

Thursday
26 June 2025

Volume 769
No. 161



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 26 June 2025

House of Commons

Thursday 26 June 2025

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Transport: Economic Growth

1. **Chris Curtis** (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure that the transport system supports economic growth. [904826]

14. **Kanishka Narayan** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure that the transport system supports economic growth. [904843]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Economic growth is this Government's top priority, and the Chancellor put growth right at the heart of her spending review, announcing more than £92 billion of capital investment in transport infrastructure to give people access to jobs and opportunities. This includes long-term funding for our largest city regions, billions of pounds of investment in roads, hundreds of millions of pounds for walking and cycling, and delivering transformative projects such as the trans-Pennine route upgrade and East West Rail. This will make a real difference to people's lives up and down the country, now and in the future, showing the difference a Labour Government make.

Chris Curtis: Every French city with a population of more than 150,000 has a mass rapid transport system, yet over 30 UK cities or towns of that size still lack it. Research from Centre for Cities shows that poor connectivity holds back growth and productivity by limiting mobility. A key reason why we have so few is cost, because building a kilometre of track in the UK is twice as expensive as the European average. Can the Secretary of State set out what her Department is doing to bring down costs and help kickstart a tram-building revolution?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that matter with me in person a few days ago and for sending me further information on the report and the research. Trams do have the potential to support growth at much lower cost than heavy rail, but he is right that the cost per kilometre of new tramline is much more expensive in the UK than elsewhere in

Europe. I have asked my officials to look into what we can do in this area as we look to unlock growth across the UK.

Kanishka Narayan: We have a proud community in St Athan in the Vale of Glamorgan that is both growing and thriving thanks to the economic opportunity provided by the Bro Tathan enterprise zone. Will the Secretary of State work with Welsh colleagues to progress funding for a new railway station in St Athan to support that growth and provide dignity for the residents?

Heidi Alexander: As we have seen in so many areas, the previous Government may have made promises about this station, but they allocated no feasibility or development funding to get the project moving. Through the spending review and infrastructure strategy, this Government will provide at least £445 million of rail enhancements over the next 10 years to deliver long-term infrastructure needs in Wales, including new stations. Details of how this funding will be allocated will be announced in due course.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): My local economy on the Isle of Wight is entirely reliant on ferry services for the movement of people, the delivery of products and, in the case of tourism, for customers. Will the Minister acknowledge just how important unregulated ferry services are for the entire economic wellbeing of the Isle of Wight?

Heidi Alexander: I do recognise that issue. The hon. Member and his colleague on the Isle of Wight have raised this matter with me previously, and I am meeting his colleague directly after this question time to talk further. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), hosted a meeting recently and we are considering what further we can do as a Department to support local leaders in finding a satisfactory resolution for his constituents.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): A number of immediate airport expansions are now planned around the London area, which is fair enough, but there is some concern about the protection that is required for vital links to airports in the regions and nations of the rest of the UK. Will the Minister provide an assurance that work will be done to protect those links and the local economies that rely on them?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have invited Heathrow to bring forward proposals for a third runway and we are expecting further information on that this summer. We are clear that part of the expansion of Heathrow is about improving regional connectivity. He will also be aware that we have provided airports such as Doncaster with Government money to support that reopening.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): To achieve growth, businesses rely on our world-class logistics and haulage sector. Given that Logistics UK said that it was "disappointed" that the logistics sector had not been identified as one of the foundational industries in the

industrial strategy this week, what happened? Did the Department for Transport go into bat for our logistics sector? Did it lose the row? Or did it not bother? What will the Secretary of State be doing to ensure that our logistics sector is seen across Government as foundational to any growth mission?

Heidi Alexander: It is my understanding that the logistics sector was pleased to be recognised as a case study in the industrial strategy. I know that it welcomed the announcement in the spending review of £590 million to progress the lower Thames crossing, which is a key strategic freight route. For many years the sector has been talking to us about improving the route from the south-east to the midlands and the north. Unlike the previous Government, this Government are finally getting on with the job. We have taken the planning decision to grant consent to the crossing and are making money available through the spending review to improve the country's critical freight routes.

Greg Smith: The Secretary of State clearly has not listened to Logistics UK—I hope that at least she knows where the lower Thames crossing starts and ends. Let us turn to another foundational industry to transport and growth: fuel. Elizabeth de Jong, chief executive of Fuels Industry UK said about this week's industrial strategy:

“we are disappointed not to be named explicitly as a ‘foundational industry’ today, given the vital role of the fuels sector in enabling growth”.

Why has our transport-critical fuels sector also been left behind by the Government?

Heidi Alexander: This Government's industrial strategy sets out the sectors that have the potential to deliver economic growth and for which are competing internationally for mobile capital investment. My colleague the Minister for the Future of Roads and I meet repeatedly with the industry, be that to discuss fuels or freight and logistics. We are determined to get our economy firing on all cylinders, and we know what critical role the sectors he talks about play in that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): My party and I were pleased when the Chancellor recently announced funding for Northern Powerhouse Rail to improve connectivity. However, we still do not know on what the money will be spent. Any plan to boost the northern powerhouse must surely include a new main line between Manchester and Liverpool—a vital link that would not only drive economic growth across the north-west but strengthen connections between two of our greatest cities. When will we finally see the detail behind the Chancellor's announcement, and will she meet with me and my hon. Friends the Members for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) and for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) to discuss proposals for the better linking of Manchester and Liverpool?

Heidi Alexander: The mayors of Greater Manchester and Liverpool—Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham—have made a strong case for improving rail connectivity between their two great cities. The hon. Member is right to say that this Government are committed to improving the country's rail network. I hope to say more on

schemes for the north in the weeks and months ahead. I assure all hon. Members that I will come back to the House swiftly when I have more information so that they can question me further.

Mr Speaker: Including Coppull railway station, I hope!

Local Bus Services

2. **David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [904827]

3. **Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [904829]

5. **Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [904833]

6. **Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [904834]

12. **Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [904840]

17. **Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [904846]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Government are kick-starting a revolution in bus services across the country, delivering the right services in the right places at the right fare levels to serve local communities. Our Bus Services (No. 2) Bill will overhaul bus service operations, protecting vital routes, including in rural and deprived areas, and delivering on our commitment to improve living standards across the country. The Government have confirmed over £1 billion of funding for buses to support and improve services in 2025-26, and we are keeping fares low by maintaining the £3 bus fare cap.

David Williams: It is no surprise that Stoke-on-Trent's bus service improvement plan is among the best in the country. Thanks to funding from this Labour Government, dozens of new services have been delivered, such as the 36, connecting Kids Grove to Hanley and Meir, and the 501, helping people get to Wolstanton retail park. Will the Minister join me in recognising the progress that Stoke-on-Trent has made with its bus network, and will he meet me to discuss how we can ensure that progress continues when funding ends next year?

Simon Lightwood: I congratulate Stoke-on-Trent on its success. It is great to hear that local ambitions are being realised through new bus services, lower fares and more accessible buses. Funding has been announced for 2025-26: Stoke-on-Trent city council was awarded £9.8 million, and Staffordshire county council was awarded £11 million. Future allocations for individual local authorities will be confirmed in due course.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I am grateful to the more than 300 residents who took part in my bus survey. Many expressed frustration about Arriva's decision to cut the X5 service, leaving schoolchildren stranded and people unable to get to work. Fortunately, on this occasion,

Red Eagle Buses stepped in, but what happened speaks to the wider issue of bus companies not putting residents' needs first. Will the Minister join me in asking Buckinghamshire council to take up the new franchising powers in the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill to fix exactly that issue?

Simon Lightwood: The Bus Services (No. 2) Bill puts the power over local bus services back in the hands of local leaders right across England, enabling them to choose the bus model that works best for their areas. The Government will support local transport authorities that decide that the franchising route is the best option for them, delivering improvements to services in their area. I hope that my hon. Friend's local council will work with her and her constituents to find the best local solution.

Paul Davies: Reliable and accessible local bus services are vital for our communities, connecting people to work, education, healthcare and each other. Yet too often, services are reduced or withdrawn due to low usage, leaving many isolated. To ensure that those services remain viable, we must not only improve them but encourage more people to use them. What steps are the Government taking not only to improve local bus services but to commit to running national or regional campaigns to boost bus usage and protect those essential routes?

Simon Lightwood: We will encourage operators and local authorities to work together to run their own regional campaigns to help boost bus usage. Funding provided to local authorities through the local authority bus grant to improve services could be used for that kind of campaign, if those authorities feel that will help them to meet their bus service improvement plan objectives.

Chris Vince: After decades of failed bus deregulation under the Tories, I am pleased that this Labour Government truly understand the importance of delivering better bus services for millions of people. How will the Government support local leaders to take back control of their bus services, and how will that benefit my constituency of Harlow? I am thinking particularly of rural areas in my constituency, such as Roydon, Nazeing and Hatfield Broad Oak, where residents often talk about how a lack of connectivity causes issues of isolation and a lack of job prospects.

Simon Lightwood: The Bus Services (No. 2) Bill will put power over local bus services back in the hands of local leaders. It is intended to ensure that bus services reflect the needs of the communities that rely on them, including in rural areas. Leaders in places such as Harlow will be empowered to deliver reforms to their bus services. We will also be reforming bus funding, giving local leaders more control and more flexibility to deliver their local transport priorities.

Matt Turmaine: I welcome the extension of the £3 fare cap and the new powers enabling local authorities to deliver bus services that local residents need. In my constituency of Watford, the recruitment of bus engineers to keep services running remains a major problem. What are this Labour Government doing to work coherently with the sector to meet that need?

Simon Lightwood: I appreciate my hon. Friend's concerns about the recruitment of engineers. Although it is, of course, primarily bus operators' responsibility to ensure that they meet their staffing needs, the Government will continue to support the bus sector to meet its current and future labour requirements. The greater long-term funding certainty that the Government are providing through the spending review confirms that the bus sector is a great one for engineers to build their careers in. It was great to meet some of the rising stars in the Go-Ahead Group just yesterday.

Liz Twist: My constituents in Blaydon and Consett rely heavily on buses. Thankfully, with the support of the North East combined authority and our Mayor Kim McGuinness, my constituents have benefited from subsidised fares as a result of the Government's continuation of the bus service improvement plan funding, for which I am very grateful. That funding is due to expire in March '26, but it is crucial that we are able to plan how bus users across the north-east can continue to benefit from those fares. Will the Minister agree to meet me and members of the combined authority to discuss how we can continue to provide value for money for bus users in the north-east?

Simon Lightwood: I am delighted to hear that my hon. Friend's constituents are benefiting from reduced fares, below the Government's national £3 bus fare cap. I was pleased that we were able to allocate £23.8 million to the North East combined authority under the leadership of Mayor Kim McGuinness. I am, of course, more than happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): As I mentioned to the Minister when he appeared before the Transport Committee, I sent a transport survey to every household in Weald of Kent and received hundreds of comments about our buses. Many are dismayed that villages such as Smarden, Egerton, Frittenden and Pluckley now have no bus service at all, while others observe that small villages are served by massive buses carrying one or two passengers. What further assessment has the Minister made of the role of demand-responsive services in rural areas such as mine?

Simon Lightwood: The hon. Member will be aware that the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill contains powers to ask local transport authorities to identify specific routes that are of social value and need. That will be particularly important when considering rural areas. She will also be aware that the Department has been supporting a number of design-responsive transport schemes, of which we are undertaking review.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): In my constituency, Hammersmith bridge has been closed to vehicles for over six years. During that time, buses have been unable to cross, emergency vehicles have experienced delays and businesses on both sides of the bridge have lost out. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury was recently unable to confirm on the radio whether the structures fund will be put towards the bridge's repairs, so will the Minister tell me whether we can expect funding for Hammersmith bridge to reopen?

Simon Lightwood: I entirely appreciate the problems that the hon. Member and her constituents have experienced as a result of Hammersmith bridge. Further information on the structures fund will be announced in due course.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Several of my constituents have written to me, concerned that Arriva, which provides local bus services, has cancelled or reduced some of their local routes, such as the 322 in Maple Cross and the 328 in South Oxhey, leaving them with no other transport options aside from costly taxis. What will the Minister do to ensure that everyone has access to public transport, such as those vital bus services?

Simon Lightwood: I will expect the hon. Gentleman to walk through the Lobby with the Government when our Bus Services (No. 2) Bill comes forward. It is exactly designed to take back control of our bus services, which the Conservative party completely and spectacularly failed to do.

The Bill will empower local leaders to choose a model that works best for their area. It includes, as I mentioned, a socially necessary local services measure. Local transport authorities that operate under an enhanced partnership will be required to identify local services that they consider to be socially necessary and put in place requirements that must be followed before such services can be changed or cancelled. They also need to consider the alternative options available to them.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Bus usage and services in rural and semi-rural areas such as Wokingham were particularly hard hit during the pandemic. Will the Minister confirm that councils such as Wokingham will not see funding for local bus services reduced, and will he recognise that rebuilding bus usage in rural areas is a unique challenge that requires extra resources?

Simon Lightwood: I completely understand the challenges, particularly in rural areas. That is why the package of measures in the Bill to give local areas the powers that they need to take control of those buses is so important. I already mentioned socially necessary bus routes. In the Budget, we confirmed £1 billion in support to improve bus services and keep fares affordable, including in rural areas. That funding has been devolved down to local leaders to decide how to spend that in any way they see fit. That will improve bus services in their area, including in rural areas.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): A blind resident in my constituency, Marilyn, relies on her guide dog and the local bus network to live independently. However, changes under the Government's £1.7 million active travel grant, including floating bus stops on Rifford Road in my constituency, force her to cross fast, bidirectional cycle lanes just to board a bus. That goes against safety advice from the Guide Dogs organisation and the Royal National Institute of Blind People and is causing real distress. Does the Secretary of State agree that Government-funded infrastructure must be safe and accessible for everyone, and will she commit to reviewing active travel guidance to consider the role of floating bus stops that put blind and visually impaired people at risk?

Simon Lightwood: During the passage of the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill in the other place, we committed to writing to all local transport authorities asking them to pause the installation of a specific kind of floating bus stop, where passengers get off the bus straight into a cycle lane or an island. That is because they have been identified through research as problematic for people, particularly those with vision issues.¹ We have already done work with Active Travel England and Transport for London to identify a design standard. Fundamentally, this Government believe in accessible transport for everyone, and that is exactly our ambition.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If we are to deliver local bus services, we must deliver buses that are efficient and technologically modern to ensure we can meet those targets. With that in mind, will the Minister assure the House that any action taken by Government to provide buses and local bus services will support bus manufacturing across all parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and, in particular, Wrightbus in North Antrim?

Simon Lightwood: Absolutely, and that is why I was so proud to chair the first bus manufacturers expert panel in March. That is a year-long project with bus operators, bus manufacturers and mayors across the country to try to forge a smooth pipeline of orders to support our fantastic UK manufacturers.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Government know that bus franchising is commercially risky and very expensive for any local authority. We know that because Transport for London costs taxpayers £650 million a year in subsidy, and Andy Burnham's Bee Network in Greater Manchester is currently on course for an annual deficit of £226 million, when its business plan was for a forecast profit. What is the point of giving risky franchising powers to every local authority in the country when the Government do not provide the money to support them?

Simon Lightwood: I will not take any lectures from the Conservatives under whose watch we saw 300 million fewer bus miles. As I have explained to the hon. Gentleman in Committee and in various exchanges, the full fat franchising—as it is commonly known—in Greater Manchester is only one kind of franchising available to local authorities. Various other methods are available to different areas, including the model adopted in places such as Jersey, which is a partnership between the private operators and the local transport authority so that they can benefit from its skills and knowledge.

I do not recognise—and I have corrected this in Committee—the figures that the hon. Gentleman quotes for Greater Manchester, which is performing fantastically, delivering better, more affordable, greener, smoother and reliable services for the people of Manchester.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for that answer, and we have four hours of Bill Committee later today to rehearse the arguments yet again. In an earlier answer, the Minister said that he is providing £1 billion of support for buses in this financial year, but surely he knows that £700 million goes to help local authorities navigate the huge administrative burdens that come

1.[Official Report, 9 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 8WC.](Correction)

with franchising and the other schemes that the Government have in mind. That leaves just £255 million for actual bus services across the whole of England. That is only enough to satisfy Andy Burnham for a year, yet we have full fat being pursued by Liverpool and West Midlands. I ask again: where is the money to support those ambitions?

Simon Lightwood: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, places such as Greater Manchester are part of the group of authorities that have received £15.6 billion to spend in their local areas. It is important to recognise the extraordinary performance of buses in Greater Manchester. Once again, we are not telling local areas which model to adopt for buses: it could be franchising or enhanced partnerships, as well as removing the barrier to municipal bus companies.

Passenger Rail Performance: Cumbria

4. **Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve passenger rail performance in Cumbria. [904831]

18. **Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail performance. [904847]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I am all too aware that rail performance has been sub-par for many years in this country, but following a decade of decline, we are now starting to see train performance stabilise, with passengers returning to the railway. We are working with the rail industry on a performance restoration framework, with five clear focus areas to recover performance, including timetable resilience, staffing and keeping trains safely moving during disruptive events.

Josh MacAlister: The energy coast rail line in Cumbria is in desperate need of upgrading. It has Victorian-era signalling, and parts of the track suffer from coastal erosion. Upgrading the line would be of huge benefit to passengers, improving the reliability and speed of journeys, and to critical freight for the nuclear decommissioning work and for the shipyard work at Barrow. Businesses, other Members and I will meet the Minister for Rail next week to push for funding to get the final business case over the line. Will the Secretary of State confirm that her Department will work with me and others to ensure that the project is in the Government's infrastructure pipeline when it is published?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has been a great advocate for his constituents on this topic and makes a strong case for the scheme. My officials are working with Cumberland council and across Whitehall to refine the business case he refers to. I know the Rail Minister looks forward to meeting him next week to discuss it.

Chris Webb: In 1911, Blackpool was home to the busiest railway station in the world—a testament to our town's rich transport heritage. Today, the Blackpool South line urgently needs a passing loop to enable trains to pass each other and deliver the reliable, frequent rail service that our community in South Shore deserves. The Government's recent £4 million investment in Blackpool's local bus services was welcome. Will the

Minister meet me to discuss the long-overdue need for investment in the Blackpool South line to finally deliver that passing loop?

Heidi Alexander: This Government are committed to investing in local transport around the UK. I am pleased that we have been able to make such a substantial investment in bus services in my hon. Friend's constituency. Fylde council's business case found that there was potential to increase frequency on the south Fylde line. I know the Rail Minister would be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Mr Speaker: The lead question is on Cumbria. We are putting general questions into what is a lead question, and I do not think it is good to join them up. We are now going round the country on what should have been a Cumbrian question, which is something we could think about for the future.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Rail services are important in Cumbria, but they are also important in Sleaford. For some time, I have been campaigning for lifts at Sleaford railway station for those who have difficulty with stairs. I was pleased when the previous Government included Sleaford in the Access for All scheme, and having raised it at previous Transport questions, I was delighted when the Rail Minister wrote to me to confirm that the feasibility studies will go ahead. When I met Network Rail yesterday, I found that it is stuck. Network Rail has done as much as it can, but the money ready for it has not been officially unlocked. Could the Secretary of State look into that and ensure that the work goes ahead as soon as possible so that people can access the second platform even if they have trouble with stairs?

Heidi Alexander: I understand the importance of accessibility at rail stations, such as Sleaford in the hon. Lady's constituency, and she is right that feasibility work has been done on 50 schemes across the country. That feasibility work shows that the cost of those individual schemes will vary from place to place. We are reviewing that work and looking at the overall quantum of funding we have available. I must say to her and other Members of this House that it is unlikely that we will be able to fund all 50 schemes, but I will provide an update in due course on which ones will go forward.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Much like Cumbria, my constituents and rail users in Chichester share a part of the Brighton mainline when commuting into London. Unfortunately for them, the journey time into London Victoria—on the rare occasion when everything is running on time—is nearly 100 minutes, which is above average for cities of a similar distance from London. The complaint I hear most often about the journey is the lack of a fast service. Will the Secretary of State work with me to encourage Southern rail to implement such a service for the benefit of my constituents?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Lady will know that these matters are constantly kept under review. We have constrained capacity on the rail network and need to balance the number of fast services we have with local stopping services, but I am happy to discuss the matter further, both with the train operating company and Network Rail.

Aviation Sector

7. **Alison Taylor** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the aviation sector. [904835]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): We are unlocking growth through the power of aviation by progressing airport planning decisions and driving airspace modernisation, including through the new UK airspace design service. We have also invited proposals for a third runway at Heathrow, which will have benefits across the UK and could result in billions of pounds invested in our economy. To help the sector grow in a sustainable way, we have introduced the sustainable aviation fuel mandate and a Bill for a SAF revenue certainty mechanism.

Alison Taylor: Has the Minister had discussions with the Scottish Government on how best to use the substantial increase in the Scottish budget to support the aviation sector? In particular, what do the Government plan to do to make up for the lack of investment in connectivity around Glasgow international airport in my constituency?

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend is a champion for Glasgow airport, and as she knows, Scotland needs investment in transport and infrastructure of the kind we are now seeing across England and Wales. The Scottish Government will receive the largest real-terms settlement since devolution began in 1998 as a result of this month's spending review. I hope this budget increase will be put to good use.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): It was good to see Doncaster regional airport recently attract £30 million from this Government. The public service obligation flight route between Newquay airport and Gatwick is a vital regional connection between Cornwall and the capital, but with the current service ending in July, it is now up for renewal. Will the Minister please meet me as a matter of urgency to ensure that this vital link remains in place?

Mike Kane: Public service obligations are vital for connecting the UK economy, and I think we currently have three. I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss the one affecting his constituency.

Bus Manufacturing

8. **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Whether she has had recent discussions with Alexander Dennis Ltd on the potential impact of the proposed closure of its Falkirk and Larbert bus manufacturing sites on her targets for public transport decarbonisation. [904836]

16. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the bus manufacturing sector. [904845]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I understand that this will be a deeply concerning time for workers at Alexander Dennis and their families. It is important that the Government, at all levels, support British manufacturers, which is why I was proud to chair the launch meeting of this Government's new UK bus manufacturing expert panel

on 13 March. The panel aims to explore ways to ensure that the UK remains a leader in bus manufacturing. My officials and I have been in close contact with Alexander Dennis, and I remain committed to working with it and relevant Government Departments to find a way forward.

Brian Leishman: I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which details my membership of Unite the union.

Once upon a time, Scotland was an industrial powerhouse—we made things—but last week, Alexander Dennis started a 45-day consultation with employees. As it stands, hundreds of jobs will be lost from my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank). Unite and the GMB have called for both the Scottish Government and the UK Government, the company and the unions to come together to find a solution to save those jobs and Scottish bus manufacturing. There are changes to policy and legislation that could achieve this. My constituents, the Alexander Dennis workers, want and need to know whether the UK Government are willing to do what it takes.

Simon Lightwood: The £15.6 billion for regional transport projects over five years that we announced earlier this month will help to create a pipeline of investment for the zero emission bus market in the UK, while improving local transport for some of our largest regions. As I said, we are in close contact with all relevant parties to consider how we can support Alexander Dennis.

Euan Stainbank: I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British buses. As the Minister has outlined, this Labour Government will double real-terms transport spending in city regions by the end of this Parliament. While this should be very good news for bus manufacturing in this country, Alexander Dennis—in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman)—is, in a contradictory move, seeking to end more than a century of bus manufacturing in Scotland and put 400 workers in Falkirk out of their jobs. What actions will the Secretary of State and Ministers, in conjunction with Cabinet colleagues and the Scottish Government, take to maintain strategically necessary bus manufacturing in Falkirk?

Simon Lightwood: Labour mayors across the country are putting in orders for UK-manufactured buses, as we support bus travel in our towns and cities. The Scottish people will be asking questions about why the Mayor of Greater Manchester has managed to buy almost four times as many buses from Scotland as the SNP Scottish Government have. My officials and I are in close contact with Ministers and representatives from the Scottish Government, the Department for Business and Trade, the NFI Group—the owner of Alexander Dennis—and Scottish Enterprise to explore avenues of support.

Road Network: Condition

9. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the condition of the road network. [904837]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): Potholes and poor road surfaces are a nuisance for drivers, cause damage to vehicles and can pose a real danger to road users. To tackle the poor state of our roads following a decade of decline, this Government will provide £24 billion of capital funding over the spending review period to maintain and improve local roads and motorways across the country, delivering faster, safer and more reliable journeys.

Jim Dickson: I thank the Minister for her answer, and for reassuring residents in Swanscombe and the surrounding areas that, two years after the collapse of Galley Hill Road, hope for a solution is in sight, thanks to the structures fund announced as part of the comprehensive spending review. Can the Minister confirm the likely timescale for the structures fund being up and running and open for bids? Will she undertake to ensure that her officials in the Department are working closely with Kent county council to maximise the chances of a successful bid to the structures fund, as I am sure she will for other parts of the country?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his steadfast advocacy for people and businesses in his constituency, which I know has been blighted by the collapse of the A226 at Galley Hill. It was visiting places such as Galley Hill that led us to invest £1 billion to enhance the road network, and create a new structures fund that will repair rundown bridges, decaying flyovers and worn-out tunnels. Details on how that fund will be allocated will be announced in due course.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The Minister is familiar with the campaign that I and neighbouring colleagues have been running for many years to improve the A180. When will she have some good news for us?

Lilian Greenwood: I can already give the hon. Member the good news about the £24 billion allocated in the spending review for improving our nation's roads, and as he knows, National Highways is looking closely at what can be done on the road that leads to his constituency.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): Peacehaven in my constituency is a growing town, but it remains a one-road-in, one-road-out town. The daily gridlock and frequent roadworks on the A259 is the single biggest frustration and barrier to opportunity for my constituents. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can unlock that and provide a real boost to Peacehaven and neighbouring towns?

Lilian Greenwood: I appreciate how frustrating the situation is for my hon. Friend and his constituents. My officials are continuing to discuss details of the business case for the scheme with East Sussex county council, and I would of course be happy to meet him to discuss that further.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): The Rapid Transition Alliance tells us that we can improve the quality of our roads if we support more people to use rail as a form of public transport. That is one reason why I am campaigning to restore the direct train between Eastbourne and

London Bridge that was discontinued during the pandemic. Will the Minister back my campaign, with a view to helping to improve our roads and improve economic growth for Eastbourne too?

Lilian Greenwood: That was a creative way of asking about railways in a question about roads. This Government are committed to improving all forms of transport, so that people have a real choice about the best mode to use for their journey. We are keen for people to have the choice of sustainable transport modes, including rail, walking and cycling, as well as driving and travelling on buses. As the hon. Member will see, the Government are investing huge amounts to support our rail industry, just as we are doing to support the state of our roads.

Train Frequency: Sutton and Cheam

10. **Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD):** How much funding she plans to provide to increase the frequency of trains from stations in Sutton and Cheam constituency. [904838]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Rail services in Sutton and Cheam are supported by requirements on train operators to plan services and timetables to meet current and future passenger demand, ensuring value for money for the taxpayer. Govia Thameslink Railway and South Western Railway are required to work collaboratively with the Department for Transport to develop future plans, and our Department holds them accountable for delivering for passengers.

Luke Taylor: Earlier this week I was contacted by a long-suffering commuter using Worcester Park station. She wrote:

"As a teacher my days are already demanding, often filled with pressure, high energy, and very little downtime. Sadly, commuting to and from work now feels just as stressful. Trains during peak hours are frequently so overcrowded that they feel unsafe and extremely uncomfortable. What should be a straightforward journey has become an exhausting and frustrating part of my day."

Now that South Western Railway is under Government control, will the Minister tell my constituents when we can expect to see the service and timetable finally improve for Worcester Park station?

Simon Lightwood: Services returning to public ownership is a watershed moment for our railways and the beginning of our efforts to build Great British Railways, a new publicly owned organisation that runs our trains. We want passengers to see improvements to their services now and, starting with SWR, each operator will have to meet rigorous bespoke performance standards on things such as punctuality, cancellations and passenger experience, so that we can begin to build a world-class public service.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Worcester Park is a station that my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) and I know well as it is on the boundary of both our constituencies, and I confirm that my constituents face the same issues of overcrowding. SWR acquired 90 high-capacity Arterio trains to address this issue back in 2019, yet six years later only a handful

have entered service. The UK taxpayer is currently spending over £5 million every month on leasing the Arterio fleet, and over £0.5 million additionally every month to store the unused trains. Will the Minister confirm how many Arterio trains are now in use, whether the issues delaying roll-out have now been addressed, and whether he thinks that spending millions of pounds every month on unused trains is a good use of taxpayers' money?

Simon Lightwood: I am aware that another two of those trains are now in operation. The new managing director is aware that this is a challenge and we are already beginning to see progress.

Driving Test Backlog

11. **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce the backlog for driving tests. [904839]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): I know that many learners are still struggling to book a driving test. We are working hard to reduce driving test wait times and help more people get on the road. In April, the Secretary of State announced further measures, including doubling examiner training capacity and offering overtime pay incentives. In May, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency launched a consultation on improving car driving test booking rules, which currently has over 30,000 responses. Over 630,000 learners now have a test booked. That number will rise as the DVSA increases test availability.

Lincoln Jopp: The post-covid backlog in driving tests was trending down under the last Government. At the time of the general election, it had got to 521,000, which was still too high, but it was coming down. Since this Government took over, the number has rocketed up to 600,000, a new record high, meaning that constituents like Oliver, in my Spelthorne constituency, have had to wait six months for a driving test. The increasing delays in driving tests are putting a handbrake on growth and productivity, so whatever the Government are doing, can they do more of it and faster please?

Lilian Greenwood: We recognise that demand for driving tests has grown not just because of a covid backlog, but due to a long-term change in behaviour and demand for driving tests. I am pleased to report that the changes we have introduced, particularly on overtime pay incentives, are making a difference. The DVSA expects to deliver thousands of additional tests this month and is working to increase test availability further over the coming year, so that constituents like the hon. Gentleman's can obtain a test as soon as possible. I understand how important this is, particularly to young people, and we do not want to curtail their life chances.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I now have to move on to topical questions. There will be disappointment for hon. Members whose questions are next on the Order Paper, but that is because of the way questions have been grouped. We really do need to think about why we are grouping questions that are not relevant to each other.

Topical Questions

T1. [904851] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Earlier this month, the Chancellor's spending review made it clear that national renewal must be felt everywhere, in every place and in every journey, and that is what this Government are delivering, starting with the biggest ever regional transport investment outside London: over £15 billion towards metro extensions in Newcastle and Birmingham, mass transit in West Yorkshire, and a new bus fleet in Liverpool.

But that is not all. We are putting billions towards the trans-Pennine route upgrade, as well as East West Rail, and we are protecting the £3 bus fare cap until at least March 2027. Today, we are going further: we are proud to announce that we are improving mobile connectivity in over 50 rail tunnels, and using satellite technology to strengthen wi-fi on all mainline trains to transform rail travel for passengers.

Finally, last week I revealed our shocking HS2 inheritance. Make no mistake: we will fix that appalling mess and get the project back on track. Our plan for change is under way, with better journeys for passengers and value for money for taxpayers.

Wera Hobhouse: The transport sector generates Britain's highest emissions. Through collaboration with France, we have the opportunity to transform the world's busiest ferry route, across the strait of Dover between Britain and France, into the world's first high-volume green shipping corridor. Will the Minister commit to championing this great initiative in the UK and at the upcoming COP30?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Lady is entirely right to highlight the importance of decarbonising our maritime industry and ensuring that our ports have the grid connections to enable fleets to purchase new vessels, so that we can get carbon emissions down on the seas, as well as elsewhere in our economy. I would be very happy to talk to her further about what more we can do to champion that important work.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Both Grand Central and Hull Trains have seen their passenger numbers increase dramatically since the pandemic, by more than 50% and 20% respectively. That is a significant increase compared with other operators. Why does the right hon. Lady think that might be?

Heidi Alexander: If the hon. Gentleman wants to trade statistics on the rail network, I can tell him that we have seen a massive increase in passenger numbers on TransPennine Express and LNER. In fact, last year we had a 7% overall increase in passenger journeys and passenger revenue overall went up from £10.6 billion to £11.5 billion, which is good news for the taxpayer and a clear sign that people want to come back and use our railways.

Gareth Bacon: I was not hoping to trade statistics—I was hoping that the right hon. Lady would answer the question. I will provide the answer: it is because they are open access operators. They have to compete for passengers by providing a service that passengers want at a price they are prepared to pay, and it is clearly working. Why have the Government indicated to the industry that they are not supportive of open access by stating their opposition to eight of the nine proposals submitted in February?

Heidi Alexander: I have said repeatedly at this Dispatch Box that we see a role for open access operators when they open up new markets and add value. We have to balance that against the revenue that they abstract from the public sector operator. We cannot have a situation in which we import too much congestion on to the rail network, because there is constrained and finite capacity. I am keen to see a mixed model of delivery going forward, but I need to reduce the taxpayer subsidy going into the rail network at the moment. We are supporting—

Mr Speaker: Order.

T2. [904852] **Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): In a recent survey I conducted in Mansfield, local and minor roads were among the worst affected by poor maintenance. The A60 in Warsop, Chesterfield Road in Mansfield and Old Mill Lane in Forest Town were highlighted as particular problems. What is the Department doing to improve local roads in my constituency and in Nottinghamshire as a whole?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): My hon. Friend is a great champion for his local constituents. We have provided an extra £500 million for councils this year to end the pothole plague, and the East Midlands combined county authority will receive almost £20 million extra, taking the total to £76 million. For Nottinghamshire to unlock its full uplift, it needs to show that it is following best practice and publish a report on its highways maintenance activities by the end of this month.

T3. [904854] **Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): After years of broken promises by the Conservatives, this Government have finally confirmed this week that the Camelford bypass project will not go ahead. Having anticipated that for some time, I have already started working with local stakeholders on a plan B. Will the Roads Minister meet me to discuss an alternative way forward?

Lilian Greenwood: I am aware that at least the certainty of a decision was welcomed by the hon. Gentleman, and I appreciate that. The Department is happy to discuss any alternative plans with him and with Cornwall council. We have met before, and I am very happy to meet him again.

T6. [904858] **John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): First Bus is axing the critical 65 bus, which runs through Dalmarnock, Bridgeton and the Gorbals in my seat and into the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks). Without the 65, Dorothy, who is in her 90s, will not be able to visit family and friends. That is a loss for everyone, because Dorothy is brilliant company.

Does the Minister agree that bus operators must take into account the needs of people such as Dorothy before axing critical bus services?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I am sorry to hear about the impact that that is having on Dorothy. As my hon. Friend will know, bus services are a devolved matter in Scotland. In England, we are taking action to put power over buses into the hands of local leaders through the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill.

T5. [904856] **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): When the Government introduced the increased £3 bus cap, it saw the cost of a number of shorter journeys with local bus providers increase by more than inflation. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that people are not feeling the effects of Labour's bus tax?

Simon Lightwood: Participants in the bus fare cap are only able to increase bus fares by inflation, so if the hon. Gentleman wants to speak to me outside the Chamber, I would be happy to take that matter up for him.

T7. [904859] **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I was disappointed to see the findings of yesterday's Civil Aviation Authority airport accessibility performance report, which outlined that three airports—Edinburgh, London Heathrow and Glasgow Prestwick—received a “needs improvement” rating for accessibility. Can my hon. Friend provide an update on when the aviation accessibility task and finish group's recommendations will be published, and when the Government will be able to outline how they plan to introduce measures to support disabled people who wish to access air travel?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): Everyone should be able to travel with dignity and ease, which is why we launched the aviation accessibility task and finish group last year. I expect to be able to provide an update soon, when that group publishes its findings. As my hon. Friend has mentioned, the Civil Aviation Authority's airport accessibility performance report 2024-25 demonstrates that improvements are still required in some areas.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Devon and Torbay combined county authority will receive just £40 million between 2026 and 2030 in local transport grant funding—less than half the amount awarded to York and North Yorkshire and a fraction of the billions given to the city regions, despite Devon having the longest road network in the country. A large local operator says that just £1 million a year would make a transformational change in Devon, where rural deprivation is well hidden. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the issues facing the bus network in Devon and the Government investment that is needed?

Simon Lightwood: Our long-term bus investment will support rural areas to improve local bus services. That is on top of the £712 million we have allocated to local authorities in 2025-26.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I met taxi drivers in Derby, at a meeting organised by the GMB, who are proud of the work they do. They want high

standards across the board; what actions is the Minister taking to review taxi licensing, so that everyone can have confidence that the taxi and private hire industry is reliable, sustainable, and safe for passengers and the drivers themselves?

Heidi Alexander: I assure my hon. Friend that we are taking this issue very seriously. We are reviewing licensing authorities' compliance with existing guidance, and we will hold those who do not follow that guidance to account. We will go further following the publication of Baroness Casey's review, and we have committed to taking legislative action to close the loopholes in the current licensing regime to achieve higher standards of safety across the board.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): The Dawlish sea wall collapsed in 2014, causing a devastating loss to the south-west's economy of about £1.2 billion. It was not the break in the sea wall that closed the railway for eight weeks; it was the collapse of the cliffs. Will the Minister prioritise the project to secure those cliffs, which is yet to be carried out, or will she meet me? Perhaps she could even visit Dawlish to see how important this fix is going to be.

Lilian Greenwood: I know how important that rail line is to the people of the south-west, including the hon. Member's constituents. We are working to determine which rail enhancement projects will be taken forward following the Chancellor's spending review statement on 11 June. More information will be made available shortly, and I am sure that my colleague, the Rail Minister, will write to the hon. Member in due course.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Following the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), last week the Casey review showed us yet again that private hire vehicles are a dangerous place for many children and young people. Nationally in 2023, 96% of taxi licences were issued in one local authority—Wolverhampton, one of my neighbouring local authorities—yet only 10% of the applicants lived there. What action is the Minister going to take to ensure local taxi licensing is done locally and to high standards?

Mr Speaker: Hear, hear!

Heidi Alexander: Baroness Casey has rightly brought this issue into sharp focus, and as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), we are committed to addressing it. We will work as quickly as possible and consider all options, including out-of-area working, national standards and enforcement, in seeking the best overall outcome for passenger safety.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The Minister may be aware that the outline business case for improvements to the A31 at Hickley's Corner in Farnham

will come before her in a couple of months' time. While I understand that she cannot make any promises now, will she at least agree to look kindly on that application and meet me to discuss it?

Lilian Greenwood: I look forward to seeing that business case when it comes forward, and I will of course be happy to discuss it with the hon. Member at the appropriate time.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): A new report from the all-party parliamentary group for cycling and walking warns of the growing public safety risk posed by the widespread use of unsafe, illegally modified bikes, and the fire risk caused by their cheap but powerful batteries bought from online marketplaces. What assessment has the Minister—along with his colleagues in other Departments—made of the risks posed by those fake e-bikes?

Simon Lightwood: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for that question. I am studying the APPG's report in detail. Illegal e-bikes are clearly dangerous and have no place on our roads. I would be happy to meet her to discuss it further.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): My constituent Paul cycles more than 1,000 km a month all across the country, but he tells me that Cheshire's roads are among the worst. Poor roads are dangerous for all road users, so does the Minister agree that national guidance for pothole repair policy must properly reflect the needs of cyclists alongside motorists? We must urgently improve road conditions for everyone.

Lilian Greenwood: I absolutely agree that the poor state of the roads that has been left to us after 14 years of under-investment poses a serious risk to cyclists. That is precisely why we have given that extra £500 million to councils across England, and it is precisely why we are holding them to account and asking them to follow good practice in roads maintenance.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, I welcome the £445 million being invested in Welsh rail over the next five years, but will she help me to secure a meeting with the Rail Minister, so that we can discuss the need to start off building the Burns stations with the Magor and Undy station in Monmouthshire?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has been a fearsome champion for this rail investment, and I am delighted that over the next 10 years we will be spending more than £445 million on rail enhancements in Wales. I will certainly help her to secure the meeting that she requests.

Business of the House

10.31 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I shall. The business for the week commencing 30 June includes:

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

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

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

THURSDAY 3 JULY—Debate on a motion on financial redress for 1950s women impacted by Department for Work and Pensions maladministration of state pension age changes, followed by a general debate on mobile phone thefts. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 4 JULY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 7 July will include:

MONDAY 7 JULY—Second Reading of the Pension Schemes Bill.

TUESDAY 8 JULY—Remaining stages of the Football Governance Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 9 JULY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill.

THURSDAY 10 JULY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 11 JULY—Private Members' Bills.

Jesse Norman: I am afraid to say that the past week has been another horror show for the Government. This is Armed Forces Week, as the House will know. It is a time to celebrate and champion all those who serve and have served in our armed forces, and nowhere more than in my own county of Herefordshire. We must also note that, far from celebrating the armed forces, this Government deliberately opened the door last year to unfair and vexatious prosecutions of veterans who served decades ago in Northern Ireland, and they have kept that door open.

What else? The original Abortion Act was debated for more than a year, but the Government allowed no notice for public debate on the abortion amendment last week, and they gave just two hours of debate in the Chamber on the biggest change in abortion law in nearly 60 years. Whatever one thinks of the merits of the issue, that is a scandalously bad way to make legislation.

What else? Defence Ministers were left out of the loop on the US bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities, and were unable to say whether they supported this action by our closest ally. A Government Whip resigned, expressing her deep concerns over the welfare Bill, and the Government have promised to bring the Bill forward next week, as we have just heard—let us see if they do.

Talking of U-turns, the Government, having only just U-turned on the winter fuel payment, and again on grooming gangs last week, have prepared themselves for a U-turn on the two-child benefit cap less than a year since they suspended seven Labour MPs for voting against the cap.

This is just one week. Is it any wonder that the Prime Minister's personal reputation has continued to plummet? Only yesterday, *The Times* of London said:

"Not quite a year has passed since his landslide general election victory and already his political stock is trading at junk status, akin to a Zimbabwean dollar or Weimar papiermark."

Mr Speaker, you may recall from your intimate knowledge of German history that the papiermark was a monetary instrument that led to hyper-inflation and political collapse. That is coming from *The Times* of London.

Shall we dig a little bit further into one specific reason why the Prime Minister's reputation might have fallen so much? Following the record pay settlements of last year, the junior doctors have announced that they are "excited" at the idea of six months of strike action. Meanwhile, hospital consultants are balloting to see if they will strike as well. Doctors received a 22% increase last year after Labour took office, and now the junior doctors are apparently demanding a further pay increase of 29%. These are eye-watering numbers and, of course, we will all end up paying if the increases are granted, but I am afraid this is exactly what we would expect from a Government who have taxed and splurged the cash since the election.

It is hardly surprising that the unions now think they have an open door to extract money from the Treasury, and the Government have actually made the situation even worse through their rolling programme of nationalisation, and by abolishing NHS England. Whatever else it may have been, NHS England acted as a firebreak on union lobbying, because it operated semi-independently of Ministers. By abolishing it, the Government have now removed one of the few means they had to face down extortionate demands for more pay and more restrictive practices.

The same is true with the railways: as each one is nationalised—including South West Railway only last week—so the obstacles to the unions' demands are progressively being removed. The House will recall the massive pay settlements given to the rail unions last year, with no attempt to negotiate any efficiency gains. It is only a matter of time before those unions come back for more, as the doctors are doing. These are not pay bargains; they are an abject surrender. Of course, Ministers themselves do not mind—after all, 90% of them are reported to be union members. As far as I can see, the Leader of the House is an exception: she is not a union member, and all credit to her for that.

Lucy Powell: I am!

Jesse Norman: Ah, okay. I am very sorry to say that the Leader of the House has corrected me. She is, in fact, a union member and therefore fully complicit in the same problem.

The Treasury itself is now the only hold-out against union demands. Little wonder the Chancellor has looked so unhappy and out of sorts—and that was before the Deputy Prime Minister started leaking memos calling for billions of pounds a year in tax increases. The unions know the Government are vulnerable, and they have

[*Jesse Norman*]

come back for more. Labour Back Benchers also know that the Government are running scared and, led by their Select Committee Chairs, they are starting to get organised. Can the Leader of the House positively and personally now confirm that the welfare Bill vote will take place next Tuesday?

Lucy Powell: May I start by wishing two Deputy Speakers a happy birthday? [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

As the right hon. Gentleman said, this is Armed Forces Week, when we thank and show our support for the men and women who serve, or who have served, in our armed forces over many years. It is nice to see the right hon. Gentleman in his place again this week, because we have missed him quite a bit recently, but I might gently suggest that if he had been here last week, he could have asked last week’s questions last week instead of asking them this week.

He asks me about the welfare Bill. As I have just announced to the House, the Second Reading of the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill will take place next Tuesday, and the remaining stages of the Bill will take place on the Floor of the House the following week. I want to reassure colleagues that we take parliamentary scrutiny and the process of Bills extremely seriously. That is what our parliamentary democracy is all about: Bills are introduced; principles are considered at Second Reading; and the details receive robust debate and discussion, and are often amended in Committee, before we consider Third Reading. As the House would expect, the Government actively engage with parliamentary opinion throughout a Bill’s passage, as we are doing intensively with the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill.

