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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 8 July 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NORWICH LIVESTOCK MARKET BILL [LORDS]

Bill read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

ROYAL ALBERT HALL BILL [LORDS]

Second Reading opposed and deferred until Monday 14 July at Seven o'clock (Standing Order No. 20).

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I would like to take a moment to remember Lord Tebbit, the former right hon. Member for Chingford, who died yesterday. He was one of the giants of the Thatcher era, before his political career was cut short by the attack on the Grand hotel in Brighton. The thoughts of the whole House are with his family and friends.

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Crown Court Backlog

1. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to reduce the Crown court backlog. [905064]

2. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to reduce the Crown court backlog. [905065]

7. **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to reduce the Crown court backlog. [905073]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The Government inherited a record and rising courts backlog. We are investing more than the Conservatives ever did, and funding a record allocation of Crown court sitting days—110,000 days this year, which is 4,000 more than during the last Government—but we must reform, too. Sir Brian Leveson will soon present his recommendations for delivering once-in-a-generation reform and swifter justice for victims.

Chris Vince: In Essex, 20% of cases are stopped after a defendant has been charged because victims are dropping out and withdrawing their support. With some waiting years for their case to get through the courts, is it any wonder that they give up on justice? Does the Secretary of State agree that we need radical action now to stop the backlog from getting any bigger in places like my constituency of Harlow?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Victims on many occasions feel retraumatised by the criminal justice system because of the long delays. Defendants know that cases are taking too long to be heard; too many of them think that they can game the system, and that if they wait long enough, victims will drop out. That is why we are determined to deliver swifter justice for victims. It is why we have delivered a record number of sitting days in the Crown court this year, and it is why we will do once-in-a-generation reform of our courts after Sir Brian publishes his review.

Jim Dickson: Thanks to the massive court delays inherited from the Conservatives, as the Secretary of State said, residents in Dartford continue to face huge delays in getting cases involving them to court. What assurance can she give that the delays will reduce, and that for my constituents, it will not continue to be a case of “justice delayed is justice denied”?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the old adage, “justice delayed is justice denied”, has come true. We know that we need bold reform. We have to get the backlog down, and we have to deal with the rising and record demand coming into the system as well. That is why we have made a record allocation of Crown court sitting days, but we also need bold, once-in-a-generation reforms. His constituents and the country deserve nothing less.

Adam Jogee: The people of Newcastle-under-Lyme want thugs and criminals to be held to account and to feel the full force of the law, and victims of crime to get the justice they deserve. In the west midlands—my home region and the Lord Chancellor’s—the Crown court backlog has increased by over 3,000 cases since 2016. It is clear that we need an overhaul of the system, and to speed up justice. Will the Lord Chancellor tell us two things? When does she expect the Leveson report to be published, and what may it mean for the future of jury trials?

Shabana Mahmood: The publication of Sir Brian Leveson’s review is due very soon. My hon. Friend will understand why I cannot give any the exact date, but once Sir Brian has published his findings, the Government will consider them in due course, and we will come to the House first with our full response.

Jury trials will remain a cornerstone of our justice system in the most serious cases, but we have to recognise that they take five times longer than cases heard in magistrates courts, and magistrates courts already hear 90% of all criminal trials. With victims waiting so long for their day in court, we must ask whether there are cases being heard by juries today that need not be heard by juries in future.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The rise in the Crown court backlog in 2024 was 7,051 additional cases; that is 588 extra cases on the backlog every month. The figures for March 2025 show an additional rise over three months of 2,300; that is 769 additional cases on the backlog every month. Not only is the position getting worse under the Lord Chancellor’s leadership, but the rate at which it is getting worse is increasing. Can she explain to the House why the rate is getting worse, and why, when in November the Lady Chief Justice offered 6,500 additional sitting days, she did not accept every single one of those?

Shabana Mahmood: I am rather surprised by that question from the hon. Gentleman, because he is normally across the detail. Let me tell him two points of detail that were missing from his question. First, he knows that the demand coming into the system is rising. We have record numbers of cases coming into the system, which is a good thing, because it means that victims are seeking justice, but the system has not been able to cope with that demand. Secondly, he should know that there is a difference between judicial capacity, which is what the Lady Chief Justice has spoken about, and system capacity. Unless he and the Conservatives have suddenly discovered a system that will 3D print new judges, lawyers, prosecutors and defence barristers overnight, I think he will recognise that there comes a point at which additional money does not buy us the ability to go faster. That is what I have to reckon with as Lord Chancellor. I have set the sitting days at 110,000 because that is the max for the system, and that is fully funded. We will consider once-in-a-generation reform to get to the bottom of this problem and fix it once and for all.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Hannah contacted me for the first time in August last year after numerous stalking incidents, online abuse and violent threats from a member of her family. He is still at large almost a year on, despite four arrests. The court date keeps being put back due to the backlogs. There have been further breaches of the bail conditions and a restraining order issued, but we have heard that a fourth trial will be delayed until 2026 at the earliest. What is the Lord Chancellor able to do to help victims who are already in the system, and who continue to be abused by a perpetrator?

