate the town council and Derek French on driving that fantastic project forward.

I understand the frustration of residents in Abbots Langley, which is not too far from St Albans, because residents there lost their last remaining bank, the Barclays branch, in 2021. I know that Liberal Democrat-run Three Rivers district council is keen to support the efforts of the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire in his campaign to secure a banking hub in the village, and I would certainly encourage him to reach out to work on a cross-party basis, as we often do in Hertfordshire. Across Hertfordshire, my Liberal Democrat colleagues have been hugely supportive of the temporary banking hubs in Hatfield and Royston and are keen to make sure that those hubs get permanent homes.

In St Albans, we are fortunate to still have a number of banks and building society branches on our main high street, but many businesses rely on the incredibly busy and conveniently located Crown post office branch on St Peter's Street for banking and cash-handling services. As the Minister may know, Post Office Limited has been proceeding at pace with plans to sell off the Crown post office branches, and we have had confirmation that ours will soon be put out to franchise. Will the Minister make sure that Post Office Limited guarantees access to personal and business banking services on our high streets when the final Crown post office branches disappear in the coming months? The villages around St Albans—Colney Heath and London Colney, for example—also rely on their local post office branches for basic banking services and access to cash.

Finally, many areas that do not have branches, banking hubs or post offices have to rely on ATMs for access to cash. We have heard from a number of Members during the debate that, for many communities, it is frustrating not to be able to access cash outside core hours—and, of course, many ATMs are inaccessible for disabled people. The Royal National Institute of Blind People reports that fewer than four in 10 ATMs have audio assistance, which is critical to enable their use by the blind and partially sighted, and often machines are out of reach for wheelchair users or those with other impaired mobility.

Once again, I congratulate my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire, on securing this valuable debate. We can all agree that banking hubs are a lifeline in rural and semi-rural areas, essential to our high streets and vital to make banking inclusive for all.

5.11 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your talented leadership, Sir Desmond. It is very good to be here. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra). This may be his debut debate in Westminster Hall, but I am sure that it is the first of many. He has always been a champion for his constituency and I am surprised that he has not been here a thousand times before. As he eloquently put it in his opening

[Mark Garnier]

remarks, banking hubs show why banking must remain at the heart of all our communities, and we should cherish the role of banks in our society.

I have long been a huge fan of the banks, having been on the banking commission, which was a great opportunity to see just how important they are. We all talk about their importance for banking local businesses and local communities, but banks perform two extraordinarily complicated functions. The first is taking money from where it has accumulated and delivering it to where it is needed—for loans for businesses and all the rest. But they also do something else—they are almost like Doctor Who in their ability to transform time. They take money that has been put on deposit overnight and turn it into a 25-year mortgage that pays for all our constituents to buy their homes and bring up their families. We must never forget how incredibly important banks are.

The previous Government recognised the importance of maintaining essential banking services as a foundation for public confidence in the sector. We provided a system of free and convenient access to banking through Post Office's branch network. The banking framework partnership between Post Office and more than 30 of the UK's banks and building societies means that consumers and businesses can access banking services through the Post Office network where there is not an alternative bank. Post Office now has more branches than all the banks and building societies combined. I hope the Minister agrees that the banking framework was a real success story—one of many success stories, by the way—of the previous Government.

However, we in the previous Government also recognised that post offices do not completely fill the hole left by the loss of the high street bank. That is why we also introduced banking hubs, as we have heard today, which have been a successful concept where they have been delivered. I welcome the fact that the new Government have now embraced the idea and set an ambition to deliver hubs across the country by 2030—I understood it to be 500, although the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), said that it was 350, so it would be helpful if the Minister clarified exactly how many the Government are hoping to have.

The new hubs, whether there are 350 or 500, are a new solution to meet wider banking needs, particularly in communities where the last bank branch has closed. Members have made many eloquent points about the decline of banking services in their constituencies. In my constituency, adjacent to that of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson), Stourport-on-Severn, my second biggest town, has just one bank left—a TSB—and Bewdley, the third biggest town, now has no banks at all.