I am sure that the whole House can agree that our welfare system needs reform. Too many people are consigned to benefits for life without support to work and to get on. During the pandemic in particular, the number of those on sickness and disability benefits rose significantly, and the previous Government did nothing to re-engage people with the labour market afterwards. One in eight young people are now not earning or learning. Many post-industrial communities have been scarred over generations by worklessness and little job creation. As constituency MPs, we have all seen the inadequate and, frankly, degrading nature of disability benefits reassessments.

Addressing these deep-seated problems is at the core of our Labour principles and what we are trying to do with our welfare reforms. I just remind colleagues that these include: the biggest permanent increase to the standard out-of-work benefit since 1980; an end to reassessments for all those with serious health conditions; creating a more holistic and professionally-led assessments process; the biggest back to work programme in a generation; the right to try work; and ending the era of consigning people as unable to work.

To be clear, it is the Conservatives’ legacy that this Government now have to sort out—their legacy of one in 10 working-age people on sickness or disability benefits; their legacy of a generation of young people with no mental health support and poor skills; their legacy of over 7 million people on NHS waiting lists; and their legacy of inaction on welfare reforms over years and

years. Quite honestly, the right hon. Gentleman has a brass neck, because the Conservatives have written the book on Government chaos, have they not? There were three Prime Ministers in three years; they sent the markets into chaos, with Budgets done on the back of a fag packet—they really did write the book on that one—there was by-election after by-election for misconduct; over 40 Ministers resigned in a single day; billions were wasted on crony covid contracts; public services were left on their knees; and industrial action was sweeping the country, costing us all dear. All of that left ordinary people paying the price with higher bills, higher mortgages and longer waiting lists.

However, this is not just about welfare reform; it is also about the context in which this sits in, and that is what this Government are getting on with doing—this Government’s mission to create good, decent, well-paid jobs in every community; this Government’s mission to bring down waiting lists and deal with the deep-seated health inequalities in this country; this Government’s mission to tackle child poverty; this Government’s mission to build more affordable and social housing, giving people a bedrock in life; and this Government’s mission to revolutionise skills and opportunities for young people. That is this Labour Government, with our Labour values, getting on with the job and delivering for people.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to allow business questions to run only until 11.30 am, because of the important statement that is to follow, so I ask Members to help each other, and there will be a good example from Afzal Khan.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I know that many colleagues in the House share my frustration with the leasehold and management companies that leverage excessive and ambiguous service charges on leaseholders and tenants. In my constituency, I am facing ongoing problems with Glide Property Management, which demands unreasonably large sums from constituents without providing suitable services, and which is refusing to respond to the numerous complaints that have subsequently been submitted to it. Does the Leader of the House agree that such companies should not continue taking advantage of leaseholders and tenants, and must be held fully accountable for all complaints?

Lucy Powell: I fully share my hon. Friend’s frustrations with our leasehold system, and the charges and difficulties that many leaseholders face. He will know that we are acting quickly to implement the provisions of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024, and there is more coming on that very soon, including the measures to drive up the transparency of service charges and ensure that they can be challenged more easily by leaseholders.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I join the Leader of the House in congratulating the Deputy Speakers on their birthdays, and in celebrating our armed forces.

Earlier this year, when the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announced the welfare reforms, her argument to this House was that they were all about getting people back into work. That argument was

undermined somewhat by the timing; in the spring statement the following week, we discovered that the £5 billion saving we achieve from the welfare reforms makes up fully half of the fiscal headroom that the Chancellor is relying on. When we take a closer look at the reforms, we find that most of the savings are generated by changes to the eligibility criteria for the personal independence payment. Entitlement to PIP is given to those in work, those out of work and those unable to work. It follows that many of those who stand to lose out as a result of the reforms will not be incentivised into work, because they will already be in work, or will be unable to join the workforce any time soon. No wonder, then, that when the Bill was published last week, there was condemnation from all sides of the House. If the books need to be balanced, we need to make sure that they are not balanced on the backs of the disabled.

The Leader of the House will be well aware of all the rumours circulating around this place that the Government are preparing to make concessions on the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill. What is the procedure for doing that? We understand that a reasoned amendment, if one is tabled, would kill the Bill off entirely. What are the options for the Government to make concessions? Will they have to withdraw the Bill and re-present it, or is there some other mechanism by which they can make compromises with their Back Benchers before next week?

Lucy Powell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. He has done a very good job of standing in for his excellent colleague, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), with whom I also enjoy working.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that reform to the welfare system has to be done with compassion and be carefully managed. I am sure he also agrees that the system does need reform. He is absolutely right that PIP is not an out-of-work benefit, but a benefit that helps to support disabled people with their living needs. We have to ensure that it is sustainable for the long term, and is there for those who need it most. As I have said, we are listening closely to colleagues from across the House—including, I am sure, Members from his party—who have a lot of experience of dealing with the PIP assessment process. I am sure we all recognise that for too long it has been a box-ticking, degrading process that has not been fit for purpose. That is why we have been reviewing it and listening closely to colleagues. We want to get this right for disabled people, their carers and others.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the parliamentary process. As Leader of the House, with responsibility for legislation across the piece, I struggle to think of many Government Bills brought in this Session that have not been amended during their passage. Most Bills are amended, and those amendments are usually made in Committee and on Report. I am sure that this Bill will be considered in the usual way during its parliamentary passage.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House extols the virtue of parliamentary democracy, yet over half of MPs reject the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill. We have spoken to our constituents and to organisations representing disabled people. They reject the Bill, because it will cause harm to disabled people. Their voices have

not been heard, much though we are trying to amplify them in this place. Will the Leader of the House urge the Cabinet to withdraw the Bill, and instead allow a general debate on how we support disabled people?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has campaigned on these issues for a long time. We have not yet voted on, or even considered, the Bill. We will have an extensive and, I am sure, thorough parliamentary process in which to do that. I ask colleagues to think about the principles of welfare reform on Second Reading, and to then really drill down into the details of the Bill as it passes through Parliament. We have engaged with the disabled community. We will continue to engage with colleagues from across the House and with stakeholders as we consider not just this Bill but the further welfare reform that is needed, which has to be, as I say, compassionate and considered, so that we have a system that is there for the long term for those who need it most.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Following the successful seven-year experiment on estimates day debates, the Chairs of the Procedure and Liaison Committees, the hon. Members for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) and for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), met me yesterday, and we agreed that we would bring forward proposals for changes to the Standing Orders, which I am sure the Leader of the House will look favourably on.

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, there will be a debate on Thursday 10 July in the Chamber on the attainment and engagement of boys in education, followed by a debate on children's health. In Westminster Hall, there will be a debate on regulatory powers over billing of energy supply to businesses on Tuesday 1 July, and debates on the future of music education and on safeguarding children with allergies at school on Thursday 3 July. There will be a debate on alcohol and cancer on Tuesday 8 July, and debates on state support for victims of terrorism and on London's contribution to the national economy on Thursday 10 July.

Tomorrow, across India, the annual Ratha Yatra festival will take place. In Ahmedabad, the Rath Yatra festival has been held since 1878, and there is a procession through the streets of the deities that Hindus worship. In Harrow, we will celebrate on Sunday, when the annual procession will take place. This year, it will be between Stanmore temple and Kenton temple—a seven-mile route, in 31° heat, taking about four hours to complete. The good news, of course, is that it is downhill this year, and not the uphill route from Kenton to Stanmore. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing all Hindus celebrating this most important festival Jai Swaminarayan, Jai Shri Krishna and, indeed, Jai Jagannath?

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for once again highlighting to the House all the forthcoming Backbench Business debates, and look forward to receiving from him and colleagues representations on how we hold estimates day debates. I am sure we can all agree that that probably does need to be looked at.

[Lucy Powell]

I join the hon. Gentleman in wishing everybody who is celebrating this weekend in his constituency and beyond a happy chariot festival, as I think it is also known. I hope that he and others keep cool, wear sunscreen and drink lots of water on their downhill walk.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Yesterday's resignation of the Reform leader of Warwickshire county council and his replacement with an 18-year-old will be of real concern to my constituents. We desperately need a functioning council to fill in potholes, deliver our care services and end the crisis in education for those with special education needs and disabilities. While I am sorry to hear about Councillor Rob Howard's health challenges and wish him and his family well, questions remain about how he came to resign after just six weeks in the job, and about the qualifications of his 18-year-old replacement. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the need for competent and effective local government that delivers for communities around the country?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of Rob Howard's ill health. My hon. Friend raises a much broader and more important point about the Reform party in local government. Reform is committed to reducing the headcount in local government, and its councillors clearly got the memo and are acting on it; they are resigning in droves.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The constituency of Bromsgrove and the villages is 89% green belt. Under this Labour Government, our housing target has gone up by 85%, yet nearby Birmingham has had its housing target reduced by 20%, despite there being at least 140 hectares of brownfield land in the south of the city alone. Surely the Leader of the House agrees that that does not make sense. If it does make sense to her, could she explain it to my constituents?

Lucy Powell: We make no apology for having the most ambitious house building programme in a generation. That programme is locally led; it is about local plans that bring together a strategic view of what land is available and its best use. Those decisions should be taken locally.

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): My constituents regularly contact me about the need to improve dementia care. I remember the impact that dementia had on my grandparents and my family, so I sympathise profoundly with everyone impacted by it. I was therefore delighted when my constituent Joy Watson was awarded the British empire medal in the King's birthday honours in recognition of her inspiring work as a dementia champion. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Joy on her fantastic achievement, and send the best wishes of this House to Joy and her husband Tony, and will she consider a debate in Government time on how we can enhance dementia services?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Joy Watson, and we send our best to her and her husband Tony. Like thousands of others across the country, they live with dementia every day. We thank the carers who support those living with dementia. This

Government are committed to dementia services and making sure that we have the best research and innovation on dementia. The Health Secretary will continue to keep the House updated as part of his 10-year plan.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): June is Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month, celebrating the colourful histories and contributions of those communities. People are drawn to Glastonbury and Somerton as a place of pilgrimage, because of its unique spiritual heritage. After the Conservative cuts, we have no sites across Somerset for our Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. Can we have a debate in Government time on support for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community?

Lucy Powell: As the hon. Lady is the MP for the Glastonbury festival site—or an area close to the site—may I join her in welcoming all those going to the festival this weekend, where it is likely to be very hot? She raises an important point about the Gypsy/Roma community and the need to support it where we can. This would make a really good topic for a debate.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): This is Armed Forces Week, and as we celebrate the contribution of our armed forces, we must do more to support those who serve our country. Too many of our veterans return home with post-traumatic stress disorder, for which there are few treatment options. Since December 2023, the Home Office has been sitting on a response to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs report on barriers to research on schedule 1 substances, including MDMA and psilocybin, which are used in other jurisdictions such as Australia to treat PTSD. Can the Leader of the House please find out where this response is, and arrange for a debate in Government time on novel treatments for mental health conditions?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter during Armed Forces Week. I am really sorry to hear that there has not been a response forthcoming. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of the mental health trauma suffered by many of our veterans, and the need to do more to support them in the community. I will make sure that a response is forthcoming.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating my excellent local schools in Romford and Hornchurch—Ardleigh Green infant school, Dame Tipping Church of England primary school, Hornchurch high school, Parklands primary school, Squirrels Heath junior school, St Edward's Church of England primary school, the Frances Bardsley academy for girls, and Towers infants school—for their superb Ofsted reports, both good and excellent? Will she join me in promoting, as my local schools do, more British values, more patriotism, singing the national anthem at assembly, and flying the Union Jack outside every school across our country?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Member in congratulating schools in his constituency on their recent Ofsted ratings. The schools in all our constituencies do an amazing job in not just educating our young people, but giving them that full life experience about how to be good citizens—and good British citizens as well. We thank them for all their work.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): In the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced the largest devolution settlement in the history of the United Kingdom. It is deeply concerning that despite the Government giving Scotland the funding that it needs to deliver vital public services, the SNP-run East Renfrewshire integration joint board has launched its second attempt to close the Mirin and Milldale day care centres, which provide essential services supporting people with learning and physical disabilities, autism, and older adults and children. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning those savage cuts by the SNP-run integration joint board, and call on the SNP to rethink and save those services?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a very strong case. She is absolutely right that, after decades of failure under the SNP Government, local people are crying out for change. We gave the Scottish Government the largest budget settlement in their history, and they have no excuse for not using it well.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My constituents are facing a crisis endured by people across the UK: a lack of access to basic dental care. Siân Gwenllïan, Member of the Senedd for Arfon, has commissioned a report that provides a compelling case for a dental school at Bangor University. While the Welsh Government have acknowledged the potential benefits of the proposal, they cite financial constraints. Given the promise of two Governments at both ends of the M4 working together, does the Leader of the House agree that time should be found to revise Wales's financial settlement to make this vital proposal a reality?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of dental deserts, which we see across the country, not just in Wales. She will know that the previous Government did not invest in dentistry, and that has had a knock-on effect in Wales. Many colleagues have raised with me the need for more dental schools. I suggest that she clubs together with some colleagues to get a debate on that subject.

Jade Botterill (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): My constituency has recently hosted some fantastic community events. We have had the world coal carrying championship, the annual Ossett and Gawthorpe maypole procession, the Horbury craft fair, the annual Shelley French lunch, and plenty of beer festivals—not to mention the upcoming galas across the constituency over the summer. Could the Leader of the House support me in finding parliamentary time to celebrate the hard-working volunteers behind all these events, including Visit Ossett, and acknowledge their contribution to Yorkshire's community, culture and local economy?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend gives us a great advert for all that is going on in her constituency. These sorts of events are important for attracting visitors and tourists to her constituency, Yorkshire and beyond.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The latest data from the Environment Agency shows nearly 17,000 reports of waste crime across England in the past year, with the west midlands sadly showing the highest concentration of incidents. Waste crime costs the UK

economy around £1 billion annually, and no doubt the Labour-led Birmingham bin strikes are not helping. Can we have a debate in Government time on the problem of waste crime and the need to take action to tackle both waste crime and the bin strikes, which have been going on for over 100 days?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Lady is right that fly-tipping and waste can blight communities and are a real problem, though I must say that incidents sky-rocketed and prosecutions fell under the previous Government. That is why we are taking steps through the Crime and Policing Bill to give police and local authorities more powers to take off-road vehicles off the streets and to take tougher action on fly-tippers.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my support from trade unions. This week we have heard extremely disturbing news that Northumbria police have destroyed all documents relating to the miners' strike, including on Orgreave. That is absolutely alarming. The Labour Government have pledged an inquiry or investigation into the strikes, yet the wanton destruction of that vital, critical evidence has been allowed to happen. Is this a sinister attempt to obscure justice? I am not sure that anybody is prepared to answer that question. Who gave the police permission to destroy these documents, and what is behind it? Can we have an urgent debate into how the Government can instruct all police forces and all authorities—everyone that holds any detail on the miners' strike and Orgreave—to retain that evidence for when the Labour Government maintain their pledge and hold an inquiry into the events of 1984? Justice cannot be served if evidence is systematically and deliberately destroyed.

Lucy Powell: That sounds like a deeply worrying development in the case, and I am sure the whole House will be shocked to hear it. My hon. Friend has long campaigned for justice and answers to what happened at Orgreave, 41 years ago. He raised the issue with me last week and I will continue to raise it with Ministers on his behalf. I join him in telling anyone involved that they must retain their records, and when questions are asked, they must come forward with every bit of information they have on what happened, as they would be expected to.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): My constituents constantly tell me that Thames Water is failing in its duties and has no financial future. In spite of its failings, we are reliant on it for the most basic human needs of water and sanitation. Will the Leader of the House allow us Government time to scrutinise in detail the merits of turning Thames Water into a public benefit company?

Lucy Powell: We urgently need to restore public trust in the water sector; that is particularly true of Thames Water, whose performance has been extremely poor over many years. There are lots of concerns about it. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we brought in the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, the first step to reforming our water system. We have commissioned a deep look at the water governance sector. Further announcements will be coming on that, hopefully before the recess.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Sadeq Nikzad has been convicted of a horrifying sexual assault in Falkirk in October 2023. Shamefully, Mr Nikzad continues to maintain that he has done nothing wrong; during sentencing, his lawyer claimed that this was due to cultural differences. To be clear, no one from any culture or background in our community believes that his actions were anything other than disgusting and criminal. Will the Leader of the House clarify that, once it is in force, clause 48 of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill will ensure that those who commit such serious offences will be unable to claim refugee status in our country ever again?

Lucy Powell: Obviously, I cannot comment on specific cases, but this one sounds truly shocking. Clause 48 of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill will give the Home Secretary powers to refuse refugee status to those convicted of any sexual offence, even when it does not result in a prison sentence of 12 months or more. We are determined to ensure that those who commit such crimes do not get the right to stay in this country.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Brilliant organisations such as citizenAID, which was co-founded by two of my former bosses, Major General Tim Hodgetts and Professor Sir Keith Porter, provide brilliant education about civil resilience and emergency preparedness. In an increasingly uncertain world, will the Leader of the House commit to Government time for a debate on that really important issue, so that we are upskilling our citizens in case of serious incidents?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking all those involved in citizenAID in his constituency. It sounds like a great initiative. He is absolutely right: we need more contingency provision and to train people up so they know what to do during these kinds of incidents. When they happen, we always rely on volunteers and volunteer organisations like the one he has described. This sounds like a good topic for an Adjournment debate.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): HS2 has impacted many residents across Tamworth, with businesses and farmers having been forced to sell their land. One resident has been trapped for nearly 10 years with a property that borders HS2. He is unable to sell because 50% of the land occupies what HS2 claims is safeguarding territory. Despite the involvement of three solicitors, HS2 has failed to explain that ruling. May I therefore ask for a statement to the House on when the statutory blight will be lifted on land no longer needed for HS2, so that my constituents, along with those of other hon. Members, can move on with their lives?

Lucy Powell: That case in my hon. Friend's constituency sounds really difficult. As she will be aware, the Secretary of State recently came to the House to explain more deeply the shocking mismanagement of HS2. We are determined to get a grip of that and get delivery back under control. We are reviewing the position on HS2 phase 2 and will set out more plans shortly, including about the safeguarding of land.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): My constituent Liz was thrown out of the RAF in 1969 when a love letter from her girlfriend was discovered. Not only did

she lose her career but, as she recently discovered, she has had a criminal record for 50 years. The compensation scheme for veterans has been open since December last year, but the discharge of funds for those suffering such injustice is slow: 1,000 veterans have applied, but only 44 payments have been realised. Will the Leader of the House please make time for a debate about the process, so that those who have waited for decades can finally be compensated?

Lucy Powell: We have all been shocked by these cases; I am sorry to hear about what Liz has suffered. For so many years, those who were gay were not able to be in the armed forces. That they were treated in such appalling ways, getting criminal records and losing the jobs they adored, is truly shocking. I was really pleased that we recently had a debate on these matters on the Floor of the House, but I will absolutely ensure that she and other Members are updated on the delivery of that compensation scheme and of justice for those involved.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): This weekend, the England women's football team play their final friendly before they defend the Euro championship trophy they won so brilliantly in 2022. I am delighted to say that Rochdale's very own Keira Walsh will again wear the No. 4 shirt at the heart of our midfield. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking and wishing Keira and the Lionesses all the very best of luck and in thanking her proud mum and dad, Tracy and Peter, for what they did in producing such an inspiring figure for women and girls across the country?

Lucy Powell: I am sure that the whole House will join my hon. Friend and me in wishing the Lionesses well in defending their title. What joy winning the Euros four years ago brought to us all. I join him in thanking Tracy and Peter for bringing up their daughter and for all the drop-offs and pick-ups, and all the time and energy, that go into creating someone as brilliant as Keira Walsh.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I do not know if the Leader of the House is aware that if we installed just 15% of floating solar panels on the man-made reservoirs in this country, we would double the installed base of solar power without having to put a single new solar panel on agricultural land. I know what she is thinking: "If only some plucky Back Bencher had secured today's Adjournment debate, the House could learn more." I am happy to say that I have, so will she encourage Back Benchers from across the House to attend today's debate to learn more about floating solar?

Lucy Powell: I am pleased to confirm that the hon. Gentleman is a very plucky Back Bencher indeed. I am sure that many will be interested in his Adjournment debate. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, because it sounds like a great idea.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): My constituent Danielle Wiseman is desperate to pass her theory test, but she was recently told that she cannot get a theory test in Gateshead until 2026. Will the Leader of the House make time for the urgent debate needed on access to theory tests and driving tests—an issue that bedevils people in Gateshead and

across the country? Also, if she will allow me, will she congratulate Danielle and her partner David on the upcoming birth of their child?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Danielle and David on the upcoming birth of their child. It is so important, as a parent, to be able to drive around, so I am sorry to hear about the delays they are experiencing. This matter gets raised with me lots at business questions. The Government have recently taken steps to deal with the abuse of and the huge backlog in the driving test system. We are delivering around 10,000 additional driving tests, but I will ensure that the House is updated on the matter.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): In recent weeks and months, Harrogate has been gridlocked, with seemingly unco-ordinated roadworks blocking our town. It is particularly difficult for businesses when those works go on for protracted periods of times—and when they already face Labour's jobs tax. Will the Leader of the House agree to look at a compensation scheme for businesses affected for long periods by roadworks?

Lucy Powell: Really badly delivered roadworks, which are often unco-ordinated, can be a huge blight on local businesses, town centres and others. I hear what the hon. Member is saying. These are the responsibilities of local councils and we are putting more money into making sure that roads can be put right, but I will definitely ensure that he gets a reply.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): One in four women experience mental health challenges during pregnancy or after birth; in fact, it is the most common complication of pregnancy in the UK. Last month, almost 50 hon. Members of this House pledged their support for improved maternal mental health provision at an event that I hosted with the Maternal Mental Health Alliance. Will the Leader of the House advise on further opportunities to embed better maternal mental health provision in the Government's 10-year plan for the NHS?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that maternal mental health is a critical issue to the development of a child. I have long been involved in the initiative on the first 1,001 days—from conception to the age of two—with former Leader of the House Andrea Leadsom, and I will be visiting such services in my constituency tomorrow; let me get that plug in. I assure my hon. Friend that these sorts of issues will be covered in the NHS 10-year plan, which will come to this House very shortly.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Research shows that 91% of farmers see poor mental health as the industry's biggest hidden issue. Last year, Kelso farmer Neil Stewart very sadly took his own life. His friends and family have since raised over £80,000 for RSABI, which provides support for people working in farming. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to them and may we have a debate on mental health in farming?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear that Neil Stewart took his own life, with the impact that must have had, and is still having, on his family and friends. To hear of their extraordinary fundraising efforts for

RSABI is heartwarming. Mental health and mental health support, whether in rural communities, young people and other aspects, are a priority for the Government, and more will be announced shortly in the 10-year plan.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): On 5 July, Renfrewshire hosts the annual Sma' Shot Day parade, as it celebrates the victory of weavers over their employers in the 19th century. For more than 30 years, Mr Tony Lawler, a Paisley Buddy, has led the procession, beating the Charleston drum. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Tony as he retires from the role, and does she agree that celebrating workers' rights is a worthwhile topic for a future debate?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in wishing everybody a happy Sma' Shot Day celebration and all that involves, and I congratulate Tony Lawler on 30 fantastic years of service to that rich history and festival. She is right: as a Labour Government, we celebrate the advancement of workers' rights and all the history involved.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Surfers Against Sewage has just published its 2025 water quality report, showing that more than five people a day fall ill after entering the water at UK beaches, with many requiring GP visits or hospitalisation for chest infections or serious gastro bugs. Given the serious public health consequences of sewage pollution, will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time about the health and economic impacts of untreated sewage discharges?

Lucy Powell: Water quality has been shocking in recent years, whether in our rivers, seas or lakes. It is a huge public concern and, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, it has a number of consequences. That is why one of the Government's first acts was to bring in the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which is now an Act, and we will go further. We have the commission on wider water governance reform, and further details of that will come shortly.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): At a time when the Government are reducing NHS waiting lists across England, they continue to rise in Scotland. Just yesterday, the SNP Government announced plans that could see investment in NHS services reduced by a shocking 12%, resulting in a significant reduction in frontline NHS staff. Does my right hon. Friend agree that people in my constituency deserve a Scottish Government focused on improving our NHS, as has been the commitment of this Government since the general election?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right. The SNP's record on the NHS is shocking. We have seen years of mismanagement and growing waiting lists, including eight-hour waits in accident and emergency and 100,000 Scots stuck on NHS waiting lists for more than a year, which is truly shocking. The SNP Government have had the biggest settlement they have ever had under this Government, and they now have no excuse not to sort it out.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Earlier this month Family Business UK confirmed what was obvious to many on this side of the House—but not,

[*Robbie Moore*]

apparently, to Labour Members—that the Government's changes to business property relief will cause more than 200,000 job losses and cost the economy nearly £15 billion. That includes 250 jobs in my constituency and more than £60 million lost to the local economy in West Yorkshire. Can we have an urgent debate on the catastrophic consequences that the Government's changes to inheritance tax, through business property relief and agricultural property relief, will have on many of our family businesses from April 2026?

Lucy Powell: As someone who also represents many family businesses, I know this is an issue of concern, but we had to take difficult decisions in our Budget to ensure that we have money going into our national health service to reduce waiting lists, and into our skills sector and education, and that meant looking at those with the broadest shoulders, including inheritance tax, so that we can restore our public services to where they need to be.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Black Country Living Museum in my constituency, which was recently named the best large visitor attraction in the country by VisitEngland? The museum brings to life the Black Country's rich heritage through the reconstruction of shops, houses and industrial areas, telling the story of this revolutionary period in our history. Will she also make time for a debate in Government time on supporting world-class visitor attractions, which contribute so much to our local and national economies?

Lucy Powell: It is wonderful news that the Black Country Living Museum won that award—it pulled a real peaky blinder. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that these kind of visitor attractions are critical to bringing people into our communities and ensuring that our high streets and town centres thrive.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Reference has already been made to Armed Forces Week. Like Members from across the House, I will be taking part in events this weekend. North-east Lincolnshire is staging the major national event, and around a quarter of a million people will descend on Cleethorpes this weekend to take part in the events. Unfortunately, due to a constituency engagement, I cannot take part in this afternoon's debate, but I want to put on the record my thanks to Alex Baxter and the armed forces major events team in north-east Lincolnshire and, indeed, to all the volunteers across the country who put together the events that mark this occasion.

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Member in taking the opportunity to thank Alex Baxter and all those in the hon. Member's constituency marking Armed Forces Week. We join together, as we always do, to thank all those who have served and are serving this country.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): New figures today from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority show that the equivalent of one child in every UK classroom is born through IVF. Yet funding for IVF is a postcode lottery and there is not enough support in the workplace, as Fertility Matters At Work

highlighted in Parliament yesterday. Can we have a debate in Government time on this issue, and will the Leader of the House advise on how we can address it across Government because we need cross-departmental action?

Lucy Powell: The Government recognise, and we all recognise, that access to fertility treatment is variable across the country. We are considering these issues as part of our broader plans for the NHS. I will ensure that my hon. Friend and the rest of the House are kept updated.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wish to raise the urgent situation facing Christians in Syria, where a suicide attack on a Damascus church recently claimed the lives of at least 20 people and injured many more. The brutal assault is a devastating reminder of the threats that Christians and other religious communities continue to face in Syria, amid years of conflict and displacement. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Foreign Office gives the House an assessment of the attack and the wider security situation for religious minorities in Syria? What steps can the Foreign Secretary take with international partners to support those vulnerable communities, ensure humanitarian access and hold the perpetrators of these atrocities to account?

Lucy Powell: Once again, the hon. Gentleman raises a serious issue. We strongly condemn the horrific terrorist attack in Damascus and continue to monitor the situation closely. We do note on this occasion that the Syrian Government's response was swift and robust, but we will of course keep monitoring it.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): This week is also Small Charity Week—a chance to celebrate the work of small charities in all our constituencies. I have had the privilege of meeting many such organisations, whether that is Home-Start Hillingdon, Hillingdon women's centre or Trinity Homeless Projects. Despite their important work, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations found that only 3% of charities are confident about their long-term financial future. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate to celebrate Small Charity Week and talk about how we can continue to support their work?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those small charities in his constituency. We recognise that the last few years have not been the easiest for charities. We are taking a number of steps to keep them going, including with the charitable tax reliefs and exemptions. We are also ensuring that local government, on which many charities rely, has the long-term secure funding to support them.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Under the last Government, fly-tipping skyrocketed while prosecutions fell, and places like Burnt Oak, Colindale and west Hendon in my constituency paid the price. It is fantastic to see this Labour Government acting where the previous Government failed, bringing in stiffer penalties and giving the police powers to seize and crush vans. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how we can use those powers to consign fly-tipping to the dustbin for good, and would she join me in Hendon to crush a van?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Fly-tipping and littering are a blight on many of our communities, which is why I am proud that this Government are finally acting by giving councils and the police the powers they need to seize and crush many of these vehicles. My hon. Friend will know that I recently took part in a vehicle-crushing exercise with my local police, and I recommend it to others.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): My constituent applied to have his case against his pension provider considered by the ombudsman, and he contacted me because of the delay in receiving a determination. I, in turn, wrote to the ombudsman, who advised that my constituent was in the correct place in the queue and would be allocated to an adjudicator in September 2025. My constituent made his original application in May 2020. I am sure the Leader of the House would agree that this timescale is not acceptable, so will she find time for a debate to shine a light on why such inefficiency and poor response to constituents is happening?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about this case. My hon. Friend is right that five years is unacceptably slow. The performance of the Pensions Ombudsman has been raised with me in previous business questions, and I am happy to take this up directly for her. She is right that such delays are just not acceptable.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Last week at Bishop's Stortford carnival, I met Katie from Blues pre-school and nursery, which is taking part in this week's Small Charity Week. Any donations to the nursery, which will be matched by partners, will be used to upgrade its outdoor area so it can be used by the children in all weathers. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the nursery well as it raises funds, and in encouraging my residents to visit the donation page?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in hoping that the nursery raises the funds it needs to support its work.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Last Saturday, I launched the first Bournemouth town centre citizens panel, which brings together 50 local residents and the council to co-create an action plan for our town. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the more than 250 people who applied, and the participants for their energy and ideas to restore pride in our town? Will she also consider making time to debate how we can support more meaningful engagement on the future of our town centres and high streets?

Lucy Powell: A citizens panel in Bournemouth sounds like a fantastic initiative, bringing people together to revitalise the great town she represents.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): My border terrier, Jack, always receives a very warm welcome in Stockton North, but too many pet owners are choosing

to have their animals put down for fear of sky-high vet bills. I received a positive response from the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs on 8 May to my request to review the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. Can we have Government time to debate the recommendations of the Competition and Markets Authority because, just like Jack, I am not letting this go?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend sounds like a dog with a bone. This is an important issue that is raised with many of us by our constituents. I will ensure that the Minister updates him and, if necessary, the whole House.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): This Government have secured record investment in the NHS, which for local people across my constituency means more appointments, earlier diagnosis and access to efficient, high-quality care. After years of under-investment and increasing waiting times, can we have a debate on how these are the first steps to restoring a health service that is fit for the future and is there when people in my constituency need it?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This Government have taken swift action to bring down waiting lists, which are down by almost 200,000 in a year, with 100,000 more patients treated in that time. We are putting extra money into the NHS because reducing waiting lists is critical to our economy and the health of everybody in this country.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): On my recent visit to Greenways primary academy in Stockton Brook, pupils were busy decorating plates kindly donated by the brilliant Steelite, showing off the artistic flair for which our creative city of Stoke-on-Trent is known.

I learned during my visit that more than 70 children are now attending the school's brilliant breakfast club, an initiative made possible by this Labour Government. Does the Leader of the House agree it is important that kids have hungry minds that are ready to learn rather than hungry bellies?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. We are proud of the free breakfast clubs that we are introducing. We are also proud that we are extending free school meals to all those on universal credit, because it is critical to every child's learning that they are not going hungry.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Prime Minister to make his statement, I note that it will cover two separate substantial subjects—the G7 summit in Canada 10 days ago, and the NATO summit in The Hague this week. For that reason I will allow a degree of latitude and, unusually, I will allow hon. Members who wish to ask about both subjects to do so. I urge colleagues to keep their questions brief for the benefit of those who are still waiting to be called. I call the Prime Minister.

G7 and NATO Summits

11.30 am

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): This Labour Government are focused on delivering security for the British people—national security, economic security, and social security. On social security, I recognise that there is a consensus across the House on the urgent need for reform of our welfare system, because the British people deserve protection and dignity when they are unable to work, and support into work when they can. At the moment they are failed every single day by the broken system created by the Conservatives, which achieves neither. I know that colleagues across the House are eager to start fixing that, and so am I; all colleagues want to get this right, and so do I. We want to see reform implemented with Labour values of fairness. That conversation will continue in the coming days, so that we can begin making change together on Tuesday.

Mr Speaker, with permission I will update the House on the G7 and NATO summits, where the middle east was at the forefront of our minds. For decades, it has been the stated policy of the UK and our allies that Iran must never obtain a nuclear weapon. No one who cares about the security of our country, or the future of the middle east, could live with that eventuality. For decades we have worked to prevent it, and on Saturday night the US took a big step towards resolving that threat.

There is now a window for peace. We urge Iran and Israel to honour the ceasefire and seize this opportunity to stabilise the region. That is our priority—to get Iran back around the negotiating table with the US. Ultimately, that is how we will ensure a complete, verifiable, and irreversible end to Iran's nuclear programme. We are using every diplomatic lever to support that effort, because further instability would pose grave risks to the region and beyond, taking us even further away from freeing the hostages and easing the intolerable suffering of the Palestinians. There is also an opportunity now to push for a ceasefire in Gaza, and we must seize it. I have been discussing this with other leaders, and we will keep pushing to put the region on a better path. I have also spoken to the Emir of Qatar to express our solidarity after Iran's unacceptable attack on the Al Udeid airbase. We took the necessary action to protect British military personnel ahead of that attack, and we will continue to support all our citizens in the region.

Mr Speaker, this crisis has punctured once again the mistaken idea that domestic and foreign policy concerns are separate, and that action in one area is at the expense of the other. The truth, now more than ever, is that international problems rebound on us at home, impacting our security and our economy. Our national security strategy is clear. In this era of radical uncertainty, faced with growing conflict, state threats, illegal migration, organised crime and terrorism, the only way to respond to these issues is by being strong, both at home and on the world stage, by pursuing a foreign policy that answers directly to the concerns of working people. That is the approach I took to NATO and to the G7.

NATO is the most successful military alliance the world has ever known and the cornerstone of our defence for over 75 years. Our duty is not merely to reflect on that success; we must equip the alliance for the future. I have long argued that this is the moment for Europe to make a fundamental shift in posture.

That is what the UK has done, delivering the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the cold war and setting out a landmark shift in our defence and deterrence in the strategic defence review.

Yesterday, NATO allies stepped up as well, to meet this moment and create an alliance that is stronger, fairer and more lethal than ever. Together, we signed a new defence investment pledge of 5% of GDP by 2035, including, for the first time, wider issues of homeland security and national resilience, like protecting our cyber-security and our energy networks. This is in lockstep with our national security strategy and we are already investing in these areas. Under NATO's new definitions, we estimate that we will reach at least 4.1% of GDP in 2027, on the way to 5% by 2035. Allies also agreed to review both the balance and the trajectory of these requirements in 2029 to coincide with the scheduled review of NATO's capability requirements, ensuring that we keep pace with threats and technologies as they evolve.

With this historic commitment, we are continuing our proud tradition of leading in NATO, picking up the torch from Attlee and Bevin. And now, following their lead, we will seize the opportunity created by this moment to align our national security objectives and plans for economic growth in a way not seen since the 1940s, renewing industrial communities the length and breadth of our country, boosting defence production and innovation. Our investment in Britain's nuclear deterrent alone will support 30,000 high-skilled jobs.

I want to speak directly about our deterrent capability. It has kept this country safe for decades, but we recognise the grim reality today that the nuclear threat is growing. So we are renewing our existing at-sea capability and we are going further still. I can tell the House today that we will procure at least 12 F-35A fast jets, and we will make them available to bear nuclear weapons, if necessary. That marks the return of the Royal Air Force to nuclear deterrence for the first time in three decades, the biggest strengthening of our deterrence posture in a generation, keeping our country safe while also supporting 20,000 jobs.

The NATO summit sent a message of intent that will be heard around the world, but this must be joined by renewed support for Ukraine, because if we let Putin succeed there, the deterrent effect of NATO's new plans would be fatally compromised. So I told President Zelensky at Downing Street on Monday that we will harden our resolve. We struck an agreement together to share battlefield technology, accelerating our support for Ukraine's defence, while boosting British security and British jobs. We committed to providing hundreds more air defence missiles, paid for not by the British taxpayer, but with money from Russia's frozen assets.

And, together with Europe, Canada and our Indo-Pacific partners, we announced that we will deliver €40 billion of military aid to Ukraine this year, matching last year's pledge in full. There is a path to a just and lasting peace, but it will only come through flipping the pressure on to Putin. His position is weaker than he claims, so I urged all our partners, including the US, to step up the pressure now, with more sanctions and more military support to bring Russia to the table, to agree an unconditional ceasefire, leading to serious negotiations.

Let me turn to the G7 summit, where, again, my priority was to deliver in the national interest. Again, I can report some significant progress. Leaders agreed to take decisive action on illegal migration, following

the UK's lead in using hard-headed measures such as sanctions. We marked an export contract with Canada worth over £500 million, creating jobs here at home. We secured Canada's agreement to ratify Britain's entry to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—a trading bloc worth \$12 trillion.

We secured President Trump's signature to fully implement our trade deal, which will slash tariffs on British goods. His executive order will remove aerospace tariffs completely and cut tariffs on cars from the 27.5% that British car makers face now to 10% in a matter of days, saving thousands of jobs in the west midlands and around the country. I have been to Jaguar Land Rover many times now; I have looked those workers in the eye, and I know what this means to them, their families and their whole communities. That is who I am representing at summits like this—the working people of Britain.

Navigating this world requires cool heads. It defies simplistic answers and knee-jerk judgments. We do not pretend that we can fix every global problem, but we can carve a unique path through these dangerous times to secure and renew Britain in an era of global instability. That is what our plan for change is all about: putting Britain's national interest first.

After years of economic chaos, we have delivered economic stability for the British people. After years of our armed forces being hollowed out, we are building up our military, firing up our industries, leading in NATO, supporting Ukraine and keeping Britain safe. After years of fraying alliances, we are rebuilding and shaping them to serve the British people. We have focused every ounce of our global influence to deliver for working people and to deliver in the national interest, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

11.42 am

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement. He has evaded Prime Minister's questions for two weeks, only to come back here to tell us what we already heard on the news. This is a weak statement from a weak Prime Minister, which can be characterised in two words: noises off.

In his statement, the Prime Minister said:

"We urge Iran and Israel to honour the ceasefire".

He said:

"We are using every diplomatic lever to support this effort".

What diplomatic levers? Are they the same levers he is using with his Back-Bench rebels? Is he just asking them to please play nice? Let us be honest: nobody cares what this Prime Minister thinks—why should they, when he does not even know what he thinks? Clearly no one cares what he thinks, because he was not involved. We used to be a strategic player on the global stage, advancing Britain's interests with confidence—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. You may not wish to hear the Leader of the Opposition, but I do. It does not do anybody good in this Chamber to try to shout down somebody who is speaking.

Mrs Badenoch: Labour Members can shout as much as they like, but we all know the truth. We used to be a strategic player on the global stage, advancing Britain's interests with confidence, and now we are on the sidelines.

Over the last few weeks, historic events unfolded in the middle east, and at every stage Britain has been out of step with the US and out of the loop with Israel. Last week, the Prime Minister came back from the G7 insisting that there was nothing President Trump said that would indicate he was about to get involved in this conflict. Days later, the US launched its attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, and the Prime Minister had no idea what was going on.

The week before, Israel launched an attack on Iran, and it became apparent that the UK was not even informed about the attack in advance, despite us having been involved in previous preventive action. How is that standing up on the world stage? On Tuesday, the Foreign Secretary—a lawyer—repeatedly could not say whether the US strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities were legal. This is a Government who do not know what they are doing. Let me make the Conservative position clear: Iran has been a direct threat to the UK for years, plotting terrorism on British soil. It must not get nuclear weapons. This is a time for Europe to step up, and the UK should be leading; instead, we have an Attorney General using international law to constrain and restrict the UK while the Prime Minister hovers indecisively on the sidelines. What we need is a leader—instead, we have three lawyers.

Last week, I wrote to the Prime Minister about how this conflict has underscored the folly of the Government's £30 billion Chagos surrender deal. The Diego Garcia base is of obvious strategic importance for conflicts in the middle east. [*Interruption.*] Labour Members are shaking their heads—they do not understand. It is obvious; Diego Garcia was used extensively during the war in Afghanistan, including by the United States.

At Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that this Chagos surrender had been

"opposed by our adversaries, Russia, China and Iran".—[*Official Report*, 4 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 302.]

Since then, it has been widely reported that China has offered massive congratulations on the deal and conveyed that it fully supports Mauritius. Will the Prime Minister now admit that he was incorrect to state on the Floor of this House that China opposes the Chagos deal, and can he confirm whether he still views China as an adversary? Under the terms of the Prime Minister's deal, if the US were to launch an attack from the military base on Diego Garcia, we would have to inform the Chinese-allied Mauritius Government. Will he abandon the deeply flawed surrender deal? If not, when will he introduce the legislation setting out the details of the Chagos surrender, so that Parliament can consider and debate it?

We welcome the announcement that the UK will be buying F-35A fighter jets, and I am pleased that the Labour party has now moved on from its previous position of not supporting NATO and advocating against the nuclear deterrent. [*Interruption.*] Labour Members pretend that it never happened, but we have the receipts. Conservatives are proud of exceeding the NATO baseline of 2% of GDP spent on defence, and we led NATO in getting there. However, the Government's aspiration to get spending on national security to 5% is just hope—the reality is that Labour does not have a plan to get to 3%. It is all smoke and mirrors, and we do not know what the Government will spend the extra 1.5% component on. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether this is

[Mrs Badenoch]

money we are already spending, or whether there will be any new money? So long as this plan remains unfunded, these are just words.

Instead of using smoke and mirrors to inflate defence spending, Labour should heed our call to hit 3% by the end of this Parliament with a fully funded plan to get there. Look at the money the Government claim they are going to save through their welfare Bill—£5 billion is nowhere near the tens, if not hundreds, of billions we are going to need to find if we are to meet that defence spending target. This is the problem, Mr Speaker: it is one thing to talk about spending money on planes and infrastructure and to make announcements about reviews, but it is another to be clear about where the money will come from and how it will be spent efficiently to secure the defence of our nation. [Interruption.] Labour Members can mutter all they like; we all know that they are terrified of doing anything that is even remotely difficult.

It is crucial that there is a clear, united front in full support of Ukraine that secures peace on Ukraine's terms. The stakes could not be higher. We need the Government to be leveraging British influence in every way they can for Ukraine, so can the Prime Minister tell us whether he pushed for clearer language in the NATO communiqué about Russia being the aggressor in this conflict? Can he update us on the UK's current position on Ukraine's accession to NATO, given the absence of detail in this year's communiqué? We must ensure that our leading role continues, but that requires strong leadership and an ability to influence.

The Prime Minister may have finally returned to this House after a fortnight away, but in truth, he is all at sea—irrelevant on the world stage and impotent in the face of rising illegal immigration. Now, with 126 of his own MPs openly undermining his authority, his Government are incapable of making even the smallest changes to bring down the cost of our ever-expanding welfare bill; there is no way that they are going to be able to pay for our defence. This is a Government who are paralysed by their own legal advice, paralysed by their rebellious Back Benchers, and paralysed by the fear of being found out for having no real vision for this country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to those who were late into the Chamber, please do not stand. I call the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: We live in more volatile times than many of us can remember, with conflicts in many parts of the world that are evolving in a very fast and dangerous way. There has never been a more important time to work with our allies and to be absolutely serious in our response. That response was unserious.

To suggest at a time like this that the Prime Minister attending the G7 summit and the NATO summit is avoiding PMQs is unserious. What happened at NATO yesterday was historic. It was very important that, at a time like, NATO showed unity and strength, with a commitment to the future, not just to the past. That took a huge amount of work with our allies over the last few days and weeks. We were centrally involved in that, crafting the final outcome, and were recognised as having done so. I am proud that we helped put that

summit into the right place yesterday, and the world emerged safer as a result. That was the unanimous view of 32 allies on leaving NATO yesterday. For the Leader of the Opposition to belittle it just shows how irrelevant she and her party are becoming. They used to once be serious about these issues, and they used to be capable of cross-party consensus, but all of that is slipping away. We have led on Ukraine and secured three trade deals.

The right hon. Lady talks about the prospect of US attacks. She must have overlooked the fact that on Tuesday, when I returned from the G7, the first thing I did was go straight into a Cobra meeting to plan for all contingencies, including a possible US attack on Iran. I will tell her why I did that, although we did offer a Privy Council briefing, so she knows this. We have military personnel co-located in nearly all the bases across the middle east, and I was therefore extremely concerned immediately upon my return to take every step to ensure that I had the highest levels of assuredness that we had the preparations in place to keep our people and our assets safe, should the need arise. Far from being blindsided, we were planning through last week, we were talking to the Americans, and we were put on notice about everything they did. She simply does not understand the nature of the relationship at that level.

In relation to Diego Garcia, let me disabuse the right hon. Lady. We do not have to give Mauritius advance notice under the treaty. That is absolutely clear.

The right hon. Lady talks about defence spend. We are the party that has increased defence spend to the highest level since the cold war—2.5%. The Conservatives talked about it; we did it. She says we do not know where the money is coming from, but she was pressed on this in an interview not so long ago, and she said that “we talked about getting to 3% by 2030 and we couldn't make the numbers work.”

She went on:

“We need to find a way to make the numbers work”.

I was intrigued by this interview, and I thought she was about to lay it out. Then she said:

“This sort of thing requires real thinking.”

Then she said:

“Let's start looking at what we can do...It's about us setting up task forces”.

That is how unserious they are.

The right hon. Lady asked about the Ukraine communiqué. As she will know, had she actually studied it, the way that NATO works is an iterative process. Therefore the position on Ukraine has not changed for NATO, and it has not changed under this Government. On the contrary, we are recognised as leading on Ukraine and as the closest ally of Ukraine, working with them the whole time. That is something I am proud of. I think it is something the House is proud of, because we had been doing this on a cross-party basis, and the sooner we get back to that, rather than the unserious response of the Leader of the Opposition, the better.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): In the year since the election of this Labour Government, Britain is back as a force for good on the world stage. Following the outbreak of conflict in the middle east last week, I was proud to see the Prime

Minister lead calls for calm, cool heads and de-escalation. In its aftermath, we must take seriously the renewed defence commitments that the Prime Minister has made at NATO, but we must also proudly wield the soft convening and convincing power that the UK has in spades. That soft power has historically been the key to successful diplomatic efforts in Iran, securing the joint comprehensive plan of action, and in the wider middle east and around the world. Can the Prime Minister confirm what the Foreign Affairs Committee has learned from our conversations with our European allies, which is that Britain is quietly and effectively stepping up to lead the fight against Russian disinformation and cyber-warfare, and that the investment we will be putting in will be well spent?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question, and she is absolutely right. The need to de-escalate was the central focus going into the weekend and coming out of it, and I am very pleased that we have reached a ceasefire in relation to the conflict in Iran. We absolutely need that to hold.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the soft convening power of the United Kingdom. It is an incredible asset and, yes, I can confirm that we are working with others in relation to Russian disinformation and cyber-attacks, which, as the House knows, are a regular occurrence.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for early sight of his statement. The Liberal Democrats agree that it would have been wrong to leave an empty chair in front of the Union Jack at the table for the G7 and NATO. It is astonishing, and I share his surprise, that it is now Conservative policy not to attend the G7 and NATO.

I am glad that the Prime Minister has signalled retreat on his welfare plans. I hope that he will now listen to everyone and not just his Back Benchers.

On the G7, despite the progress that he outlined, it remains extremely damaging to the world economy that the United States and Donald Trump continue their policy of protectionism. Can the Prime Minister update the House on whether he has had discussions with other G7 and, indeed, NATO colleagues about how we could persuade President Trump to resile from protectionism?

On NATO, the Prime Minister is right to say that Putin's imperial ambitions present a once-in-a-generation threat to our security. Last week, I travelled to Estonia to meet British troops and Estonian leaders, including Prime Minister Michal. The Estonians have not forgotten the repression enforced by Russian tanks, nor the murder of four former Prime Ministers at the hands of the Kremlin. They are under no illusions about the threat posed by Putin, and we must not be either, so I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to NATO's new spending target.

In the face of Russia's war machine, the British Army remains an essential guarantor of our country's security and that of our allies. When I met our incredible troops stationed in Estonia, I was inspired by their skill and professionalism. We need to get more brilliant people like them into the military, so will the Prime Minister consider the Liberal Democrats' proposals to move more quickly to reverse the Conservatives' cuts to the

Army, and back our new £10,000 bonus for recruits? It is vital that we take such measures, as Putin continues his barbarism in Ukraine.

Our commitment to Ukraine's defence must be increased, not reduced. In addition to the actions that the Prime Minister outlined, can he confirm whether he has held more discussions with partners on not just using the interest from frozen Russian assets, but seizing those assets, so that we can bolster our support for Ukraine and pay for a faster increase in defence spending? The Estonians believe they have a plan to deal with all the complications that he mentions when I ask him questions about this. Is he prepared to meet me to discuss the Estonians' ideas about how to break the backlog so that we can seize those assets?

The Prime Minister also spoke about the conflicts and crises in the middle east. He is right to push even harder for a ceasefire in Gaza. People around the world will question whether military action, rather than diplomacy, will actually make us safer in the future. We must redouble our efforts for a just peace in the region, and that must include self-determination for the Palestinian people. Will the Government finally commit to recognising a state for the Palestinians?

The Prime Minister: May I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions? He started by asking whether I have discussed with other G7 partners the question of US tariffs. Yes, we frequently discuss trade, the economy and, frankly, the challenges that those tariffs put in place for all economies. That is the sort of co-ordination and discussion that goes on all the time, and it will continue.

On the troops in Estonia, I have visited them a number of times myself. They are incredibly brave, and they have a real sense of purpose. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that, at NATO, the frontline states on the border with Russia were leading the charge in relation to the work that we had to do yesterday to renew and take forward the pledges that we make.

The right hon. Member asked about reversing the cuts to the Army. We will begin the work of reversing those cuts. When the Conservatives came into government, there were 100,000 in our Army; when they left, there were 70,000. I think that is what Ben Wallace meant when he said they had "hollowed out" our armed forces.

On the question of the assets, and whether they themselves can be seized rather than just using the interest, I have been discussing that with colleagues, as the right hon. Member would expect. It is complicated, as he knows. There is not one view, frankly, on this issue among colleagues and allies. I am very happy to see the proposals that he has received from Estonia, I believe, or any others, but it remains complicated. I have to say that allies are in different places on this, but we will continue to discuss it.

On a ceasefire in Gaza and recognition, I think it is very important that we have been pressing the case, particularly, in recent days, quite urgently and in close collaboration with our colleagues—the E3 of Germany, France and the UK are working very closely together at the moment—to say that this is the moment to press on from Iran to a ceasefire in Gaza, and I mean that that should happen in days, not weeks or months. I do think there is a window of opportunity here. I hope that it

[*The Prime Minister*]

happens but I cannot predict that it will. I do think that all of us should do all we can to ensure that, along with a ceasefire in Iran, we push to that ceasefire in Gaza.

On the question of recognition, it has long been our party's policy—this Government's policy—to recognise Palestine at the right time in the process to bring about the peace, because I think that without a two-state solution there is little prospect of lasting peace in the region, and that remains our policy.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Last week, as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I visited NATO headquarters in the UK, where I met fantastic young men and women who are learning great skills as they prepare to defend Britain abroad. However, my constituents, when they see cuts of such great amounts—for example, as proposed in the welfare Bill—may well ask why defence spending is rising. For the benefit of my constituents, could the Prime Minister simply and briefly set that out?

The Prime Minister: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on her elevation—I have not seen her personally since then—which is very well deserved.

My hon. Friend raised a really important point. It is right that we recognise that the first duty of the Prime Minister is to keep the country safe and secure in a volatile world, and that is a duty that I take extremely seriously. We do live in a volatile world, and it is not just something that happens overseas and has no impact on us. What has happened in the Ukraine conflict has already had an impact on her constituents in relation to their energy bills, the cost of living and so much else. We can see, from the last week or two, the impact that the conflict in Iran was having on oil prices, which again has a direct impact on her constituents. So it is absolutely right and in our own interests that we take the necessary measures in relation to defence spend. I should also say that we are determined to ensure that, as we spend more on defence, that is reflected in good, well-paid jobs in the United Kingdom, including in her constituency. On all three fronts, that is the answer I give to her constituents.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): The Iranian regime has long presented a threat to the United Kingdom. As the Prime Minister and I have both experienced, our security services have foiled almost 20 Iranian-backed plots here at home. The prospect of such a regime having nuclear weapons is unacceptable, so I welcome the US and Israeli action. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that we and our European allies should now trigger snapback sanctions unless Tehran admits the International Atomic Energy Agency and allows it to fully verify that all efforts to enrich enhanced uranium have ceased?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for his question and endorse what he says about our security services, which, as he knows very well, do an incredible job in the most difficult of circumstances and at great speed, and they have foiled a number of plots that would have caused widespread panic, violence and destruction.

On snapback—I thank the right hon. Member for raising this—that is a consideration that we are discussing with our allies. I do think that it has to be part of the pressure that we apply. Exactly when and how snapback is applied will obviously be a question for discussion, but he is absolutely right to say that that is the very discussion we should be having at the moment, and I thank him.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's statement and his commitment to increase defence expenditure, but given that we are looking to improve public services—the health service, social care, education and the police—is it realistic to do that within the current tax envelope? Has the time not come for us to review how we tax wealth, as opposed to work, to ensure that those who can bear the heaviest load do so?

The Prime Minister: On defence spend, when we set out the commitment to 2.5% by 2027-28, I set out at the same time how we would fund it. We will continue to take that approach to any spending commitment we make. My hon. Friend will know that we made a commitment in our manifesto to not raise taxes on working people. We will keep to that commitment.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I welcome the element of the Prime Minister's statement where he explicitly links defence, diplomacy and domestic security. He is absolutely right to highlight that interconnection. Therefore, will he revisit the spending review, which sees 4.5% and 5% real-terms reductions in Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office budgets, to make sure that they can actually do their jobs within that interconnected system? To pay for that, will he ensure that his Chancellor removes the job-destroying taxes on employment and reduces the tax burden, which is seeing entrepreneurs and wealth creators leave the country in their droves? Will he show real leadership and ensure that his Back Benchers do not prevent his Front Benchers reducing the cost of our welfare bill so we can pay for these incredibly important governmental functions?

The Prime Minister: On Home Office responsibility for domestic security, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is why it is important that, under the new definition of NATO, resilience at home is now included, because cyber-attacks are commonplace, energy has been weaponised, and many counter-terrorism operations have to be carried out in relation to state threats. We were very careful in the spending review to ensure that there was adequate money on all those threats. I went through that myself, so I can give him that assurance. On money coming in and out of the country, he will no doubt want to celebrate that we have had record investment under this Labour Government in the past 12 months: £120 billion, including the single biggest investment of £40 billion two days ago from Amazon, which is a sign of confidence in this Government that will be measured in many jobs across the country.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Rochdale has been a proud home for Ukrainians ever since they were forced to flee Soviet starvation, murder and oppression in the 1930s and 1940s, so many in my constituency will

warmly welcome the decision to send 350 advanced air missiles to Ukraine, built in Britain and paid for by the interest on seized Russian assets. Does the Prime Minister agree that Russia, not Ukraine, should pay the price for Putin's barbaric war?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. It is very important that when we send those missiles to Ukraine, we emphasise: first, that we are supporting Ukraine, as we have done throughout; and secondly, that that is paid for not by the British taxpayer, but with the interest on Russian assets that have been frozen.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree that, in the context of the threat posed by Putin, we must provide more guidance and support to Britons to prepare them for the possibility of a future conflict, and that that should involve a national resilience campaign?

The Prime Minister: I do think we need to focus on resilience. In a sense, the shift to 5% is a reflection that national resilience is becoming ever more central in our own national defence, in particular on: cyber, where there are frequent attacks from other states; energy, where we have seen from the Ukraine conflict that energy has been weaponised; and counter-terrorism, with state-backed actions in this country, many of which have been thwarted. But the hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to do more on resilience.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): While the Prime Minister was in his rightful place at the NATO summit this week, I was in my constituency for the opening of the Janet Harvey hall, a £250 million installation that will turbocharge shipbuilding in this country and put it in the service of our defence sector. The Prime Minister knows Govan shipbuilding very well. Labour recognises that the defence of our country is now inextricably linked with the growth of our economy and investment in our public services, but that view is not universally shared. I therefore ask the Prime Minister to urge the SNP Government to back our defence sector as we do, for the sake of jobs and prosperity in Glasgow South West and beyond.

The Prime Minister: I urge the SNP to back our defence spend and the jobs that brings with it, but also our defence stance. As I understand its position, the SNP is against the single most effective capability we have, which is our nuclear deterrent, at a time of the greatest volatility we have seen for decades. That is simply wrong in principle, and I urge the SNP to change it.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): At the NATO summit, was the Prime Minister able to add his voice to the congratulations and thanks that the NATO Secretary-General paid to President Trump for the successful military strike on Iran's nuclear programme?

The Prime Minister: We have long argued that Iran should not be capable of having a nuclear weapon, and what happened on Saturday night was a big step to alleviating that threat. That was the subject of many comments at the NATO summit, along with the congratulations for the ceasefire that has now been brokered and the emphasis we now need on getting Iran

around the negotiating table, because if it is to be irreversible and verifiable, it is important that it is done through negotiation. That is what we are focused on.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, especially on defence. Politics is about priorities and, as I know he knows, the most important responsibility of Government is the defence of the country and its people. I echo the sensible points made by the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak)—sadly, they were not made by those on the Opposition Front Bench—and in particular his point about our intelligence services, who are the finest in the world. There are those whom we will never know and never see, but who have kept this place, our democracy and our communities safe. Will the Prime Minister assure me that, as we seek to invest more in defence, there is a particular focus on supporting our intelligence services?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Our intelligence services do an incredible job, and I pay tribute to them. As he will know, from now on, where the intelligence services are contributing to our national defence, that will be included in our defence spend. It will not be included in the 2.5%—that is core defence, as always understood—but will be added to it, taking it to 2.6% in 2027-28.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It will not have escaped anyone's notice that while the Prime Minister was rightly away at the G7 and NATO summits, he made tens of billions of pounds of unfunded spending commitments, yet next week he expects Members of Parliament to vote with him to remove money from disabled people who need help to go to the toilet. How can he justify making a moral argument for security abroad while removing security from disabled people at home?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, when we announced the 2.5% increase in defence spending, we made it very clear where that money was coming from, and it was not coming from welfare spend, as he very well knows. I do believe in the moral duty—and it is a moral duty—to defend our country, which means working with our NATO allies to ensure that we have the most effective deterrent. He cannot give lectures on the moral duty to protect our country while maintaining a position of casting aside the single most effective deterrent we have. That is unserious.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I recently visited a NATO air force base in Poland as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme I am taking part in with the RAF. There, I saw at first hand the importance of working closely with our NATO allies to defend our nation and keep us secure, as we witnessed the scramble to the skies to ward off Russian fighter jets. Will the Prime Minister confirm that he is prioritising the wellbeing of our armed forces personnel, both at home and abroad, so that they can continue to keep us and our allies safe?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. It is, of course, Armed Forces Week. Among other things, we have given the armed forces their single

[*The Prime Minister*]

biggest pay increase in many years, and made a strong commitment to other aspects, including their accommodation. It is important that we recognise and reflect what they do for our country, and that we ensure we are able to retain the brilliance of our armed forces.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I very much welcome NATO's commitment to 3.5% core defence spending, and 5% on a broader definition by 2035, for all NATO member states. However, the Prime Minister and the Government have published spending figures only up until 2030. When will they publish public spending plans for 2030 to 2035? Is it not incumbent on them to show how the target of 3.5% for core defence spending will be met by the Government? Otherwise, it is just an unfunded promise.

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, when we presented the strategic defence review, we had already set out the path to 2.5% and the ambition for 3%. I think it is right that all NATO allies have now agreed the 5% by 2035, subject, of course, to review in 2029 of both the trajectory and balance. The reason for that, as he will understand, is that NATO itself is reviewing its capabilities in 2029, and the reviews will therefore coincide.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Diplomacy is the best way to prevent and de-escalate risk and ensure long-term security. What discussions took place on how to escalate the focus on diplomacy in the middle east in order to resolve the situation in Gaza—clearly, the architecture is not delivering at pace—as well as on the forgotten war in Sudan?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I reassure her that we are having discussions with other leaders not just at NATO and the G7, but on a daily basis about the architecture and the path, and how we can use diplomacy to get to a ceasefire in Gaza, and to a much better place in Sudan; I thank her for raising Sudan, which is not raised often enough. We are doing that at speed, and are trying to bring as many allies with us as possible. If the Iran ceasefire holds—I hope that it will—that will create the space to say that now is the time for that ceasefire in Gaza. That is only the first step, of course, in the route first to recovery, and then to a two-state solution.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): After a worrying start, President Trump has now strengthened NATO, both by extracting promises of more money and with the positive comments he made at the end of the summit. Has the Prime Minister had a chance to assess whether that means that President Trump's love affair with Vladimir Putin is beginning to cool?

The Prime Minister: First, I think it was really important that NATO was united in the way that it was last night, and I do not just mean the comments of President Trump—I mean having the whole 32 countries on the same page at a really important moment for NATO. The right hon. Gentleman will understand how much hard work, guile and diplomacy went into ensuring that was the outcome. I think there was a real sigh of relief

around the world that this was the position. On Putin, we are urging that this is the moment to push further to get Putin to the table for an unconditional ceasefire; President Zelensky has said for many weeks that he is prepared for those talks. We discussed that as allies, and I have discussed it many times with President Trump, as the right hon. Gentleman would expect.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Would the Prime Minister care to comment on what our adversaries will think when they hear the Leader of the Opposition mistakenly say that we cannot afford our defence commitments? Does such a fatuous response keep our country safe?

The Prime Minister: No, it does not. It was frankly embarrassing to suggest that I should not have been at NATO or the G7, and I think the Leader of the Opposition's Back Benchers recognise that. That is not the traditional position of the Conservative party, and the sooner the Conservatives get back to their former position, the better.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Was there any discussion about the killing zones that currently constitute the provision of humanitarian aid in Gaza?

The Prime Minister: Yes, there was. There is real concern about the intolerable position in Gaza and what we can do to alleviate it. We have repeatedly said that it is intolerable, and that the current arrangements for aid are never going to work and cannot be maintained. Urgent diplomacy is under way to alleviate that situation, and we will continue with those efforts.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Prime Minister's announcement on defence spending, especially during Armed Forces Week. Does he agree that this is a landmark, historic commitment, reflecting both the scale of the threats that we face and this Labour Government's commitment to the security and defence of our country?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend: the commitment is landmark. It is very important, it shows the resolve of NATO, and it reflects the resolve of this Labour Government. I am pleased that we were closely involved in crafting and bringing together the agreement that was reached yesterday.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): The Democratic primary in the most cosmopolitan city in the world has demonstrated that people will no longer support hypocritical and disingenuous politicians. I am sure that the whole House agrees that Iran must not have nuclear weapons, but as a lawyer, the Prime Minister will understand that the attack on Iran by Israel and the US did not engage the Caroline principle, which allows for a pre-emptive strike. Does the Prime Minister agree with that analysis? If he does not, can he say from the Dispatch Box that he supported those attacks?

The Prime Minister: If we all agree that Iran should not have nuclear weapons, it is about time that we did something about it. What happened on Saturday night was a big step towards alleviating that threat, which is important. We now need to complete on that. The way

to do that is through the talks that are now needed to get Iran back to the table, in order to make sure that the position is irreversible and can be verified, and that is what we are focused on.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's leadership in recognising the need for a strategic response. It has been 35 years since the Options for Change defence review began bringing down defence spending from 4.1% of GDP. We have spent that dividend, gambling that we would not need to defend our values, and a generation has benefited from that bet, but now we must take our chips off the table and reinvest in our security. Does the Prime Minister agree that we must level with the public about the threats that we face and the cost of under-investment in our armed forces?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do agree. That is why we have begun the hard work of reversing the damage done under the previous Government. My hon. Friend is right about the dividend that has been enjoyed, but we must now make sure that there is a defence dividend—that higher spending in that area is reflected in good, well-paid jobs in the United Kingdom that boost our economy across all parts of our communities.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The former Prime Minister has just welcomed the US military action against Iran at the weekend. Why cannot the Prime Minister bring himself to welcome it, too?

The Prime Minister: I have said that we need to alleviate the threat, and that we have taken a huge step towards alleviating the threat. I have discussed that with G7 and NATO colleagues, and with President Trump. Everybody was very pleased that there was such unity on it.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): The forced deportation of children is illegal under international law, yet Russia continues to steal Ukraine's future, one child at a time. Was the issue of Ukraine's stolen children discussed with our allies? What more is being done to return those children to their homes and families?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter. She has campaigned hard on this. It is central that if there is to be a ceasefire and a lasting peace in Ukraine—and I hope that there is—it must involve the return of the children. We have discussed that many times, and will continue to do so.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Since the second world war, our national security has been based broadly on three pillars: our physical defences, which the Prime Minister mentioned in his statement; the alliances that we have built, which he also mentioned; and the international rules-based order, which he did not mention. What discussion did he have at either summit about the importance of international law, and the undermining of its credibility through the inconsistent way that it has been applied in the conflicts in Ukraine and in Gaza? In particular, did he try to persuade President Trump to lift the United States sanctions on the International Criminal Court?

The Prime Minister: I have long been an advocate of the international rules-based order, and I discuss that regularly with allies. NATO itself is a rules-based framework, and an important one at that. We need to maintain these rules-based systems to make sure that they are fit for purpose. I would add that the same is true for trade and the economy.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): As a member of the cross-party UK delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I have had the opportunity to meet Ukrainian Members of Parliament, who make the powerful case for continuing support from NATO allies. It has become clear in recent months that other countries in the region—Poland and the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia—are growing ever more nervous about their vulnerability to invasion by Russia. Can the Prime Minister comment on the UK's efforts and dialogue with those countries at this unsettling time? Does he agree that the security of the Baltic states is important for our national security?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Baltic states are incredibly nervous at the moment. That has been the case for the past three years or so. We engage with them regularly, and I engage with their leaders regularly. They have been brought into the coalition of the willing, and on the occasions when they cannot attend, I have a special session with them, because their concerns are of such importance to us.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I welcome the increase to defence spending and the revised targets. Earlier this year, at the spring statement, we saw cuts to official development assistance—the overseas aid budget—to fund defence increases. The ODA budget is integral to our international security abroad, so will the Prime Minister rule out any further cuts to this budget for defence spending increases?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is right to emphasise the importance of overseas aid, and that was a difficult decision. I want to put it back up to 0.7%, rather than taking it down. In the meantime, I am exploring other ways that we can find funding for overseas aid, and working with other countries to that end, because I do not think that we can just wait until we are in a position to increase the funding again.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement today, and the leadership that he is showing on the world stage in really uncertain times, which, beyond the confines of this place, I know are genuinely welcome in my community in Hertford and Stortford. As we mark Armed Forces Week, veterans and servicemen in my constituency will welcome the Government's commitment to strengthening our national security, so for the benefit of my constituents, can the Prime Minister set out a little more how we are supporting our armed forces to keep us safe and honouring the service of veterans across the country?

The Prime Minister: Let me first pay tribute to the veterans in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country. We have already put in place a number of initiatives, particularly in relation to homelessness and veterans, and more broadly in relation to accommodation and the support for not just veterans, but our armed

[*The Prime Minister*]

service personnel. That is vital not only as a reflection of their contribution, but to ensure that we deal with the retention crisis among those serving, which was caused by the Conservative party.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Although we may disagree on the detail, I agree with the Prime Minister that, as far as possible in this place, it would be better to keep partisan politics out of national security issues. Who knows, I may get the Whip withdrawn for saying that, but so be it. There are things that go beyond party politics. I thank the Prime Minister for all his hard work in the national security interests of this country.

On the G7, the Prime Minister mentioned sanctions. In his statement, he said that he urged the United States to do more on sanctions. Is he aware that the United States is actually urging the United Kingdom to do more on sanctions when it comes to Russia? Can the Magnitsky legislation be widened and deepened, so that it captures more Russian assets, and possibly other countries that may have sanctions imposed on them soon—for example, Georgia?

The joint expeditionary force was mentioned at the NATO summit. The Prime Minister will know, having attended the Norway meeting some weeks ago, that Ukraine is a JEF partnership nation. Does the UK support Ukraine becoming a full member of the joint expeditionary force? If so, when might that happen?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for his questions; they are all good ones, so I will endeavour to answer each part of them. Sanctions are being discussed intensely, as he will understand, and there are two elements. The first is the immediate application of sanctions in relation to Russia. We are attempting to ensure that we all act together—the US, the UK and the EU. That is the focus of our discussions and what we are urging on the US. The right hon. Member will know that there is a piece of legislation in the US that is ready to go; that needs to be co-ordinated with what we are doing. In the longer term, we need to look always at whether there is more we can do within the framework on sanctions, and we can discuss that in this House.

The right hon. Member raises an important point about Ukraine and the JEF. We have been a leading advocate of Ukraine having a role in the JEF. Ukraine already has an enhanced partnership with the JEF—the first of its kind. That was done the last JEF meeting that we had in Norway a few months ago, where we were one of the leading nations pushing for that greater involvement. We will see over time whether that partnership can be taken further, either with the JEF or NATO, but it was an important first step—not only a reflection for Ukraine but also a message to Russia.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his leadership in representing us around the world in the last two weeks—exactly where he should be. Does the Prime Minister want to remind the Conservatives that it was a Labour Government who last spent 2.5% of GDP on defence, and can he set out how increasing our defence spending will keep our country safe and support high-quality manufacturing jobs in West Bromwich and the whole nation?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to remind the House that we had 2.5% of GDP on defence spending under the last Labour Government, and we will have it under this Labour Government. In 14 long years, the Conservatives did not do that.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I welcome the increase in defence spending. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to explain where the money is coming from, particularly as his Government continue to weaken our economy and when another expensive benefit U-turn—on top of the winter fuel U-turn—is on its way?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady must have missed the record investment in our country in the last 12 months of £120 billion, the four interest rate cuts, and the fastest growth in the G7 in the first quarter of this year. Every time we have increased defence spending, as we did with the 2.5%, we have at the same time set out where the money is coming from.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I found the Leader of the Opposition incredibly disappointing, so goodness knows what those on her own Benches think. While she is talking Britain down, may I commend the Prime Minister for the leadership he has shown this week? Could he say a little more about how businesses in the defence supply chain, particularly in the Teesside defence and innovation cluster, can contribute to the national mission for defence and security?

The Prime Minister: There are two or three principles here. First, we need to see the increase to our defence spend reflected in good, well-paid jobs in constituencies across the country. Secondly, the big sectors in defence will obviously benefit, but we have also put together a hub for smaller supply chain businesses—which, whether defence-specific or not, are in pretty well every constituency—to ensure that they take advantage of the contracts and extra spending on defence. In that way, we can ensure that there is a dividend back in the United Kingdom from the extra spend we are putting in place.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): There has been some recent confusion from Defence Ministers surrounding the purchase of 12 F-35A nuclear-capable fast jets. Can the Prime Minister please inform the House of the proposed in-service date for this important capability?

The Prime Minister: We made the commitment to that capability, and we are now talking to allies about precisely what the timetable will be; I will update the House. The important thing is that the commitment is there. It is a commitment to the NATO initiative, and it brings us within that initiative. Therefore, there are a lot of moving parts, but we have made a very firm commitment, and I will set out the timeline and progress on that in due course.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): F-35As—hard power; BBC World Service—soft power. Does the Prime Minister agree that the World Service is a crucial element of our soft convening power?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I have long been a supporter of the BBC World Service. My hon. Friend's question chimes with other questions about the soft power of

this country. We have incredible soft power and incredible strength in our diplomacy, and that very often achieves results in a way that then makes it less necessary to use the hard power.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): There is scepticism in my constituency that the increase in defence spending might create good local jobs there. As I have already pitched to the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary, and earlier this month to the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry, alongside my local authority CEOs, I know that Huntingdon is recognised as the home of UK defence intelligence capability and of US operations in Europe as well as NATO's. Given that 10% of the equipment budget is now pledged for developing new technology, along with the £400 million defence innovation fund, will the Prime Minister back my commitment to leveraging the designation of RAF Wyton as a Ministry of Defence trailblazer site to build a defence technology cluster that will create highly technical local jobs and build new defence capability from Huntingdon?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Member is in discussion with Ministers about this, and we look forward to taking that forward. In relation to the scepticism of his Huntingdon constituents, I reassure them that this increased defence spend will bring yield to Huntingdon in the defence-specific sectors and in the supply chains.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and his leadership. The International Development Committee recently published a report showing that international humanitarian law is under threat like never before and that attacks on aid workers are rising. Can the Prime Minister assure the House that the UK will be a champion for IHL, and could he elaborate on conversations about upholding it in relation to Gaza as well as Sudan and the many other countries around the world ravaged by conflict?

The Prime Minister: We have an absolute commitment to international humanitarian law, and it is extremely important that we keep to that, whether in Gaza or Sudan. It is the framework through which we make our decisions.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): When it comes to the evils of terrorism and aggression across the middle east, all paths lead back to the Iranian regime—be that the sponsorship of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis or, indeed, at the heart of the regime, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Although I fully appreciate that the Prime Minister will not speculate on proscription from the Dispatch Box, will he at least reflect on how it can be that, despite calls from both sides of the House over many years to proscribe the IRGC, it still has not happened, not least given that he took the right and proper action to proscribe Palestine Action after the attack on Brize Norton last week? How is it that the IRGC still sits un-proscribed?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we keep proscription under constant review and will not hesitate to take the most effective measures against the Iranian regime. He will know that we have already sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety, including individual commanders, but we do keep the matter under constant review.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I praise the Prime Minister for his work on the new 5% target and on ensuring that we reach it for our national security and core defence. Does he agree that just as the Labour Government in the 1940s helped to found NATO, this Labour Government could help found a multilateral defence development bank that would ensure that we reach 5% by the mid-2030s?

The Prime Minister: There is a debate going on across allies as to how we can work together on the increased spending: on the spend itself; on the financial arrangements, be that development banks or others arrangements; and on ensuring that we co-ordinate our capability, because the last thing we want is everybody spending more money in an unco-ordinated way. There has been intense discussion about that.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The situation in Scotland is very difficult. I welcome the news that we are to go further with our at-sea deterrents, and of course the nuclear missile Trident boats are based at Faslane. But as we have heard, First Minister John Swinney and his SNP Administration do not back nuclear weapons. Further, they have created a hostile environment for defence firms in Scotland because they will not back any firms that make ordnance. This week we have also heard former First Minister Humza Yousaf claim—wrongly—that allowing our American allies to use the Prestwick air base to refuel is some kind of war crime. What can we do to nullify the threat to British security from these fifth columnists?

The Prime Minister: Beat them. This is not just the usual politics; it is a serious question of national security. The at-sea nuclear deterrent is housed in Scotland, and just a few months ago I went and saw one of the subs coming back in. It was a very humbling experience, quite frankly, and I got an even deeper sense of what they do for our country. It should be supported in its own right and as an essential deterrent. That matter is among the reasons that we need a change of Government in Scotland.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, which shows that international co-operation and the ability to forge relationships of trust and human empathy are signs of strength, not weakness. Our country is stronger for his leadership and pursuit of peace globally through diplomatic means.

Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that we can deter war and defend our allies such as Ukraine only if outward-looking diplomacy is backed up by ever stronger armed forces and an ever stronger economy; that those matters ought to unify all in the House; and that it is very unfortunate that we have seen petty, party political games from the Leader of the Opposition?

The Prime Minister: I agree. All I can say is that, in fairness, I see on the faces of some Conservative Members disquiet at the approach that the Leader of the Opposition took. That is not surprising.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Under the 5% defence investment pledge, resilience spending appears to include energy infrastructure. Given the evidence about Chinese-made cellular internet modules and kill

[Nick Timothy]

switches, will he say categorically that China must be kept out of all critical infrastructure, including wind turbines and solar panels?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue. Obviously, we carefully review and monitor any Chinese involvement in any elements of security. But it is right that we now include resilience in our overall definition of national spend, and act accordingly.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his commitment to keeping our country safe and for his effective diplomacy to that end. While our international aid budget is now diminished, it remains my belief that the work we do to prevent and respond to humanitarian crises around the world plays a crucial role in global stability and security and, in turn, in our own. Can the Prime Minister reaffirm his commitment to that vital role for the UK in the world?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can. My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue and describe it as she did. We are a leader on this and continue to be. We want to get our aid budget back up, but in the meantime I want to work with other countries to find other ways of financing that support as a matter of some urgency.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): I welcome the increase in defence spending, but how on earth is the Prime Minister going to pay for it when his party cannot agree on a small reduction in the welfare bill?

The Prime Minister: When we went to 2.5%, we set out in clear terms both the date and the way we would pay for it. That is the way we do business on the Government side of the House. For 14 years, the Conservative party lost control of the economy, left our armed forces hollowed out and left a £22 billion black hole. Frankly, they are in no position to lecture anyone about these issues—still less after the response of the Leader of the Opposition, which shows exactly why the party is sliding into irrelevance.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): It is clear today that the Leader of the Opposition should never represent the United Kingdom on the world stage—it was absolutely outrageous.

I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for his statement. Following the comments of other hon. Members, may I ask him what assessment he has made of the potential opportunities for Scotland-based defence and aerospace industries, which already support hundreds of jobs in Coatbridge and Bellshill, arising from the expectation that spending will reach 4.1% of GDP by 2027? Does he share my concern that the SNP's disjointed defence policy risks jobs and investment in Scotland? We need to fight that at all costs.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend should not worry too much about the Leader of the Opposition representing our country—she never will. If she did, presumably the chair at the NATO summit would have a little sticky note on it saying, “Busy at PMQs”. That is how unserious her point is.

On the substantive question of jobs in Scotland, there is now the real potential to build on what Scotland does. It has a proud history in relation to our defence and security. This provides an opportunity to build on that platform.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister very much for his statement. Nobody in the House can doubt the sincerity of his careful words and commitment to what is best for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland at the G7 and NATO summit. The Prime Minister will be aware of my support for Israel and that of so many in this great nation. The situation was, I believe, one of the major issues of the summit. Can the Prime Minister please outline whether time was taken, with our closest ally, the United States of America, to discuss steps that can be taken to cut the head off the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, ensure that the USA bombing of the Iranian nuclear programme was a success and thereby secure a truce and lasting peace in the middle east?

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we have that discussion with our US allies, both at leader level and between our teams, on an ongoing and constant basis. Israel has the right to be safe and secure, and it is neither safe nor secure at the moment. We have to be absolutely clear about that and about the right of Israel to defend itself. That means discussions about the IRGC and Iran, which has been a constant source of threat, terror and conflict in the region. Yes, we discussed not just the attack on Saturday, but the further measures that can be taken to ensure that Iran never has the capability to develop nuclear weapons.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and his leadership—something that I am sure is welcomed by our allies around the world, if not by the Opposition.

My right hon. and learned Friend mentions that there is now a window of opportunity for peace in the middle east. I am sure that we would all want that to come to fruition. However, given the continuation of deadly attacks on Palestinian people seeking food, can the Prime Minister advise, following his discussions, whether there is any prospect of Israel allowing the United Nations and other humanitarian organisations to resume food distribution in an ordered and fair way?

The Prime Minister: They should do that, and we are urging that they do. The current arrangements are intolerable and are never going to work; we need to be really clear about that. We will continue to urge that, with our allies and talking to leaders across the region, as my hon. Friend would expect. But now is also the time to push on for the broader ceasefire, to alleviate the situation more generally and allow a path to open for the long-term conflict resolution that is needed.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is the first duty of any Government and Prime Minister to keep this country safe. The Prime Minister takes that role incredibly seriously, in stark contrast to what we have seen today from the Leader of the Opposition.

The Prime Minister has visited Blackpool many times since becoming leader of our party. At Blackpool sixth-form college, young people told him that they were crying out

for local jobs in the Blackpool area, to keep them there. Will he ensure that the defence increase to 5%, which is welcome, creates the decent, well paid jobs on the Fylde coast so that young people in Blackpool can get those jobs where they live?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. I have visited Blackpool many times, as he knows. I know first hand just how important it is for those young people to see money going into their economy, with jobs in Blackpool for them. I profoundly remember asking a group of 17-year-olds, I think, at a sixth-form college in Blackpool how many were proud to be from Blackpool. They all put their hands up. When I asked them how many thought that their future jobs would be in Blackpool, only one put their hand up; the rest all thought they would have to leave Blackpool to get the jobs they wanted. We need to turn that around. This gives us an opportunity to start doing that.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement today. From a personal point of view, I thank him for his recent visit to Harlow and Downs primary school, which recently received an excellent Ofsted report.

Does the Prime Minister agree that to achieve the sustainable and long-term peace that we all so desperately want—in the middle east, in Gaza, in Ukraine and in Sudan—we must work together with one voice and with all our NATO allies? That is why his leadership on a global level is so important and why it is so important that he attends all these events to represent our proud nation.

The Prime Minister: My most recent visit to the primary school was to roll out our free school meals policy. I was happy to do that by serving school meals myself—if all else fails, I've got a back-up.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. At a time like this, the House usually comes together and speaks with one voice, and we are the more powerful for it. President Zelensky has told me on a number of occasions how much that means for his people. In fairness to the Conservative party, it has always been resolute on Ukraine. The Leader of the Opposition needs to look again at her approach. At a time like this, the sooner we get back to the kind of cross-party unity that we had, the better. Our adversaries know that when they see unity here, that is much more of a problem for them than when they see unserious division.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Armed Forces Day

12.50 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Armed Forces Day.

This week, our nation comes together to give profound thanks to the men and women of our armed forces, their families and veterans—the heroes who give and sacrifice so much for their country at a time when the world is becoming increasingly dangerous, unpredictable and insecure. Right now, our armed forces are helping Ukraine to defend itself against the might of Russia by supplying kit and equipment, nearly three and a half years into a war that Putin thought would be over in three days. Our armed forces are in Singapore with the UK carrier strike group led by HMS Prince of Wales, strengthening Britain's ties with the Indo-Pacific. They are operating as part of every NATO mission alongside our allies, keeping the peace in zones of potential conflict, and our people are working in the middle east to de-escalate tensions and stabilise the region. Our armed forces are contributing to UN peacekeeping forces around the world, helping to bring hope to war-torn communities, and they are protecting our shores at home, ready at a moment's notice to respond to any emerging threats.

The members of our armed forces are truly the best of Britain, recognised globally for their professionalism and dedication. This week, in Armed Forces Week, we have a chance to say thank you: to them for their service; to their families for their understanding at the times when they are away; and to the people in the defence industries, the supply chain and the technology companies who support our men and women in uniform and help them continue to have the fighting edge that keeps our country safe.

Apart from the years affected by covid restrictions, 2024 was the first since the inception of Armed Forces Day in which there was no national event. This Government are proud to have restored that this year, backing three days of celebrations in Cleethorpes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) knows, it is a community that carries a long tradition of not just honouring our armed forces, but shaping and supporting them. From the local RAF station at North Coates, which was home to the Coastal Command strike wing during world war two, disrupting enemy supply chains with great success, to today's active veteran groups such as NEL4Heroes, which does outstanding work in North East Lincolnshire helping veterans to return to civilian life.

Although the biggest celebrations will take place in Cleethorpes, where the Defence Secretary will be this weekend, there are more than 180 other events taking place across our nation. Earlier this week, my ministerial colleague Lord Coaker was among the large crowds that turned out in Northern Ireland to celebrate Armed Forces Day.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I was fortunate to be there and had the opportunity to meet Lord Coaker. I was clear to him, as were the 60,000 people who turned out to commend and celebrate such a wonderful occasion. Will the Minister outline later on what can be

[*Jim Shannon*]

done to recruit more Territorial Army soldiers? Will there be flexibility with employers and jobs and courses that people can do to enlarge the numbers of cadets?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his years of service. It was in Westminster Hall yesterday that he added up all the years that he served in uniform. I think it was 14 and a half years in total in various roles.

Jim Shannon indicated assent.

Luke Pollard: I thank him for his service to our country. It is vital that we address the retention and recruitment crisis that we inherited from the previous Government. We are making good progress in that regard. A key part of that is not only recruiting new people to our regular forces, but making it easier to join the reserves. Whether people serve full time, part time or in their spare time, there is an opportunity for people around the country to contribute to our armed forces.

The Minister for Veterans and People will set out further steps as to how we will improve our reserves as we approach the armed forces Bill in the next session of Parliament. He will make the case that improving our reserves makes us safer, but also provides more opportunity for the nation to have a closer connection with those people who serve as well.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): One of the 180 events that the Minister mentioned will be Armed Forces Day in Andover, which I will attend on Saturday. As the Minister knows, Andover is home to the Army's land forces headquarters. Will he reflect on the importance of the work of celebrating the armed forces in the communities that physically embrace their headquarters, camps and residences, to sustain that connection between the non-uniformed civilian population and those who protect them on a daily basis?

Luke Pollard: I thank the right hon. Member for his attendance at an Armed Forces Day event this weekend. As someone who represents Devonport, which is home to western Europe's largest naval dockyard, I am acutely aware of the relationship, the important history and the connections today between our military, the civilians who, in Devonport's case, support the fleet, and our wider community, including veterans. It is absolutely right that we tell the story of that connection, not just by looking back at the battles of previous years and those people who never returned from wars, but by making the case that investing in our defence today creates good, well-paid jobs. It provides opportunities for our young people and it is one of the sources of great pride that our Army, our Navy and our Air Force all feature among the top five employers of apprentices in the country. It is a huge opportunity to celebrate the skills that we have and the connections between our people. All our communities are proud of our armed forces, and this weekend is a great opportunity to say that again.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): My hon. Friend knows that recently I had the great privilege of visiting our base in Erbil, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where I saw for myself the dedicated service of the troops and their officers, who are doing huge work to help that

regional government, thereby enhancing regional and British security. They are a credit to this country and we owe them a debt of gratitude. We should also remember that there are so many servicemen and women overseas who are doing difficult work, sometimes in harm's way. On Armed Forces Day, we must remember all those serving officers and soldiers as well.

Luke Pollard: May I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks? It is a good reminder that on Armed Forces Day and in Armed Forces Week, there will be parliamentarians from all sides of the House visiting local communities and making the case for the armed forces in their communities. There will be people from communities right around our country, however, who will not be at those celebrations because they will be serving on the frontlines overseas, helping to project UK power and influence, helping to stabilise regions and helping to ensure that we de-escalate tensions. The work that our forces do in the middle east may have been in the news quite a lot recently, but the work that they do that is often not covered in the news is just as vital for our national security and worthy of our praise and thanks. I am sure that there is cross-party support for the work that they do across the middle east.

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry will be in Liverpool this weekend, celebrating alongside her community of Liverpool Garston at Armed Forces Day events. The Minister for Veterans and People will be in Coventry, having completed a tour of many of our communities nationwide making the case for further investment in services to support our veterans. Indeed, supporting those who have served is a vital part of this Government's work. Many celebrations will take place across Scotland and Wales, including in Edinburgh where the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill) will be attending. I will be back home in Plymouth, which is home not only to Devonport but to Stonehouse, the spiritual home of the Royal Marines. We will be out in force on the Hoe on Saturday. For those people not familiar with Plymouth's geography and our international viewers, the Hoe has a wonderful clifftop view of Plymouth sound—it is nothing more sinister than that.

As the son of a Royal Navy submariner, I am proud to represent my home town, which is not only steeped in military history, but plays a pivotal role in protecting Britain today. Having grown up as a Navy brat, I know that many remarkable people in defence tend to dismiss their achievements as "just part of the job"—a humility that defines service in our country. But I know what they do, how they go well beyond the expectations of a normal day job, how they shoulder immense responsibilities with great modesty and, supported by their families, how they perform the ultimate public service.

Through the Government's strategic defence review and defence reform, we are putting much more emphasis on our people and on renewing the nation's contract with those who serve. The most troubling thing I have seen recently in relation to our people was the continuous attitude survey, which revealed that only a quarter of our service personnel believe that they are valued by society. I encourage Members who have not read the latest continuous attitude survey to do so: it tells the story of what our people think. Although we are now seeing morale stabilising, after a decade of it falling

across all three services, the fact that they do not feel valued by society should be a wake-up call for all of us in thinking about how we talk about and support our armed forces.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I apologise for not being in the Chamber when the Minister referred to my constituency earlier. This weekend we will host the national Armed Forces Day event, which will be fantastic. He mentions remembering our veterans and our people, and Saturday will be a true celebration of all the work that so many people put into making sure that we are safe and secure every day.

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that she put into making the case for Cleethorpes to host the first of the renewed national day events. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is looking forward to attending events in Cleethorpes this weekend and to hearing not only from those people who serve today, but the young people of the cadets in her community, who may be those who serve in the future, and the veterans who have served our nation. I am looking forward to events in Plymouth, but I know that the events in Cleethorpes will be the centre of our national attention this weekend, and rightly so.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Does the Minister recognise that the UK's armed forces are a visible manifestation of the philosophy and values that underpin the country? If society does not value the armed forces, would he concede that it might be because we have consistently failed to defend the principles and values that underpin our society? We should confront the accusations, for example, that this is an inherently racist country, which it absolutely is not, and that our history is not something to be proud of. Perhaps then wider society would appreciate the men and women who defend not just the physical country but our values, our history and our philosophy.