I hope the Minister will address how Members could be more involved in deciding where new banking hubs will be located—that is an important point. I am sure that all Members would like to have input and make representations to get these services in every constituency. Local knowledge and community engagement must be at the heart of these decisions. That is why Members of Parliament, as the elected representatives of these communities, must be part of that process.

Banking is rightly a commercial sector, so I would also like to hear how the Minister can encourage banks to deliver their own innovations. For instance, the multi-bank kiosk proposed by the Building Societies Association has already been piloted. With a cost of just one third of a traditional banking hub, the kiosks offer a cost-effective, building society-led solution that could work alongside banking hubs in areas that have a strong mutual presence but lack a high street bank. Will the Government support the expansion of the kiosks and encourage more private sector innovation alongside banking hubs?

I do not want to hold the room for too long, so I will draw my words to a close. Today's debate and the recent Backbench Business debate on high street banks have shown just how much Members support high street banking services. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government will support our high street banking services. Once more, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire for the extraordinary hard work he does for his constituents.

5.16 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): It is a great pleasure to serve under your excellent chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra); this may be his first Westminster Hall debate, but I am sure it will be the first of many. Can I just say how much I enjoy the debates in Westminster Hall? We often get a bit more time to express opinions, and the Government can give a greater degree of detail than I certainly could in the Backbench Business debate on the Floor of the House a few weeks ago.

I thank all the hon. Members present, who have come from beyond Hertfordshire, if my geography is good. I know the beautiful rural areas of Shropshire extremely well because I have family there. When the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) was talking, I could not suppress a smile at his description of the beautiful hills of Shropshire, which is where I spend many of my recesses with my children. My parents live in his constituency, in the beautiful town of Ludlow. I could go on, but I had better stop there.

From Shropshire to Strangford and beyond, we have heard perspectives from different parts of the country. I have met many hon. Members who have championed their constituencies and campaigned for banking hubs. It was good to hear from the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), who is a doughty champion. We have had a number of discussions in private and in the House, as well as in written questions. I know he has real concerns, and is campaigning, particularly, for the banking hub in Cheshunt. It was good to hear from the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray), who stressed the importance of rural areas, which I will come back to. The hon. Member for South Shropshire also mentioned that, referring to his 700 miles of beautiful countryside. He also asked about the criteria for the Link assessment, as did other hon. Members.

It is always a pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He often asks difficult questions on a variety of subjects. The way in which he is able to range across different subjects in the House is really quite impressive. He talked about digital inclusion and exclusion, as did other hon. Members, and I will

come back to that. I thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper); I met her constituent Derek French, who is a doughty campaigner for access to cash and banking. I pay tribute to his work.

Daisy Cooper: Derek French is a constituent in my neighbouring constituency of Harpenden and Berkhamsted—I just want to put that on the record. Harpenden very proudly defends its independence from St Albans and I do not want anybody to be inadvertently offended by my trying to secure some recognition from the Minister in the House, but I thank her for her congratulations.

Emma Reynolds: I am grateful for the correction. I would not like to get in trouble with the hon. Members that represent different parts of Hertfordshire, not least our Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), who also represents a constituency there. I have better knowledge of Buckinghamshire, which is nearby, but I thank her for that correction to the record. I do not want to get in trouble with the hon. Lady's colleague, the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins), who was very active in our previous debate on this issue.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), for his speech. I will come back to the points that he made in a moment. I also thank, for their interventions, my hon. Friends the Members for Hexham (Joe Morris) and for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), and the hon. Members for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). I have met some of them separately to this debate.