Luke Pollard: I share the right hon. Gentleman's passion for telling our nation's story. To tell our full story, we have to explain the good bits and, sometimes, the bad bits, but at all times we can look at the bravery, courage and service of our armed forces as a source of national pride. I also look at our armed forces today as the embodiment of some of our British values. I believe in equality: it is very important to me personally. When I think about our soldiers operating in Estonia at the moment, ready to deter a Russian move across the border, the colour of their skin, their religion, where they come from or their accent do not matter. All that matters is that in that unit, everyone has each other's backs and is proud of our country, proud of their service and proud of the reasons they are there.

Armed forces week is an opportunity to remind people of the difficult jobs we ask our people to do and to thank them for it. The right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the values that stand behind the uniform and why the flag they carry on their arms matters so much—it is not just a piece of cloth; it represents British values that we should all be proud of.

For that reason, it is important that we recognise that our service personnel need to feel more valued. The figure has plummeted over the past 12 years. We know

that words will not address the problem. Only action will, and that is why it was so important to award our service personnel their biggest pay rise for more than two decades and to follow that up with another above-inflation pay rise this year. It is a source of great pride to me as the Minister for the Armed Forces that, for the first time, we can say that every single person in uniform is now paid the living wage. That should always have been the case, but sadly it was not; it is now.

Our armed forces deserve a lot more than just a decent salary. The cold, damp and mouldy homes that many have been living in are a betrayal of their service. After buying back 36,000 homes from the private sector that were sold off under a previous Conservative Government and saving taxpayers more than £600,000 a day in rent payments, we are delivering a generational renewal of military accommodation, with at least £7 billion of funding in this Parliament to tackle the poor state of forces housing.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): I take this opportunity to mark an important week for our armed forces. I welcome everything my hon. Friend says about support for our armed forces and their families by way of investment in their homes and more money in their pockets. Does he agree that supporting our armed forces goes way beyond just the equipment that they need on the frontline? It is about making sure that their families are valued through the support that the Government can give them and that they receive from the communities they live in.

Luke Pollard: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more: that is so important. I am somewhat guilty of this myself, but many of our defence debates have been about kit, platforms and—if I have anything to do with it—frigates. We talk about the equipment, but we need to talk about our people. At the heart of the strategic defence review, and the Government's policies, is talking more about the families of those who serve. That is why I hope that the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill will become law soon. It puts an emphasis on allowing service families to access the commissioner to make the case that it is the whole defence family—those who serve in uniform and their family members who back them in their service—that needs to be valued by this nation. I believe that view is shared on a cross-party basis, and we now need to ensure that it is featured in our legislation and in the day-to-day operations of our military. There is more to do on that.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): On the selling off of military homes and the buying back of them by the Labour Government, will the Minister acknowledge that the negotiations for that deal started in May 2024 under the Conservative Government and were completed by the Labour Government?

Luke Pollard: Indeed, and when the announcement was officially made, I recall standing at the Dispatch Box and thanking the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, who is not here today, for his work on it. It was a terrible privatisation—truly awful. It represented the worst value for taxpayers and it has doomed many of our forces families to appalling accommodation for far too long. Now that that privatisation has ended and we have brought those homes back into public control, we can invest in them. We need to do that at pace, because

[*Luke Pollard*]

people are living today in accommodation with mould and damp. That is not good enough. We need to proceed at pace, and the Minister for Veterans and People who leads on this work in the MOD is as impatient as I am to see the improvements—as I know the hon. Gentleman will be, as someone who represents a military constituency.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): For the record, the shadow Defence Secretary is not here because he has a very important personal family commitment today. I am honoured to stand in for him.

Has the Minister seen our proposals for a ringfenced armed forces housing association, to provide better quality accommodation for armed forces personnel and their families?

Luke Pollard: I am sure the House will agree that the right hon. Gentleman is by no means a poor substitute for the shadow Defence Secretary.

We plan to publish our defence housing strategy later this year, which no doubt was not at all in the minds of the shadow Front-Bench team when they published their proposals ahead of time. I encourage the right hon. Gentleman to wait for the full work to be published in due course, but improving defence housing has to be a priority, because for many years as a nation, we have not delivered what our forces deserve—that will now change.

This year, we extended the ability to reclaim the costs of wraparound childcare to many of those deployed overseas, and next year we will go further and cover all overseas areas to help make family life a little easier. We are legislating for an Armed Forces Commissioner—an independent voice to help improve service life. We made a manifesto commitment to bring the armed forces covenant fully into law—a promise made by the nation that those who defend it will be treated fairly and will not be disadvantaged because of their service. That includes, for example, ensuring that service children have the same access to education as other children. We are transforming recruitment, and hope that many young people will be inspired to join up after attending Armed Forces Day events this weekend. We are also overhauling access to care and support for veterans through the Valour programme.

I turn to veterans because although Armed Forces Day is an opportunity to thank those people in uniform, we should also use it as an opportunity to thank those people who have served.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I very much welcome the work being done to bring the covenant into wider, and legislative, effect, with consequences where it is not applied. That will be important in delivering services to our armed forces right across the public sector, but there is a financial consequence. Parliament and Government need to seriously consider how that financial consequence is borne and distributed to ensure that those public services are empowered and financed to support armed forces personnel and, just as importantly, their wider families in the best way they can.

Luke Pollard: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; it is important that the pledge is made in action and deeds, not just words. If we look at the implementation of the armed forces covenant across the country at the moment, some areas are exceptional and have embraced not just the words of the covenant but the spirit behind it, and others are perhaps a little further behind on the journey. When we look at central Government compared with local government, there is a distinction between the services and the offer. That is why we are putting it fully into law. I hope that one thing we will be able to do in having a debate on putting the covenant fully into law is to share the best practice we see in local councils up and down the country.

In this place, there is sometimes a temptation to believe that all good ideas must come from the Dispatch Box. I certainly do not believe that, when I can see brilliant councillors of all parties making the case for improving the lives of veterans, those people who serve and, perhaps most importantly, their families. Where the covenant grips most successfully is where we can improve provision for children who may suffer disadvantage because their parents who serve move around so frequently, which means they sometimes do not get the same access to educational support, special educational needs and disabilities support and other aspects. When that debate happens—it will probably be later this year or the beginning of next year—I hope that all hon. Members will be able to participate and take something from that debate to amplify the work of their local councils. Probably each and every Member in this place will have something good to share about the work being done in their area.

We owe a substantial debt of gratitude to all those who have served their country. The Government have an enduring duty to recognise their extraordinary contribution and to support them after service. The majority of veterans go on to have successful careers and lives. We are helping them to make the best use of the diverse skills and experience that they have gained—for example, through the career transition partnerships and Op ASCEND—but a minority do not find the transition easy and may need extra support. We are creating a new £50 million network of Valour-recognised support centres across the UK to give veterans easier access to essential care and help.

Just today, we launched the Valour pilot in the north-west region, at the Imperial War Museum North. We have announced £75 million to recognise the historic wrongs experienced by LGBT veterans in the armed forces, which is significantly above the level recommended in the Etherton review. We have also committed additional funding to maintain veterans' homelessness support programmes, ensuring that those at risk of homelessness have continued access to specialist help.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I appreciate that the Government are working on this issue, but could the Minister update us on the work being done to waive visa fees for families and dependants of our Commonwealth service personnel?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Member will know that the Ministry of Defence recently published a written ministerial statement on how we can improve recruitment from the Commonwealth. It is not just about how we expand the pipeline coming into our armed forces; we also need to

recognise and support those who might be at the end of their service to get the support they need. We have a manifesto commitment to deliver that. The Defence Secretary has spoken to the Home Secretary about this, and our officials are in dialogue about it. I hope that the Minister for Veterans and People, who looks after this area, will be able to announce progress in due course. The hon. Member and I share a strong sense that there is a wrong to be righted here, and those people who serve our country for a good period of time should be able to settle here. I think progress will be made, but I recognise his interest in that happening.

The magnificent VE Day commemorations, as well as the equally historic 80th anniversary of VJ Day in August, have been widely acknowledged as perhaps the last major opportunity to thank those who fought in the second world war. But we are also slowly losing the generation who did national service after the war and, with them, the living bridge they provide to our armed forces. We need to reconnect society with our armed forces and widen participation in national resilience. This weekend's festivities are a great way to kick-start that process, but, as our strategic defence review made clear, we have to be much more proactive as a country about rebuilding those connections, particularly with young people.

Half of the Army's current crop of regimental sergeant majors were once cadets, so we will boost the cadet forces by 30% by 2030, creating opportunities for 42,000 more young people to be a cadet. We will introduce a voluntary gap year scheme for school and college leavers and develop a new UK strategic reserve by 2030—a fitting objective considering that yesterday was Reserves Day, when we were able to thank the many thousands of reservists who serve this country. They greatly bolster our capability at times of crisis, serving across defence, from the back office to the frontline. They give us the skills, scale and ability to meet the threats we face at home and overseas in a cost-effective way, as the Minister for Veterans and People can attest after serving alongside them on various tours.

I have seen personally the enormous benefits that experience with our armed forces can offer people, particularly young people: purpose, adventure, social mobility, and a unique sense of camaraderie and self-achievement. For many people, it is a route to a much better life. We want to make many more young people aware of the opportunities on offer and the chance to see where service life can take them.

As I noted earlier, we are taking decisive action to address the recruitment crisis that we inherited. The tortuously slow process that caused so much frustration is being transformed. For example, we have eliminated more than 100 outdated medical recruitment policies and we are slashing the time it takes to access medical records from weeks to hours. Our objective is to reduce the time of flight from application to starting at a training establishment. The new 10-30 policy introduced by the Secretary of State, which means applicants will get a decision on a provisional application within 10 days and a start date within 30 days, is a good step towards improving this process, but we know there is much more to do.

Army recruitment has been completely restructured, and we have acted to keep hold of valued staff who are most at risk of leaving—for example, by introducing

retention payments for Army privates, lance corporals and aircraft engineers. The results speak for themselves: year-on-year inflow of recruits is up by 19% and outflow is down by 7%. The Royal Navy has exceeded its yearly recruitment target, and Royal Air Force applications are up by a third compared with early 2024. Applications to join the Army are at their highest level for seven years.

John Slinger: As we are discussing the armed services' recruitment problems, does my hon. Friend agree it is very helpful that this Government were able to deliver an above-inflation pay rise of 4.5% for service personnel, recognising their extraordinary professionalism? In combination with last year's 6% headline award, that represents a cumulative pay award of 10.5% since July 2024, which can only help with the issues he is discussing.

Luke Pollard: It absolutely does. The strategic defence review talks about a whole-of-society approach, and I view that from both an inside and an outside perspective. As a society, we need to value our armed forces more, recognising that we all have a role in building resilience and improving how our nation is defended, but we must also recognise that armed forces personnel need to feel more valued by the whole of society. Ensuring that our people are paid well and live in decent homes is the foundation of that, and I hope that one day this House will not need to debate the quality of our military accommodation, because the quality will be such that, when we ask our people to move around the country—whether into single living accommodation or service family accommodation—it is simply a given that it is decent. That is our objective, but we have a lot of work still to do.

I hope that Members across the House will join our armed forces and our communities this weekend to celebrate the work of our service personnel. As we set about reconnecting the nation to its military, we must remember that service and sacrifice are not values confined to the history books; they are just as important today as they have ever been, and they are just as visible if we tell their stories. Those values are embodied in Britain's armed forces. There has never been a more important time to thank them for the fantastic work they do, or to promote the benefits of an armed forces career to young people. To all who serve, all who have served and all their families, we give our deep thanks. To those who might serve in the future, we say: come along to an event this weekend and find out what our brilliant armed forces could do for you.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I am conscious that some Members arrived after the start of the debate. Ordinarily, that would preclude them from speaking, but I understand that the Prime Minister's statement has slightly thrown our timings. My intention is therefore to accommodate all those in the Chamber who wish to speak, but inevitably those who arrived late will have to take their turn. I call the shadow Minister.

1.22 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Given the topic, I am genuinely honoured to open this debate on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition on the subject of Armed Forces Day. I had the honour to be present in New Palace Yard on Monday to watch

[Mr Mark Francois]

members of the armed forces raise the armed forces flag in Parliament, in a ceremony presided over by Mr Speaker and his Chaplain, the Rev. Canon Mark Birch MVO. It was a joyous occasion, and I am pleased to say it was very well attended by many MPs.

My opposite number, the Armed Forces Minister, is the proud son of a submariner, and I am the equally proud son of Stoker First Class Reginald Francois, who served on the minesweeper HMS Bressay on D-day. We are both naval brats, as he put it—at least after a fashion.

It is now established that Armed Forces Day is held on the last Saturday of June. This Saturday there will be many ceremonies across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, including in my county of Essex, and I hope to attend the celebration in Basildon, the town in which I grew up. This is a time when people across our four nations come together to celebrate the role of the whole armed forces family—regulars, reserves, veterans, cadets and, of course, their loved ones—in defending our country and our democratic way of life. I will say something about those four categories—regulars, reserves, cadets and veterans—in my remarks this afternoon.

Beginning with reserves, Armed Forces Day and, indeed, Armed Forces Week normally enjoy bipartisan—perhaps I should say tripartisan—support in Parliament. Touching on this allows me to say something about the value of the reserves to our armed forces. In doing so, I declare an interest having served as an infantry officer in the 5th Battalion the Royal Anglian Regiment, in the Territorial Army, in the 1980s during the cold war, when—this dates me—the Berlin wall was still up. I greatly appreciate the extremely important role that our reserves in the Royal Naval Reserve, the Army Reserve, the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, the RAF Volunteer Reserve and others play in supporting our regulars in the defence of the realm.

In that context, I recently saw an analysis showing that, following the 2024 general election, there are now 17 Conservative MPs who have served or are serving in either the regular or reserve armed forces of the Crown. However, the Conservatives have no monopoly on military service, as the same survey rightly showed that Labour has 13 MPs in a similar position and the Liberal Democrats have eight. For completeness, I should add that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also served in the Territorial Army, so he is with us on that point. I sometimes feel that he is always with us—he is virtually omnipresent in the Chamber.

It is therefore true to say that the armed forces enjoy support across the political spectrum, at least from those of us who are here. I merely note in passing that, yet again, when defence is being discussed in this Chamber there is no Reform MP present to grace our proceedings. It is ironic and telling that Members of a party that likes to wrap itself in the flag—a flag it does not own—cannot be bothered to turn up to debate the service of those who loyally serve under that flag. Bluntly, Reform does not do defence. Nevertheless, I hope that most of what I say in the next few minutes will be broadly consensual, with perhaps one exception, which I will come to near the end.

The role of our armed forces in defending our way of life down the centuries is just as pertinent today as it has ever been, with the war in Ukraine, where brave Ukrainians

continue to resist Vladimir Putin's barbaric and illegal invasion of their country, alongside the continued turmoil in the middle east.

On the regulars, those who serve in our armed forces deserve our unstinting and ongoing support. Numerous studies show that the vast majority of people who serve in the armed forces benefit greatly from the experience. As well as serving their country, they often learn valuable skills and trades that make them highly marketable in the civilian jobs market—indeed, that can be a problem for retention, as the Minister intimated. When I served as a Defence Minister, albeit over a decade ago, one powerful statistic was that 80% of those who left the armed forces found a job within six months, and I believe the figures are equally good, if not better, today. People who are smart, disciplined and trained to turn up on time and to be resourceful are always likely to be attractive to employers.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Veterans play an important role in my Glastonbury and Somerton constituency, where 11% of households include at least one veteran. However, female veterans are more than 10% less likely to be employed than male veterans. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we must put more support into helping female veterans find the right employment after their service?

Mr Francois: I agree. We should do everything we can to help all veterans, whatever their gender, to find good employment after their service, and that certainly includes female veterans.

Forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, but as it is taking place in the hon. Lady's constituency, why on earth are Kneecap being allowed to appear at the Glastonbury festival? Why on earth have the organisers allowed that to take place? [Interruption.]

Moving on, we need to bear in mind that without—

Sarah Dyke: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If I may just correct the right hon. Gentleman, the Glastonbury festival site is not in my constituency.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): That is not a point of order for the Chair, but I think it is helpful to have the record corrected.

Mr Francois: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We need to bear employability very much in mind, as without skilled regular personnel to maintain and operate even the most expensive and sophisticated kit, from Typhoon and F-35 fighters to Type 45 destroyers and main battle tanks, we cannot achieve operational success. In short, without well trained people, the equipment counts for nothing and does not have the deterrent effect that we seek. When asked at the Royal United Services Institute earlier this week about the single biggest challenge that the Royal Navy faces, the fleet commander, Vice-Admiral Andrew Burns, replied:

“It's people right now. It's the quantity of people, and it's not just recruitment, it's retention.”

For context, this is not a uniquely British problem. All our Five Eyes partners face similar challenges, even the United States, and I shall return to that in a moment.

Let me turn to cadets. We in this country are fortunate to have an active and enthusiastic cadet movement, and while we welcome the proposals in the White Paper to expand the cadets even further, we would like to see more detail about how exactly that will be achieved. Cadet units play a vital role in fostering disciplined teamwork and a sense of service among young people, providing invaluable opportunities for personal development, and serving as a pathway to a career in the armed forces, should the young person desire that.

Whether we are Ministers, shadow Ministers or otherwise, we are all ultimately constituency MPs, so I pay tribute to the Army cadet detachments in Rayleigh and Wickford, which are part of C company in the Essex Army Cadet Force, both of which I have visited. I hope to see the Rayleigh detachment again shortly, not least as it appears that it will need to find a new home within the next several years. I also highlight the valuable work undertaken by 1474 (Wickford) Squadron of the Air Training Corps, and their sister unit, 1476 (Rayleigh) Squadron Air Training Corps; I declare an interest in the latter, as I recently had the honour of being appointed honorary squadron president. Its motto is “Amanogawa”, which is Japanese for heavenly river, and I can confirm that they are in full flow.

Over the years, I have heard a number of hon. Members pay full tribute in the Chamber to their cadet units; I will chance my arm and say that I am sure we will rightly hear praise for more cadet units before the debate is out. They are a fundamental part of the armed forces family. I thank not only the young people who sign up, but those adults who give of their time, voluntarily, to provide instruction and leadership for these outstanding young people.

Let me turn to veterans. As one example of work that can be done to protect veterans, I commend to the House an initiative known as the Forcer protocol. The idea is named after Alan Forcer, who served in the British Army for a number of years in several theatres, but who sadly took his own life after a struggle with complex post-traumatic stress disorder. His widow, Claire Lilly, came to see me at my constituency surgery a number of years ago, and told me that she was determined to channel her grief in a positive way, by establishing a system to help find and protect veterans who go missing. When I met Claire, I was struck by her absolute determination to succeed, and I am pleased to tell the House that that is exactly what she did.

In short, the Forcer protocol is now a standard operating procedure for many police forces. It is similar in some ways to the Herbert protocol for people who go missing with dementia, but it has special features that are designed specifically to assist former service personnel. In essence, it works like this. People who have a veteran in their family who they believe may be vulnerable can register their details confidentially, including known associates and favourite haunts, with an organisation known as Safe and Found Online. In the event that a veteran goes missing, the family, by releasing a PIN code, can make that information immediately available to the police, to assist them in their search for the potentially vulnerable veteran. The initiative was trialled by Greater Manchester police over six months. The trial was an outstanding success; GMP reported that it had allowed them to make positive and timely interventions that undoubtedly saved the lives of dozens of veterans in the Greater Manchester area.

As a result of that highly successful trial, the Forcer protocol is being rolled out across police forces nationwide. We had an event to encourage progress in the Commons in November 2024, and I am pleased to tell the House that at very short notice, the new Minister for Veterans and People attended to give his personal support, for which I thank him again today. In an equally bipartisan spirit, I pay tribute to the actor and TV celebrity Mr Ross Kemp, aka Grant Mitchell, for his unwavering support for that initiative, for the work that he has done for veterans more widely, and for his amazing documentary with the Royal Anglian Regiment—my old regiment—in Afghanistan. Thank you, Ross, for everything you do for our armed forces, past and present. We know your heart is absolutely in it, and we are grateful.

I am delighted to report that my constabulary in Essex is formally adopting the Forcer protocol today at a ceremony at Colchester. It is deliberately doing so in Armed Forces Week. Thirteen forces, including Essex, are now using that life-saving procedure. It is estimated that since the initial trial with GMP and the roll-out across other forces in this country, the process has saved literally hundreds of veterans. I commend Claire Lilly for everything that she and her loyal band of supporters have done to make this possible. We have another event in the Commons this November, by which time I very much hope that all 43 police forces in England and Wales will be fully signed up. Well done, Claire. Alan would be proud of you.

As I mentioned earlier, despite the tri-partisan nature of this debate, there is, I am afraid, one issue on which I feel that the Government and the Opposition will not agree: the Government's proposed treatment of Northern Ireland veterans. More than 300,000 regular British soldiers served in Northern Ireland during the troubles between 1969 and 2007. That highly challenging task, known as Operation Banner, was one of the longest-running continual exercises in the history of the British Army. During that long and at times highly dangerous deployment, more than 700 British soldiers were killed assisting the Ulster Defence Regiment and the then Royal Ulster Constabulary GC, now the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in upholding the rule of law in Northern Ireland. Many thousands of soldiers were maimed for life by both Republican and so-called loyalist bombs, while trying to hold the line in an incredibly complex and dangerous situation.

I have seen many memorials in my time, but perhaps one of the most poignant was the Royal Ulster Constabulary memorial at its headquarters in Knock, on which are commemorated hundreds of officers who gave their life, working alongside the Army, to attempt to uphold the rule of law in Northern Ireland. Imagine the utter dismay of those veterans who served in the British Army in that highly complex theatre at the news that the Labour Government intend to drive through a remedial order, under the auspices of the Human Rights Act 1998, effectively to remove key provisions in the Conservative-inspired Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. That will have two very important effects. First, it will reopen the endless cycle of investigation and reinvestigation, often via coronial inquests, to which many British Army soldiers have already been subject. Secondly—I wonder whether many Labour Members are aware of this—that same remedial order, which their Whips will urge them to vote for later

[Mr Francois]

this autumn, will make it easier for Gerry Adams and his associates to sue the British Government, and ultimately the British taxpayer. This is two-tier justice at its absolute worst.

The veterans have initiated a parliamentary petition, "Protect Northern Ireland Veterans from Prosecutions", which amassed more than 100,000 signatures in well under a month. As of noon today, the petition has achieved more than 145,000 signatures, and it is still going strong. As a result of that public support, we will debate that counter-productive policy, which is a looming disaster for armed forces recruitment and retention, in Parliament next month. We Conservative Members vigorously resist that wholly misguided remedial order, which is designed to aid Gerry Adams while throwing our brave veterans to the wolves. We warmly welcome the *Daily Mail's* campaign, launched this morning, to defend our veterans. As the *Daily Mail's* editorial powerfully put it this morning,

"It is profoundly unfair that frail ex-servicemen will continue to live in dread of a knock on the door, by the authorities, while IRA murderers sleep easily, with letters of immunity, handed to them by Tony Blair."

I think that puts it rather well.

It is worth recording that many of the soldiers who served in Northern Ireland were recruited from what we might now call red wall towns, from Blackburn to Bury and from Bolton to Burnley. They were then ordered across the Irish sea to help uphold the rule of law. Many of those surviving veterans are now in their 70s or even their 80s, and I suspect that many Labour MPs would find it extremely difficult to explain to them and their loved ones that they are taking this action just because their Government are literally obsessed with the Human Rights Act 1998. Conservative Members will bitterly oppose the remedial order; Labour Members will need to look into their consciences and, hopefully, when the Division bell rings, do the same.

With that important exception, I hope that hon. Members from across the House who are in the Chamber can agree that we value immensely the work of the whole armed forces family, and everything that they do to keep our country safe. Without those people who have the courage to take the King's shilling, as the old phrase has it, put on a uniform and, if ultimately necessary, risk their life to keep this country free, we would have no guarantee of our precious democracy.

Perhaps the most fitting way to end my humble contribution will be to quote the words of Rudyard Kipling from his famous poem, "Recessional", which was written in 1897 to commemorate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. Those who know the poem will know that there is no hint of jingoism about it—indeed, quite the reverse. It warns about the power of divine judgment and the humility of kings. As Kipling put it:

"The tumult and the shouting dies;

The Captains and the Kings depart:

Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,

An humble and a contrite heart.

Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,

Lest we forget—lest we forget!"

1.42 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), for sharing with us those powerful words by Kipling, which have sunk into our national consciousness. I appreciate the cordial nature of the debate between the Minister for the Armed Forces and the shadow Minister. We three were together earlier this week for a debate on recruitment in the north-east, which was also incredibly cordial. This is a great opportunity to continue that conversation.

In Stockton, we celebrated Armed Forces Day early, on Saturday, with a flag-raising ceremony, many celebrations on the high street, and a service led by Rev. Paul. I was pleased to see representatives of our local armed forces. Members of the Yorkshire Regiment, which largely serves my constituency, were there, although people in the north of my constituency might tend to join The Rifles, and we had representatives from our local cadet forces, including the Royal Marines Cadets, the Sea Cadets and the Royal Air Force Air Cadets, who are based in Norton, in my constituency. There were also representatives from the Royal Military Police Reserves, who I am proud to say are also based in Norton. Stockton has strong representation from the armed forces in our local community; I am pleased to say that one in 20 people in my constituency are either serving in the armed forces or veterans.

I mentioned the Royal Military Police. I wondered if they were not mentioned enough in the House, so I thought this would be a good opportunity to commend their work. They can claim to be the longest-established regiment or corps, with a history stretching all the way back to the 13th century and the appointment of the first sergeant of the peace. Today, they are a vital part of our armed forces, with around 2,200 soldiers and civilian staff. They support operations in conflict zones, peace-keeping missions and humanitarian efforts. This is perhaps a suitable moment to pay tribute to the hon. and gallant Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for her service as a captain in the Royal Military Police, and for her continued advocacy for the armed forces community.

The Royal Military Police are much like other skilled units in the armed forces, but they have three main roles: the policing of the Army, special investigations and close protection. In policing the Army, they will be attached to a unit in the field, and will ensure that captured members of enemy forces are treated appropriately, legally and humanely, which is clearly an important role. They were recently deployed in Ukraine as close protection for staff of the Foreign Office. There are airborne RMP, based in Colchester; they were part of Operation Market Garden at Pegasus Bridge.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): I welcome what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Would he accept that the actions of the Royal Military Police attached to fighting units are a direct reflection of the Army and of our national character in upholding the rule of law even in warfare?

Chris McDonald: I would. I may go on to develop this point, but that role creates for members of the Royal Military Police a unique duty and a serious responsibility that puts them in a slightly different position from their comrades, which must be quite difficult. That is why I wanted to highlight the role of the RMP.

Members of the RMP can also find themselves in incredibly dangerous situations. A friend of mine, who is a member of the RMP reserves, highlighted to me the role of Royal Military Police officers during the second world war and in other conflicts in managing traffic points. Those fixed grid reference points are vital in managing the traffic flow of equipment and personnel appropriately for our logistics, but they also mean that RMP personnel are easy to target by artillery and aircraft. They carry out that role with great bravery; I commend them for that.

As I have mentioned, policing puts individuals in a difficult and unique position. That is also true for the civilian police force, but I think there is a particular additional burden on members of the Royal Military Police in how they discharge their duty. I was struck by the story of Royal Military Police veteran Kate Green, which she told 20 years after the lifting of the LGBT military ban. When she served in the Royal Military Police, the thing that she feared most was being asked to investigate those suspected of hiding their sexuality from the Army. If an LGBT serviceperson admitted their sexuality, they were out and that was the end of their military career. Eventually, Kate decided that she could not continue with her service anymore and that she did not want to continue to live a lie herself, so she handed in her one-year notice. The LGBT ban was lifted on 12 January 2000, just a short time after her career ended. Kate now works with the Royal British Legion and maintains a strong connection with the Army, despite no longer serving. This is an opportunity for us all to welcome the lifting of the LGBT ban and to recognise the service of LGBT veterans.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Nearly 30 years ago, when I was at the University of Exeter, I argued vociferously to make sure that our armed forces were allowed to recruit from our campus and that they got people like us into the military, so that we could create a military that was receptive and reflective of our society, so that people from LGBTQ+ communities could serve alongside us, without any impediment. Does my hon. Friend agree that inclusion comes from being part of an institution and helps to change it from within, and that it is necessary that we do not put in place impediments to armed forces recruitment on campuses today?

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his service and his continued advocacy in this place for the armed forces. He spoke powerfully, and I agree with him. It is no small task to change the culture in an organisation; it starts and ends with leadership, so we must thank the leaders in our armed forces, who have done exactly as he said.

I will share the story of Rachel Webster. She is a Royal Military Police veteran from the north-east, and she is another example of how it is possible to break down barriers and overcome some really quite entrenched stereotypes. Rachel chose engineering over cookery when she was at school—that was her interest—but she was told that she would not be able to weld because she was a girl. I do not know if any hon. Members have ever had a go at welding, but I have; I am a boy, and I am terrible at it.

Rachel was unable to pursue welding at school, but, like me, she left school and joined British Steel. It was better at teaching her welding than it was at teaching

me, because she took a four-year apprenticeship programme and learned how to weld. But her ambition was to enter the armed forces; she wished to join the Royal Engineers, where many of her compatriots on the British Steel apprentice scheme went, but when she applied she was told that women could not be in the Royal Engineers at that time.

Undeterred, Rachel joined the Royal Military Police in 1989. She trained with the Women's Royal Army Corps, and then with the RMP, and she was deployed to Germany. Her career took her across the world, from Northern Ireland during the troubles to Afghanistan in 2001, but one of her proudest moments came in Iraq in 2003. She was helping to build a girls' school and impressed the local men, who did not realise it was possible for women to weld—so she was able to use her welding skills on behalf of the Army.

Both Rachel and Kate have really powerful stories. They show us that courage does not know any gender or sexuality, and I hope that their stories will inspire my constituents in Stockton, Billingham and Norton and people across the country. Let me take this moment to very much thank all our armed forces—particularly the Royal Military Police and its reservists in my constituency, across the north-east and across the country—for their valuable service to our nation.

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

1.52 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is an absolute privilege to speak in today's debate on Armed Forces Day—a day on which we recognise and celebrate the bravery, dedication and sacrifice of those who serve and have served in our armed forces. We honour and thank them.

Earlier this week I was proud to attend the armed forces flag-raising ceremony in Epsom. Such events are held in communities across the country, and their meaning runs deep. They are a visible reminder of something that should never be taken for granted: the courage of the men and women who step up to defend our freedoms, often at great personal cost.

This week is personal for me, because I served in the British Army as part of the Royal Military Police, who vital operational work was quite rightly highlighted by the hon. Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald). My journey began with the desire to lead, travel and make a difference. I joined Sandhurst, which was gruelling and inspiring in equal measure. As one of the few women there at the time, I trained in boots that were not designed for me, but I emerged with unbreakable friendships forged in resilience.

I was first deployed to Bosnia as part of NATO's peacekeeping mission. Later, I served in Iraq with 1 Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment during Operation Telic 4, helping to retrain the Iraqi police force in a dangerous and volatile area. We operated under constant threat. A year before my arrival, six of my Royal Military Police colleagues were killed in Majar al-Kabir. I still remember the fear of that first night in Maysan, travelling in a blacked-out bus and unsure of what lay ahead; the fear of the unknown and of not making it home is one that many serving personnel still face today. We carried out our mission with professionalism and camaraderie—British troops working shoulder to shoulder with brave interpreters,

[Helen Maguire]

local allies and international partners—but I saw at first hand how overstretched and under-equipped our troops often were compared with our allies. We got on with the job, but we should not have to make do.

Armed Forces Day is not just about parades and flypasts; it marks a time for action. Our service personnel deserve more than warm words. They deserve a fair deal. That is why I am calling for a fair deal commission to overhaul the conditions facing service personnel, veterans and their families. From housing to pay and from diversity to transition support, our service personnel deserve reform. Unfortunately, too many military families still live in substandard accommodation, too many veterans struggle with poor mental health and inadequate support, and too many LGBT+ veterans are still waiting for proper justice and compensation. We were pleased to see the Government accept the Etherton report's recommendations, but speed is of the essence because many of those affected are elderly or seriously ill.

Women in the armed forces still face unacceptable levels of harassment and misogyny, as the Atherton report revealed. We must do better, and we will push for full implementation of those recommendations.

When it comes to troop numbers, the reality is stark: our armed forces are overstretched and under-resourced. We are calling for a new bonus scheme to help to bring into and keep more new recruits in the British Army, and the expansion of the current rejoining scheme to attract former soldiers to re-enlist.

I left the Army earlier than I planned. Like many servicewomen, I was forced to choose between motherhood and military service. There was no support, no nursery and no flexible career path. Those are the real barriers that drive people out of uniform, and the military lose many experienced people. We must change that. If we want to recruit and retain the best, we need to support families. The Liberal Democrats would create a one-stop shop for military families to access housing, education, healthcare and career support.

I am proud of my constituency's military history. Langley Vale was once a world war one training camp for more than 8,000 soldiers, and it is now a place of reflection. Our local Royal Engineers, the 135 Geographic Squadron, recently celebrated 75 years of proud service, marching with bayonets fixed through Ewell.

In this volatile and uncertain time, let us honour the legacy of our service personnel not just in ceremony, but in policy. Let us make Armed Forces Day a starting point for serious change.

1.57 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak today to mark Armed Forces Day 2025—a moment for our country to show its deep and enduring gratitude to all the men and women who serve and have served in our armed forces. Their service underpins our national security, our values and our way of life. Whether it is on the frontline or behind the scenes, at home or abroad, those individuals commit themselves fully to something far greater than themselves, and they do so not for recognition but out of duty.

Since becoming the Member of Parliament for Mansfield, I have had the opportunity to meet veterans, serving personnel and their families. I have seen at first hand the

strength of character, discipline and resilience that military life builds. It is clear that those who serve bring with them skills that enrich every part of our society once they return to civilian life, but we must be honest about the reality that many of them face after service.

By its very nature, military life is unique. It often means frequent moves, long separations from family and sudden transitions. Although the vast majority of veterans make successful moves into civilian life, there are still far too many who encounter disadvantage, whether in housing, employment, access to healthcare or mental health services and so forth.

Mr Calvin Bailey: I served for 25 years. At times—for almost 10 years at a stretch—I had month-on, month-off deployments, where I was away from my family. During this Armed Forces Week, we must remember, give praise to and celebrate our armed forces families, who, as my hon. Friend describes, suffer unseen pressure and burden.

Steve Yemm: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Certainly, when I speak to the families of serving personnel in Mansfield, that subject is always very close to the top of the conversation. It is very important to recognise those issues, and it is for those reasons that it is so important that we recognise the armed forces covenant—our collective promise across government, society and public services that those who serve should not be disadvantaged by virtue of their service. That is not just a principle; it is important that it be recognised in law, but the covenant can be effective only if those in positions of responsibility understand it and implement it properly.

That is why, earlier this month on 4 June, I was proud to host the first ever all-party parliamentary reception for the armed forces covenant here in Parliament. That event was held in partnership with the Royal British Legion and the Ministry of Defence's covenant team, who do outstanding work to support veterans and promote awareness. I formally put on record in this House my thanks to the Royal British Legion, and to the Minister for Veterans and People for his attendance at that event. Its aim was really simple: to help Members of the House and their staff members better understand how the covenant operates and the support it provides, and how we can use it to serve our constituents more effectively. I found it very encouraging to see Members from across the House and across the political spectrum in attendance, absolutely united in their belief that no one who serves this country should face barriers when their service comes to an end.

Armed Forces Day and Armed Forces Week are not just about parades and flag-raising, important though those things are; they are really about recognising and reaffirming our commitment to the people who defend our freedom day after day. As we rightly thank our armed forces today, let us recommit ourselves in this House to ensuring that their support is matched by our support, that their sacrifice is never met with silence, and that their families are never left behind. Let us move forward on this day, not just with gratitude but with purpose.

2.2 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): It is an honour to speak today ahead of Armed Forces Day—a day not just of pageantry, as the hon. Member for Mansfield

(Steve Yemm) said, but of principle. I congratulate the Government on reinstating the pageantry as well—it is a good thing. It is a day to recognise the men and women who serve, or who have served, in His Majesty's armed forces: the quiet professionals who carry the weight of our security, often in silence and too often without thanks. As we have heard, we owe them and their families a debt of gratitude that we can never really pay, but gratitude alone is not enough. As the Minister said, only a quarter of veterans feel that their service is properly recognised, and there is a reason for that. I will speak plainly about it, and I hope the Minister will not take it as partisan. I hope he will take what I have to say, in what will be a difficult five minutes of listening for him, as a call for action and assistance—or, if he likes, a call for help.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said, there is a shadow that hangs over our armed forces: the political and legal vendetta targeting the veterans of Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. Those men answered their country's call in one of our country's darkest hours. Without hesitation, they stood between the innocent and the terrorists, often literally—they were often in the way of the bullets. Now, decades later, they are treated not as heroes but as suspects. The frankly inadequately informed inquest into the SAS-IRA conflict at Clonoe is just one incident in which elderly veterans are being persecuted; there will be many more.

We should never forget that terrorists killed 722 British soldiers during the troubles. The people who carried out those murders have effectively been exonerated by the British state. I do not blame the state for that—it was necessary at the time—but today, we witness a legal crusade against the men who risked everything in the service of peace. This is not justice; it is an attempt to rewrite history. It is prosecution driven by politics, not facts. While the killers walk free, authorities hound the soldiers who stopped them from killing and treat those soldiers like criminals. The legacy Act—forgive my shorthand—was designed to put an end to this travesty. For their own reasons, the Government have decided to repeal that Act, but if they do not properly replace it with effective legislation, they will hand the initiative back to those who spent decades glorifying violence. I hope the Minister will pay attention to every detail of the paragraph I have just spoken, because it is important.

The Government must decide whose side they are on in this exercise. Our veterans, who are now in their 70s or even older, deserve peace in retirement, not a knock on the door and questions about battles they fought to defend the public half a lifetime ago. Those battles were fought under orders, under supervision and under yellow card rules, and immediately afterwards, everybody faced close judicial examination of their behaviour to ensure they had obeyed the law in every respect. To refer back to the speech made by the hon. Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), the military police were often involved in those investigations—it did not always make them popular, but it was a necessary part of the process. Not one of the conditions I have described applied to the psychopathic murderers those soldiers were up against.

I have repeatedly asked the Government to end this shameful campaign of retrospective injustice, and I will continue to ask until I get a meaningful answer and a resolution to this running sore of injustice. That is why I support the petition that my right hon. Friend the

Member for Rayleigh and Wickford referred to, with its 145,000 signatures—an astonishing number in such a short time. However, this is just the start. This issue is not just massively important to our veterans; if this rewriting of history succeeds, this weapon of lawfare can be used against soldiers in any future conflict, destroying the effectiveness of our troops in future operations.

This morning's edition of the *Daily Mail* carried a powerful headline announcing the start of a campaign to highlight that very problem. When we look at that headline, though, we should remember that this is not just about our special forces; it is about the whole of the armed forces. There are at least 20 inquests into actions by Government agencies and forces that could potentially be restarted by the Government after the end of the legacy legislation. Only a minority of those inquests are about special forces; most are about conventional forces, or about the Royal Ulster Constabulary or the Ulster Defence Regiment.

If we continue down this path, not only will we betray our past; we will jeopardise our future. This campaign of persecution sends a chilling message to the next generation: "Serve your country, risk your life, and face prosecution in your old age." Why would any young man or woman sign up for that? The truth is that many will not. I know that the Minister referred to better recruitment and retention figures, but that will not last if this battle is lost by the British state.

This challenge has been most high-profile when it has struck at our elite units, such as the Special Air Service, the Special Boat Service and the Special Reconnaissance Regiment—the Det, as it was once known—but it applies to every rifleman, soldier and member of the military who carries and wields a weapon in defence of his country. Those soldiers, who operate in conditions of extreme danger and uncertainty, are required to make impossible decisions at great speed while under fire, or in terror of being under fire. They expect neither recognition nor reward, but just one thing: the support of their Government. We expect our soldiers to put their lives on the line for our country, but why would they do that if their country will abandon them after their service? Instead, they face doubt—doubt that creeps into the field, into the command and into mission planning.

If soldiers must weigh every trigger pull against a future court case, we cripple their ability to act. What is the point of the armed forces if we render them useless through legal ambiguity? I am the last person to tolerate unnecessary killing or misbehaviour by our troops. Those who were in the House at the time will know of my past campaigns on torture and rendition. I will not stand for that, but we must balance properly the rule of law as it applies to each environment. We already have thought-through rules of lawfare established in the Geneva convention, and that is where we must look first when conducting a war.

From 2005 to 2007, during the operations against al-Qaeda in Iraq, our military achieved, along with the Americans, spectacular results in saving lives. I reiterate that that was about saving lives. In Baghdad, the number of vehicle-borne suicide bombings fell from 100 a month to just one after we engaged. Sectarian assassinations—once rife—all but ceased, care of our military. That was not the work of indiscriminate bombing or division-level assaults; it was achieved through precise, controlled and surgical raids into some of the most hostile environments, generally by elite forces, and backed by careful planning.

[David Davis]

The impact was staggering. Even a hostile “Panorama” programme showed that 95% of terrorist neutralisations were captures, not kills. That was under unbelievable circumstances, and thousands of innocent lives were saved. That was a matter not just of operational skill, but of moral discipline. In the midst of close-quarters combat against some of the most dangerous men on earth, our forces showed a restraint few could match.

I have no doubt that mistakes are made from time to time, and those should be answered for, but if we allow our opponents to use lawfare to destroy these capabilities, we are left with blunt instruments—the bomb, the missile and the drone—with which, instead of capturing or killing just the guilty, we kill every innocent civilian on a bus or every guest at a wedding party. Our military has been brilliant at doing the opposite—at being targeted, lawful and effective. Dismantling that capacity would be not only militarily reckless, but a betrayal of the principles that the Minister said we stand for, which distinguish us from those whom we fight.

Let us today do rather more than clap politely at a parade. Let us act. Let us end the relentless hounding of our veterans. Let us give our serving forces the legal protection and political support they deserve. Let us recognise that if we find it difficult to recruit, it is a consequence of a state that too often turns its back on its defenders. This Armed Forces Day, let us make one promise: that no British soldier will ever again be abandoned by the very nation they have so bravely protected.

2.13 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I rise to pay tribute to our armed forces personnel. May I associate myself with the Minister’s remarks? I start by recognising veterans for their past service and their contribution to society. They continue to serve society with their skills and leadership, shaped by their unique military experiences. I also thank our reservists for the extra time they give in supporting our armed forces, and I declare an interest, as I have a husband who is a reservist in the Army. I also thank our cadets and our armed forces families, who make sacrifices in their own way to keep us safe, which must be recognised.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): At the weekend, I attended the Royal British Legion Old Catton’s 90th birthday celebration, and I pay tribute to all the volunteers and community groups, as well as our armed forces and veterans. I met cadets from Constitution Hill, Aylsham Road and College Green in Norwich, and what they are learning is phenomenal. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to back them with support and also back the many volunteers who help make those cadet groups run effectively?

Kirith Entwistle: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Our cadets provide a good opportunity for our young people, and they should be supported and backed as much as possible.

I am proud to have attended Monday’s flag-raising ceremony in Victoria Square, in my constituency of Bolton North East. I was proud to see the strong showing of support for our armed forces at that ceremony, where the armed forces flag was raised above Bolton town hall. It will fly there proudly until the end of

Armed Forces Day on Saturday. The ceremony was an opportunity to reflect on those who have served and those who are currently serving, especially those deployed overseas and in active service. I was glad to join in celebrations with Jerry Mistry, president of the Royal Artillery Association’s Bolton branch, and also members of the Royal Artillery, such as Gunner Paul Brindle. There are nearly 3,000 veterans in Bolton North East, and Bolton is also home to the 216th Battery of the 103rd Regiment of the Royal Artillery, which is the most northerly sub-unit of the 103rd Regiment, with lineage dating back to 1889.

I am deeply proud of our local military history, but on Monday I also heard concerns from members of the 216th Battery about a lack of funding, particularly around general training, meaning that there is not enough money to progress training levels. I sincerely hope that the Government will look at ways to provide more support on that.

I am also a former employee of the Royal British Legion, and as someone with experience campaigning to improve the lives of our armed forces, I strongly welcome this Government’s commitment to renewing the nation’s contract with those who serve and those who have served. Having worked on raising awareness about the armed forces covenant, I am pleased that this Labour Government recognise its importance in supporting our armed forces communities and that we have committed to enacting it in law. However, what plans do the Minister and his Department have in place to ensure that sufficient funding and budget is in place to implement an extension of the armed forces covenant duty? How do the Government intend to work with different layers of local government and our regional mayors?

As a parent, I welcome plans to expand wraparound childcare to support families deployed overseas, and I was pleased to hear that they will now receive 20 hours a week of funded childcare, saving families around £3,400 a year. I strongly commend the Minister and this Government on broadening support to our armed forces families, because I have experienced at first hand how much they struggle and the unique challenges they face.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): On that point, there are many brave men and women in my constituency who are serving or who have served. I am proud of them and their families, and I thank them for their contribution this Armed Forces Week. My hon. Friend mentioned the Royal British Legion, and I wish to give particular thanks to Tilehurst Royal British Legion in my constituency. It does a fantastic job to support our veterans, particularly Christine Lewendon, the president of the Tilehurst branch. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking them for all that they do?

Kirith Entwistle: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in that. We should pay tribute to the Royal British Legion, its branches and its teams, with all the various support that they provide to our armed forces community.

I am pleased to see that this Government are boosting cadet forces, creating opportunities for 42,000 young people by 2030, because I know how much of a difference that will make to people in my constituency. I also welcome the largest pay rise for the armed forces in

more than 20 years, and I am deeply grateful that we are establishing an armed forces commissioner, which is long overdue.

Finally, I will end by reiterating the concerns highlighted by members of the 216th Battery around funding for training. I hope that the Government will look at more ways to provide more support so that we can continue to back up our words with action and help to upskill our vital defence sectors and our armed forces community. I look forward to joining in Armed Forces Day celebrations this Saturday.

2.19 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I want to speak in the debate today to recognise the contribution of all those who serve in our armed forces and those who stand beside them in support. It is Armed Forces Week, and I will be attending the Huntington Armed Forces Day on Saturday at Sapley playing fields. I pass on my appreciation to Anna Dutton for her efforts in organising the day from a standing start. I also thank Andy Phipps of Cambridgeshire army cadet force for his efforts.

For a region with strong links to the armed forces, it is wonderful that our armed forces personnel and families, both British and American, will have the opportunity to participate locally. I say that as an MP who is very proud to have military bases in his constituency, whether they are British with RAF Wyton, the home of UK defence intelligence, or RAF Molesworth and RAF Alconbury, which are both run by the US air force. We have an extraordinary number of US personnel in and around our villages, which always takes people by surprise when they hear those American accents.

Armed Forces Day is about the recognition and celebration of those young men and women who give up the best years of their lives to serve their nation in a uniform. It is also about those who stand behind them, who sacrifice their time, their careers and their ability to make a home in order to support their partners, mothers and fathers to realise their career ambitions.

I spent the best part of a decade in the Army. Although I rarely, if ever, mention it, it was one of the greatest experiences of my life, particularly now that, through the passage of time, I have all but forgotten how bad some of it actually was. But I did love it, and I do miss it. The camaraderie, the experiences and the opportunities are all unique elements that make being a part of the armed forces so special. You forge bonds with those who serve alongside you, and the unspoken shared experiences allow you to meet a fellow veteran and bond over a shared love of spinning dits. Sadly, it would be inappropriate in this place to recount most of those dits, if not all.

I served in the armed forces during the highest tempo of kinetic operations since the Korean war. It placed a strain on our armed forces, the likes of which we have not seen since. I know that those on the Labour Benches often like to recall that the last time we spent 2.5% of GDP on defence was under the last Labour Government, and the PM even mentioned it in his statement earlier today. What they do not often mention is that that operational tempo just about broke the Army.

I echo the words of the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire): in my experience of serving during the same period, we went through kit and equipment very quickly. With the pace of change that we currently

see on operations and in warfare, we would do well to remember—I know the Minister is listening—that we cycled through different types of body armour. In a four-year period, I think we had three different types of body armour and three different types of helmet. We changed our entire camouflage pattern, and we had to bring in urgent operational requests to have vehicles that could withstand roadside bombs. We went from patrolling in berets and enhanced combat body armour in Iraq to patrolling in helmets, and with metal detectors, in Afghanistan only a couple of years later. The pace of change is something that we must consider.

Chris McDonald: I hesitate to interrupt what is a marvellous speech and a great testament to the hon. Gentleman's service, but he mentioned the urgent request for vehicles that could withstand roadside bombs. I thought this might be an appropriate moment to mention that, in response to that, a new type of steel was developed in the UK: ballistic steel, which was invented at the University of Cambridge, developed at our steel research institutes and produced in south Wales. That was a great national response, and it demonstrates the importance of not only our steel industry, but our industry in general, in providing a rapid response to the requirements of those in the field.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I concur. Although I do not know anything about the detail of that steel and the armour it provided, it is worth bearing in mind the pace of change and our ability to react. We have heard a lot of talk in recent weeks about the capability that we intend to buy, but we have to remember the old adage, which is so true: no plan ever survives first contact with the enemy. That is probably truer now than it has been for many a year.

We take our armed forces for granted. Although the jingoistic applause, the veterans' discounts and the "Thank you for your service" is not for us—it is too gauche; we are, after all, British—the flip side is that there is certainly some middle ground to be occupied. We need greater societal recognition of the value of serving and an inculcation that service to one's nation is something to be proud of, something to aspire to, and something that benefits not just the country, but the individual.

We too often look to our armed forces as a default civil emergency force and the first port of call. If there is flooding, we ask them to deliver sandbags. If it is snowing, we ask them to clear the runway at Heathrow. If firefighters go on strike, we ask our armed forces to man the fire trucks. We also ask them to provide security at the Olympics. Even the bin strikes saw the Army brought in to help. Although I appreciate that there is a specific process by which the help of the armed forces is enlisted, I wince whenever I see it activated. We should not need to rely upon a force of barely 100,000 or so available service personnel to cover everything. They should not be the default bailout for Government or local government ineffectiveness.

Our armed forces deserve better. They deserve to be paid properly, so that they do not have to take a pay cut when they are deployed on operations, as was recently explained to me by some of the personnel on NATO operations in Poland; to be housed properly, so that defence contractors do not paint over the mould on the walls because treating it is not on the contractors' checklist, as I have been informed is happening in service family accommodation in my constituency at

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

the moment; to be posted sympathetically, so that families do not end up split apart if both parents are serving personnel, as I have seen happen to my good friends who are still serving; and to be supported and granted stability, so that service personnel's children can receive a stable home and education.

I could go on, but the point I am making is that the treatment of our service personnel is not good enough. Frankly, it was not good enough when I served, it was not good enough under the last Government, and I do not think it is good enough now. While I do not doubt the Government's sentiment, I retain little confidence that the situation will drastically improve, despite the promises. We in this House often stand in this Chamber and wax lyrical about our armed forces, recounting stories of their bravery, courage, commitment and sacrifice. But they are more than just a backdrop for an announcement, and I encourage those of us in this House to remember that.

I will make one light-hearted final point. As we Members of Parliament return to our constituencies this weekend to participate dutifully on Saturday and attend the events and parades, spare a thought for those young men and women. As much as I am sure that they value and appreciate the recognition—I remember this well from my own Army experience—the irony is that the best way we could show how much we value them is by not making them work on a sunny Saturday afternoon in June.

2.25 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): It is with immense pride that I rise today in Armed Forces Week, particularly as the national celebrations are returning to Cleethorpes this weekend. That will be a moment of real honour for our community in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, nearly 10 years after the last time we hosted such an event, in 2016—and my, hasn't a lot happened in those years? To have it return under a Labour Government is an incredibly proud moment.

My constituency may not have garrison towns such as those that my colleagues represent, but our ties to the military run deep and proud. From American GIs camped in Grimsby's People's park during the second world war, to the brave men and women who gave everything to their country to support the war effort—including our towns' fishermen, as well as my great-grandma May and my great aunt Kathleen, who both took roles as wartime wardens in their village of Healing—our towns have long stood shoulder to shoulder with our armed forces.

Those connections continue today, with the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Anglian Regiment, a reserve battalion, operating out of Westward Ho in Grimsby, and training and serving with distinction across our area and further afield. Their commitment really does reflect the values that define our area: resilience, solidarity and service. Every Remembrance Sunday, they open their doors to the whole of the local community in order to provide refreshments to the young cadets—the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) just mentioned cadets—who will be out parading this Sunday.

Mr Calvin Bailey: We must be very proud of our cadets. I was a cadet myself, and it kept me on the straight and narrow and out of trouble. In my constituency

I have two amazing squadrons: 12F, based in Waltham Forest and Leyton; and 241, the best air cadet squadron in the country. Behind them is a corps of volunteers who really do not get the recognition they deserve, and it is really important that we recognise the people who prop up these organisations in our community. Will my hon. Friend join me in recognising their service and commitment?

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Members have said today that we will not have a future pipeline of young people who want to participate in the armed forces, who already have the training and the discipline, and who understand the lifestyle if we do not have the adults who are prepared to give up their time to support that. It is incredibly time-consuming and takes them away from their families, and it really does show a commitment not only to young people, but to their communities and the armed forces more widely.

Sarah Dyke: I, too, participated in my school's combined cadet service, and we enjoyed many evenings and nights on Salisbury plain in the bitter cold—in fact, they were some of the coldest nights I have ever experienced. Glastonbury and Street sea cadets give youngsters an experience that helps them grow into the people they want to be, in a safe and friendly environment. It gives them confidence, friendship and leadership skills to help them launch well into life. Will the hon. Lady join me in celebrating groups such as Glastonbury and Street sea cadets, and thank them for all the amazing work they do?

Melanie Onn: I am very happy to do as the hon. Lady asks. All the organisations working with young people do an amazing job. The fact that the young people involved show up and commit themselves is testament to their resilience, and to their belief that they can achieve. They are putting time and effort into preparing themselves for their future.

The Westward Ho barracks opens its doors to our local community every year, providing hot food and drinks. It is a place for families to come to, and for everyone to get together and reflect on the day. It provides a little bit of community spirit, connection and conversation on a very important day in our constituency. We regularly see hundreds of people lining the streets as the procession goes from the minster to the memorial near the Grimsby Institute.

This year, as Cleethorpes hosts the national Armed Forces Day event—I do not want to keep saying it, but we are hosting the national event this year, and are very pleased to do so—we will be celebrating not only our nation's servicemen and women, but the economic and cultural boost that the event will bring to our area. I have to pay tribute to our local armed forces events team. They are volunteers, and they work tirelessly at any event related to our armed forces. They are always there, and they will be working incredibly hard right down to the wire. I am absolutely sure that they will not have the opportunity to enjoy any of the events on Saturday, because they will be so busy making sure that everything is running smoothly, and that those participating and coming from outside the area to make this a grand celebration have everything they need. It will be a moment for our businesses and our tourism sector. Above all, it is about our people, and we will welcome

those from around the country who will come to this national event and line the streets to give thanks to our servicemen and women.

Only recently, I had the pleasure of welcoming students from the uniformed services course at Grimsby Institute, who came into Parliament and the education centre. These young people are preparing for careers across the police, the fire service, the armed forces and the emergency response services. Their enthusiasm and discipline were a reminder that the future of our uniformed services is in good hands. They are the next chapter in our proud tradition of service, and I was very pleased to have them here.

We also have some excellent community groups. The armed forces events team have turned an old local authority building called the Knoll into a centre for signposting for veterans. It provides signposting for any kind of mental health support, housing support, or welfare and benefits advice. It is a really nice, relaxed environment, with space for veterans to have a coffee, and there are professionals to signpost them and provide additional support.

We have another brilliant grassroots group called NEL4Heroes, which is run voluntarily by ex-servicemen and women. It brings people together through food and drink, and other activities, and it really helps people who have left the services—sometimes recently, sometimes many years ago—who are finding life a little bit difficult or find themselves in a challenging situation. There is a pride that comes with service, but sometimes that pride means that people do not wish to access the help available to them. NEL4Heroes is a brilliant group that informally builds relationships and ties, and provides support. It encourages people not to feel embarrassed about requiring additional support for a period of time, and it helps them to access it. I congratulate the group on that work.

Our town's military history runs deep and has lasting connections to our European allies. After the second world war, the Carpathian Lancers, a Polish regiment unable to return home due to the Soviet occupation, made Weelsby Woods their home. In their honour, a plaque and a wooden sculpture of their bear mascot, Wojtek, stands in the park as a tribute to their service and to the many who settled in Grimsby in 1947. I wanted to mention that, because when I was growing up, my great aunt and her mother, my great-grandmother, welcomed into their house one of those Polish servicemen, so I grew up with him, and he lived as a lodger with our family for 50 years until he passed away. I want to remember Michek Włodarczak, because he was a big part of our family's life. I am sorry—

John Slinger: In my hon. Friend's very powerful and moving speech, she has spoken about the efforts of the entire community. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talked about the importance of the national endeavour to remember those who have served, and those who continue to serve, irrespective of party. In that spirit, I would like to put on record that former Conservative councillor Kathryn Lawrence is doing wonderful work with her team at the Hillmorton branch of the Royal British Legion. I have met her many times and worked with her, and will continue to do so. Indeed, I will be taking part in the ceremony on Saturday. It is in that spirit that we should support our armed services.

Melanie Onn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which was particularly timely. There are people who play a big part in our life at different periods; I know that my family are not alone in feeling that.

It would be remiss of me not to pause and remember the Grimsby Chums, the ordinary men from our community who volunteered together, trained together and, in July 1916, faced the horrors of the Somme together. As part of the 101st Brigade in the 34th Division, they stood shoulder to shoulder with battalions from Edinburgh as they launched the first wave of the British assault. At 7.28 am, the Chums advanced into what would become a day of unimaginable loss. Some managed to reach the German trenches, including Second Lieutenant Harold P. Hendin, who, with just five men, reached the enemy's reserve trench and held out under relentless counter-attack. Of the battalion, 502 fell that day—15 officers and 487 from other ranks—with only two officers returning uninjured and barely 100 men left standing. Their bravery and sacrifice are an enduring legacy of our community's contribution to peace and freedom.

Our losses are not just from that time. Over the last two decades, we have had a number of other losses from our community, such as Flight Lieutenant Smith, Marine Lance Corporal Ford, Trooper Pearson, Guardsman Major and Sergeant Telford, who should also be recognised.

In that vein, I welcome the commitments from the Government that show their determination to improve the lives and welfare of military serving personnel and their families, and particularly the forces accommodation improvements. Having lived in service accommodation, I can confirm the difference that it makes to have a good-quality home. The properties of some of my friends were not in such a good state. They were bringing up children, but were having to keep on top of some pretty terrible structural issues while their partners or husbands were away on service.

I also acknowledge the additional funds for homeless veterans, which will be invaluable for ex-servicemen and women who become homeless after struggling to adjust and make changes later in their life, and who perhaps feel that their community is not as strong as it was when they were in the forces. Making sure that we have the precision funding to support them is incredibly important.

This weekend, as the Red Arrows fly over Cleethorpes beach, hopefully I can share an ice cream with the Secretary of State, or perhaps a pint; there will be lots of pints drunk this weekend. As our community celebrates with parades and displays of remembrance, we will feel a fierce pride in our past and present, and a sense of unwavering support for our armed services. I know that I speak for everybody in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes when I say thank you to those who served, who serve now, and who are preparing to serve. Their bravery and sacrifice is written into the soul of our nation, and into the streets, homes and families of our communities. Let us honour them, not just on Saturday, but through the values we champion, the support we offer, and the remembrance we preserve for generations to come.

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

2.40 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): There are many gallant Members in this Chamber, in the Scottish Parliament Chamber back home in

[*Graham Leadbitter*]

Scotland, and in other legislatures of these islands, both national and local—Members who have served in the armed forces with distinction and bravery. I pay tribute to them, and to those family and many friends who have served, and in some cases continue to serve. I hold them in the highest regard for their commitment to protecting the freedoms that we hold dear. That commitment is demonstrated by every rank and in every location where our armed forces operate.

Scotland has a very proud and distinguished military history. Armed Forces Day has become a further focal point of community support for our serving armed forces and our veterans. In my constituency of Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey, there are around 4,500 serving personnel—around 3,000 at RAF Lossiemouth and around 1,500 Army personnel between 39 Engineers at Kinloss and the 3rd Battalion, Royal Regiment of Scotland, the Black Watch, based at Fort George. They are supported by hundreds of Ministry of Defence civilians and military contractors, such as Boeing and BAE Systems, who jointly, with our serving personnel, deliver significant defensive and offensive capabilities for our military system. In addition, there are around 12,000 veterans in my constituency; I believe we have the highest percentage of any constituency in the UK. That reflects the north of Scotland's very long and distinguished connection with the military. Once we add in immediate family, around one in five people living in Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey have a direct military connection—quite some figure.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the armed forces in the area are not viewed as a separate or distinct community, but rather as a significant and integrated part of the wider community. As is often the case in the north of Scotland, there is no fanfare, but rather an everyday respect and appreciation of the role of the armed forces embedded in community life. Frankly, it is something that just is. That is important. There is no “us and them”; we are a whole community.

That does not, of course, equate to the armed forces being ignored, as can be readily observed from the significant numbers that turn out, year on year, across the constituency to witness acts of remembrance. I am very pleased that those numbers have grown over the last 25 years very significantly, and show no sign of dropping off. There are military children in most schools in the constituency, and some schools have a very significant percentage of military children. Military charities are well supported in the region, including SSAFA, the RAF Benevolent Fund, Help for Heroes, and Erskine Veterans Charity, which fairly recently opened a very welcoming and well-attended facility in Forres that is providing fantastic support to veterans. They can get together for a chat, or for the more extensive support that Erskine can provide.

The military, including contractors, offers a fantastic range of opportunities to young people in the region, and many take up those opportunities. In my pre-parliamentary life, I spent some four years as leader of Moray council. During that period, we strengthened our role in delivering the armed forces covenant. We worked cross party and across the chamber in the council to do that. That has continued, with cross-party support, and the council achieved the gold standard in the employer recognition scheme. During my time as

council leader, I was very pleased to support the developing civic link between the council and HMS Spey, a Royal Navy river class offshore patrol vessel currently operating in the Indo-Pacific, giving the constituency and the wider region really strong links with all three services.

I will touch on some politics. I trust this will be taken in the positive spirit in which I present it. This is not a day for hard politics, but there are some things that could be better for our armed forces. First, on the covenant—I mentioned this earlier to the Minister—I very much welcome proposals to embed the covenant in legislation. There will, no doubt, be challenges associated with that, and financial implications, but it is, in my view, the right thing to do. I look forward to future opportunities to debate embedding the covenant in law.

Secondly, one thing that frustrated me in my council days was comparatively rapid changes in numbers, notably at RAF Lossiemouth, which happened with no financial support to the council. Many councils with military bases, particularly air force bases, are in rural areas with small populations and consequently smaller budgets to operate with. That makes them less agile, because they simply do not have the money available at short notice to make the changes required to deliver services at a bigger scale. Other Members will, I am certain, have similar experiences in areas with significant changes in military numbers. If the MOD were a private developer, it would be contributing substantial sums to support growth in childcare, education and health provision, and a range of other public services. It would also be required to invest in infrastructure, such as improved roads and junctions in the area. The current design of our armed forces and the Government Departments that support them does not lend itself to doing that. This needs serious work.

I am by no means a fan of everything that the US does, but in this regard when significant changes occur to military-related populations there, there is a Government Department that steps up for a period to support local authorities, including with finance, to help smooth changes, with investment in service provision and the local economy. Councils and health boards have to absorb big bumps in demand, and that is frequently easier said than done. We have a welcome opportunity to fix that.

The Department in the US is called the Office of Local Defence Community Co-operation. It used to be known as the Office of Economic Adjustment, but I think that perhaps sounded a bit Orwellian. I would welcome further opportunities to debate this issue to see what progress can be achieved. The team in the US describes its role as helping communities to navigate the impact of Department of Defence actions and programme changes. That is exactly what we need to achieve in the UK, and it is particularly important as we move into an era of significantly increased spend on our armed forces and growth in our base numbers. There will be demand for more dentists, doctors, teachers and wraparound childcare. That puts a lot of pressure on local services and we need to navigate our way through that.

Before I conclude my contribution, I would like to make three specific mentions. First, like a number of Members who have contributed to this debate, I am taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme—in my case, the RAF course—which has afforded me many excellent learning opportunities that enable me as a parliamentarian to better understand our armed forces and to more effectively represent constituents with

connections to our armed forces. I pay tribute to the Armed Forces Parliamentary Trust, which is behind the excellent scheme, and the military officers who support the scheme here in Parliament, who have given so much time and effort to ensure that the scheme is the effective learning tool for MPs that it is. I commend the scheme to other Members who may be interested in taking it up.

Secondly, it was a real delight to give my constituent Evie Skinner a tour of Parliament earlier this week and to congratulate her in person for her well-deserved win in the Month of the Military Child poetry and art competition, set up by the excellent charity Never Such Innocence. Evie, who has a parent serving in our armed forces, should be really proud of her art piece on the theme of “Memories”, and I hope she and her family enjoyed their time in Westminster.

Finally, this morning, I was pleased to welcome to Parliament several members of the Battlefield Co-ordination Detachment with their associated ground liaison officers, who are based with 1 (Fighter) Squadron at RAF Lossiemouth. The group was led by Lieutenant Colonel Gee Jenner and Captain Ant Butler, who, alongside their colleagues, are developing their understanding of the role of Parliament and the interaction between Parliament and our military services. Achieving that mutual learning is as important to the military as it is to parliamentarians.

It is vital that we continue to support and celebrate the dedication and commitment of our armed forces, and Armed Forces Day affords us the opportunity to do just that.

2.49 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I associate myself with the Minister's opening words.

It is a privilege to speak in this debate as both a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme and the proud Member of Parliament for Portsmouth North, the home of the Royal Navy and a community with deep historic ties to our armed forces. However, for me, this debate is not just about duty—it is personal. I have a son currently serving, as well as several cousins and, indeed, a grandad who wear and wore their uniforms with pride. Like those in so many military families, I know both the pride and sacrifice that service life brings. I have proudly stood on the shoreline waving off ships as they sail out of my city and sail back in—and yes, it is emotional. I thank the Minister for joining me last month as we waved loved ones off on the Prince of Wales. I will be returning again next month.

This Armed Forces Week, we honour not just those in uniform—regulars, reserves and veterans—but the families who stand behind them. Our armed forces are the backbone of our national security, and they are the very best of us. I want to make special mention of the 14th and 15th Battalions and the 16th (Reserve) Battalion, more fondly known in my city as the “Pompey Pals”, and to remember the more than 1,400 who have lost their lives, many going over the top in the battle of the Somme on 3 September 1916. A tribute to the armed forces veterans who did not survive can be found at my football club; their names also adorned our football shirts one season.

After years of neglect and underfunding, I am proud that this Labour Government are turning the page. We delivered the largest pay rise in more than 20 years for

our armed forces and, as we heard from the Minister, we are increasing recruitment and have committed £1.5 billion more for military accommodation, tackling years of decay and poor conditions that too many forces families have had to endure. I am proud to have brought the Minister for Veterans and People to Portsmouth to meet residents and armed forces families and to see what can be done with accommodation, and I look forward to this Government changing homes for the better.

We must also look to the future and at boosting the cadet forces, which I am pleased we are looking to increase by 30% by 2030, opening doors to 42,000 more young people from every background to develop the skills, discipline and confidence that service life can bring. I want to mention the Royal Navy Cadets, Royal Marine Cadets, Sea Cadets, Army Cadet Force, Air Cadets and Combined Cadet Force, as well as the teachers at City of Portsmouth college who teach the uniformed protective services BTEC levels 2 and 3, and who do a great job showing our young people that there can be a life in the military.

To ensure those who have served are not forgotten, we are launching Valour, a £50 million programme creating a nationwide network of veteran support centres. I urge Portsmouth city council to sign up to and wholeheartedly embrace this programme, as we have veterans who deserve and need our support. I also look forward to putting the covenant into law and promoting this service to our armed forces and their families, many of whom do not know it exists, so that we can follow best practice across the country and deliver for our people.

We proudly commemorated VE Day in Portsmouth, where it was fantastic to join the residents of Knox Road at their street party. I look forward to joining many other street parties on VJ Day in August.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): We owe a huge debt of thanks to the whole of the world war two generation, but I would like to pay special tribute to a remarkable local hero from my constituency, Jack Dark, the last surviving member of the Pathfinder squadron. The Pathfinders played a crucial role in world war two, flying ahead of bomber formations to mark targets for attack. To say it was a tough mission is an understatement: Pathfinder crews survived for an average of just six weeks. Against all the odds, Jack will celebrate his 102nd birthday on 11 August—an extraordinary milestone that speaks to his incredible spirit and determination. I am very much looking forward to meeting Jack in person tomorrow, and I hope the hon. Lady will agree that his story is a powerful reminder of the bravery and resilience of all our armed forces.

Amanda Martin: I thank the hon. Member for that wonderful intervention and send my best wishes to Jack for his birthday. In remembering that, I would also like to remember John Jenkins—one of our very own veterans from Portsmouth.

In Portsmouth, we also proudly celebrated Armed Forces Day last Saturday, honouring the service and sacrifice of our military community with events across the city. It is a day that I have attended since I was a kid, and it shows our city at its very best. On Monday, we raised the armed forces flag—a visible sign of our respect and support for those who serve and have served—but in my city the armed forces are remembered every day, not just on one day.

[Amanda Martin]

I also want to pay tribute to the local charities, veterans' organisations and community groups in Portsmouth, which work year round to support our armed forces communities. Their dedication and compassion make a real difference. It has been a pleasure to work with them since coming to this place on behalf of my constituents, veterans and their families, and I have been proud to host many of them in this place.

Let us use this week not just to show gratitude, but to rebuild the bond between society and those who serve, and to ensure that our armed forces community is properly respected, supported and championed. Let us also use it to say thank you: to my Olly, to Kate, to Craig, to Kirstin, to Mark and to Jonty, who is currently away on the Prince of Wales—and, indeed, to all who serve and have served. Whether they are serving now, have served or are supporting from home, they all deserve nothing less than our full commitment on their return.

2.55 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I welcome the Minister's opening speech; as a member of the Defence Committee, I look forward to scrutinising the detail of his remarks.

I wish to say a brief word of thanks to the Royal Marines Association, the Royal British Legion, SSAFA, the Veterans Charity and many others that all do good work in my constituency of North Devon, which is home to more than 4,800 veterans across more than 11% of the households. Obviously, North Devon is also home to the Royal Marines Barracks Chivenor and the Commando Logistic Regiment, and has the Royal Marines, the Navy and the Army all stationed there.

Back in January, I spent a day with a wonderful organisation called the Root Cause Project—a community of veterans and serving personnel who meet regularly around the camp fire in the great outdoors of North Devon to look out for each other and to talk. Their message is simple: being able to talk to people with shared life experience is vital to those who have served in uniform, and is good for their mental health.

I know from my time working for SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity, just how important that support structure is. When I left the Royal Air Force in the 1990s, many veterans still found the experience of being out of uniform not just strange but very isolating. I hope that Armed Forces Week continues to bolster our forces community, and shows that we all appreciate the service of those who keep us safe.

Recently, I visited the British Normandy Memorial with fellow parliamentarians, including some in the Chamber today, to lay wreaths in memory of those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. It was a truly moving experience. Officially opened on 6 June 2021 by His Majesty the King as royal patron of the Normandy Memorial Trust, the memorial stands as a powerful tribute to the 22,442 servicemen and women under British command, who lost their lives on D-day and throughout the battle of Normandy in the summer of 1944. I was extremely honoured to meet a veteran of the D-day landings who had just turned 100 years old. He told me that, on that day, he had landed on the beach seven times. When I asked him why, he said it was because he was the pilot of one of the crafts. I thanked him for his service and he recited some memories from that momentous day.

Walking among the stone inscriptions, I was struck by how the memorial brings together the names of individuals from over 30 different countries, all united in sacrifice. Set on a hillside overlooking Gold beach, the site offers a poignant reminder of the scale and diversity of those who fought and fell. That day certainly put a large lump in my throat, just as every remembrance service does.

We recognise that dedication to duty this Armed Forces Week. Most importantly, I hope that veterans and serving personnel know that a support structure is there for them and that they will never be alone.

3 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks, and I thank colleagues across the Chamber for coming together to commemorate and celebrate the brave men and women who keep us safe.

Before I begin, I note that a Westminster Hall debate was due to take place at around the same time today on the RAF Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, whose intelligence-gathering work of taking a staggering 26 million photographs was vital to the war effort. These men, often unarmed, operated at extreme risk, with a tragic 48% fatality rate. Their bravery and sacrifice was instrumental to our victory. I hope to contribute to that debate when it takes place so that we can rightly honour their role in protecting our freedom.

On Armed Forces Day, I want to focus on the women and men currently protecting our country. Many colleagues have spoken about the uncertain global times that we face. These challenges serve only to sharpen our focus and strengthen our resolve to honour our armed forces.

I have previously shared with the House that while I grew up knowing that my grandfather and great-grandfather had served in the war, I rarely saw their contributions recognised. Armed Forces Day is about changing that. It is about raising the flag for all those on active duty, thanking them for their service, and honouring their decision to put themselves in harm's way for the rest of us. I take this opportunity to thank the men and women of Ilford whose names are etched in Memorial Hall, which used to be the entrance to the maternity unit of King George hospital in Newbury Park. It is a wonderful idea that they gave their lives so that babies could be born in freedom.

Armed Forces Day is about recognising our armed forces who come from every walk of life and from diverse faiths and backgrounds. Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, black, white and Asian—each individual making an incredible contribution to our collective security. If we are serious about supporting our armed forces, we must do more than hold debates to observe commemorative days. We must improve the experience of those serving now, so I am proud of the Prime Minister's announcement of increased funding today. Improved experience means supporting efforts to make the military more inclusive, more accessible and more responsive to the needs of its personnel.

Groups such as the Defence Sikh Network are doing just that by raising the voices of Sikhs in service and working to ensure that they can serve with dignity and authenticity. In 2022, the Defence Sikh Network spearheaded the introduction of a waterproof, tearproof, camouflage copy of the Nitnem Gutka—a sacred Sikh prayer book—for use in tactical environments. This

initiative revived a tradition first seen in world war one, when Sikh soldiers who served under the British Indian Army carried their scriptures with them into battle. For many Sikhs, their decision to join the military is rooted in their faith—in the Sikh principle of protecting those more vulnerable than them. The introduction of these Gutke helped serving Sikhs to maintain the connection between their faith and their duty.

It was not always like that. What comes to mind is the story of a young Oxford graduate, Hardit Singh Malik, in 1916. He was denied entry into the British Royal Flying Corps; he was going to join the French, until his tutor intervened and got him a special dispensation. He flew with great distinction. He fought against the Red Baron and, coming back, survived for 40 miles at low altitude with two bullets in his leg, his plane being shot at more than 400 times. As he himself said,

“My pursuers just did not have the bullet with my name on it.”

These small but meaningful initiatives about the Gutka are made not just on Armed Forces Day but on ordinary days, demonstrating respect for those who serve. On Armed Forces Day, we commemorate the men and women whom we may not see daily—the ones behind the scenes who work tirelessly to keep us safe, like the people in the Plessey factory in Ilford in world war two. We honour those whose names are not always remembered, whose records are lost, like those of the men of the RAF Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, and we reaffirm our commitment to implementing real change. From larger-scale policy initiatives to smaller cultural initiatives, we must make our forces stronger and more inclusive.

3.6 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Rather fittingly, this debate comes in the shadow of the NATO summit at The Hague yesterday, with its headline pledge for defence spending to reach 5% of GDP by the midpoint of the next decade. I echo remarks from across the House about how we live in an increasingly volatile world—perhaps more volatile and more unpredictable than at any other point in the post-1945 era of *pax Europaea* and *pax Americana*.

We see the bloodiest conflict on European soil since the second world war and death and devastation in the middle east and across Africa, Asia and beyond. In comfort on civvy street, we are perhaps sometimes guilty of forgetting how fragile our freedoms and democracy are, and we forget the threats posed to them. Our values are not guaranteed; they have to be fought for, and we must be reminded of that. We live in an age that is the historical exception, not the norm. Our way of life at home depends on our strength to defend it and how we project ourselves abroad.

We recently celebrated the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe. Just a few generations back, still within the memories of many, this country was engaged in a fight for its very life and survival. We would do well to remember that always. Thankfully, the brave men and women who serve today need no such reminder.

I come from a military family. My late father served in the Royal Naval Reserve. Two of my three brothers have had long careers in His Majesty's armed forces. Ben is a brigadier in what I still insist on calling the Black Watch. As officer command in Scotland when the late Queen died, he was in charge of making sure that

everything went smoothly; I cannot tell you how proud I was of my baby brother Ben when it did. Johnny, now retired, was a lieutenant colonel in the Grenadier Guards. They have dedicated their lives to the service of our country. I assure everybody that their example, and that of every soldier, sailor and airperson, reinforces my knowledge that our military remains in the best of hands. I say, perhaps with a shred of bias, that Britain's armed forces are still the finest in the world.

I speak with additional pride about my constituency of Tiverton and Minehead, which is home to 4,577 veterans. It is a proud part of the country with a strong military tradition. I take this opportunity to salute the fantastic presence of the Royal British Legion and other veteran organisations in my patch, particularly the wonderful Dunkirk Memorial House at the foot of the Quantock hills and the armed forces breakfast clubs in Minehead and Bishops Lydeard, which provide a sense of community.

Having done lots of pro bono work with the Royal British Legion in a previous life, particularly on PTSD and hearing loss, this is a topic very close to my heart. I am delighted to hear the Minister announce that the armed forces covenant will be included in legislation. It is a national obligation to look after those who have served us. Before I was elected, I had to try and help young RAF veteran Owein and his family, including his young daughter, Autumn, who had just been diagnosed with autism. They had become homeless. If only that legislation had been in place then. I know that my colleague, Councillor Claudette Harrower, who is responsible for the covenant at Mid Devon district council, will endeavour to make sure that the very best has been done. The armed forces covenant is not charity; it is justice.

We must be alive to the recruitment crisis currently bedevilling our armed forces. We must close that gap. I fear, however, that we are not overly helping ourselves in this regard. Allow me to draw attention to the plight of a young constituent of mine, which I suspect is a frustratingly similar story to that of a number of young people up and down the country. In February 2024, she gave up the chance to study A-levels to attend the Lichfield assessment centre, where, in October 2024, she passed the assessment with scores that were exemplary and such that she was accepted into the Intelligence Corps. However, by June of this year—some 16 months later—she still has not been given a start date, and just receives occasional holding communications from military authorities. Meanwhile, she gets by with a series of menial part-time jobs, but has seemingly been left in the lurch by her Army recruiters.

I am not using her name because she has asked me not to, but I will give the Minister her details later in the hope that we can process this matter sooner rather than later. Young people like my constituent, who are prepared to serve their country and so represent the best of their generation, deserve better. Will the Minister comment on that privately? Will the Minister also commit to publishing detailed targets for processing applications, allocating sufficient personnel to the recruitment pipeline and providing all successful candidates with a concrete start date within a reasonable time period?

I want to put on the record that the Veterans Minister was known as a legend when he served in the Royal Marines and, to me, he remains a legend. I can send him an email and receive his response within 48 hours, which is enormously helpful to my constituents, who are the people I serve.

[Rachel Gilmour]

In finishing, I refer to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who said that he was a patriot, but not a nationalist. As I finish my speech, I reiterate his words: I speak as a proud patriot, but never, ever a nationalist.

3.13 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): It is both a pleasure and a privilege to close today's excellent debate on Armed Forces Day. I pay tribute to colleagues across the House for their thoughtful and passionate contributions. I rise on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition to express our sincere thanks to all those who serve and have served in our armed forces—regulars, reservists, veterans and cadets—and to the families who support them every step of the way.

Armed Forces Week, which began on Monday and culminates this Saturday, 28 June, with Armed Forces Day, is a national moment to say one thing clearly and collectively: thank you. Thank you to those defending the UK and our interests around the world. Our armed forces represent the very best of our country: committed, courageous and professional. They work tirelessly, often in the most challenging conditions, to keep us safe and uphold the values that we share. Today's debate has been particularly powerful because of the personal reflections shared by so many right hon. and hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) represents a strong military constituency—one in 20 serves, or has served, in the military. Having watched the hon. Gentleman in defence debates, it is clear to me that he is a passionate advocate for his constituency, with strong military links. He talked about the Royal Military Police, a regiment that plays a vital role that we need to hear more about. I enjoyed hearing about the airborne police officer unit—an interesting skillset that we could potentially see in the Met. He also talked powerfully about his constituents Kate and Rachel, veterans who faced internal adversity because of their gender and sexuality. As he said, rightly, courage does not know any gender or sexuality.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) talked strongly about the skills that military people bring to civilian life. Having seen many veterans in my constituency make that transition, I know how many skills they bring. He advocated for more support for them to make that transition, and mentioned the real need for the armed forces covenant to be strengthened. I was glad to hear about the reception he held here recently in support of the covenant, and it would be good to support him in future such endeavours. We must ensure that the sacrifices made by our service personnel are never met with silence, as he says, but with real lasting commitment and action.

I agree with my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) that gratitude for service is not enough on its own. Only a quarter of veterans believe that service is valued, and I completely agree that that needs to change. He spoke powerfully about Northern Ireland veterans, especially the Special Air Service, a regiment in which he served. He spoke about the injustice that group of special forces soldiers, and others in the military, face from the opening up of domestic legal frameworks. Those veterans were in battles that were fought under orders, under the

yellow card legal system and under the view of the Royal Military Police. There were strong legal frameworks surrounding those operations, and my right hon. Friend made the point that those veterans joined up and served our country, but the view is now that they can be prosecuted in later life. That is not right, and I look forward to the issue being debated later this month and, I hope, overturned. The petition on the subject is currently live, and there has been a significant uptick in the numbers signing it in the last few hours.

The hon. Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) made remarks about her personal connection to the armed forces, and her husband's service in the reserves. It was interesting to hear about the 216 Royal Artillery regiment in her constituency and her link to the Royal British Legion. She made a powerful case for greater support for training, and I look forward to the Minister's response to it. I also echo her support for expanding the cadet programme. I spent many happy years in the air cadets, and I see what value they bring to society and as a pathway for people to join the military. I align myself with her comments.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) was, as ever, a strong advocate and champion for the military units in his constituency. We regularly hear him calling for more support. He served the UK in operations during the global war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, and he knows first hand the challenges that come from the evolution of war and the need for kit to keep pace with the evolution of threats. As he rightly said, no plan survives first contact with the enemy, and those words remain as true today as they have ever been. It is crucial that we not only learn the lessons of modern conflicts, but ensure that our armed forces retain a broad range of capabilities to meet the demands of the evolving environments that we may be involved with in the coming years. My hon. Friend also made the fair and timely observation that making our armed forces work on a hot Saturday in late June is perhaps not the best way to honour them.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) rightly highlighted the volunteers who work tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that our armed forces are commemorated properly. They often miss out on enjoying the events themselves, so I hope that they will find time to relax and enjoy some sunshine with their families. We thank all of them and their grassroots groups for their vital support for these commemorations. She also shared a moving story about her great-aunt and mother, which touched many of us in the Chamber. They welcomed Polish servicemen into their home and they became part of their family nearly 50 years ago, demonstrating how service personnel become deeply woven into our communities and lives. As always, I am sure the Red Arrows will deliver a magnificent display over Cleethorpes this weekend. I hope that she manages to enjoy an ice cream—and hopefully a few beers, too—with the Secretary of State when he is in her constituency this weekend.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) is the proud mother of serving Royal Navy sailor, Olly, whom she has spoken about many times. She represents a city with a high number of service personnel and veterans—one of the highest in the country—and one of the homes of the Royal Navy. I say that as a Devon MP, and standing opposite the Minister, who

represents Devonport. She also raised an interesting point around the protective services BTEC course. I have seen the value of that at first hand in my constituency at Bicton college, and it is interesting to see young people flourish in that environment. Again, just like the cadets, it provides a strong pathway for those who want to go into the military or other protective services.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome), again, represents a strong military constituency—4,800 veterans and 11% of households. He has long been a proud advocate for the Royal Marines, with the Commando Logistic Regiment in his constituency. I was impressed to hear about the work he has done with SSAFA, the armed forces charity. It was enjoyable and interesting to go away with him recently on the trip he spoke about to Normandy to see the D-day commemoration. It was particularly poignant to meet the D-day veteran Norman Ashford, who is 100 years old. He was a Royal Marine and, as the hon. Member said, made countless trips up and down on to the beaches that day. I had a great deal of respect for him when I met him and heard his stories.

The hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) spoke about the RAF photographic units—tales of derring-do. It is a unit that I have enjoyed learning about as the campaign has been growing, and I look forward to that debate being rescheduled and brought back to the House. He made some interesting points about the contributions of people from all over the world, including the Commonwealth, to our armed forces, and the need to celebrate them this Armed Forces Day. It was interesting to hear about Hardit Malik, the first Indian fighter pilot in world war one with the Royal Flying Corps, fighting against the famous German Red Baron.

Lastly, my near neighbour in the south-west, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), has a strong military family, and I have spoken to her many times about her brother's service. She raises an interesting and important point about the pathway for people who want to join the military. She talked about her constituent trying to join the Intelligence Corps and the waiting time to join being far too long. It would be interesting to discuss whether something can be done to provide concrete start dates.

I, too, speak from personal experience. I am proud to have served in the Royal Marines, and after leaving regular service a decade ago, I was fortunate to continue as a Royal Marine reservist with the Royal Navy parachute display team. It was—to say the least—one of the more unconventional side-gigs in public service, giving me a literal bird's eye view of Armed Forces Day celebrations. Over several years, I had the privilege of parachuting into national Armed Forces Day events in Guildford, Cleethorpes and Llandudno. From thousands of feet above, seeing the crowds gathered to show their support was genuinely humbling. Although I will admit that, at that height, my primary concern was not so much national pride as avoiding crash-landing into someone's picnic.

Those kinds of events are not just pageantry, as Members from across the House have said today; they are powerful tools for engagement and recruitment. I have vivid childhood memories of attending large air shows and other military displays, but one personal favourite, and one that I am sure many hon. Members attended, was the royal tournament at Earl's Court here

in London. The Navy's high-octane field gun competition and the Royal Signals' famous White Helmets motorcycle display team made a lasting impression on me, and without doubt helped shape my decision to join the military.

As defence spending rises, and as difficult choices are made to support that increase, it will be more important than ever to showcase our armed forces and their capabilities. That visibility ensures public understanding and accountability for where taxpayers' money is spent.

There is also a broader point. As the national security strategy outlined this week, the threats we face are serious. The possibility of a hostile attack on the UK, which for many decades has been seen as unimaginable, is now again within the realm of possibility. A time may come when we must once more defend the things that we hold dear. We must therefore forge a renewed relationship with defence—not seeing it just as a line in the Budget, but recognising it as a fundamental pillar of our national security and resilience.

Armed Forces Day is about more than capability; it is about morale. It is about recognising the extraordinary service of our sailors, soldiers and aviators. Public support matters, as it lifts spirits, strengthens bonds and reminds those in uniform that their country stands firmly behind them. That support must go further than symbolic gestures, as we have heard repeatedly in today's debate.

The armed forces covenant is a solemn pledge—a year-round commitment from Government, businesses and communities to treat those who serve, and their families, with fairness and respect in everyday life. The message from today's debate is clear: gratitude must be backed up by action on housing, employment and a dignified transition to civilian life. These are responsibilities we all share.

The Government's strategic defence review rightly proposes a whole-of-society approach to national defence. It is welcome, and it is necessary. Defence is not just the task of our armed forces; it is a shared civic responsibility. True resilience relies not only on military capability, but on strong institutions, cohesive communities and national unity.

At the heart of that resilience is trust—a social contract between the nation and those who serve it. We must do all we can to honour that trust, which is why we cannot ignore the serious concerns raised by veterans, especially those who served in Northern Ireland. The strength of feeling in that community is real and justified. My right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington mentioned that in his speech.

I place on record my thanks to the Minister for Veterans and People, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), for his principled support for a judicial review of the Clonoe inquest, and I hope his judgment is actively being sought by his colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office, especially as they reflect on their plans to repeal the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. Our veterans deserve clarity, compassion and fairness.

The strength of the Royal Navy, the British Army and the Royal Air Force lies not just in firepower or training, but in the character of those who serve. Their dedication, discipline and selflessness are a credit to our country. So let us use this Armed Forces Week not only to reflect, but to renew our commitments to serve those

[David Reed]

who serve us, to honour those who have worn the uniform, and to ensure that future generations understand the debt we owe.

We are grateful. We are proud. We will remember them. We will support them. And we will thank them.

3.29 pm

Luke Pollard: Members who had to sit through my opening remarks will be pleased to know that I will not be repeating many of them, but I am keen to pick up on a number of points raised in their speeches, which were so ably summarised by the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed). I thank hon. Members for their contributions. At a time when it is easy to take political pot-shots across the Chamber on serious issues, today's debate has shown that we can come together, cross-party, to support our people, to have a serious debate about the contribution our armed forces make to our national security, and to raise genuine issues of concern with respect and thoughtfulness. Sadly, not as many people will be watching this debate as watch other proceedings in the Chamber, but if did, they would see Parliament working effectively and properly.

Mr Francois: In a bipartisan spirit, perhaps the Minister will allow me to relay a brief apology. I promised the Chair of the Defence Committee that I would explain why he and some of the Committee are not here, when ordinarily they would be. They are on an overseas trip directly related to defence business. It would help keep me honest if the Minister allowed me to place that on the record.

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman certainly does not want to offend the Chair of the Defence Committee, so I am glad that he has had the chance to put that on the record.

What I heard in the debate, and what I hope our forces will have heard if they were listening, was not only support for the men and women who serve, and advocacy for the armed forces as a brilliant career choice, but support for improvement to the transition from military life to civilian roles, and support for those who have served in the past; we heard stories of heroism and courage. That makes for a good debate, and I am pleased that a number of Members were able to pick out elements from the strategic defence review. The Government have adopted all 62 recommendations from Lord George Robertson's report, and we will implement them in full. Further announcements will be made about what we are implementing and how we are taking forward not only the SDR's recommendations, but its spirit.