I thank again the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire—I was going to call him my hon. Friend; the debate feels very friendly. I have looked in detail at his constituency, thanks to his calling this debate, which is always a benefit of having such Westminster Hall debates, as he will attest to. I have had a look at Abbots Langley and Rickmansworth. I often go through his constituency on the way home, particularly the Rickmansworth area. They are very different parts of the constituency, from what I can see, in terms of the scale of the population and the number of shops in those areas. In Abbots Langley, I am told—he can correct me if this is not true—that there has been no community access request, as of our information. So if he does want to campaign for a banking hub there, it is open to him and his colleagues on the council he mentioned to request such a thing. Equally, I know he has an enhanced post office in Rickmansworth. Again, it is open to him or others in the community to make the application so that Link would assess the criteria.

Mr Mohindra: I thank the Minister for her summing up. In terms of Abbots Langley, she is correct that the post office has not yet put in an application. It was first establishing the criteria and trying to learn lessons from others. The postmaster is now in a position to actively pursue that, and part of my local campaign is to support that. I hope the Minister will give her blessing and potentially a letter of support, if that is within reason, to ensure that Link and others think that is practical. In terms of the Rickmansworth one, she is correct. It is an enhanced banking hub rather than a full banking hub, as the debate suggests.

Emma Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman will have to excuse me; I cannot offer letters of support. If I were to do that, there would be a number of letters that I would be writing. The Link assessment is independent and is what the previous Government set up and legislated for, in terms of access to cash. I will come on to that in a moment, if that is okay, and give him some more clarification on that.

We need to recognise that the landscape for retail banking has changed significantly in recent years, turbocharged by the pandemic. For example, last year we had 93% of people with current accounts access their bank online or via a mobile app. That obviously does not include the nan of the hon. Member for Broxbourne, who I have heard about on numerous occasions, but there are lots of people who access their banking in that manner. There has also been a shift among older customers, with 83% of those aged over 75 now using online or mobile banking, compared with just 27% in 2017. That is a marked shift.

We know, however, that there are vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and people with disabilities, who very much appreciate and value in-person banking. Branches can act as anchors in a local community and are very important to small businesses, as several hon. Members mentioned, not least the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire. When a high street branch closes, particularly the last branch on the high street, it can be a real blow to an area, especially where the alternatives are limited.

That is why the Government, when we were in opposition and formulating our manifesto, secured the industry's commitment to roll out 350 banking hubs—that is in totality. I say to the hon. Member for St Albans that that is not a limit, and actually, we are quite far along that journey. We have 230 that have already been agreed, and more than 170 are open. That includes 108 that have been open since the general election, and we are not even a year into our Government. We promised 350 by the end of the Parliament, but we are running much more quickly than that. I hope that we will surpass 350 by the end of the Parliament.

Robbie Moore: I would like to put on record my thanks to the Minister for her interaction with me in my endeavours to get a banking hub in Ilkley. Could I ask the Minister about the assessment criteria that Link and Cash Access UK are using? Is it the right course to get to the point where we are relying on the final bank to close before we start looking at applications? Secondly, does the Minister not feel it is right that when we do manage to secure a banking hub, an ATM could be located on the outside of that banking hub so that people could access cash out of hours?

Emma Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman brings me to the meat of my speech, which I must move on to, as I do not have very long left. I always get lulled into a false sense of security in Westminster Hall, where I think I have quite a long time to speak. I made the position very clear on the Floor of the House a couple of weeks ago, when we had a similar debate. The hon. Gentleman will know that under the previous Government's Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, Parliament legislated to protect reasonable access to cash. Specifically, Parliament gave the Financial Conduct Authority new powers to

[Emma Reynolds]

ensure that communities could both withdraw and deposit cash, but that governs only access to cash; it did not include access to in-person banking.

The hon. Member asked about the Link criteria, an issue that has been raised in previous debates. The Government do not have the power to amend the assessment criteria. Any decisions on changes to Link's criteria for access to banking services are an independent matter for Link. As he will know, the set-up of banking hubs is a voluntary initiative by the banks. I visited a very good banking hub in Buckingham that has different community bankers coming in every day of the week, which works extremely well.

The hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire and others asked whether we are minded to change this situation. We continue to monitor it, and we have heard lots of concerns expressed today. I continue to meet hon. Members, and I have another session next week for those who, if they have not met with me, would like to. Currently, however, the Government are not minded to change the legislation. I am soon to meet John Howells, the chief executive of Link, and I have listened to the concerns of hon. Members, particularly those with rural constituencies, including the hon. Member for

Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk. I think that Link should take into account his point about the different rules for what is rural and what is urban.

I am running very low on time, and I am conscious that the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire should be allowed a brief wind-up. I promise to respond in writing to some of the questions asked about the Post Office in the debate.

5.29 pm

Mr Mohindra: I thank the Economic Secretary to the Treasury for that response. She will have heard the sentiment around the Chamber that all of us want to see more banking hubs throughout the country. Although the target of 350 may once have been ambitious, that does not mean we should not have more, especially if we already have 230 in place. I thank hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions and for making my first Westminster Hall debate so enjoyable.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered access to banking hubs in Hertfordshire.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 25 June 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Switzerland Free Trade Agreement Negotiations: Round 7

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The seventh round of negotiations on an enhanced free trade agreement with Switzerland took place in London between 5 and 13 June 2025.

Economic growth is our first mission in government and FTAs have an important role to play in achieving this. An enhanced trade agreement with Switzerland will support British businesses, back British jobs, and put more money in people's pockets.

Switzerland is the UK's 10th biggest trading partner and the UK-Swiss trade relationship was worth more than £45 billion in 2024. Services exports account for more than £18 billion of this, making Switzerland the UK's sixth largest services export partner. This included over £700 million from Scotland and £1 billion from the north-west in 2022. The trading relationship supported 130,000 services jobs across the UK in 2020.

An enhanced FTA with Switzerland aims to deliver long-term certainty for UK services firms, by locking in access to the Swiss market, guaranteeing the free flow of data and cementing business travel arrangements.

This round saw momentum in a number of areas:

Services and investment

Constructive discussions were held across services, including with regard to market access.

Negotiators also made good progress and agreed several key commitments in cross-border trade in services and domestic regulation. Progress was also made on financial services, with both sides confirming our shared ambition in this area.

On mobility, talks focused on long-term certainty for UK businesspersons travelling to and delivering services in Switzerland.

Innovation

Both sides discussed how the FTA can support trade in innovative goods and services. This could include mechanisms to bring together businesses, academia and Government to discuss ways to address any trade barriers and opportunities that arise from innovation in the future. This is an important request from businesses in the UK and Switzerland.

Intellectual property

During this round, the UK and Switzerland focused on geographical indications, with the aim of retaining the GIs already protected by the UK and Switzerland as well as establishing a streamlined process for the protection of new GIs. Negotiations will continue with the aim of agreeing a comprehensive framework for the protection of intellectual property.

Goods

Progress was made on goods market access as we continue the process of modernising the existing agreement. The 99% of UK goods exports to Switzerland by value are already tariff free. We reached provisional agreement on rules of origin which will make it easier for UK businesses to use imported materials in their exports to Switzerland through a new cumulation article and provide continuity by preserving the existing product specific rules.

We also reached provisional agreement during the round on policy areas including dispute settlement, development, consumer protection, animal welfare and anti-corruption.

Next steps

Round 8 of negotiations is set to take place in Switzerland in autumn 2025.

The Government are focused on securing outcomes in an enhanced FTA that boost economic growth for the UK and Ministers will continue to update Parliament on the progress of negotiations.

The Government will only ever sign a trade agreement which aligns with the UK's national interests, upholding our high standards across a range of sectors, alongside protections for the national health service.

[HCWS737]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health Inequalities: England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): Today I am updating the House on steps the Government will take to ensure the NHS is playing its part in tackling deep and long-standing inequalities in our country.