As we set a path for increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by April 2027, to 3% in the next Parliament, and to 3.5% by 2035, and for spending 1.5% on resilience and homeland defence over in the same period, I hope there will be plenty of opportunity for Members to make the case that increased defence spending can mean spending not just on kit and equipment, but on our people. I expect that to be heard loud and clear across the House, so that when we hear conversations about renewing military accommodation, we know that there is an increased budget to pay for that work, and

when we talk about valuing our people, we know there are above-inflation pay rises for them for the first time in a very long time. That is important.

There is one thing that I will expect to see and hear more about in future debates. We heard lots of mentions of our Army, Navy and Air Force and their traditional roles, but in future debates on the armed forces, I expect that we will hear more mentions of those who work in cyber and the digital defence of our nation. The cyber direct entry pathway that we have opened has been a success, and we look forward to announcing the passing out of the first cohort later this year. The ability for us—the armed forces and people who care about defence—to talk about cyber resilience and protecting our digital infrastructure is just as important as protecting against kinetic and more traditional military threats. Indeed, I expect that in future years there will be more discussion of how we keep our space domain safe.

I am glad that a number of hon. Members were able to talk about their role and participation in the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I am the Minister responsible for that, and I am proud of the way that the scheme has been expanded in the past year. I thank the Armed Forces Parliamentary Trust for its support on that. The scheme is a superb opportunity for parliamentarians who have not served, and for those who have, to experience a different perspective on military life. It allows them to understand what we ask of our people; to listen and learn from them, their deployments and their experiences; and to bring that into the House and improve our work here.

I turn to comments made in the debate. I am glad that the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), talked about the Forcer protocol. Indeed, I expect all Members of the House to ask their chief constables whether their police force is going with that. I undertake to do the same for Devon and Cornwall police, as will many of the other Devon MPs, I imagine. There is a real merit in the protocol, so I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing it to the House's attention.

I am proud to be Plymouth's first ever out MP, and seeing the way that LGBT personnel and veterans are now spoken about in the House fills me with pride. When I was growing up, there were not always the role models or the public debate that enabled folk like me to feel that there was a place in the armed forces for them. The remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) and others were very powerful. He said that courage knows no gender or sexuality, which is absolutely right. We need to build that sentiment into our armed forces as we seek to change the culture, so that everyone is welcome and there is no place for abuse. As we move to warfighting readiness, we need the contribution of people from every background to our armed forces if we are to keep our nation safe.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for talking about the importance of payments to LGBT veterans. The priority order was established by the Minister for Veterans and People. The initial payments have gone to those over 80 and those who are sadly towards the end of their life, so that we can ensure that those payments are made before they leave this place. We have now established the procedure for paying the larger cohort of people who do not fit into that category, and the Minister for Veterans and

People will make further announcements about how we will roll out the payments. We are pleased that the first payments have been made in full to the first cohort.

I agree with the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell that Armed Forces Day is a starting point for serious change. I believe that change started on 4 July last year, but I take her comments in the spirit in which she made them. It is not enough to talk about change; we have to take action. Hopefully, she and Members from across the House will see the strategic defence review being implemented, the increase in defence spending, the increased pay for our forces, and the housing improvement, all of which will contribute to improvement.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm), who spoke about the armed forces covenant being our collective promise, which is exactly right. As we look to put that fully into law, there will need to be a conversation. If I may be cheeky, Madam Deputy Speaker, I point out to right hon. and hon. Members of all parties that questions on our armed forces covenant need not be directed only to the Ministry of Defence. If the covenant is to be effective, we need every Government Department to understand their role in putting the covenant fully into law. The Minister for Veterans and People has been undertaking cross-Government work on that, and I imagine that there will be further such work in due course, as we build towards that legislation.

Mr Francois: In the hope that other Government Departments are listening, the Minister might recall that I said in my remarks that at noon today the Northern Ireland veterans petition had just over 145,000 signatures. I looked a few seconds ago, and the figure is now just shy of 148,000. Perhaps people were inspired by the excellent speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis). Will the Minister convey to his colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office that we do not want to throw our Northern Ireland veterans to the wolves—and clearly, from this petition, neither do the public?

Luke Pollard: I will return to the right hon. Gentleman's speech, so he will not have to wait long for my response, but first I will deal with some other points.

I am grateful for the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) about the national Armed Forces Day event, which I am pleased to see back. She has a passion for the event and is serious about her community. She also has pride in and a close connection to the folk she mentioned—it was a very powerful speech. I am certain that the ice cream will be on the Secretary of State, especially now that he knows he is going to the event, so she should expect plenty of dairy coming her way.

I thank the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter), who spoke about RAF Lossiemouth, the importance of how we base our people and valuing the wider community. I am grateful to him for mentioning HMS Spey; the offshore patrol vessel is doing a superb job in the Indo-Pacific, as is her sister ship HMS Tamar. Their contributions to upholding the international rules-based order and supporting our allies in the region are really important. She is a little ship with a big impact and is really very powerful there, so I am grateful for his comments.

I encourage the hon. Gentleman not to forget the opportunity to talk about resilience spending. He talked about the spending of other Government Departments and councils effectively enabling homeland defence. That is precisely why the spending pledge agreed at the NATO summit was that by 2035, 1.5% of GDP should be spent on homeland defence and other activities that bolster our resilience as a nation. I think he has a strong case to argue on that. NATO will shortly publish the full criteria, setting out what money will come into that, but I believe that the examples he gave are good ones to use in arguing his case, so I encourage him to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) and I did indeed wave off HMS Prince of Wales when she left for her deployment to the Indo-Pacific. That was a good opportunity to meet members of her community in Portsmouth. The carrier and the carrier strike group include people from all parts of our country, who are all sailing together, alongside many of our allies, including our Norwegian friends, who have a frigate sailing on the entire deployment. When we celebrate the contribution of our armed forces, let us remember the contribution of our allies to keeping us safe today and in the past.

I am very grateful for the intervention from the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne), who spoke about Jack Dark's 102nd birthday. I am also grateful for the remarks from the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome), who spoke about Norman Ashford, a D-day veteran. It is really important that we value and take extra care of those final few folks from the second world war. We must ensure that we capture their stories and retell them, so that they are not forgotten. I am grateful for the contributions of all of them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) correctly raised the issue of the RAF photographic reconnaissance aircraft. I can report that the Minister for Veterans has indeed met those involved in the campaign, as I suspect nearly every single person in the House has. If there were a public affairs award for best lobbying campaign, this campaign would certainly deserve it. I understand that progress is being made, and that the campaign group met Westminster city council to discuss the issue. The cost of what is being suggested would need to be met by public subscription, and I have no doubt that it would be, so I expect positive progress. There is strong support for recognition of the bravery of the people who undertook these roles in the second world war, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I am also grateful to him for giving examples of service personnel who, in recollections of wartime stories, do not always get the attention that they deserve, including those from the Sikh community, who he spoke about.

It is good to have three Front-Bench speakers from Devon; that does not always happen in this place. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), who spoke about the contribution that her family made. On the issue of the time of flight, as it is referred to in the Ministry of Defence, that is the time from signing up to attending a training establishment. We inherited a situation in which that time was over a year for some of our services, and that is not acceptable. In July last year, we were losing 84% of people in the process, not because of medical problems or eligibility issues around nationality or criminal records, but simply because the process took too long. That is not acceptable.

[*Luke Pollard*]

I am strongly against the criticism made that our younger generation do not want to serve our nation, because that is not true. Last year, 165,000 people tried to join the British Army, and we hired 9,500 at the end. We lost the vast majority because the process is too long and slow. That is why we are reducing the time of flight. I am very happy to look into the casework matter that the hon. Lady raised if she writes to me. The “10 and 30” policy that I mentioned in my opening remarks should certainly make a difference when rolled out fully across all three services. I will certainly try to discourage the Minister for Veterans and People from reading the transcript of this debate; being regarded as a legend will no doubt boost his humbleness.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East for his concluding remarks, and for his story of nearly crash-landing in someone’s picnic. He did not tell the end of that story, but as he is here in one piece, let us assume that it all went well. I am also grateful for the way in which he summarised the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) raised valid questions from 216 Battery about training levels. We have inherited a situation in which training—for both regular and reserve forces—was often the first casualty of trying to manage in-year budget pressures over a number of years. We are very aware of that within the Ministry of Defence. We are conscious that the increase in defence spend could, in part, make a difference to that, but as we have a number of challenges to deal with, we need to look at the best way of delivering increased training—particularly adventurous training, which is what many of our forces want. I would be very happy to have a further conversation with my hon. Friend, so that she can raise with me the particulars of those issues.

The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), between making his speech and coming back, has changed his tie to look more like mine—I am very grateful for that fashion change. His remarks, particularly about the contribution of the US air force bases in his constituency, were a good reminder of the close friendship we have. I was at the US embassy earlier today as part of a conference organised by the Council on Geostrategy, looking at our transatlantic alliance. Our military-to-military co-operation underscores the value of our relationship with our US friends, and I know that America really does value the bases in the UK that it is able to operate from.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Huntingdon that our armed forces personnel should be paid properly, housed properly, posted sympathetically and granted stability. That is the intent of many of the changes we are making. On the stability point, I am thinking in particular about where we are with British Army deployments, because Air Force and Navy personnel generally have greater stability than their compatriots in the Army. We are aware of that issue and are looking at it, but I am certain that the hon. Member will be sending me lots of parliamentary questions—possibly before I have even sat down.

Let me turn to the very serious issue raised by the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), who spoke about Northern Ireland veterans. He will know—because we have spoken about it a number

of times, and he has also spoken with the Secretary of State and the Minister for Veterans—that we on the Government Benches feel very strongly that we need to support our veterans. We are seeking to navigate through that process at the moment. The debate on the petition mentioned by a number of Members will take place on 14 July. I welcome that debate, which will be an opportunity to make the case for those people who served our nation in support of peace in Northern Ireland.

There is more work to be done in this area. After the right hon. Gentleman made his speech, I read the article in the *Daily Mail* about the launch of the campaign that he referenced. It is certainly true that the Government seek to repeal the current Northern Ireland legacy Act, but what one has to get to the penultimate paragraph of the article to read is that we intend to replace it as well. The right hon. Gentleman chose his wording carefully about how that replacement needs to work.

The current Act is unlawful—it has been found to be so in a number of courts—and it has not prevented some of the things we are seeing at the moment, so we have to find a way forward in this area. The Northern Ireland Office is looking at it at the moment, and we in the Ministry of Defence continue to have conversations with our NIO colleagues—indeed, I think that was the point that the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, was making in his intervention—and we will continue to do so.

Chris McDonald: Coming, as I do, from a constituency in the north-east, let me say that members of our community, of course, served in Northern Ireland for many years, so the issue of Northern Ireland veterans is just as important to those of us on the Government Benches as it is across the whole House. I was in the House on 21 May when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that the Government came into office committed to remedying the failure of the legacy Act. That gave great assurance to me, and I am sure it gave great assurance to veterans in my constituency. Does the Minister agree with the Secretary of State’s comments?

Luke Pollard: I entirely agree—there is something that is not right, and it needs to be resolved. I do not doubt the passion that Opposition Members, and indeed those on the Government Benches, feel about this issue. I share that passion. We need to find a solution to this issue that can provide peace of mind as well as the ability to address community concerns. There is a path through, but we need to go carefully to make sure that we are cognisant of all the strong views, but I am certain that will happen. I am also certain that we will continue our conversations outside the Chamber as we work with Northern Ireland Office colleagues, who have the lead in this policy space. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington for raising the issue in this debate.

This has been a good debate for Armed Forces Day. Support comes not just from the Members who can speak in this debate; I am conscious that a number of Members present have been unable to speak, due to the vagaries of parliamentary procedure, including my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke (Pamela Nash), who sits behind me as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State. She is attending Armed Forces Day events at the Motherwell United

Services club on Saturday. My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen) was the Whip on the Government Benches earlier, and I am conscious that there are Whips on both sides of the House who might not be able to contribute verbally, but who I am certain will be supporting Armed Forces Day events in their constituencies across the country.

We need to ensure that the warm words and well-crafted speeches we have heard today are put into action all year round. It is not enough to have a day where we celebrate our armed forces; we need to recognise their service each and every day. As the nation sees an increasingly uncertain and dangerous world on their TV screens and on their phones, it is the men and women of our armed forces who are at the pointy end of the defence of our nation, but we can all do something to increase the resilience of our defence.

If everyone in the House updated the operating systems on their computers and phones, Britain would be more cyber-secure than it was beforehand. We all can do something. In this place in particular, Members of Parliament from all parts of the House can continue to make the case for our people, for defence families, for investment, for better pay and for better equipment for our forces. That is this Government's intent, and from the sentiments I have heard from all parts of the House today, we can see that has cross-party support. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions, and I wish everyone a successful Armed Forces Day on Saturday.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Armed Forces Day.

Floating Solar Panels

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)

3.52 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I am delighted to see the House so full for this Adjournment debate. I want hon. Members who are staying to remember who was here. Indeed, people in the Public Gallery might wish to make a note in their diary, too, because I hope that I will in some way blow the House's mind with what I am about to say and sow a seed that will grow into something fantastic. What we are here to discuss is floating solar.

Members will know that I am the Member of Parliament for Spelthorne. I feel obliged to remind the House on regular occasions that Spelthorne is not in Lancashire or in Lincolnshire. It is everything south of Heathrow until one gets to the River Thames. Hon. Members from around the House know my constituency well, because it is what they see when they take off from or land at Heathrow airport.

I was selected as the candidate for Spelthorne four days into the general election campaign. Having spent 25 years in the Army, obviously I love a map. There is a very good saying, "If you don't understand what is going on, get a bigger map." When I looked at a map of Spelthorne, I was struck by these four massive blocks of blue, so I looked into them. They are four raised reservoirs, which hold half of London's drinking water. Being a practical person, I first thought to myself, "Well, there are not many votes there!" Secondly, I thought, "I cannot really build any houses there." Spelthorne is 67% green belt and water, and a large chunk of the rest of it is floodplain, so it is difficult to know what we might do to meet our housing targets; people get crammed into the small islands where development can happen.

I was determined, though, to find some way to utilise the 2,000 acres of raised reservoir in my Spelthorne constituency. I looked into it a little further, and came upon the concept of floating solar. This is a terribly simple concept: simply take solar panels, attach them to plastic floats, anchor those floats to the bottom of the reservoir, and string some wires to take an alternating current from the floating solar panels. The clever bits, in terms of intellectual property, are the anchors—because, as I am sure hon. Members know, the depth of reservoirs tends to vary by about 1 metre from time to time. Equally, reservoirs are drained and reassessed on a rolling cycle of about 20 years.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for allowing me to intervene. We are told that there is nothing new under the sun, but he is describing something that ticks both boxes—it is quite remarkable. I learned much about reservoirs from playing by the side of the scenic Penwhirn reservoir, outside my home town of Stranraer. I also learned about them in geography classes at Stranraer academy, and it strikes me that one of the reasons that reservoir levels rise and fall is to do with evaporation, and water is obviously a precious resource. Does covering reservoirs help to combat evaporation?

Lincoln Jopp: My hon. Friend pre-empted one of the many benefits of floating solar that I will highlight to the House. He remembers his physics higher well,

[*Lincoln Jopp*]

because the placing of floating solar reduces evaporation from the body that is covered by 70%. Given that the vast majority of the water in our reservoirs is lost through evaporation every year, we will save a great deal more water if the Government decide to pursue this technology at a grand scale.

Part of my coming here today is to speak to two large constituencies within this House. There are 543 constituencies that contain reservoirs or man-made water sources. Similarly, countless Members from across the House have very difficult decisions to make about putting solar farms on good agricultural land. Essentially, what has happened is that the whole discussion in this area has become a zero-sum game. It is a battle between food security and energy security, and there has seemed to be no way of unpicking that—until now.

Globally, floating solar has been put to practical application at large scale in China, India and Vietnam. The UK was formerly a leader in this space, because on the Queen Elizabeth II reservoir in 2016, a grand technology demonstrator was put on and plugged in, and it has been banging out 6.3 MW into Thames Water's water treatment facility ever since. That is enough to power 2,000 homes. Given that floating solar covers less than 10% of that reservoir, I am sure that hon. Members can see the vast potential.

I want to talk about some of the benefits of floating solar, because they are legion. First, as hon. Members will have worked out already, there is the removal of the opportunity cost of putting floating solar panels on grade A agricultural land. If we do not have to put them all over Lincolnshire and we can put them on reservoirs, that land can be used for growing food.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): My hon. and gallant Friend is talking about the use of prime agricultural land, and food security is part of national security, as is energy security and, indeed, water security. However, there is a huge trend of prime agricultural land being devoted to solar plants, including in my constituency of Epping Forest, where a new plan is about to go in for a 237-acre plot between Thornwood and Epping Upland. He is articulating alternatives for the placing of solar panels, and there are plenty of such places up and down the land—brownfield sites, reservoirs, railway sidings, rooftops of agricultural buildings—so does he agree that we must protect prime farmland and the green belt, and make sure that solar panels go in the right places?

Lincoln Jopp: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I hope we are going to give hope across the House and therefore across the country that this alternative solution to putting solar panels on grade A agricultural land is, to a certain extent, an answer to a maiden's prayers. Not only does floating solar remove the opportunity costs of putting it on agricultural land, but one of its beauties is that it is twice as efficient as a land-based system. Land-based systems warm up because they are on the land, and as they warm up they become less efficient, whereas floating solar panels, because of the evaporative effect on the underside, remain automatically cool and 100% efficient throughout a sunny day.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not here, unusually, perhaps I can fill in for him. We have

already heard from one of my Essex colleagues, my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), about the controversy in Essex over a number of solar farm developments on land. Before the 2010 boundary changes, I had a very large reservoir in my constituency at West Hanningfield, which would be ideal for the technology my hon. and gallant Friend is suggesting. Does he not believe that many hundreds of other reservoirs across the country would be so suited?

Lincoln Jopp: I do, indeed. I was not 100% sure which Minister would respond to this debate, so I have had only the briefest of moments to look at the lake in Burgess park in the Minister's Peckham constituency to see whether that may be suitable for floating solar.

We have talked about the opportunity costs and about doubling efficiency. I am sure hon. Members will have worked this out, but the 2,000 acres of reservoir in my Spelthorne constituency are raised, which means no one can see the top of them unless they are flying off to Torremolinos or landing from Dubai. Therefore, there would be none of the visual vandalism that people object to so much, and the carpeting of our beautiful country in solar panels would go away too.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I must declare that I share an office with my hon. and gallant Friend, so I know an awful lot about floating solar because he is so passionate about it. As a result, I would point out that Grafham water in my Huntingdon constituency is the eighth largest reservoir in the country by volume and the third biggest by area. It is also a raised reservoir, but, ironically, it is surrounded by solar panels to generate electricity that we can see from the ground. He obviously agrees with me that it would be a fantastic idea to use that enormous stretch of water for some floating solar.

Lincoln Jopp: I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend for joining this merry band of evangelists for floating solar, and for seeking to get in on the ground floor with the inclusion of the reservoir in his constituency. Within minutes, he is immediately seeing the opportunity, and I congratulate him on that.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I am really happy to join this debate, which is not only amusing, but very educational. For me, it is a matter of great concern for this country to conserve the water supply we have. Does the hon. Member therefore agree with me that floating solar stops the evaporation of water because it avoids direct sunlight hitting the water, and that it also conserves water?

Lincoln Jopp: The hon. Member, with whom I serve on the Defence Committee, makes a very important point about future-proofing the United Kingdom's water supply from increased temperatures. In Australia, I understand that reservoirs are being covered at great expense to reduce evaporation. He might know that where floating solar panels exist, they reduce evaporation by 70. In the case of the Queen Elizabeth II reservoir, that is 100 tonnes of water a day. It is absolutely extraordinary.

I know Members are thinking, "Well, Lincoln, it couldn't get any better," but I have to tell the House that there are still some further benefits. [HON. MEMBERS:

“More!”] Where reservoirs are owned by water companies and the water companies want to use the electricity themselves, there is no requirement for planning permission. When we consider the turmoil that land-based systems have to go through over many, many years, and the paroxysms the nation puts itself through before it puts in a land-based system, we should note that floating solar can be deployed within a few weeks.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): This is another issue where the Conservatives can perhaps give more information to those on the Government Benches. We have real issues in many parts of rural Britain with the energy infrastructure that has to go alongside solar farms—for example, the massive megapylons in East Anglia. If the energy can be used onsite or if there is existing energy infrastructure, as there often is around reservoirs due to hydro and other factors, that is another great reason why floating solar is a solution that everyone can get on board with.

Lincoln Jopp: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. The Queen Mary reservoir in my constituency has a plug-in point to the national grid at one end of it. The ability to minimise the disruption that is caused by placing solar farms away from where the power is needed is certainly a consideration that plays into this.

Hon. Members will think, “Well, that must be his list complete. Those must be all the benefits of floating solar, because there can’t be any more.” But I say to the House that one of the most astonishing things about floating solar is that it improves the water quality underneath, as it is denuded of light and heat. There are things that grow in the water which the water companies subsequently have to filter out to make it tap-ready for us and our constituents. The water companies have to use fewer filtrants where the surface has been covered by floating solar. We have covered the evaporative effect, so I think I have made the case for floating solar.

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend makes a strong point about being able to use floating solar to obviate the need for development on green-belt land in other parts of the country. Is he aware that a development has been proposed by Bloor Homes at Dollymans Farm in my constituency for up to 1,300 houses, which is a major issue in the ongoing by-election in Wickford Park? Does he agree that to prevent the housing at Dollymans Farm, people should vote for the excellent Conservative candidate, Lewis Hooper, before the polls close tonight?

Lincoln Jopp: We have gone from Cooper to Hooper! I am delighted to follow my right hon. and gallant Friend’s endorsement, and wish everyone there the opportunity to get to the polls today to exercise their democratic right.

John Cooper: I am very grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend for giving way a second time. I do wonder if I may have stumbled across another advantage to floating solar, which may not have occurred to him. If water quality is improved, will that not help the fish? Clatteringshaws loch reservoir in my constituency has some of the best pike fishing in the country. I wonder if the fish might benefit from having a roof over their heads.

Lincoln Jopp: On Tuesday, I visited the Queen Elizabeth II reservoir, which is a closed site owned by Thames Water. I am not aware that there were any fish there, but there was certainly bird life. It is important to make the point that the general planning norm and all the modelling have been based on covering only 15% of these reservoirs, in order to leave sufficient space for leisure use, including fishing, no doubt, and for bird life. The birds I saw on the Queen Elizabeth II on Tuesday were warming themselves very happily on the floating solar panels, because, of course, by being on the panels, they are predator free, as nothing can attack them there.

“How big could this be?”, I hear the House roar.

Dr Hudson: How big could this be?

Lincoln Jopp: I thank my hon. Friend for that.

The installed base of every single solar panel in the United Kingdom is producing 17 GW. If we were to cover 15% of man-made reservoirs in this country, we would double the national capacity, adding a further 16 GW without touching an inch of agricultural land. That is absolutely extraordinary. In so doing, we would create 80,000 jobs in the construction phase and 8,000 jobs in the maintenance phase.

My plea to the Minister—who I know is putting the finishing touches to the Government’s solar road map—is that floating solar should play a much greater part in the final road map than it did in the first draft. I am grateful to my right hon. and hon. Friends for their support; I hope this debate has been educational and informative, and that they are now fully signed up to the floating solar brethren and sisterhood, which will go forth from this place and evangelise for the good cause.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): I thank the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) for securing a debate on this important issue and for prosecuting his case for floating solar with such flourish. I also wish to put on the record that the Minister for Energy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), was desperate to be here and is very sorry that he cannot be, but I am glad that I am able to stand here in his place. I am also glad that the hon. and gallant Gentleman was able to make his speech today, as I know he was not able to intervene in the recent solar debate.

Let me start by saying that I absolutely agree. The Government are very clear that, like the hon. and gallant Gentleman, we believe there is an exciting role for floating solar. It is a new technology, but one that we think has huge potential. Developers around the world started to come forward with utility-scale proposals in the past decade, and several large projects have been constructed in recent years, including installations with the capacity to generate hundreds of megawatts of electricity, which have mainly been in China.

The hon. and gallant Gentleman has very effectively set out the upsides of floating solar, so I will not reiterate them. However, I want to put on the record that we agree, and that we recognise many of those upsides.

I will say a little about the state of floating solar in the UK today. There has been some deployment of floating solar in the UK. Lightsource led a project on

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

the Queen Elizabeth II reservoir, which is just outside the hon. Gentleman's constituency, as he mentioned. The project uses 24,000 solar panels to generate around 20% of the site's electricity needs. It was, at the time of construction, Europe's largest floating solar installation. There are now other, smaller projects across the country, but the scale is still nascent and very limited.

Ben Obese-Jecty: We have already heard about Grafham Water, which is a large reservoir in my constituency. Just to the north of my constituency, in North East Cambridgeshire, we are about to start building the Fens reservoir, which is, as I am sure the Minister is aware, a joint project between Cambridge Water and Anglian Water. It will be 50 million cubic metres, and the development consent order is expected to go in in 2026, with actual construction starting in 2029. Does the Minister agree that this is a fantastic opportunity to try out this nascent technology on a large project, which could generate so much energy in the Cambridgeshire area?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. There are many schemes and huge opportunities, and the Government are working with industry to think about what the potential is across the country. New proposals are coming forward, and we are trying to engage with them.

Although we see that there is huge potential, it is also important to put that in the context of some of the challenges we face as we try to grow floating solar. We are trying to do our part to work with industry, so we want to ensure that we deal with some of the obstacles and barriers to the schemes that are coming forward—for example, planning or investment certainty. Floating solar projects can apply to the Government's flagship contracts for difference scheme, and they do.

I know that one of the arguments in favour of floating solar, which the hon. and gallant Gentleman put forward, and which was reiterated by other hon. Members, is that it will reduce the amount of land that we need to use. Arguments have been made about agricultural land and constraining the amount of ground-mounted solar panels on them. I gently say, however, that if we look at the statistics, we see that only 0.1% of land in the UK is covered by ground-mounted solar at the moment—a minuscule amount. Even with the expansion that we are actively trying to encourage, we are still talking about a fraction of UK land that will only ever be used for ground-mounted solar, so it is important to put that in context.

John Cooper: The Minister is right to point to the figures now, but this is a growing problem. One of the difficulties with the land that goes under solar panels is that it tends to be south-facing land, which is prime agricultural land. That is where the crops would normally go, so this is a growing problem.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I recognise that point, but even with the expansion, we are still talking about only a fraction of land. Inevitably, regional and local government will make a judgment about the land that we protect. Everyone recognises that we must have prime agricultural

land, because we need it, so we are making decisions, and local government will also be making decisions in that context.

Lincoln Jopp: I just point out to the Minister that she could save herself a vast amount of political pain, because, apart from a few swans that I saw, a couple of seagulls and one man from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, there ain't many people who are going to complain about putting floating solar on raised reservoirs.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I am always in the market for less pain. Let me say a little bit about some of the constraints. Eligible bids have been submitted to our contracts for difference schemes, but unfortunately none has yet been successful. That is because the cost of floating solar is about 10% to 15% higher than those of ground-mounted projects, and the reason for that is the cost of the floating structures on which the panel sits. And we hear from the sector that these can account for nearly half of the cost of the project. Moreover, floating solar requires expensive underwater cables, which costs more than land-based systems. Therefore, although we are very keen to encourage this technology and to encourage the sector to grow, there is more that needs to be done in order to make them cost effective. From a Government perspective, it is critical that every scheme and every project that we support is cost-effective, so that, in the end, taxpayers are not footing the bill for technology that is too expensive.

John Cooper: I thank the Minister for allowing me to intervene again. She is making a powerful argument for looking again at the CfD scheme, which is notoriously complicated and very difficult. I think we need a two-pronged approach—we need some changes to CfD, but obviously technology associated with solar is moving on all the time, so perhaps the two could come together.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We will always keep this area under review. We recognise the potential of the technology, and we will continue to work with industry to bring down costs. As the hon. Member says, there are reservoirs and waterways where there are potential problems, but there is also the potential for it to be painless. If we can help to unlock the technology, there will absolutely be appetite from the Government for this. We are trying to invest in research and development in this area, and we are putting in Government support and investment to unlock that.

Finally, the hon. and gallant Gentleman mentioned the solar taskforce. We are working at pace to deliver the taskforce's recommendations. The taskforce has effectively brought together industry and Government to discuss the actions needed to scale up solar deployment, in line with our 2030 clean power mission. It has identified the need for a road map to address the specific barriers to floating solar and other innovative technologies, and a sub-group has been convened to focus on this specific topic.

Lincoln Jopp: I wonder whether the taskforce has engaged with the company that runs the Queen Elizabeth solar farm; it is called Bluefield—very clever name; very clever company. It wrote to the Secretary of State earlier in the year, some four months ago, but is yet to

receive a reply. I would be grateful to know whether the Department is engaging with Bluefield and whether I could nudge the Secretary of State to reply to its letter?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for that; his nudge has been taken, and I will pass that on to the Minister for Energy. As a Department, we are trying to engage extensively with industry on how we will take forward the complex and difficult challenges as we try to deliver our clean power mission. If companies and organisations can lend their insights and knowledge to help us develop better policy, we are always in the market for that, so I will pass on the nudge.

We are finishing the final touches to the solar road map, and it is due to be published very soon. While I will not disclose the detail of it, I assure hon. Members that the question of floating solar will be addressed within it. We recognise that floating solar is an exciting area, and we think it has huge potential for deployment

in the UK. We are seeing the technology being deployed more broadly in other countries, and we want to be part of that. The hon. and gallant Gentleman has talked about the benefits for the grid, water quality, consumers of electricity and, ultimately, climate change.

There is much to like about floating solar. The challenge for us is to work with industry to ensure that we can unlock its potential. That means reducing the cost, ensuring that it is cost-effective, and ensuring that we can deploy the technology. The one commitment I will make on behalf of the Government is that we will always engage with industry as we do this work. We want the innovation, insight and experience of the brightest and the best as we try to build up our clean power sector, so we will work with industry to unlock the huge potential that we believe is there.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 26 June 2025

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

Legislative Scrutiny: Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Clive Efford (in the Chair): We begin with a Select Committee statement. Alex Sobel will speak on the publication of the fourth report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, “Legislative Scrutiny: Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill”, HC 789, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions will be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, Members will put questions on the subject of the statement and Alex Sobel will respond to those in turn. Questions should be brief, and Members may ask only one question each.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding the time for this statement on the Joint Committee on Human Rights report on legislative scrutiny of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. I also thank my fellow members of the Committee, Lord Alton, who is the Chair, and the staff, who worked very hard in the production of the report.

The Bill is intended to prevent loss of life at sea and to deter and disrupt organised immigration crime. The Committee welcomes that intention. The Bill introduces a number of new offences targeted at organised criminal gangs facilitating unlawful migration, but the Committee is concerned that the new offences are drafted excessively broadly and pose a serious risk of criminalising refugees and other vulnerable groups. It recommends some changes to address that issue.

Clauses 13 to 17 create three new precursor offences. Those measures are intended to target the activities of facilitators and organised criminal gangs that look to profit from organised immigration crime. The provisions engage rights under the refugee convention—in particular, article 31, which prohibits the general imposition of penalties on refugees on account of their unlawful entry or presence in the country where they claim asylum. Those offences could potentially also interfere in some cases with rights under the European convention on human rights—notably, article 5, the right to liberty and security, and article 1 of protocol 1, on peaceful enjoyment of possessions—which are incorporated in domestic law by the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Committee supports the Government’s intention to disrupt and deter organised immigration crime and to safeguard life. However, the Committee is concerned that, as drafted, the precursor offences create uncertainty, extend beyond the Government’s stated legitimate aim and risk inadvertently criminalising persons who ought

to be protected from criminal penalty. The scope is broad, the thresholds are low and the penalties are high. In its report, the Committee proposes a series of amendments to deal with those issues.

Clause 18 makes it an offence for a person, while journeying by water to the UK from France, Belgium or the Netherlands, to have done an act that

“caused, or created a risk of, the death of, or serious personal injury”—

physical or psychological—

“to, another person.”

The Government should ensure that that clause is sufficiently clear and defined, reflects the legitimate aim that it is intended to achieve and is proportionate to that aim. In particular, the Committee believes that a mental element should be introduced to ensure that only conduct that is intentional or reckless is criminalised.

The Bill will repeal the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 in its entirety, as well as certain provisions of the Illegal Migration Act 2023. Repealing the 2024 Act removes the significant incompatibilities identified in the predecessor JCHR’s report. However, certain provisions of the 2023 Act have been kept, which raises human rights concerns. Section 12 of the Illegal Migration Act modifies the common-law position such that it is for the Secretary of State, not the courts, to determine what is a reasonable period of detention. The Committee agrees with its predecessor Committee and recommends repeal of section 12 to restore certainty and ensure compliance with article 5 of the ECHR. Section 29 of the Illegal Migration Act broadens the public order disqualification in section 63 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. The Committee believes that that provision is not compatible with the UK’s obligations under the Council of Europe convention on action against trafficking in human beings and article 4 of the ECHR, on prohibition of slavery and forced labour. The Committee recommends repeal of the provision.

Section 59 of the IMA amends section 80A of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, which provides that asylum claims and human rights claims from nationals of listed states must be declared inadmissible. The Committee believes that it must be possible for such individuals who face a real risk of persecution on return to make a protection or human rights claim, which must be considered on its merits, in order to guard against the risk of refoulement. If the Government choose to bring section 59 of the Illegal Migration Act into force, they should, at the very least, periodically review the list of safe countries, with particular consideration of the rights of minority groups. In 2023, Georgia, India and Albania were added to the list of safe states to speed up the process of returning people who have travelled from those countries illegally, but we understand those states to be high risk in particular for LGBTIQ+ people. It is therefore important that the Government take notice of the universal periodic review by the United Nations Human Rights Council of states listed, as well as other assessments, in order to judge their safety for specific groups, particularly those from the LGBTIQ community.

Section 62 of the IMA means that if a person making a human rights or asylum claim does not allow the Home Office to look at everything, including private information, on their phone, then the Home Office shall take that into account as damaging the person’s credibility

[Alex Sobel]

when deciding whether to believe the person. The Committee believes that this provision should be amended to make it clear that the credibility of a claimant who has provided a reasonable excuse for their failure to provide a password or other method of access requested by the Home Office will not be affected.

Clauses 19 to 26 introduce new search, seizure and retention powers in relation to electronic devices. The Committee is concerned that there is a risk that the new powers of search, seizure and retention may in practice lead to a blanket policy to search and possibly seize and retain items such as mobile phones from asylum seekers, victims of trafficking and children. The Committee recommends that the Government clarify in the Bill how these invasive powers will be used, in order to guard against the risk of indiscriminate searches. The Committee also recommends that guidance clearly sets out that in circumstances where electronic devices are confiscated the authorities must facilitate the contact of individuals with their close family members.

The Committee is concerned that clause 35(7) and (8), deeming transfer of personal data to third countries and international organisations to be necessary for important reasons of public interest, inappropriately disapples the normal safeguards in data protection legislation when data is transferred to third countries. The Committee recommends the removal of those provisions.

Clause 41 amends the current powers contained in paragraph 2(2) of schedule 3 to the Immigration Act 1971, which permits the Secretary of State to detain individuals liable to deportation on the grounds that their presence in the UK is not considered conducive to the public good. The Government state that the clause is intended to clarify that the Home Office may detain someone subject to deportation from the point at which the Home Office serves notification that deportation is being considered. However, the operational effect would appear to amount to retrospectively making it lawful to have detained persons liable to deportation. This does not comply with article 5 of the ECHR, which requires a lawful basis for detention, and article 13 of the ECHR, which guarantees an effective remedy. The Committee recommends the repeal of this clause.

The Committee believes that the requirements in clause 43 for imposing conditions such as electronic monitoring, geographical exclusions and curfews should be expressly limited to cases involving conduct such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, extremism or serious crime, or where the person poses a threat to national security or public safety. The Committee proposes an amendment to deal with this point.

The Committee acknowledges that the exclusion of individuals who pose a danger to the community is an important issue, and supports the Government's intent to ensure that dangerous sex offenders cannot benefit from the protections of the refugee convention. Individuals will be able to argue against the presumptions made by

the state regarding the seriousness of their offence and the danger that they pose to the community. This is important to give refugees the opportunity to argue against the seriousness of their offence and the danger they pose to the community.

Given the severe infringement on the right to privacy posed by the imposition of electronic monitoring, the Committee believes that the threshold test for electronic monitoring should be one of necessity and proportionality, not whether it is appropriate. Clause 52 should be amended accordingly.

Overall, the Committee welcomes the Government's intentions in bringing forward this legislation but would like to see changes to ensure that the legislation is more tightly focused on criminalising those who exploit refugees and other vulnerable groups.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for making that statement. As everyone will know, I chair the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief. It is one of the issues that I am really concerned about, in this country and across the world, and I always speak about asylum seekers who are fleeing persecution and human rights abuses. Has the Committee been able to ascertain whether there has been an increase in the numbers of those seeking asylum who are religiously disenfranchised and have suffered human rights abuses? Is that something that the Government need to address?

Alex Sobel: I thank the hon. Member for giving me the opportunity to address that, as I did not include those who have come to this country to seek asylum due to an impingement of their right to practise their faith or religious belief in their home country. We have seen an increase in asylum claims—I do not have the figures to hand—but the Committee's consideration of that area in its inquiry on the Bill was in relation to the list of safe countries. Countries might be broadly safe, but not safe for individuals who are practising certain beliefs. I mentioned three countries, and of those the one where there are issues in that regard is India.

The Government should review the list of safe countries and have regard for the UN Human Rights Council's universal periodic review in terms of the ability of an individual to practise their religion or belief in safety. That is an important consideration that the Government should take into account.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to make a brief comment. I thank my hon. Friend for his statement and for applying to make it. I also thank the Committee for its work on the report. I assure him that the report is being read in detail and that the Government will respond in due course.

1.41 pm

Sitting suspended.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

IVF Egg Donation: Young Women

1.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered IVF egg donation in young women.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate on adverts targeting young women for their eggs and attendant consequences. I know that another debate was supposed to be happening here, but unfortunately for the hon. Member who secured that debate, it was not able to take place. That was fortunate for myself and others who have come along today, so I thank the Committee for having offered this slot to us on Tuesday.

It is a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. She always seems to come along to answer questions on health issues, and I thank her for that. It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), as well as others who have come along to participate.

The issue of adverts for IVF egg donation has been brought to my attention, and we have some people in the Gallery today who have enabled me to prepare this speech—as well as the questions I wish to ask the Minister—in order to highlight this issue and raise awareness. I thank hon. Members for participating in this debate, which could not be more timely, and the Minister for joining us today. I look forward to her response.

This issue is not as widely understood in this House as perhaps it ought to be. When I made representations to the Backbench Business Committee, I was asked what I was trying to achieve. I explained that, and the Committee very kindly offered me the opportunity to have this debate. This issue must be debated. Adverts in public places asking women to donate their eggs for use by others have hugely increased in recent years. They are seen at bus stops, at stalls in university student unions, in shopping centres and on social media sites. It needs to be regularised and there needs to be departmental input into how it happens. There needs to be rules on how it takes place. I hope that my speech will illustrate the clear issues and why they are so important.

All my contributions in this House start in my constituency of Strangford. My constituents have asked me to bring forward this issue, and it has been very kindly supported by others across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Adverts are not legally required to state the health risks up front, but they should be. This is despite the process for retrieving eggs from a young woman requiring her to be put through the early stages of IVF and an invasive and often painful surgical procedure to remove them. IVF is so important. I read in the paper today about the number of IVF successes, and I welcome that. This is not about stopping IVF treatment. It is not about ensuring that people cannot have babies. Nothing makes our relationships strong like having children. I always think of those who perhaps cannot and who wish they could. IVF gives them an opportunity to do that.

In 2011, the amount a young woman could be compensated for her eggs rose to £750 per cycle. Thirteen years later, in October 2024, following advice from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, it rose again, this time to £985, with additional expenses payments able to be made in some cases. That shows that there is a cost factor, and payments should be along the lines of cost.

Women as young as 18 can donate their eggs for use by others—either for IVF for older people or for surrogacy—and demand is soaring. According to the HFEA, women can undergo as many as 10 donation rounds—a huge toll on any lady's body. Later, I will give the price at which fertility clinics sell the eggs on, so hon. Members will see the difference between that and the figure that ladies are given for a cycle of eggs.

In 2024, the Department of Health and Social Care confirmed to me in a letter that it did not undertake an impact assessment before allowing the payments to women for their eggs to rise, nor has it undertaken a long-term study on the effects of egg retrieval on women's bodies, but I believe it must do so. Clinics do not undertake long-term follow-up checks on donors' health. Again, I would have thought that that happens, and I am really surprised that it does not. There seems to be no accountability in the process.

Concerningly, between 2021 and 2023, the Scottish Government also targeted women with open adverts for their eggs, and four NHS health boards in Scotland continue to do so as a result of surging demand.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. Is he aware that the adverts that the Scottish Government and NHS fertility centres put out do not convey the associated risks, and that some have used disingenuous language? Does he share my concern about those advertising campaigns, and does he believe that they should be immediately stopped?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that point. That is the central thrust of this important debate. There do not seem to be any controls, and donation is almost glamourised, so for those in financial need—I will talk about them shortly—it may look too good to be true. It certainly does need regulating, and I thank the hon. Lady for coming along and making that pertinent point. I very much look forward to the Minister's response on how the Government can regulate things in a constructive, helpful and safe way.

I do not know of any other Government in the world who ask women to donate their eggs for use by others, so why are we doing it here in a way that can undermine women's health? It does not seem to be regulated in any way, and there do not seem to be any rules. That needs to be changed.

Research from Surrogacy Concern cited HFEA data showing that between 1991 and 2000, there were 736 egg donors aged between 18 and 25. Further research has shown that between 2000 and 2022, there were at least 78 women across the UK aged just 18 who registered to donate their eggs, 283 aged 19, and 468 aged just 20. That gives an indication of the age that this starts, and I will outline some of the reasons why this can have an impact later down the line.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Between 2000 and 2022, the HFEA registered 5,158 new donors across the UK aged 18 to 25 for egg donation. I say all those things because I believe that this is such an important issue, and that we are on the cusp of uncovering a major public scandal in the way egg donation is advertised.

The issue gets worse when we look at the socioeconomic background of the donors. In 2024, the Government confirmed to me that between 2011 and 2020, 4,147 donors came from the three most deprived deciles of the index of multiple deprivation. In stark contrast, there were 3,007 donors from the least deprived deciles. Again, as I will explain, those who may feel pressurised may see donation as a method of income without understanding all the potential side effects. Between 1991 and 2022, 23,522 new British egg donors were registered across the UK by the HFEA—21,020 from England, 1,315 from Scotland, 954 from Wales and 245 from Northern Ireland. In 2022 alone, 1,645 new British donors were registered in the UK.

Campaigners are concerned about the developing societal entitlement to women's eggs, and that eggs are becoming a tradable commodity. They should not be, but that is the perception—indeed, that is the reality. Eggs for donation need to be of high quality, so only women aged 18 to 35 are targeted by fertility clinics. I believe that a power imbalance is developing between young and old, between poor and rich, and, in many cases, between female and male. The majority of egg donors are also not mothers, raising concerns about the psychological impact of a woman's own genetic offspring being raised by others, which may only be realised years after donation. There is also a concerning development whereby young women's bodies seem to be commodified resources to be assessed for the benefit of others. That concerns me greatly.

One London egg centre has an online catalogue—my goodness me—where donors can be searched for by their ethnic background, their hair colour, the colour of their eyes, their height, their skin tone and their educational attainment, raising further concerns about the development of designer babies. In other words, people think, “We’ll pick through this catalogue, and we’ll see which one we’d like to have.” It should never be that way.

Despite women supposedly not being paid for their eggs, donors have reported receiving payment, which the industry terms “compensation”. Originally £750 but now £985, it is paid into their bank accounts directly after egg retrieval, with no expenses claims or receipts needed to be submitted to the clinic. There are no rules. There are no guidelines. There is nothing to follow. Meanwhile, campaigners have seen plenty of examples of payments quoted up front and adverts directly incentivising young women to undergo the procedure for money, raising the likelihood of exploitation; the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) made that point very clearly. There is a significant risk to low-income, working-class women and to students. It also stands in stark contrast to expenses payments for British kidney donors, which must be strictly itemised with receipts provided. If that is the way to do it for kidney donors, it is the way to do it for egg donors.

The HFEA claims that egg donors largely state they are undergoing the procedure for altruistic reasons, but we must acknowledge the risk that some young women's

desire to help others, often at a cost to themselves, is being used against them. Eggs are sold in packages for thousands of pounds by egg banks and fertility clinics. The London Egg Bank offers six frozen eggs for sale at £5,500, and the Manchester Fertility clinic offers a package of eight frozen eggs starting from £11,000. That £985 against those prices gives an indication of where the real money is. The majority of British fertility clinics are now owned by private equity firms—again, there is little or no regulation, no rules and no safety measures. Something needs to be in place.

The process of egg donation is gruelling, which is sometimes overlooked. Women must inject hormones in a process known as downregulation, which switches off the pituitary gland in order to stop the ovaries working temporarily and allow the lady's cycle, in its totality, to be controlled by the clinic. In cases of fresh egg donation to another woman, the donor's cycle is synchronised with that of the recipient.

The donor then takes follicle-stimulating hormones to overstimulate the ovaries into producing an artificially high number of eggs at the same time. The clinic wants extra eggs, wants the donation to be larger than the lady would normally produce, and the woman then injects human chorionic gonadotropin, or HCG, which helps eggs to mature, ready for retrieval. This maturation mimics the natural process that normally triggers ovulation.

Finally, eggs are collected from the woman using a needle that punctures the vaginal wall and perforates the ovary, gathering fluid from each follicle—the fluid containing the eggs. Donors in the UK have reported that dozens of eggs, and often even more, have been retrieved in just one donation round. One British donor reported 42 eggs being retrieved in one cycle; another reported 46 eggs being retrieved in the next cycle. That stands in stark contrast to the one egg a month that the female body naturally ovulates. I hope that those who are here today will understand that if a lady's natural ovulation rate is one egg a month, but 42 or 46 eggs are produced and farmed, that is very much going against what the body does naturally, which has a detrimental effect on some people.

Nobody fails to have sympathy for those who struggle to have a child and who therefore embark on fertility treatment. I know quite a number of ladies who have embarked on such treatment, and their joy at having their wee baby is something that words cannot describe. The look of happiness on the faces of the mum and dad is great, as is the fact that the wee child has been born. However, the use of donor eggs has real societal consequences and potentially there can be a very negative long-term physical and psychological impact on young women who donate their eggs.

We must rebalance this conversation to take into account the impact on the young women who undergo these procedures. We need to have regulation; we need to have rules in place. The process needs to be controlled, rather than the matter just being seen from the point of view of those who want access to donor eggs.

We know from the experience of women who underwent forced adoption in mother and baby homes in the 20th century that often it takes years for women to come forward and report harm done to them in the past. Some donors have reported needing hysterectomies as a result of the damage they sustained during egg retrieval. Other donors have said that when they discovered they had genetic diseases, the clinics refused to take

further action and put the onus back on the donor themselves to report to the HFEA. Those checks should have been done before donation, not afterwards.

Similarly, donors are not required to undergo enhanced carrier screening, leading to a risk that some genetic diseases might be unknowingly passed on in the donor eggs and ultimately on to the wee baby who will be born. Another donor has reported donating eggs in her early 20s, only to find when she tried to start her own family in her early 30s that she was unable to do so. Other donors report endometriosis and adenomyosis developing after donation. Quite simply, the long-term risks to women's health from egg donation are unknown and largely unstudied. Today, I am hopefully outlining where the problems are, why regulation is needed and why I believe that the Government need to step in.

Women who have undergone egg retrieval for their own IVF have reported complications and side effects, including sepsis, abscesses, perforated bowels, severe pain during or after retrieval, and even slipping into a coma as a result of developing ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome.

All this risk is borne by young people so that older people can purchase eggs from fertility clinics and egg banks. According to the HFEA, between 1991 and 2022—some 31 years—44,760 IVF cycles involving donor eggs were made for people aged 40 or over.

Young donors are at higher risk of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome because of the higher number of eggs that they have compared with older women. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has said that as many as 30% of women aged under 30 who undergo egg retrieval may develop ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. Complications arising from OHSS can kill. That is why there needs to be regulation and consideration of safety as part of the process.

Two women died in England from such complications in 2005-06. In 2023 there were 53 severe or critical cases of OHSS reported to the HFEA. Yet nowhere in the adverts, online or anywhere else are the risks stated, and they should be. Those donating eggs should be aware of the risks. Donors have reported that clinics mention the risks and likely side effects only briefly and not in depth. They should be stated in depth, but they are not. Counselling for donors is offered, but is not mandatory.

We must look at international comparators. I always like to see what has been happening elsewhere. In Germany there is no egg donation at all. German legislation specifically prohibits the “splintering”—that is the word used—of motherhood that egg donation and surrogacy create. In Italy, donors cannot be compensated at all so that women are not incentivised to undergo the procedure because of financial need.

We must also consider the donor-conceived child. Egg and sperm donations are not meant to create more than 10 families. How many times have I read in the press about men who have fathered, through their sperm, perhaps as many as 100-plus children in the United Kingdom and across the world? One day a young boy and girl could meet, marry, and actually be brother and sister. There needs to be a limit, which is 10, but it is clear that some clinics do not have the control that perhaps they should have.

As gamete donation and use rapidly increases, the likelihood of genetic half-siblings across multiple households, often in close geographical proximity to one another, increases. That is what I fear no controls

means. Although British clinics must ensure that donor identities can be revealed to children at 18 years of age, many people resident in the UK still travel abroad for IVF, including to jurisdictions where anonymous gametes and sex selection of embryos are legal. That means hundreds, if not thousands, of children are growing up in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland unable ever to trace their genetic parents.

The evidence is strong enough to call on the Government to raise the minimum age for egg donors to 25, because of the effect it has on those under that age who donate eggs. Secondly, we should ban adverts asking for women to donate eggs—the very thing that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith referred to and which we are all very aware of. Advertising for surrogate mothers is already banned, so why not ban adverts asking for women to donate eggs? Thirdly, we should end payments to donors to ensure they are not donating because of financial need. In other words, their financial circumstances could put them in a quandary when it comes to doing what they are doing. At a minimum, adverts must state the health risks up front and the minimum donor age must rise. I sincerely hope that the Minister will take the issue back to the Department and that the Government will act quickly to protect and prioritise young women and their health.

2.14 pm

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate at short notice from the Backbench Business Committee. I am a member of that Committee but did not take part in the decision on this debate.

As ever, the hon. Member has spoken about his concerns with eloquence and passion, statistics and attention to detail. I think we may all have found some of the things that have been said shocking and harrowing. It is important that parliamentarians air these issues, because over recent years, although steps have certainly been taken in the right direction and some of the shame around talking about fertility and reproductive health has lessened, there are undoubtedly still barriers for many women. Our Parliament sets an important example. If collectively as a society we are unable to speak about these issues, that is an obstacle to achieving better health outcomes. That must be our unifying purpose: no matter what our stance on the broader philosophical question of IVF, health outcomes should always be in our mind.

I do not oppose egg donation or IVF. Friends of mine have had very happy outcomes after having treatment, and problems before that for many years. I want to focus on women's health and to ask the Minister about the broader view the Department holds on donors. Any woman who decides to donate her eggs should, as a minimum, know all the risks associated with the procedure. Some of the things the hon. Member outlined shows why that is so important.

Our understanding of the long-term effects of fertility drugs is totally insufficient and although there are no recent studies that draw a causal link between egg donation and cancer risk, several experts have argued that a longitudinal assessment of donor health outcomes is under-explored. No known long-term issues is totally different from there being no long-term adverse impacts.

[*Mary Glindon*]

Doctors from Cromwell hospital in the UK and doctors in the United States are just some of the medical professionals who have raised concerns over the years about anecdotal cancer cases and how little we know about cancer's relationship with ovarian stimulations. Will the Minister note what discussions she has had with the HFEA on these issues? Will the Government commit to conducting systematic research on the medical and psychological health of donors over time? That must be tracked over a long period. I urge the Government to ramp up our understanding without further delay.

Secondly, I want to speak about last year's decision to increase the compensation for egg donation and the impact that could have on the donor demographic. That is worth tracking, especially in the light of some of the figures that the hon. Member highlighted from across our nations. It was the first uplift since 2011, from £750 to £986, which reflected the impact of price rises.

As we all know, the cost of living over recent years has soared, placing immense pressure on so many people of all ages. My fear is that young women see this invasive procedure and the pain and discomfort it can generate as a way to help them make ends meet.

We want to have confidence that people are donating because they want to, not because they have no other option or have seen adverts that do not give them enough information about what looks like easy money. How little do they know? What information does the Department hold on the demographic of egg donors, and what impact has the rising compensation figure had on donation behaviour? I hope the House can agree that more must be done to ensure that those who wish to donate have to give full, informed consent and nothing less, and that those who make the decision to do so are not pushed into it for any reason, especially financial hardship.

2.20 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate on an issue that affects so many. Although his focus was on egg retrieval, he also identified the value of IVF to families across the UK. Like other Members present, I have family and friends who have struggled with fertility. The pain it causes, and the emotional toll it can take on families, is immense and harrowing to watch. Modern medicine has eased those struggles through IVF, which is remarkable and a credit to the many scientists and medical professionals who have worked tirelessly to develop it. If you do not mind, Mr Efford, I will selfishly mention my best friend Lottie and her husband Marvin. They were both IVF babies nearly 40 years ago, and two years ago they managed to have their little baby boy Luca without any fertility struggles. What a gift he is.

Sadly, there is currently a postcode lottery for IVF and fertility services, which undermines the generosity of those who donate eggs and shatters the hopes and family lives of many couples. In much of the country, couples are entitled to just one round of IVF on the NHS, while in other areas, people can receive up to three rounds. It is crucial that people can expect high-quality treatment wherever they live, rather than being priced

out of having children simply because of their postcode. Can the Minister therefore set out what steps the Government are taking to reduce that inequality of access to these life-changing reproductive health services?

A specific inequality still exists for the LGBTQ+ community. In England, NHS-funded access to IVF is available only to women who have not conceived after two years of regular unprotected intercourse or 12 cycles of artificial insemination. In practice, that requires all lesbian couples to pay for artificial insemination cycles before becoming eligible for NHS-funded IVF. That is an insurmountable financial barrier for many of those couples, given that cycles can cost thousands of pounds. Although the Government's 2022 women's health strategy pledged to remove that requirement for lesbian couples, the roll-out of that new policy has been painfully slow. As of April 2024, only four of the 42 integrated care boards in England have implemented it. The Liberal Democrats are pushing for all integrated care boards to make that change a priority to ensure equitable access to IVF for all lesbian couples who are looking to start a family. What work is the Department undertaking to ensure that the requirement is removed across all ICBs?

It is important to recognise the immense contribution that egg donors make to the IVF process. The lives of couples and families across the country have been transformed by the generosity and support of those who donate eggs or sperm to help them have children. Becoming an egg donor is a complex decision, and as highlighted by hon. Members' contributions, it can have lifelong implications, especially considering that donors can consent to have their eggs stored for up to 55 years, and children who were born through a donation and who have turned 18 may contact the donor. Added to that, donors must undergo rigorous medical screening. They are brave, selfless individuals who perform acts of love for family members, friends and strangers alike. It is absolutely right that eggs are donated rather than bought or sold, and that there are rigorous protections in place to ensure that.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady not think that the fact that payments are given, whether they are badged as compensation or fees, means that we cannot actually say at the moment that donations are being given for purely altruistic reasons?

Jess Brown-Fuller: That is exactly why the hon. Member for Strangford brought forward this debate, and we share his concerns that any attempt to create a market for egg donation could lead to perverse outcomes. Advertising for egg donors to come forward should reflect that, stressing the benefits to others rather than attempting to frame compensation as a primary motivation to donate. We must ensure that women donating eggs do so willingly, not out of financial necessity, and are provided with appropriate support throughout the process.

It is right that the donors clinic is required by law to offer counselling, but the Government should investigate whether additional steps are needed to ensure proper medical regulation of that counselling, beyond what is already provided by the Professional Standards Authority. Is the Minister satisfied that the Advertising Standards Authority and the Competition and Markets Authority are adequately resourced and have sufficient capacity to uphold essential regulations in this area?

I will briefly touch on an equally complex and emotionally charged topic: surrogacy and legal parenthood from the point of birth. For the sake of the child, the surrogate and the legal parents, the matter needs to be handled with great sensitivity. The Liberal Democrats believe that all potential cases regarding legal parenthood of a new baby must ensure that the wellbeing of all involved is balanced and respected. There are, understandably, concerns about financial incentives for surrogates. For example, the Law Commission found that there is a lack of clarity about what payments can be made by the intended parents to the surrogate, which makes the law difficult to apply in practice. We believe that any proposed legislation should be published and subject to scrutiny before any changes to current practice are made.

So many lives around the world have been transformed by the miracle that is IVF, but there remains much work to be done to address the inequalities in NHS provision, end the postcode lottery, and ensure that lesbian couples have access to IVF fairly. We must also ensure that donors are not unduly influenced by exploitative marketing, and we hope the Government will take action following the debate to investigate that.

2.26 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing an important debate at such short notice.

IVF counts as a medical miracle, in many respects. Since the technique was pioneered in the 1970s, some 12 million babies have been born by IVF or associated procedures. In the UK, there have been more than 70,000 donor births since 1991, when we started counting egg, sperm and embryo donations. Such births now account for one in 170 live UK births. For many families and individuals, those treatments have given hope where they otherwise would have none. Those suffering from fertility problems have been able to pursue their dreams of having a family with the help of IVF, and success rates have increased over recent decades. The children born as a result of these treatments have given great joy, love and happiness to their families.

With that in mind, the previous Government committed to broadening access to these services. As the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) said, the women's health strategy for England, published in 2022, included removing barriers to access for same-sex couples. The previous Government also changed the law so that same-sex couples would not have to go through specific infectious diseases screening before pursuing reciprocal IVF. Those measures were designed to ensure that as many as possible could enjoy safe and equal access to treatment.

In my constituency, I was approached by a lady who has medical reasons for her infertility, and is married to a gentleman who had a child many years ago in a previous relationship. She found that she was not eligible for access to IVF. If she said she had no partner, she would be eligible for a sperm donor. If she said she had a female partner, she would be eligible for a sperm donor. Since her partner, however, had a child from a previous relationship, she was not able to have treatment for her medical condition. Personally, I did not think she should be denied access to that, so I have been

campaigning with the local ICB, which is currently doing a review. I hope that review is not disrupted by the changes the Government have made to ICB funding.

IVF is a highly complex procedure, with several different approaches now available to doctors and patients. One of those approaches involves an intending parent receiving donor eggs from another woman. That can be a lifeline for those who cannot use their own eggs, whether due to age, quality or other physiological factors. It relies on the generosity and selflessness of the donor women who contribute their own eggs so that others may have a chance of raising children. That process contains risk, and although we recognise the huge opportunities that IVF offers and the generosity of the donor women, we must make sure that the procedural risks, advertising and regulation are properly managed.

Typically, egg donors must be between 18 and 35, be in good health, have no inheritable conditions, and pass a variety of screening and suitability tests. Those requirements are designed to provide reassurance for intending parents, but in order to find as many potential donors as possible, many companies pursue aggressive advertising strategies to attract eligible donor women. When I first thought about this, I thought, "I haven't seen any adverts for such a process." Then I recognised that, of course, I am not in the target audience, because I am too old.

With social media, when we think about something, before we know it, it has appeared on our phone or another device, in the corner of the screen as an advert. I am advised by women who are of the right age that they feel they get a lot of adverts to encourage them to be egg donors—more than they would like to see. Does the Minister agree that the guidance on internet advertising in particular needs to be updated, especially in the light of the targeting of adverts at particular demographic groups? Will she commit to investigating how many women are targeted by adverts for a service that they would not consider engaging with, and ways of being able to avoid those?

There are also risks to the process. It is especially important that women know the full extent of the risks before they agree to a medical elective procedure, in particular one that is not for their own benefit. Ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome is one of the main risks for egg donors and causes symptoms rising from mild discomfort and bloating to serious respiratory problems, renal failure and, in extreme cases, death. A 2023 review study in the *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics* found that severe ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome occurs in 1% to 10% of stimulation cycles. That is quite a wide range of uncertainty, and it is partly why many donors have argued for more research to be done to support informed consent and proper regulation on how the risks are communicated to donors.

We have already heard in this debate about the long-term risks. Given that the HFEA will know who all the ladies who have generously given of their eggs are, does the Minister have any plans to look back at that data in an anonymized fashion to see whether any long-term health risks can be identified? Will she also talk about the steps that the Department is taking to ensure that high-quality research is accessible for those considering egg donation, and about whether companies are mandated to conduct and provide it as part of their advertising?

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

We have talked about compensation during the debate. Fertility companies make much of the altruism motivating donors to give their eggs, and that no doubt forms part of the reasoning of donors who admirably wish to help others less fortunate than themselves by contributing their eggs. It is also true, however, that fertility companies provide compensation payments. Those are capped at £986, a limit intended to ensure that women are not enticed to donate eggs due to financial need, but a risk remains that women more in need of financial assistance may be attracted by the payments. Recent coverage has highlighted that some services present donation as a second income stream.

Clearly, however, women who put themselves through a lengthy, often uncomfortable and potentially dangerous process in the name of helping others should not be out of pocket as a result. Getting that balance right requires careful attention. The Government must ensure that they review the compensation rates and how it is provided—as a flat sum or on receipt—to ensure that we get this right.

Beyond the financial cap, companies are also allowed to advertise benefits in kind, such as discounted egg freezing for women who donate some of their eggs to others. In essence, therefore, they are saying to ladies, “If you come to donate some of your eggs, we’ll allow you to store your own eggs for a much reduced price, in case you need them later.” Some women might see that as a reason to donate eggs—that they cannot afford to freeze their own otherwise. What are the Government doing to manage the kind of additional incentives that might encourage women to donate eggs when otherwise they would not? Does the Minister plan to regulate non-monetary incentives in the future?

Jonathan Hinder: Whatever we think about the motivations of the women involved, we can agree that private companies are concerned with profit, and they are the ones that are in many cases running such adverts. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is unethical to make profit out of the practice?

Dr Johnson: I am not clear whether the hon. Gentleman is referring to companies making profit out of providing IVF services, or whether he is talking about those who profit from egg donation itself.

Jonathan Hinder: I am talking about egg donation.

Dr Johnson: I think it is reasonable for companies to provide IVF as a service in the private sector, but making profit out of the specific egg donation itself is a separate issue. I agree with him on that.

Regarding other ethical issues, we must think about the longer-term impacts of egg donation and ensure that women are properly equipped to deal with them. Children born from egg donation have a legal right in the UK to contact the woman who donated the egg from which they were born, and to obtain their name, age and last known address from the HFEA. The first cohort of children with that right were able to use it only relatively recently, in 2023, so it may be too soon to know what the long-term impacts might be for the children or donors concerned, or to what extent it may affect their family relationships or emotional wellbeing.

Will the Minister tell us how many children are known to have exercised that right since 2023? What is the Department’s assessment of the likely long-term impacts on those children, their families and the donors?

IVF offers a lifeline that can transform people’s lives for the better, but where women are donating eggs to others, we must make sure that they are aware of the risks, and that they are doing it for the right reasons, not because they are being enticed financially. The Government must ensure that compensation does not become financial incentivisation, that advertising is accurate and unbiased, that women’s wellbeing is put first, and that the public have the information they need to make informed choices about their bodies and their healthcare.

2.35 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate on egg donation in young women. He raises a number of important points, which the Government take seriously. I absolutely assure him that there are rules and regulations around egg donation in this country. Hon. Members in this debate have talked about the potential concerns of the long-term impact of egg retrieval, and the potential incentive of the compensation offered for egg donation, particularly for young women on low incomes. I hope to address those points in my remarks.

For people who are struggling to conceive, which may be for a variety of reasons, receiving donor eggs can be life-changing—as we have heard in this debate—and enable them to start a family of their own. Donating eggs should be a purely altruistic act, and choosing to become a donor is a complex decision. In the UK, the average egg donor is between 31 and 32 years of age. That average has remained stable since records began in 1991. Egg donors are typically UK-based, with around 3% of donor eggs imported from abroad. There were around 3,800 IVF cycles using donor eggs in 2023, which is an increase from around 3,600 in 2019. Those donors support around 2,000 to 3,000 people a year who would otherwise not be able to have a baby. I recognise their generosity, although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) said, we also recognise that egg donation procedures come with risks, and they should not be undertaken lightly.

The HFEA ensures that licensed fertility clinics are following law and guidance in relation to egg donation. The Government agree with the point made in this debate that young women should be fully informed of any risks when making the decision to donate their eggs, and that clinics must ensure that women are fully informed and supported throughout the egg donation process. It is mandatory for clinics to provide counselling to women before egg donation to ensure that they understand all the potential risks, and legal and social implications, of donation. Donating eggs is generally very safe, and most women do not experience any health problems beyond discomfort during the stimulation of the ovaries and the egg collection procedure.

I do not want to minimise that experience of discomfort, but where women wish to donate eggs, the HFEA and the Government are committed to making it as safe and accessible as possible. In the short term, there is a

potential risk of having a reaction to the fertility drugs used for the donation procedure. If that happens, the effects are normally mild, and can include headaches, nausea or feeling bloated. Donors are advised to let their clinic know if they experience any of those side effects.

In some very rare cases, as we have heard, women develop OHSS. It is a serious and potentially fatal reaction to fertility drugs, which happens about a week after eggs have been collected. Fortunately, it is rare, occurring in less than 0.1% of cycles. Because of the serious nature of OHSS, all severe or critical cases must be reported to the HFEA within 24 hours by the patient's clinic. They are categorised by the HFEA as grade B incidents. A grade B incident involves serious harm to one person, or moderate harm to many. The HFEA's latest "State of the fertility sector" report found that fewer OHSS incidents were reported in 2023-24, with 53 severe and critical cases reported by UK clinics.

In recent years, there has been widespread interest in donation, and figures show that the number of egg donors is rising. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), about the importance of having conversations and asking questions about the long-term impact on women's health, which is generally an under-researched area. The Government recognise that and would welcome studies in this area. If there is anything I can add to that following this debate, I will follow up with hon. Members on the opportunities for understanding the wider long-term implications for women's health in this area.

At the public board meeting last year, the HFEA discussed the rates of compensation offered to egg and sperm donors. Since 1 October 2024, egg donors have received £985, which is up from £750. That increase in donor compensation was the first since 2011, and reflects the rise in inflation. The compensation offered to them is intended to reflect their time and the nature of the procedure, rather than being an attempt to monetise donation in the UK.

I want to address some of the points raised by Members to do with the variability of access to fertility services more broadly. Infertility affects one in six women of reproductive age worldwide. It is a serious condition that impacts wider family, relationships and mental health, as we heard from the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller). I congratulate her friends, Lottie and Marvin, on the arrival of their child.

This Government expect integrated care boards to commission fertility services in line with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines. NICE is currently reviewing the fertility guidelines, and will consider whether the current recommendations for access to NHS-funded treatment are still appropriate. I look forward to the guidelines being published; we will work with integrated care boards to determine how best to improve their local offer and ensure equity of access for affected couples.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive review. I have three quick questions. First, will the Government commit to undertaking a long-term study into the long-term health outcomes of

women? That is one of the things I hope to see happen when it comes to egg retrieval. Secondly, will the Government review the safety of offering £985 per donation, which is sometimes said to be compensation? Thirdly—I hope I am not pressing the Minister too hard; I am quite happy for her to come back to us on this—everyone who has participated in the debate has expressed concern about the adverts, so we are keen to hear her thoughts on banning those.

Karin Smyth: I have addressed the issue of compensation. It rose in response to inflation, for the first time since 2011. We have no further plans to start a study specifically on health. As I said in my remarks to others, we understand that broader outcomes in women's health is an under-researched area. Bringing forward trials is the usual response. If we need to add anything else to that, I will make sure we do so, but there are no other plans currently.

Advertising is governed in this country by the Advertising Standards Authority, which issued a joint enforcement notice in 2021 with the HFEA to ensure that fertility clinics and others were aware of the advertising rules and treating customers fairly. I am afraid I cannot comment on Scotland, where I understand there has been a large advertising campaign. That is not in my ken, although it is covered by the HFEA, which is a UK-wide body, so that is a bit of a complication. If there is anything to report back on with regard to Scotland, without me stepping on devolved issues, I will make sure we do so.

I again thank hon. Members for securing the debate and acknowledging the altruism of the women who choose to donate their eggs and help to give others a much longed-for baby. I assure Members that this Government will monitor the issues raised this afternoon. Women's health and tackling inequalities are central to the priorities that we will take forward in the 10-year plan.

2.44 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all Members for their contributions to the debate. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) referred in an intervention to the advertising issue, which is really important. She talked about Scotland, as I did, but there is also advertising elsewhere that needs to be controlled.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glendon) and I had a discussion at some length before the debate today, and the very things that she wants to see, we all wish to see. We all recognise that IVF gives potential mothers the opportunity to have a child; the joy that can bring can never be emphasised enough. However, we must ensure that all the risks involved are known beforehand. She referred in particular to ovarian cancer and egg donation.

The hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) referred to the issue of compensation. When ladies give eggs as a donation, their reasons for doing so are above board. Whenever eggs are donated for compensation, which is the word that is used, unfortunately it can lead to other things as well.

I also thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for her contribution and for the example she gave, which showed the joy that having a child can bring. She referred to those who donate eggs willingly, without any financial obligations. She also talked about surrogacy, which is a different issue.

[Jim Shannon]

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), for her contribution. She brings a wealth of knowledge, through her doctorship. I also thank her for outlining all the cases that she did. She gave the example of one of her constituents, which perhaps highlighted what the issues are.

As always, I thank the Minister for taking the time to come along. My request to her is this: whenever we have a chance to look over this debate and check the *Hansard* report, we might have further questions, so would she be agreeable to coming back to us if we do?

It is very obvious to me that the Government recognise that there are issues that are outstanding and that must be resolved. With that in mind, I again thank all hon. Members, particularly the Minister, for their contributions, and I also thank those in the Public Gallery, who have come along to listen to our contributions today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered IVF egg donation in young women.

2.47 pm

Sitting suspended.

BBC World Service Funding

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

3.8 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): We will start a minute or so early because, as everyone will appreciate, there are a lot of potential speakers and I want to give everyone maximum opportunity to get in. To ensure that no one is disadvantaged by our starting early, let me make it clear that I will also call those who arrive from 3.10 pm onwards.

3.9 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the funding of the BBC World Service.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. Earlier this afternoon, hon. Members may have heard the Prime Minister agree with me that the World Service is a crucial asset of British soft power. Therefore, the debate may be superfluous in some respects, but as we are all here I think we will carry on with it.

There are few institutions in the world that so consistently live up to the values we claim to cherish—truth, independence and freedom—as does the BBC World Service. Together with the royal family, the BBC is one of a tiny handful of British brands known by billions worldwide—and not just known, but trusted. It broadcasts in 43 languages to 400 million people a week, bringing impartial news to some of the most dangerous and controlled places on Earth. It is a beacon for those who are denied the right to free expression, and a trusted voice in a world increasingly awash with propaganda, intimidation and disinformation. It certainly strengthens our hand when we deal with tyrants worldwide. That is why it is so important to ensure its continued funding.

The World Service costs £366 million annually to reach an audience of approximately 400 million people every week—what fantastic value! Across the globe, rogue and authoritarian Governments are increasingly leveraging media to undermine free societies. We see that clearly in Hong Kong, where the Chinese state is targeting journalists who report on the Chinese state's human rights abuses, and we have seen it in Moldova, where last year's presidential elections were disrupted by Russian disinformation—false stories pumped on to people's phones by hostile powers. Those dangers have been only amplified by recent cuts to American foreign spending. The Voice of America was silenced by President Trump.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to intervene on him as the MP for BBC Scotland's headquarters. Given the context that he has talked about, does he agree that investment in the BBC World Service is in fact investment in the defence of our values and the defence of our ideals as a British nation?

Peter Prinsley: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The Voice of America was established to broadcast truth and liberty into European nations darkened by fascism and Soviet oppression. When the editor of Russia Today heard that the Voice had been silenced, he said it was “awesome”, which only highlights the importance of the BBC and Britain on the global stage. We should

encourage the United States to reconsider its decision and restore the funding, but we must prepare ourselves to fill the gap through the World Service. That will mean additional demands on resources.

The World Service is vital in the battle against misinformation, which is a modern fight unfamiliar to those who will recall a world where all media outlets provided trusted and verifiable facts. Misinformation, along with confused or false facts, has become one of the most pressing global threats, fuelling doubt, division and instability.

The BBC World Service excels in countering misinformation. BBC Verify and its language services are being used to rigorously fact-check. They use cutting-edge AI to rapidly tackle and neutralise viral disinformation. Only this week, we heard how AI has been used to establish a new Polish language service.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): This is an important debate. I broadly agree with the hon. Member on the positive influence of the World Service. Would he acknowledge, though, that on occasion—such as on BBC Arabic—standards have fallen below what we would expect, with former Hamas officials put forward as neutral observers? We need to ensure that, exactly as he said, the highest possible standards of international truth and credibility are maintained at the BBC.

Peter Prinsley: I thank the right hon. Member—my recent squash partner—for his intervention, I agree that we must be sure that whatever the BBC says is true; that must be the case. The BBC Arabic service—the language service—disappeared some time ago, and that is to be regretted.

In Pakistan, a video falsely claimed to show the aftermath of an Indian airstrike on Pakistani air bases. That went viral—it was viewed over 400,000 times—stoking widespread fear and heightening tensions with India over Kashmir, but actually it was mislabelled footage of the 2020 Beirut port explosion. BBC Verify debunked the claim and calmed the situation.

In 2023, a false story spread across the internet that alleged that the newly elected President of Nigeria had forged his university degree. There was anger and unrest until a report by the BBC global disinformation team revealed it to be false, which defused the situation.

Those are not isolated stories; they are part of a growing global pattern. The fight is particularly crucial in an era when young people increasingly consume news online. A few weeks ago, I visited a school in my constituency at Bury St Edmunds and asked the children how they got their news. I said, “Do you get your news online?”, and almost every hand went up. Among 12 to 15-year-olds in the UK, only the BBC can compete effectively with the online tech giants. To continue to compete effectively and divert attention from untrustworthy sources, the BBC needs the resources to excel in what a young person recently told me is called the “attention economy”. With appropriate funding for new digital content, the BBC can significantly expand its impact.

In recent weeks, our attention has undoubtedly been drawn to the middle east, particularly to Iran, and the power of the BBC’s digital reach is no clearer than through the work of BBC Persian. It recently reached over 32 million users on Instagram in just five days,

despite the platform’s having been blocked by the Iranians. People were so desperate to view trusted BBC news that they risked their safety by using virtual private networks, or VPNs, to bypass Iran’s strict internet censors. Some posts achieved more than 12 million views.

When Iran restricted internet access, BBC Persian increased broadcasts from eight hours to nearly 24 hours a day and launched an emergency radio service. Despite the fact that there were no reporters on the ground, the team diligently verified information amid severe misinformation campaigns. With adequate funding, the BBC World Service always steps up during global crises, delivering a public good for the benefit of a whole country.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): What has been happening at BBC Persian over the past few weeks is a case in point, as my hon. Friend said. It has been narrating events in an accessible way and providing insights that are free from the talking points of the propaganda regime into how people in Iran really feel, and how they are experiencing the conflict. It is a public good for the world. It tackles misinformation and develops our soft power, but it also provides important human empathy in the fog of war. We must bear in mind that BBC Persian journalists and their families are being harassed and threatened here in London. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should celebrate their courageous work and back them with the resources that they need to continue?

Peter Prinsley: I absolutely agree. I first got into this subject when I met World Service refugee correspondents from BBC Persian and BBC News Russian at the Labour party conference. I so admired what they were doing, and it was a real inspiration for me.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office contributes £104 million a year to the World Service budget of £366 million. The BBC does an awful lot with its licence fee. I was told this week that, for the cost of a cup of coffee a week, it delivers drama, comedy and news across TV and radio, as well as one of the world’s most visited websites. However, money is tight and there are serious fears that its essential work will be chipped away.

Like many, I would describe the BBC World Service as a tool of British soft power. Remarkably, the entire Foreign Office contribution to the BBC World Service is roughly equivalent to the cost of a single F-35 jet. We lately agreed to purchase a whole lot more of those, and that was the right move because we need to boost defence in a dangerous world, but it would be a critical mistake to invest heavily in just one aspect of our security while neglecting another equally essential aspect.

Global inflation and rising costs are putting the World Service in increasing funding difficulties, and without more support there is a risk that it will lose critical technological capabilities, especially among younger audiences. Although broadcast services currently account for two thirds of the World Service’s reach and they remain crucial, the future is digital, and on digital platforms the BBC is not just competing with Russia and China but is up against Facebook, TikTok, Google and the others, so we need sustained investment. Despite all the funding challenges, BBC World Service journalists continue to bravely provide quality journalism in the

[Peter Prinsley]

most challenging circumstances, often at great personal risk. When it comes to Iran we rely heavily on the work of BBC Persian's brave journalists who face, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) said, threats, asset seizures and passport confiscations just for doing their jobs.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I do not in any way argue with the hon. Gentleman's tribute to the journalists of BBC Persian, who have endured appalling harassment, particularly of their families still in Tehran. It is also worth putting on the record the bravery of the journalists of Iran International, one of whom was attacked by a thug from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the streets of London, and who still endure enormous threats and intimidation.

Peter Prinsley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that remark. The World Service is ultimately about the listener. We must bear in mind, when considering the funding settlement for that service, that there are individuals living under authoritarianism whose freedom of expression is so very restricted. They rely on the World Service to provide an accurate and comprehensive global perspective. Funding the World Service is not just about serving elites; it is about earning respect abroad and safeguarding future freedom. Let us not be complacent when it comes to the funding of the BBC World Service. It is an important source of essential soft power and a way for the country to punch well above its weight on the international stage, to spread truth, to lighten the grip of totalitarianism, and in some circumstances prevent the need for us to use hard power at all. That is exactly what the Prime Minister told us this morning.

It has been said that we could not recreate the BBC World Service today if we started from scratch. There is not the political will and no one would be willing to take such a risk. If we lose the World Service, we simply will not get it back. I do not think we should take that risk. The Government were bold to increase funding for the World Service last year, but a more steady and long-term funding arrangement must be put in place to prevent what I fear will be death by a thousand cuts.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that if they wish to speak they should continue to bob so I can see that they do. If we are going to get everybody in, people will need to restrict themselves to about three minutes, but I am loath to impose a formal time limit. I call Sir John Whittingdale.

3.22 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Thank you, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) on calling the debate this afternoon, which is extremely topical, and on convening a very helpful panel to discuss the subject a couple of days ago.

The World Service has always been one of the great assets of this country. When we talk about the UK's soft power, the BBC is right up there at the top. Its reach into some of the most troubled parts of the world is huge. We only have to reflect back on the stories of

people like Terry Waite, who, when he was held hostage in Lebanon, spoke of how he relied on the BBC World Service. The service has become all the more important today, for two reasons. First is the huge spread of disinformation—what is called foreign interference and manipulation of information—being conducted by Russia and China.

The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket mentioned Moldova. I was there a few weeks ago and spoke to politicians there who were trying to counter a tidal wave of Russian disinformation on TikTok and Telegram channels, seeking to influence the parliamentary election coming up later this year. The same is happening in China, with independent media being closed down and huge amounts put into spreading Chinese propaganda. That is one aspect.

At the same time, the other reliable voice, which was provided by the Voice of America service, as the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket said, has been undercut by the withdrawal of funding by the US Administration. I hope that that will be reversed. At the moment, it is on hold; we are told it is under review. But having talked to some of the people involved, they are pessimistic. If Voice of America goes, it makes it all the more important that we have a trusted, reliable source of independent news.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), from a constituency neighbouring my own, is right that there have occasionally been questions about the impartiality of the World Service, as there are always likely to be. I heard the complaints about BBC Arabic, and in some cases I sympathised with them, but overall the BBC World Service is deeply trusted.

Until 2010, World Service funding came entirely from the Government. Then, as a result of pressures on public spending, the then Chancellor George Osborne decided to reduce public expenditure, and so asked the BBC to take over the funding through the licence fee. That continued until 2015, when I was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Government agreed that, although funding was still from the licence fee, the Foreign Office would provide a top-up. That is how it has remained: roughly two-thirds of funding comes from the licence fee, and roughly a third from Government.

But the World Service is now under a double squeeze. The licence fee has been frozen for a time. It is now going up again, but the BBC has had to find savings. The director general, if asked, will say, "My job is to provide value to the licence fee payer, and the truth is that most licence fee payers are unaware of, or certainly don't listen to, the World Service." It is a public good. It is for the good of the country. That is why he argues that the Government should take back overall responsibility for funding the World Service. That is an argument with which I have great sympathy.

I am deeply concerned that, because World Service funding from the Government counts as official development assistance and the ODA budget is under pressure, further cuts are to be made as part of the expenditure reductions currently taking place, even though there was a top-up last October. The latest letter from Jonathan Munro, director of the World Service, states, "we have been asked to prepare for further engagement with the FCDO on the impact of the reduction in spend on ODA".

That suggests that there may be further reductions. I hope that the Minister will say that the Government will not only continue to fund the World Service at the present level but look to increase it, because the need for that has never been greater.

3.27 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. In recent years, we have seen a rise in disinformation, with malign actors seeking to sow division and distrust within communities, across countries and throughout entire regions. One of the key problems with our global information ecosystem is that it takes significantly more time and effort to refute false or misleading information than it does to produce it. That is why continued funding and support for the BBC World Service is not just desirable but essential: it acts as a factual counterweight to disinformation.

There is documented evidence of states such as Russia employing trolls to spread misinformation internationally, in countries such as the UK and India, on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter. In 2020, Facebook uncovered a Russia-linked disinformation campaign run through a front organisation in Ghana. The operation used fake accounts to post about US social issues such as race, LGBT rights and celebrity culture, aiming to sow division while concealing its Russian origins. Those and similar actions are designed to accelerate societal division and encourage support for illegal and unethical activities such as the invasion of Ukraine.

In contrast, the BBC World Service shares a balanced view of international developments, delivered through news, speech and discussion, on TV, on radio and online, in 42 languages around the world. It is the world's largest external broadcaster by reception area, language diversity and audience reach, with an average weekly audience of 450 million. It reflects and projects impartial, accurate and independent journalism. In an increasingly competitive global media environment in which authoritarian states invest heavily in state-run media, the BBC stands as a trusted voice globally.

The case for the BBC World Service is about not only the rise of disinformation but the decline of similar global news services, of which the closest in scale was Voice of America, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley).

A striking example of the self-defeating nature of the cuts to such organisations and to impartial global journalism came when Persian-language reporters for Voice of America who had been on administrative leave were called back to work following the escalation of tensions after Israel's attacks on Iran. Just days after returning, these journalists reportedly stepped outside for a cigarette break only to find themselves locked out of the building, and they were then informed that they had been dismissed. At a moment of heightened geopolitical instability, when their language skills and regional insight were more valuable than ever, the termination of their employment was not just poorly handled; it was a serious loss for factual reporting, both for the region and for the global audience.

That is precisely the role that BBC World Service continues to play. In the absence of other trusted international broadcasters, the BBC must fill the gap.

If we do not, others will, and the voices that take the place of the BBC might not be platforms promoting informed and informing journalism. I trust that in her closing remarks the Minister will recognise the role of the BBC World Service and give her support to its continuing existence.

3.30 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Sir Jeremy, for calling me to speak, and it is a pleasure to endorse so much of what has been said today in such a unified way across party boundaries.

The value of BBC broadcasting is to be measured by the risks that people are prepared to take in order to listen to it, ranging from people in occupied countries to people in totalitarian states. From occupied France in the second world war to oppressed Afghanistan today, the BBC World Service is many people's principal lifeline to the truth. Indeed, its current reach in Afghanistan is believed to be almost a quarter of the entire population. As we have heard today, it reaches well over 400 million people worldwide, including 64 million people every week in the world's 20 most fragile states. No political estimate can be put on this reach other than its colossal impact for good.

However, resources have not kept pace and we see the consequences in places such as Lebanon, where the Russian Sputnik radio channel now transmits on the radio frequency that was formerly used in that country by BBC Arabic, which had to be closed down after 85 years, early in 2023. By the end of that year, a Russian radio channel had taken over in Lebanon.

Indeed, Russia and China are estimated to be investing between £6 billion and £8 billion in media services across Africa, Asia and the middle east. As we have heard, deplorably, the US Agency for Global Media, which runs Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, as well as funding Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and the Middle East Broadcasting networks, has suffered huge cuts in funding and personnel. Normally, that overarching system of broadcasting by the USA would reach an estimated 427 million people. Are the gaps that will be created by these cuts going to be filled, once again, by countries hostile to western values? It goes without saying that Russia and China are both absolutely delighted with that development in the USA.

As we have also heard, two thirds of the World Service continues to be funded by the licence fee, yet it is primarily a service that benefits the interests of the Government and the nation as a whole, rather than the people who pay the licence fee being the consumers of the service. By definition, their listening in is a bonus; the World Service is meant to promote values and truth overseas.

Because of the three-minute limit for speeches, I will not be able to refer to BBC Monitoring, as I had hoped to, but it is another vital service. Both the World Service and BBC Monitoring used to be paid for by the Government. If the Government decide to pay for them in full again, they can at least put the money required towards the extra contribution of 1.5% of GDP on NATO spending, to reach a target of 5% of GDP, which they have now agreed to accept.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for not mentioning the thing he has just mentioned. [*Laughter.*]

3.34 pm

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this important debate.

I declare an interest, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the BBC, a recipient of BBC hospitality, and a former employee of the Prospect and Bectu unions, which represent some BBC staff.

The BBC World Service is the ultimate example of British soft power, having driven influence, stability and security across the world for almost a century. In our increasingly unstable world, with media polarisation and disinformation on the rise, the role of the World Service in countering hostile state narratives has never been more critical. Russia and China are spending an estimated £6 billion to £8 billion to use technology and communications as a tool for influence and disinformation in Africa, Asia and the middle east, and winning audience trust as a result. However, as the world's most trusted international news provider, the BBC is uniquely placed to counter these forces, reaching an audience of 414 million people worldwide in 42 languages, across TV, radio and digital platforms every week. This includes 64 million people in the 20 most fragile states. It is the only international news media organisation still broadcasting inside Afghanistan, where it reaches 23% of the adult population, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) rightly pointed out.

Independent research shows that 62% of influential global users say consuming BBC content makes them perceive the UK more positively. However, its ability to reach global audiences has been hampered by previous moves to end the full grant-in-aid funding for the World Service. As the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) noted, today, two thirds of the World Service's budget is met by licence fee payers, with the remainder coming from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. With the licence fee generating 30% less income in real terms than it did in 2010, the BBC cannot ask UK licence fee payers to continue to invest in the World Service at a time when it is forced to cut UK content. That means that the BBC's capacity to sustain coverage, influence and reach has been stretched to the limit, while that of malign state actors is increasing. Budget limitations have forced the BBC to retreat in some key parts of the world, with others taking their place, such as Russian-backed media now transmitting on the very radio frequency previously occupied by BBC Arabic in Lebanon—a point that we have heard but is worth reiterating, as it is shocking.

It is welcome that one of the first acts of this new Government was to resolve the funding crisis for 2025/26, increasing funding from the FCDO by 31%, to £137 million, enabling the BBC to maintain all of its existing language services and to provide emergency information services to those in crisis in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine for the coming year. However, enormous pressures remain, with £6 million of savings being announced for 2025/26, focused on a reduction of 130 roles. The recent spending

review and BBC charter review process offer the opportunity to put the BBC World Service on a stronger footing. The Government should grab this opportunity with both hands, to meet this dangerous era with the stable and long-term funding mechanism needed to secure the World Service's future from central Government budgets—as was the case for the first 80 years of the life of this beacon of British values around the world.

Previous cuts to the licence fee, rising costs and the need to keep pace with technology means that the World Service needs investment. A flat funding settlement in 2026 and the years covered by the spending review would leave the BBC unable to retain the breadth of its language services, diminishing its impact and influence. As the FCDO considers how it will spend its allocation from the recent spending review in the years ahead, I urge it to restore full funding for the World Service, recognising it as a beacon of truth and trusted British influence in an increasingly unstable and fragmented world.

3.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for bringing this debate today. For years, the BBC has been the trusted voice of impartiality across the globe. That reputation of trust has been hard earned. We have much to thank those journalists of days gone by, who put their lives on the line to report truth. They stood in times of danger, determined to ensure that the world knew what was happening and were giants in truth. However, with the polarisation of opinion and the politicisation of news beyond what was ever experienced, impartiality is hard won in any news network, and the BBC is no different. We used to have hard-hitting questions that struck to the heart of an issue, but now we often have “gotcha” moments for the sake of vanity rather than pursuit of truth—those moments annoy me. We see the demonisation of one nation while another is extolled, and when true statistics come to light, the correction is a line on a website. Meanwhile, reputations once destroyed are gone forever. This is a weighty burden and a power that should be carefully utilised.

I recognise the good things that the BBC do, but I want to give two examples of where they fall short and why they should be accountable for that. The concerns with the BBC are well documented, and they include its perceived impartiality. The list of top 10 donors to the BBC include the FCDO, as well as several UN agencies, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, Global Affairs Canada, and many others. The cynic in me, and many others like me, questions whether that might affect impartiality. I make no accusations, but if the shoe fits, wear it; in this case, if the lens needs focusing because it is blurred, correct it.