First, we are determined to better allocate funding to primary care providers in a way that reflects the additional complexity of delivering care in communities with high levels of ill health. GP practices serving more deprived areas receive on average 9.8% less funding per needs-adjusted patient than those in less deprived communities, despite having greater health needs and significantly higher patient-to-GP ratios. We recognise the importance of ensuring that funding for core services is distributed equitably between practices across the country. The Government will therefore commission a review of the Carr-Hill formula to ensure fairer allocation of resources to general practice. The Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation will also be asked to advise on how the setting of integrated care board allocations can better support the reduction of health inequalities to ensure that resources are targeted where they are most needed.

Secondly, I am confirming today that the Government intend to phase out deficit support funding starting from 2026-27. This funding was worth £2.2 billion in 2025-26. This change will help ensure that NHS funding is not simply directed to overspending systems, but instead reaches parts of the country where poor health outcomes and inequality are most concentrated. Details on how this change will be implemented will be set out in the medium-term planning information published later this year.

Thirdly, the Government will harness the role of the NHS as the nation's largest employer by launching a new £5 million widening access demonstrators programme. In 2025-26, funding will be allocated to 10 integrated care systems to support 1,000 people nationally, from working-class communities disproportionately affected by unemployment and economic inactivity, into roles in health or social care. Participants will receive tailored training and employment support to help them move into employment or further training, with a focus on supporting individuals into permanent or longer-term employment opportunities, including in roles such as healthcare support and pharmacy support, or as administrative or facilities staff.

These measures form part of our commitment to delivering a fairer, more accountable, and more effective NHS, with resources and opportunities focused on the areas and communities that need them most.

[HCWS738]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Safety: “Awaab’s Law” and Electrical Checks

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): The Government are clear that homes must, above all, be safe. Safety is non-negotiable, and landlords must take urgent action to respond to issues when they arise. We want housing providers to put the people who live in their homes at the heart of their mission, approaching their relationships with tenants with care and professionalism so that mutual trust and respect is established. While many landlords do deliver effectively for their tenants, we know this is not always the case, and in some circumstances tenants have felt completely let down. As such, establishing clear standards and requirements of social landlords, and timelines to meet those requirements, will eliminate uncertainty for both tenants and landlords helping to ensure all tenants can live in the safe homes they deserve.

To this end, the Government are today introducing two important pieces of safety legislation. “Awaab’s law”, laid in Parliament today, will put in place clear protections for tenants by making sure dangerous damp and mould and emergency hazards are addressed quickly. New electrical safety regulations, also laid in Parliament today, will ensure electrical safety checks are carried out at least every five years in the social rented sector. We also want the courts to be prepared for these changes, and we are committed to working with the Ministry of Justice on tackling claim farms to aid the justice system.

On 21 December 2020, two-year-old Awaab Ishak died as a result of a severe respiratory condition due to prolonged exposure to mould in his home. I pay heartfelt tribute to the resolute campaign that Awaab’s parents have led in their son’s name. Awaab’s tragic death was entirely preventable and has brought to light the acute need for reform within the sector, to make sure that such a tragedy never happens again.

Awaab’s law is a crucial piece of legislation that will empower residents to hold registered providers of social housing to account by law if they fail to act on hazards in social homes and make them safe within set timescales. This law will ensure that the relationship between landlord and tenant is strengthened, that social landlords take tenants’ concerns seriously, treat all residents with empathy and dignity and that tenants feel respected and heard.

The first phase of Awaab’s law will come into effect in October this year, covering damp and mould and all types of emergency hazards. Social landlords will have to respond to emergency hazards within 24 hours and there will be no excuse for delays. We are clear that protections must be in place to ensure we never see a repeat of this tragic case. Two further phases, which will extend the law to additional and then remaining hazards, will come into effect in 2026 and 2027 with corresponding regulation to be laid in due course.

I am determined to ensure this policy works effectively, creating a positive impact for all tenants and leaving a lasting legacy. As such, Government will take a “test and learn” approach to implementing the policy. Over the coming months, we will closely monitor and evaluate the impact Awaab’s law is having; the effectiveness of the processes put in place to implement it and, will clarify or adapt our approach to deliver the best outcomes if we need to.