We rely on the global BBC for impartial news, and there is work to be done to restore that. I will give two examples. First, ask any member of the Jewish community whether they feel that the truth about the middle east has been related, and the response will be passionate, but also detailed, with numerous examples of times when impartiality has failed. That simply should not be the case.

Secondly, earlier in the year, the documentary, “Gaza: How to Survive a Warzone”, was pulled from iPlayer after it emerged that a 13-year-old narrator was the son of a Hamas official. This week, another documentary was pulled due to fears about impartiality. It will be aired elsewhere, but clearly the BBC has a real, substantiated difficulty that it must overcome. In my personal opinion, that must happen.

While there is a licence fee, there is a need to conform to the standards. The BBC must become the BBC of yesterday—the BBC that had that reputation for impartiality and for telling the truth without any of the bias that we have seen over the past year and a half. If it can again become that impartial organisation, I believe that it will be welcomed by everyone.

3.41 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing the debate. He is not only an hon. Friend, but a running partner of mine.

On Tuesday, in Parliament, I had the pleasure of attending a BBC World Service panel, where we heard from the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) on many things, such as how he regrets that the Government in which he served insisted that the World Service should largely be funded by the licence fee. The fee, paid exclusively by British residents, must now tenuously cover 75% of the cost of the World Service, a service designed almost entirely for an external audience, but which has huge public benefit to the British people, if not a huge British public consumption rate.

At the time we are debating this subject, Russia and China have invested up to \$9 billion in informal soft power, which is quite a bit more than we spend. They do so because propaganda, often disguised as news, works. It works today, as it did in previous decades and indeed centuries. British children spend an average of 127 minutes a day on TikTok, a Chinese app, and we saw Russian propaganda influence in the elections in Poland and Moldova recently. This is not the time for Britain to draw back. I continue to salute the BBC Russian team, which I visited earlier this year with the right hon. Member for Maldon on an Inter-Parliamentary Union visit. That team counters misinformation with impartial and accurate journalism, at significant personal cost.

Our greatest tool for soft power must be brought back from the brink, because once that point is reached, it will be increasingly difficult for us to recover such international influence.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that this form of soft power, the BBC World Service—in particular, the Farsi and Russian services—is a much more cost-effective way to try to create democracy and democratic change in countries than military action is?

John Slinger: Absolutely. Of course, military action would be unthinkable in those cases, but what is thinkable is the truth being promulgated through impartial media.

In that panel earlier this week, we heard, for example, that after closing the Voice of America service, the US Agency for Global Media has failed to regenerate any

Iranian listenership, or the amount of Iranian listenership that it used to have, for its broadcasts covering the current Iran-Israel crisis. Presence breeds trust, and the presence of the truth, in my view, is an absolute must.

Currently reaching about 400 million people a week in 42 languages, the BBC World Service is adapting rapidly and becoming more informative, engaging and appealing to a broader audience in an incredibly competitive attention economy. Clearly, the World Service has immense potential to bring people and nations together, and I am delighted that the most recent Budget increased funding by 31%.

Despite the significant budgetary pressures on the FCDO, I wish to use all the soft power that I possess to encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to do all she can to increase funding for the World Service and provide a cast-iron guarantee into the future. This is the crucial moment. We have an opportunity to prevent a diminution in our international power, just as that soft power and our British broadcasting values of tolerance, truth and impartiality are needed most. More than ever, we need to increase and protect the funding. When those values prosper, so do the world, freedom, hope and democracy.

3.45 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this important debate.

I thought I would offer some of my experiences of listening to the BBC World Service over the years: from winning a T-shirt from David Lee Travis’s BBC Wild Service, a radio show on which I requested The Stranglers’ “Golden Brown” for my friends, including Kase the Dog, in Kibbutz Re’im in the early 1980s, to sitting in the back of a Land Rover with “UNHCR” painted on the side and listening to Live Aid while I filed my first report from rural Zambia on the Angolan border in 1985, and to countless other times on aid missions across the globe where the Beeb kept me and my colleagues connected with what was going on in the world. BBC World Service: I thank you.

Of course, it is not just about the Brits abroad; it is about the people of the world having a news service they can trust in their own languages. This is so much more important now with the Russians and the Chinese spending huge amounts to get their propaganda broadcast across the world. The BBC World Service is soft power personified, and I salute it.

In a world in which it is all too easy to block websites, shortwave broadcasting is still a thing, and we should continue to keep the Beeb on the air in as many formats as possible. It is our connection with the world, and the world’s connection with us. Long live Auntie!

3.47 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing today’s vital debate. I will come on to the concerns and risks regarding the future of the BBC World Service, but I wanted to start by saying something obvious that is not said as often as it should be in this place: the BBC World

[Chris Vince]

Service is not only an institution; as the hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) said, for those who travel abroad, it is a constant friend. It reaches 400 million people in 43 languages every single week.

As many hon. Members have said, the biggest concern about any potential loss or downgrade of the BBC World Service is the vacuum that would leave behind. The issues in Lebanon, where the frequency was replaced by a Russian network, have also been mentioned by several hon. Members. That should be hugely concerning to us all. Lord Dubs said that

“the BBC World Service is...worth quite a few submarines in terms of the effect on the world and on our position within it”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 June 2025; Vol. 846, c. 465.]

We need a sustainable settlement for the World Service. I recognise my hon. Friends’ points about the increase in funding by this Government, but the service needs a multi-year settlement that would ensure that there was no fuel added to potential claims that this was part of its managed decline.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket for raising the issue with the Prime Minister today, and I thank the Prime Minister for his recognition of its importance. It was a shame to hear a few jeers from Members who did not recognise the importance of its soft power, although I am relieved that we have strong cross-party support on the issue this afternoon. We are at our best as a Parliament when we speak as one voice.

I ask the Minister to ensure that there are no cuts to the World Service and to champion the importance of multi-year funding. Of course, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said, it would be wonderful to see it fully funded by the Government. I was interested in his comments about funding coming from the defence budget—maybe I will quote him on that at a future meeting.

The BBC World Service is more than just a luxury; it is a strategic asset for this country, and more and more vital as we face a more and more uncertain future in the world.

3.50 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this debate and for his excellent speech.

Many of the points I was going to make have been raised, so I will keep this brief. It is great to have this debate and reflect on the importance of the BBC World Service and its value overseas as well as in the UK. The BBC is one of the most trusted brand names across the mass audience.

I used to work in the Foreign Office—I will say many years ago—which gave me a real appreciation of the value of the BBC World Service. As we have just heard, the World Service is mostly funded by the licence fee, but the remainder is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Funding the continuation of this service is vital. BBC News, mostly through the

World Service, reaches an audience of more than 400 million every week across the world in 43 different languages. It is not surprising that the BBC is the most widely recognised British cultural export and brand.

Recently the BBC started broadcasting on medium wave in Russia, which is a crucial opportunity for Russian people to receive impartial news from outside the country, given Russia’s clampdown on media freedom, both in country and worldwide. By funding the World Service, we continue to have strong cultural soft power across the globe through promoting democracy and neutrality in broadcasting. It is important that we protect the BBC World Service in this current climate of vast disinformation and polarisation in the media. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Lady and all those who have contributed for their self-discipline and collaboration, which has enabled us to make it through with everyone speaking. I now come to the Front-Bench speeches.

3.52 pm

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) on securing this timely and important debate.

I must say it is a delight to see such unanimity of purpose across the Chamber. Clearly, there is a real will here to support the BBC World Service, which since 1932 has been Britain’s voice to the world. Today it reaches, as we have heard, an estimated 400 million people across some 59 countries, broadcasting in English and 42 other languages on TV, radio and digital.

In today’s uncertain world, the BBC World Service is essential, in not only reaching out to people across the world, but, as we heard from many, building British soft power. It also protects and defends UK citizens wherever they are. Just this week, I spoke to a colleague who currently has constituents stuck in Tehran, and that struck a note with me. As a teenager, I was in Tehran at the start of the Iranian revolution; my father was the naval attaché in the British embassy. I remember evenings when the revolutionary guard would practise shooting stray dogs in the empty lot next to our house, and the power cuts, when people could be heard shouting from the rooftops, and all the time we listened to the BBC World Service to learn what was going on—it was an essential lifeline.

However today, this vital institution is under threat, and has faced cut after cut in its budget, recently losing another £6 million. Since the domestic BBC took over funding for the World Service, the organisation has lost much of its autonomy, which has led to merged functions with centralised BBC productions in some cases. Language services were outsourced to local regions, which has exposed them to pressure from local Governments. Indeed, the Azerbaijani Government recently suspended BBC operations. Compounded by cuts to overseas development aid, this has put UK soft power in a precarious position.

In 2025, the UK fell from second to third in the global soft power index, having been leapfrogged by China. As both China and Russia pour billions into their international media organisations, the BBC World

Service is unable to compete at the same level. We cannot keep undermining the BBC World Service, as the Conservatives did with their assault on the BBC. That hollowing out leaves a clear and dangerous information gap in the global media landscape.

China and Russia are pouring billions into their soft power initiatives, all too eager to fill that gap with disinformation and propaganda. They clearly see the value in it—and so should we. The BBC World Service is essential in building and maintaining British soft power and influence, and it requires proper funding. There is a desperate need for unbiased, impartial and fact-based reporting in today's global information ecosystem.

The World Service must now rise again to meet its historic aim: to inform people around the world with clarity, accuracy and integrity—to be a torch shining a light on truth globally. If we are to preserve the UK's world-leading global image, standing tall on the world stage, we must revitalise the BBC World Service and invest properly in its upkeep. The Liberal Democrats believe that Britain must stand as a strong voice on the world stage. We must invest an additional £100 million of Foreign Office funds in the World Service. That would help to restore its global reach and give it the certainty of consistent funding to secure its long-term stability.

We need action now. Will the Government commit today to reversing those damaging cuts? Will they guarantee the extra £100 million needed to restore the BBC World Service to its rightful place as Britain's premier soft power tool? Will they ensure that short-term savings will not undermine our long-term global influence? The world is watching; Britain's voice must not be silenced. The time for half-measures is over.

3.57 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this important debate and thank him for his powerful words supporting the BBC World Service. I think he speaks for most hon. Members of the House—in fact, I am struck by how many speeches I have heard that we all agree with. There is a consensus in this Chamber that the BBC World Service is such an important tool for soft power. I know that everyone has spoken with passion, and it is important that we ensure that it not only survives, but thrives and continues to play an important role around the world, because so many people depend on the BBC World Service.

As its name suggests, the World Service is not merely a broadcaster that serves the United Kingdom's purposes; to some, it is a lifeline. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) mentioned Terry Waite. That was an example when the BBC World Service was a lifeline to someone who was in a very difficult position. Many people around the world depend on that voice of truth, reason and liberty, and that is what the BBC World Service provides, away from so many state-controlled media organisations that promote propaganda and misinformation, which are sadly on the rise today.

It is said that power falls into three categories: military power, economic power and soft power. It is British soft power—our cultural influence, our values and our

institutions, not least our monarchy, which the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket mentioned—that has long distinguished the United Kingdom on the global stage. The vehicle at the heart of that soft power and influence is the British Broadcasting Corporation World Service.

In 2011, when I was a relatively new member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, we stated unequivocally that the World Service is a key component of Britain's soft power. The FAC recognised its invaluable work in “providing a widely respected and trusted news service in combination with high-quality journalism”

to many countries. We said then, as I will say now, that its value far outweighs its “relatively small cost”.

As we have heard, the service reaches an audience of more than 320 million people each week. It broadcasts in 42 languages and has a profound impact on some of the world's most repressive regimes. In Iran, 13.5 million rely on the BBC World Service; in Afghanistan, it is 4.9 million; and in Russia, it is more than 2 million. Yet today, this institution is under increasing financial strain.

This year alone, the BBC World Service has announced 130 job losses, seeking to save just £6 million—a tiny sum, measured against the service's global influence. Meanwhile, its total deficit is expected to rise to nearly £500 million next year. There is a serious risk that the core language services, such as those that serve Iran, Sudan and Myanmar, could face cuts or be scaled back when they are most needed, so we must ensure that does not happen. Indeed, the Foreign Affairs Committee heard clear evidence only in November that cuts to the BBC Arabic and Persian radio services have created dangerous vacuums, which are being filled by hostile, state-backed propaganda, including Russian-backed media in places such as Lebanon. What assessment have the Government made of the consequences of the cuts, and how do they intend to respond to the risk of allowing trusted UK-backed voices to go silent in those critical regions?

To address those issues, the BBC has called for the Government to fund the rise to £200 million as part of a three-year settlement. In the longer term, it is proposed that the Government assume nearly all of the £400 million budget after 2027. The Foreign Affairs Committee, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and the International Development Committee have echoed the calls for long-term financial certainty.

Lord Collins has indicated that a decision will be taken as part of the Government's 2025 spending review. However, the FCDO's own efficiency plans, published alongside this month's review, exclude the BBC World Service from projected savings, citing uncertainty around the transition of the ODA budget to 0.3% of GNI by 2027. The Minister needs to address that concern in her remarks. I therefore say to her: have the Government set any efficiency targets for the World Service? Can she clarify what scale of reduction in direct grant funding is being considered as part of this transition?

I often discuss the wider debate about the BBC's domestic funding with my constituents in Romford, and I am sure all hon. Members have similar discussions. I would welcome having that discussion in this House too, but the World Service is different; it stands apart. It is not a domestic broadcaster—it reaches all parts of the world—so it cannot be lumped together with the

[Andrew Rosindell]

BBC's domestic broadcasting. The World Service needs clarity and certainty if it is to continue its vital work across the globe.

One proposal raised during the FAC's oral evidence session is for a clearer funding distinction. English-language services should continue under the licence fee, while language services should receive dedicated Government grant in aid. Do the Government support that proposal? If so, would the Minister consider, as suggested by the former director of the World Service, Jamie Angus, allowing parliamentarians to oversee and scrutinise the work of the BBC World Service?

The previous Conservative Government rightly recognised the strategic importance of the BBC World Service and took meaningful steps to support it. The £20 million boost announced in the 2023 integrated review helped to safeguard all 42 language services through to the end of 2025. That followed earlier, targeted injections of £4.1 million in 2022 and £8 million in 2021, designed to counter disinformation and expand digital engagement. Those were timely and effective interventions, which strengthened the World Service when it was most needed, but what is now required is a long-term, sustainable funding settlement that builds on that solid foundation.

Funding is not the only challenge. Modernisation must go hand in hand with financial stability to ensure that the product is viable for the future. Is the BBC doing enough to engage younger, digitally native audiences across the world? Can it continue to evolve while maintaining the editorial depth and credibility for which it is rightly respected? Do the Government have confidence that the current digital strategy is sufficiently robust to meet the demands of this new age?

On the other hand, radio remains vital in many regions, particularly where internet access is limited or non-existent. Do the Government acknowledge the ongoing strategic value of traditional radio services, and will they ensure that they are not sacrificed prematurely in the rush towards digital-only broadcasting?

There is also the question of political neutrality, which is one of the BBC World Service's greatest strengths—I hope; it is not always the case in the UK, but I hope it is the case with the BBC World Service. Its global reputation rests on its independence. It must never speak for any Government, but it should, proudly and without hesitation, reflect the values, culture and identity of the United Kingdom. That does not mean becoming a mouthpiece for Westminster, but neither should it shy away from showcasing our constitutional monarchy, our democratic institutions or our national symbols—the Union flag or the national anthem.

There is a balance to be struck, and I ask the Minister what representations the Government are making to the current BBC leadership to ensure that balance is struck. Alarmingly, the 2025 global soft power index shows that the UK has fallen to third place, behind China for the first time. Following the announcement of the Soft Power Council by the Foreign Secretary and the Culture, Media and Sport Secretary earlier this year, will the Minister tell us what role the council sees for the World Service in its work? What progress has been made to date, or has the initiative been quietly set aside?

The British Isles, Great Britain, England, the United Kingdom—however the world sees us—have always been more than just a geographical place on the map. We have been an idea, forged through sacrifice and struggle, to uphold something unparalleled: a set of values, rich in customs, traditions and ceremony; a way of life that millions admire across the globe. The BBC World Service projects that very idea further and more effectively than any embassy, high commission, foreign aid programme or Minister ever could. If we allow the World Service to become a casualty of bureaucratic inertia or short-term budget trimming, it will be not Britain's voice that falls silent, but the voice of reason, truth and liberty, in places where those things are in short supply.

As the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, once stated, the BBC World Service is

“possibly Britain's greatest gift to the world”.

That gift has never been more needed. On behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, I urge the Government to ensure that it remains the gift that keeps on giving to peoples around the world, in every continent, who look to Britain as a beacon of freedom, a nation that always upholds liberty, and one that will stop at nothing to defend the right of free speech.

4.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West):

I look forward to serving under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, for what I think is the first time in Westminster Hall. I am really grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this important debate. It has been a really good debate, with lots of consensus across all parts of the Chamber, and I will do my best to respond to the points raised. As we are not at the exact moment of decision making, I am sure that if there are further representations to be made or particular points that remain unanswered, we will have a further opportunity to fine-tune those in the coming weeks.

Few institutions command the respect and admiration that the BBC World Service does, and I have seen that up close. I have had the privilege of visiting the World Service both as an Opposition MP and in my current role; and when I was a student in China, it was my constant friend, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) said. The hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) described how it was a very big part of his life as well. Each time, I have come away not just more fond of the BBC World Service, but struck by its professionalism, reach and impact. That impact is rooted in its independence, which is key to its success and one of the reasons it is the world's most trusted global broadcaster.

That is why the BBC World Service is a vital part of the UK's soft power, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) said so eloquently in her speech. It does not just reflect the UK to the world; it builds trust in our values through high-quality, impartial journalism. I was very pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) really supporting the role of journalists, who do such a difficult job and are so brave. I was aware three or four years ago of the

journalists in the Persian service, who are under tremendous pressure. The right hon. Member for Maldon told us of an awful example of transnational repression on the streets of London, and that is just appalling. I know that from this House we all want to thank the journalists who do that important work day by day, even though their livelihoods, their lives and the lives of their families are at risk.

As the Minister responsible for the Indo-Pacific, I was particularly moved by the World Service's response to the devastating earthquake in Myanmar. In a country with exceptionally low media freedom, the BBC scaled up its output and dramatically increased its reach. It provided accurate, timely information in a moment of crisis. That is the BBC at its best and it is not the only example. Let us take BBC Persian, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead and by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), who, by the way, represents the home of BBC Scotland. BBC Persian has been operating for over 80 years, with more people than ever relying on it in a time of uncertainty. Some of you may have heard just this morning on the "Today" programme Lyse Doucet's report, in which she mentioned the different restrictions that there are today on reporting on the important elements of conflict that are ongoing in Iran. She mentioned the particular restrictions that there always are on the BBC. I thought that was a very timely mention, given today's debate.

There is also the work of BBC Verify, which works in partnership with the World Service. As the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), said, there are so many competing channels now, which is why BBC Verify plays such an important role. I saw that at first hand on my recent visit to Broadcasting House. Due to the widespread use of mobile phones throughout the world, we see so many different videos all at the same time and sometimes with conflicting messages. That is why it is so important that we have the work of BBC Verify and the journalists who do it. During recent tensions between India and Pakistan, the BBC exposed viral videos as old footage, cutting through misinformation when that mattered most.

There are not just international audiences. Here in the UK, 500,000 people tune in to the BBC's Urdu service. There are also the emergency, pop-up services. In Syria, the BBC launched a service just five days after the fall of Assad. That speaks to the issue of the Arabic service, which many have mentioned this afternoon. I think what we saw there was the closing of a licence and other providers stepping in. That represents a very important message for decision makers, as we approach funding over the next few years, about how we ensure that something like that does not reoccur, but that we protect the vital ecosystems of the BBC World Service and do not allow other providers to come in on top.

The Gaza service reaches 700,000 people each week, also in an environment where it is very difficult for journalists to enter, and, in Sudan, the Lifeline radio service reopened in March, responding to humanitarian need. These services are often the only way for people to gain access to accurate information in times of crisis. That is why this Government value the BBC World Service and are helping it to deliver strongly on its goals.

Despite a tight fiscal context, the FCDO provided a funding uplift of £32.6 million this financial year. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) for recognising that increase, and recognising the difference that a new Government can make—the window that one has to really make a difference. That uplift takes the FCDO's total contribution to £137 million, enabling the BBC to modernise and innovate.

Just this week, the BBC launched its newest service, an AI-driven pilot in Polish, with our beloved Tomasz Schafernaker, the meteorologist we all listen to in order to hear whether we can leave our washing out, or need to water the pot plants before we come to Westminster for a few days. Here he was, both in Polish and in English, doing the news. This is what we have with the BBC's Polish service: the first new language service since 2017, delivering news in text and video across digital platforms, including Facebook and Instagram—a vision of modernity.

Audience surveys consistently show that the World Service is the most trusted international news broadcaster. That trust is built by relentlessly exercising accuracy, impartiality and fairness. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tom Rutland) emphasised that point, particularly in relation to BBC Arabic and how difficult it is to replicate it after it was defunded by the former Government.

We recognise the concerns raised about future funding. The World Service's grant in aid funding for the next three years will be decided through the FCDO's budget process up to 2028-29, but our focus is not just on the short term. My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow made the important point about multi-year funding, which allows an organisation to modernise and innovate because it can see through to the medium-to-long term.

We believe that the upcoming BBC charter review is the right moment to look at potential future World Service funding mechanisms for the longer term, and potentially bring in some of the other funding suggestions that have been made in this debate but are not formal yet. That will ensure that the BBC can continue to reflect the UK's culture and values—so eloquently described by the Opposition spokesman—to the world, through high-quality, trusted journalism.

The BBC World Service is not just a broadcaster; it boosts UK soft power, promotes the UK and our values, exposes disinformation, supports our creative industries and provides critical safety and security information in conflict zones. It is trusted, agile and essential. The Government are very proud to support it, and we will continue to do so.

4.18 pm

Peter Prinsley: I thank all hon. Members who have come here this afternoon for what I think has been a very interesting debate. It strikes me that there is more or less universal support for what is, I hope, a universal service. I was pleased that there was an increase of £32 million in the grant this year; I do not know whether that has anything to do with an interaction I had with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury at the Labour party conference.

I went to an event put on by the BBC and listened to Katya Adler and some of the journalists there, and I was very moved by it, so I stood and asked a question

[Peter Prinsley]

about the £100 million cost of an F-35 jet, which seemed to me to be the same as the funding given by the Foreign Office to the BBC. I stood up and asked, “Do you think that we’d be better off with one more F-35, or should we just look after the BBC?”

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I were in a coffee queue about an hour later, and he asked me whether I was enjoying the conference. I said, “Well, I was.” I explained about what happened, and he said, “Oh, dear. This conference is working very well, because you’ve just been to the BBC and they’ve just told you their story. Now, you’ve just told me that, and now I shall have to give them some more money.” I am hoping

that Parliament continues to work in that way, but I agree that we need to have a long-term funding solution for what is one of our most precious resources. I thank everyone very much for coming this afternoon.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. We have finished early, so now everyone can get into more coffee queues with Ministers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the funding of the BBC World Service.

4.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 26 June 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK Trade Strategy

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): I am pleased to announce that today, 26 June, the Department of Business and Trade has published the UK's trade strategy, setting out the Government's plan to maximise trade opportunities to support growth.

Following the publication of the Government's industrial strategy on Monday, 23 June, which catalyses 10 years of sustained economic growth in our most important sectors and their supply chains and workforces, the trade strategy positions the UK to address the international environment and to be a key influencer on the world stage using free trade, while also reflecting the needs of British businesses in a changing world.

This Government were elected to deliver our plan for change, and, in doing so, to improve the lives of working people and strengthen our country. This included a clear manifesto commitment to publish a strategy that would set out our response to the changing trading environment. This strategy follows our landmark deal with India, the UK-US economic prosperity deal and resetting our relationship with the EU—all of which have been achieved in the first year of the Government.

Having engaged extensively with business, the UK trade strategy is rooted in data and seeks to reflect not only the changing character of the UK economy, but the challenging geoeconomic and geopolitical context of the coming decade. Our trade strategy acknowledges that the structures that we have relied on to be a successful open economy need to adapt to accommodate the changing global trading environment.

Global trade is entering a new era of turbulence, with geopolitical tensions, geoeconomic challenges and technological disruption reshaping the international order. We are witnessing a rise in protectionism, supply chain vulnerabilities and challenges to the multilateral system.

All of these factors necessitate a fresh approach to trade policy. As a services superpower, the UK stands uniquely poised to thrive amid these challenges.

Our trade strategy sets out our prioritisation of markets that present the biggest opportunity to UK businesses, encouraging the use of our varied range of trade policy tools. This will be supported by the new Ricardo fund to help UK regulators remove regulatory barriers for businesses trading abroad.

The trade strategy strengthens our business support, with a particular focus on simplifying and digitalising border processes and introducing measures to protect businesses against economic pressure by strengthening our approach to trade defence: making our trade remedies system more accessible, assertive and agile; reviewing our trade defence instruments; and ensuring businesses are supported by establishing an economic security advisory service.

Finally, the trade strategy outlines how it goes hand-in-hand with our wider Government objectives such as our support to developing countries and our environmental commitments.

[HCWS740]

CABINET OFFICE

Public Procurement Consultation: Growing British Industry, Jobs and Skills

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): I am pleased to announce that the Government are today publishing a consultation outlining our plans for further reforms to public procurement aimed at strengthening British industry, creating jobs and enhancing skills, building on the publication of the industrial strategy White Paper this week. This consultation is intended to inform the development of primary legislation when parliamentary time allows.

In these times of global economic uncertainty, public procurement has a crucial role to play in boosting domestic competitiveness and strengthening British businesses. With £385 billion spent annually on goods, works and services, procurement is a powerful tool for national renewal, allowing local communities to benefit from investments in skills and access to quality jobs.

This consultation builds on the Procurement Act 2023, aligns with our new national procurement policy statement, and will help deliver the Government's industrial strategy. We will maximise value for money and enhance the UK's economic resilience. Strategic use of our procurement spend will protect supply chains, create new opportunities for local small businesses and generate meaningful jobs, delivering better outcomes for taxpayers.

These reforms will put public procurement in the service of the people, empowering British businesses, supporting social enterprise, safeguarding our national interests and addressing today's challenges, while fostering a fairer and more prosperous future for all.

Through this consultation, the Government are seeking the views of businesses, stakeholders and parliamentarians, to inform the ongoing development of our public procurement reforms and ensure that they deliver for people and communities across the UK. I welcome your analysis and insights, as well as the perspectives of businesses and individuals in your constituencies. The consultation is now live on gov.uk and will remain open until 5 September 2025.

[HCWS744]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Society Lotteries Sales Limits and Prize Draws

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by the Minister for Gambling and Heritage, my noble Friend Baroness Twycross:

Today I am updating the House on the Government position on the statutory limits for society lotteries and on prize draws. Alongside this, I am publishing independent research that the Government commissioned on both the lotteries and prize draw markets.

Society lotteries provide valuable funding for good causes across the country and are required to give a minimum of 20% of proceeds to good causes. The latest data showed record sales for the society lottery sector of over £1 billion in 2023-24, an increase of nearly 12% on the previous year, of which £462 million went to good causes.

In 2020, the then Government increased the annual sales limit on society lotteries from £10 million to £50 million, in response to the challenges that many society lottery operators were facing to operate within the limit. Those reforms were intended to support the society lottery sector as a whole by providing significant headroom for further growth.

In December 2023, the previous Government committed to commissioning independent research to look at the scale of the society lotteries sector, the relationship between society lotteries and the National Lottery, and the impact of any future changes to the sales limit.

The report, published here, found that five operators now have annual sales over the previous £10 million limit, with the current annual sales limit of £50 million only impacting one operator, the People's Postcode Lottery.

The research found that the current sales and prize limits on society lotteries are not a barrier to society lottery sector growth. Overall sector sales have increased by 27% from 2019-20 to 2023-24, and PPL sales by almost 30% over a similar period. Despite this significant level of growth, there has not been a corresponding growth in returns to good causes. Since 2021, sector prizes have increased by nearly 28%, and expenses by over 25%, but returns to good causes have grown by only 15%.

The research also found that increasing the annual sales limit to £100 million could have several impacts on the National Lottery, with:

a decrease in participation, with players being displaced to society lotteries (National Lottery sales could fall by between £25 million and £148 million); and

less money for National Lottery-funded good causes, which provide a vital source of income to lottery distributor bodies.

The research also found that there was a potential for an overall increase in funding to good causes, driven by higher returns to good causes by society lotteries outweighing losses to the National Lottery.

The Government want a lotteries sector centred on one national lottery—the National Lottery—while continuing to support the hundreds of wider society lotteries that exist. This model has worked successfully for the past 30 years and created the conditions for the National Lottery to flourish and support life-changing projects, alongside a thriving society lotteries sector.

Since it started, the National Lottery has raised over £50 billion for good causes, raising over £1.8 billion in 2023-24 alone. It supports communities in every UK postcode, including local initiatives, heritage sites, iconic institutions, grassroots sport and elite sport. It is a national institution that the Government are proud of and want to protect.

As the research sets out potential negative impacts of increasing the society lotteries limits on the National Lottery, and the current transition to the fourth national lottery licence, the Government have taken the decision not to make further changes to society lottery limits at this time.

Prize draws

I am also updating the House on the Government's position on prize draws, which is recognised as a significant and growing market. This Government have made it clear that we want people who participate in prize draws to be confident that proportionate protections are in place.

Prize draws and competitions, also known as "free draws", are products where the outcome, and therefore the allocation of prizes, is determined by chance, and where there is both a paid and free entry route for players to choose between. These prize draws do not currently require a licence under the Gambling Act 2005 because they offer a free entry route.

Prize draws are a significant and growing market. It is estimated that the UK prize draw market is worth £1.3 billion annually, with 7.4 million adult participants and over 400 operators.

I am therefore pleased to announce that we will be introducing a voluntary code for prize draw operators later this year. This code will help provide a uniform approach across the sector to strengthen player protections, increase transparency and improve accountability of prize draw operators. My Department has worked closely with the sector over the past six months to start to develop this code. The work is also underpinned by the results of independent research, which the then Government commissioned in 2023, which looked at this growing market. I am grateful to London Economics for this excellent report, which for the first time gives some firm insights into this relatively new sector.

This approach allows us to take swift action collectively with the sector. Although prize draw operators do not currently require a licence under the Gambling Act 2005, as they offer a free entry route, the success of this code will dictate whether this Government decide to take further action, including legislation.

[HCWS743]

EDUCATION

Higher Education Regulation Information

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

One of our country's proudest achievements is our world-leading higher education sector, which expands horizons, fosters research breakthroughs and promotes rigorous academic enquiry. Our universities and higher education providers must be supported to continue in their transformative work.

In January, I set out for the House my commitment to protecting the rights of academic staff, external speakers and students to explore and express new ideas, and my intention to implement, amend and repeal elements of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 in order to make it workable. In that announcement, I also stated my intention to publish a policy paper that would set out my proposals in more detail.

I am therefore pleased to inform the House that the technical policy paper, "The future of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023", has been published today. The paper details the future of each provision in the Act, with additional detail and information on the rationale for my decisions.

The policy paper will ensure that the sector has full clarity on the provisions I commenced on 28 April, which will come into force from 1 August 2025, and on the remaining provisions that will either be repealed or amended via primary legislation as soon as the Government have identified a suitable legislative vehicle. The paper also provides further reasoning on my decision to keep the overseas funding measures under review until later this year.

[HCWS741]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Xlinks Morocco-UK Power Project

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Making Britain a clean energy superpower is one of the Prime Minister's five defining missions of this Government.

The mission is made up of two pillars: to deliver clean power by 2030 and to accelerate to net zero. The mission focuses on the long-term challenges we face and seeks to capitalise on the huge growth and energy security opportunities that our net zero transition can bring.

Successful delivery of the mission and its objectives will be a shared endeavour requiring extensive engagement and investment from citizens, business and industry. As part of this we have been considering the Xlinks Morocco-UK power project—a private sector-led proposal—to supply clean power to Great Britain via subsea HVDC cables.

Xlinks approached Government requesting support for the project, including a bilaterally negotiated 25-year contract for difference under section 10 of the Energy Act 2013, that would guarantee a set price per MWh of electricity supplied for the life of the contract.

A team of officials within the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has engaged with Xlinks closely to understand the details of the proposal and has been working across Government to evaluate the viability and merits of the project. This evaluation has considered if and how the project could support the Government's strategic objectives and the risks which could impact its successful delivery.

The Government have concluded that it is not in the UK national interest at this time to continue further consideration of support for the Morocco-UK power project.

The Government have concluded the project does not clearly align strategically with the Government's mission to build home-grown power here in the UK.

This would be a first-of-a-kind mega-project with a high level of inherent, cumulative risk—delivery, operational, and security). We acknowledge Xlinks' excellent work in trying to mitigate these risks where possible but, nevertheless, this remains a factor in decision making.

Ultimately, we have determined that we should focus our attention on stronger alternative options to meet the Government's plans to decarbonise the power sector and accelerate to net zero at the least risk to billpayers and taxpayers.

The Government also believe that domestic alternatives can see greater economic benefits, whether that through jobs or supply chains.

The Government would like to put on record our thanks to Xlinks and its team for their innovative proposal and their constructive and patient engagement with my Department.

The Government are grateful to the Kingdom of Morocco for its willingness to consider this innovative, first-of-a-kind project, and for the assistance its Ministries have provided my Department over the course of this evaluation. The United Kingdom is committed to further strengthening our partnership and sees Morocco as an increasingly vital trade and investment partner for the UK. Earlier this month, the UK and Morocco entered into an enhanced strategic partnership which saw the Foreign Secretary visit Morocco to sign a series of agreements covering trade, green growth, and security.

The United Kingdom believes Morocco to be an attractive and innovative investment destination and is a key strategic partner for the United Kingdom in the areas of clean energy, decarbonisation, and tackling

climate change. UK companies, supported by the UK Government, are looking to increase their investment in the Kingdom. The Government's decision regarding the Xlinks Morocco-UK power project is not, nor is it indicative of, a reflection or judgment upon the Kingdom of Morocco as either a strategic partner or as a place to do business by the United Kingdom.

The United Kingdom is proud to work with Morocco as a breakthrough agenda partner, where the United Kingdom and Morocco co-lead the power workstream, and to continue supporting its ambitious renewable energy targets through the COP26 Energy Transition Council. The United Kingdom looks forward to identifying and developing new avenues for co-operation in these exciting, and increasingly significant, sectors with the Kingdom of Morocco in the future.

[HCWS745]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Gavi: UK Support 2026 to 2030

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): My noble Friend the Minister of State for International Development, Latin America and Caribbean (the right hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington) has today made the following statement:

I wish to inform the House that the Government have pledged new support to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. This announcement was made at the global summit on health and prosperity through immunisation in Brussels on 25 June, reaffirming this Government's commitment to multilateral efforts on global health.

As Gavi's inaugural board chair, Nelson Mandela, noted over 20 years ago,

"Life or death for a young child too often depends on whether he or she is born in a country where vaccines are available".

While we have made remarkable progress in correcting for these inequities, the job is still not done. More than 5 million children under five still die each year from preventable causes, including vaccine-preventable diseases.

The UK Government were proud to have supported the creation of Gavi, which, since its inception in 2000, has enabled the vaccination of over 1 billion children, saving an estimated 18 million lives. Today, we are proud to invest alongside others in the sustained efforts to support every child to have a fairer start in life.

The UK will invest £1.25 billion over five years, from 2026 to 2030, in support of Gavi's mission. This will support the immunisation of 62.5 million children, saving around 1.25 million lives. But it is not just because this investment is pursuing an obvious good that we invest. We also make this commitment as Gavi remains a vital partner in delivering our ambition for a safer and more prosperous world. The threats we face are evolving. Covid-19 taught us that diseases do not respect borders, and with anti-microbial resistance already contributing to rising mortality, the link between national and global health security has never been clearer. Gavi supports UK public health—and therefore protects the NHS—by preventing disease. Gavi prevents disease both through routine immunisation and through global stockpiles of vaccines to respond to outbreaks, such as Ebola or cholera, in order to prevent these diseases reaching our shores.

Gavi works directly with UK pharmaceutical companies to develop and manufacture vaccines, such as the MenFive vaccine against meningitis and the RTS, S and R21 vaccines against

malaria. This investment in the UK's science sector supports economic growth and job creation, putting money in the pockets of British people.

As the UK pursues a modern approach to development, Gavi must also continue to deliver on its model of partnership, not paternalism. In the last 25 years, 19 countries have successfully transitioned from Gavi support to fully self-finance their immunisation programmes, and some have themselves become Gavi donors. But there is more to be done.

Multilateral health organisations must go further to maximise impact. This means putting country needs at the heart of the future approach. It requires simplifying processes, working more closely together, and strengthening national health systems to deliver. The multilateral system must help countries to take the lead in delivering universal health coverage and to accelerate the move to funding their own systems.

[HCWS746]

JUSTICE

Legal Aid Agency Cyber-security Incident: Temporary Operational Changes

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman):

In my statement to the House of 19 May 2025 on the cyber-security incident affecting the Legal Aid Agency's digital platforms, I said that I would provide a written update to the House in due course.

I therefore want to inform the House that the Ministry of Justice has introduced secondary legislation to make temporary operational changes until these contingency arrangements are no longer needed.

Contingency to date

As I outlined in my statement on 19 May, we have already put in place a number of contingency measures following the incident. In particular, the LAA has set up an incident webpage, with contingencies guidance and frequently asked questions, this is updated daily. The LAA has also set up a telephone helpline for members of the public who are concerned they may have been affected by the data breach.

In terms of contingency measures, the LAA has:

- set up an average payment scheme for legal aid providers for civil legal aid cases;
- resumed payments to providers on criminal legal aid cases;
- put in place processes for urgent civil legal aid application approvals;
- resumed processing criminal legal aid applications for the Crown Court; and
- confirmed that criminal legal aid applications made in this time will be backdated.

Why is this statutory instrument necessary?

We now need to go further by making some operational changes to ensure the LAA's business continuity because some LAA digital services, especially those covering civil legal aid, remain offline. Therefore, earlier today, I laid before Parliament "The Criminal and Civil Legal Aid (Amendment) Regulations 2025" (the Statutory Instrument (SI) and accompanying explanatory memorandum are available at legislation.gov.uk). These regulations come into force on 27 June 2025. This SI makes amendments to ensure business continuity for a temporary period until these changes are no longer required.

The intention is to make operational changes to ensure LAA caseworkers can continue to process high-profile, and contentious matters. To enable this, delegations

to providers will be extended to carry out certain functions. While this delegation does not require legislation, the SI makes necessary changes to regulations to enable providers to undertake certain work during this period.

These legislative amendments together with some delegation to providers, enables business continuity and ensures the Lord Chancellor is fulfilling her obligations under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 to make legal aid services available in accordance with the Act. It ensures continuity for both legal aid providers and clients, and maintains access to justice. The measures are designed to ensure these important obligations are met and maintain system stability until digital operations can be restored. In doing so, we are mindful of our responsibility to the taxpayer: proportionate cost controls and assurance mechanisms are in place to manage financial and fraud risks.

The SI will, for a temporary period:

waive civil legal aid income and capital contributions for new and existing cases;

remove prohibitions on delegation of powers to enable the Director of Legal Aid Casework (DLAC) to delegate some additional decisions regarding civil legal aid determinations to legal aid providers; and

make some minor and consequential amendments relating to criminal legal aid determinations which supports other measures being taken as business continuity arrangements.

The above changes contained in the SI will be complemented by changes to the legal aid tables of delegated authorities, issued by the DLAC through a non-legislative process.

Criminal legal aid

For criminal legal aid, the practical effect of this package, that is, the SI and the consequential changes, will be to delegate to providers various DLAC functions, in particular:

the power to issue representation orders, and complete related means and merits assessments, for some criminal proceedings in the magistrates' court where the client is passported, unemployed or under 18; and

the power to withdraw representation orders for the magistrates' court under certain circumstances.

In criminal legal aid, there is also a provision to ensure providers will be paid for any work conducted on behalf of new clients where they have not been able to properly submit an application to the LAA since some systems first went down on 7 May 2025.

Civil legal aid

For civil legal aid, the effect of the SI package will be to waive both income and capital contributions from clients, and remove the prohibition on delegation to providers of certain functions. The DLAC will then delegate to civil legal aid providers the ability to:

amend substantive determinations for Licensed Work up to a certain limit;

make determinations in respect of certain proceedings which are related to those for which a determination has already been made by the LAA; and

withdraw non-contentious determinations on legal aid funding where: the services made available by the determination have been provided; the proceedings to which the determination relates have been concluded; the individual consents; or the individual has died.

For licensed work, where legal representation in court is needed, the LAA, acting under delegated powers, usually determines eligibility and is also typically responsible for taking decisions in relation to the potential amendment of the determination as well as its possible withdrawal, subject to the circumstances of the case.

In relation to civil legal aid contributions, there is a transitional provision which will act as a deterrent to individuals who already have civil legal aid, from stopping instructions to their solicitors to seek a refund of any contributions already paid, then making a new application for the same case under the more favourable terms provided for under this SI.

The DLAC will also be required to withdraw, rather than revoke, any emergency representation determination where the individual does not subsequently pass the means test.

The distinction between revocation and withdrawal is broadly as follows: when the LAA revokes the funding certificate, any legal aid funds paid to the provider for work undertaken in the case would be reclaimed from the individual; in contrast, when the LAA withdraws the funding certificate, legal aid funding ceases from that point and the individual faces no liability to the LAA for the legal aid costs incurred in the case.

I want to reassure the House that we are continuing to work hard on stabilising the LAA's systems, and we have put in place these contingency plans, and those set out in the LAA's published guidance, which is regularly updated, to ensure that those most in need of legal aid can continue to access the help that they need. We have engaged with legal aid representative bodies on these contingency plans and will continue to do so.

[HCWS743]

Written Correction

Thursday 26 June 2025

Ministerial Correction

WORK AND PENSIONS

Topical Questions

The following extract is from Work and Pensions questions on 23 June 2025.

Graeme Downie: My constituent, Nicola Smith, works for NHS Fife. Like many people across the country, she is not paid on the same date each month. This leads to incorrect calculations for her husband Steven's universal credit, often leaving the family without a payment or being sanctioned before the system catches up the following month, and I am aware of thousands of others in a similar position. What reassurance can the Minister provide that he is addressing these issues, ensuring smooth and fair payment for NHS workers and their families on universal credit, and will he meet me to discuss this issue in more detail?

Sir Stephen Timms: We are reviewing universal credit to ensure that it makes work pay and tackles poverty, and we are looking at exactly the kind of problem that my hon. Friend highlights. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss it, because Nicola, Steven and **all 7,000 households** claiming universal credit in his constituency will benefit from the standard allowance increase proposed in the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill, which we will be debating next week; it is the biggest increase in the headline rate of benefits since at least 1980.

[*Official Report*, 23 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 822.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Social Security and Disability, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms):

Sir Stephen Timms: We are reviewing universal credit to ensure that it makes work pay and tackles poverty, and we are looking at exactly the kind of problem that my hon. Friend highlights. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss it, because Nicola, Steven and **7,000 households** claiming universal credit in his constituency will benefit from the standard allowance increase proposed in the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill, which we will be debating next week; it is the biggest increase in the headline rate of benefits since at least 1980.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 26 June 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	1223	TRANSPORT—continued	
Aviation Sector	1233	Road Network: Condition	1234
Bus Manufacturing	1233	Topical Questions	1238
Driving Test Backlog	1237	Train Frequency: Sutton and Cheam.....	1236
Local Bus Services.....	1226	Transport: Economic Growth.....	1223
Passenger Rail Performance: Cumbria	1231		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 26 June 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	57WS	ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	60WS
UK Trade Strategy	57WS	Xlinks Morocco-UK Power Project.....	60WS
CABINET OFFICE	58WS	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND	
Public Procurement Consultation: Growing		DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	62WS
British Industry, Jobs and Skills.....	58WS	Gavi: UK Support 2026 to 2030.....	62WS
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	58WS	JUSTICE	63WS
Society Lotteries Sales Limits and Prize Draws.....	58WS	Legal Aid Agency Cyber-security Incident:	
EDUCATION	60WS	Temporary Operational Changes.....	63WS
Higher Education Regulation Information.....	60WS		

WRITTEN CORRECTION

Thursday 26 June 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTION	5WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTION—continued	
Work and Pensions	5WC	Topical Questions	5WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 3 July 2025**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 26 June 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1223] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Transport

Business of the House [Col. 1243]
Statement—(Leader of the House)

G7 and NATO Summits [Col. 1261]
Statement—(Prime Minister)

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 2) Bill [Col. 1283]
Read a Second and Third time, and passed

Armed Forces Day [Col. 1284]
General debate

Floating Solar Panels [Col. 1332]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Legislative Scrutiny: Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill [Col. 359WH]
Select Committee Statement—(Alex Sobel)

IVF Egg Donation: Young Women [Col. 363WH]

BBC World Service Funding [Col. 378WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 57WS]

Written Correction [Col. 5WC]
Ministerial correction