The requirements set by Awaab’s law are as follows:

If a social landlord becomes aware of a matter or circumstance in a social home that may be a hazard within scope, they must investigate within 10 working days to ascertain if there is such a hazard.

The social landlord must produce a written summary of the findings of the investigation (in most cases) and provide this to residents within three working days of the investigation concluding.

If the investigation finds that a hazard presents a significant risk of harm to the health or safety of a resident, the social landlord must, in most circumstances, within five working days of the investigation concluding, make the property safe (using temporary measures if necessary) and begin any further required works. The social landlord must satisfactorily complete repair works within a reasonable time period.

In an emergency situation, the social landlord must investigate and action any emergency repairs as soon as reasonably practicable and, in any event, within 24 hours.

If the property cannot be made safe within the specified timescales for Awaab’s law, then the social landlord must offer to arrange for the residents to stay in suitable alternative accommodation, at the social landlord’s expense, until required repairs are completed.

Social landlords should begin preparing for phase 1 of Awaab’s law now and be thinking about steps needed to get ready for phases 2 and 3. Tenant safety must remain paramount and landlords must continue to ensure that duties to keep homes fit for human habitation and free of category 1 hazards and to remedy disrepair continue to be met as Awaab’s law is phased in.

I am immensely grateful to all those across the sector who have engaged—through the public consultation, via membership organisations or otherwise—to help make Awaab’s law as robust as possible. Many of you will see your feedback reflected in the final policy. It is my profound hope Awaab’s law provokes a cultural shift in the way social homes are managed by landlords and experienced by tenants, and that all social landlords will place the safety of residents as their priority.

Under Awaab’s law, where landlords do not meet their obligations by failing to comply with the new strict timelines for remedying hazards, tenants will be able to challenge them. They can seek to have poor housing conditions put right through their landlord’s complaints process, the Housing Ombudsman, and through the courts by bringing a housing disrepair claim. To ensure that the system of redress remains fair, that vulnerable tenants are not exploited and that both tenants and landlords are not unfairly targeted by unscrupulous claims farming activity—the Minister for Housing and Planning and the Minister for Courts and Legal Services are today also announcing their intention to launch a call for evidence this year. Through this we will gather evidence on claims management company referrals to solicitors on a no win no fee basis to seek views on current practices and consider how to reduce unscrupulous “claims farming” activity in housing disrepair cases.

We will continue to protect consumers' interests by sharing insight on poor practices with the SRA and FCA to inform their work in regulating inappropriate behaviours and practices in the sector.

Our Make Things Right campaign already informs tenants how they can use social housing complaints procedures and access the Housing Ombudsman Service. To ensure tenants continue to know their rights and are fully informed about the introduction of Awaab's law, later this year the Make Things Right campaign will also include information on the new requirements, and we will publish guidance for tenants on Awaab's law, when it comes into force in October 2025.

Alongside Awaab's law the Government are driving transformational and lasting change in the safety and quality of social housing by improving electrical safety so that tenants can feel safe in their homes.

We know that poor electrical safety can have devastating effects and can cost lives. The Grenfell Tower fire, which claimed the lives of 72 men, women and children, was started by an electrical fault in a fridge-freezer. It is vital that we act to keep social housing residents safe from electrical harm.

In 2022, the previous Government carried out a consultation inviting views on proposals to introduce mandatory checks on electrical installations at least every five years; ensure parity between the rented sectors in respect of safety standards; and requiring mandatory portable appliance testing on all electrical appliances provided by social landlords.

This Government are now acting to bring this crucial safety measure into force and to protect social housing residents from harm. That is why we are laying regulations in Parliament today that will require social landlords to carry out:

Checks on electrical installations for social housing at least every five years; and

In-service inspection and testing of electrical equipment (ISIT) on all electrical appliances they provide as part of a tenancy (sometimes known as "PAT testing").

The statutory instruments and consultation responses for both policies will be published on gov.uk and copies will be deposited in the Library of both Houses.

[HCWS739]

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