Shabana Mahmood: I will happily look at the details of the case that the hon. Lady raises. Some of that relates to charging and what the police and others are doing, but I will ensure that she gets a full response from across Government on some of the specifics. Let me observe that we make a whole range of victim support available to victims as they navigate the criminal justice system, and we will continue to do so; I recommend that she recommends some of those mechanisms to her constituent. We have made a record allocation of funding to the Crown courts, but we recognise that we need to go further, as we will after the publication of Sir Brian Leveson's report.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): The Crown court backlog stands at approximately 73,000 cases annually, and rape and sexual assault trials in Leicester Crown court face delays of up to three years. What steps is the Department taking to reduce that backlog and ensure that serious offences are brought to trial more efficiently to prevent further trauma for victims and the miscarriage of justice?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman is right that the delays in the system and the long waits for trials are causing huge amounts of trauma to victims, who regularly tell me, him and other Members from across this House that they feel retraumatised by the criminal justice system when they seek justice. I am not willing to tolerate that, which is why I have made record funding available. I recognised right at the outset that the system cannot carry on as it has done for all these years. We need to ask a bigger question about the sorts of cases in

our system that get a jury trial, and those that do not. This Government will pursue once-in-a-generation reform of our Crown courts.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Last year, 839 magistrates court trials and 186 Crown court trials had to be cancelled because the defendant was not brought to court on time by prisoner escort contractors. We expect Sir Brian's report very shortly, which will have a range of proposals on how to reduce the unprecedented backlog in the Crown courts. Does my right hon. Friend agree that however effective those reforms prove to be, they will be undermined from the start unless the performance of contractors such as Serco improves?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right that the performance of contractors needs to improve. He and I have discussed that, and the issue regularly comes up in oral questions in relation to the contract for electronic monitoring. We monitor those contracts regularly. We are determined to pursue once-in-a-generation reform, but my hon. Friend will know that the whole system needs to become more productive and efficient. That is why there will be a second part to Sir Brian Leveson's work, which will report later in the year, and which will look at productivity and efficiency across the criminal justice system. I regularly discuss these matters with the Criminal Justice Board as well.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): One of the most important things we can do, as the Lord Chancellor seems to indicate, is reduce the number of cases going into the system by reducing reoffending where possible, including intergenerational reoffending. Given that 65% of boys with a parent in prison will go on to offend, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that the children of prisoners are properly identified and supported, so that they do not become the next generation of people in prison?

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Gentleman raises a really important point, and I am grateful to him for doing so. Focusing on the children of prisoners was a manifesto commitment of our party, because—exactly as he says—there is a cycle there that society needs to break, particularly for the children of male prisoners, and especially their sons. We are leading work on joining up information sharing across Government to make sure that those children are identified, properly supported, and able to break the cycle of offending in their family. We must do so in a way that does not stigmatise those children and push them away from those who want to help them. Sensitivity and delicacy are required, but the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to recognise the problem, which we are working on with colleagues in other bits of Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): The Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone was right when he said,

"Justice delayed is justice denied".

He would look on the inheritance that this Government received from the Conservative Government as a matter for great shame. While creative solutions are required to

tackle the backlog, the jury trial—which we hear may be at risk for some—is a critical safeguard on state power, and is key to a liberal and free society. Ahead of the Leveson report, which is coming out very soon, can the Government tell us how they will increase the overall capacity of the courts system to dispense justice, as opposed to potentially undermining justice altogether?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for that question, but I would challenge him on two points. I do not think we are undermining justice in this country, when he himself recognises that justice delayed is justice denied. We are trying to properly think through, “What is a good system for us to proceed with in this country?” As he knows, 90% of all criminal cases already go to the magistrates court. That is why we will pursue the reforms that we have set out.

Private Contractors: Justice Services

3. **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): What steps she is taking to ensure that private contractors delivering justice services are held to account. [905066]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): We inherited a set of contracts from the previous Government, some of which are not performing as we would like, particularly in the areas of maintenance and electronic tagging. The Prisons Minister in the other place is gripping this situation and driving progress, with regular meetings to review performance.

Mr Reynolds: In 2013, Serco was fined £68.5 million for overcharging the Government for electronic tagging, but it was still awarded the new £200 million contract in 2023. Given the Secretary of State’s comments in March that the performance of Serco was “not good enough”, can the Minister explain what a private company actually needs to do for the Government to see it as unfit to hold a contract such as this one?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: While the performance of Serco has been unacceptable, as the hon. Gentleman says, we have made progress, and performance is improving. We have imposed fines for poor performance, and will not hesitate to employ further contractual remedies or other measures should they be required, but this is a contract that we inherited from the Conservative party, and we are doing our best to make it work.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for that response, and this Government are doing their best to make things work, but Channel 4 has revealed that the contract with Serco was fundamentally failing. In the answer to my written question in June, Serco’s performance was still deemed to be unacceptable, so where are we with bringing Serco around to perform properly? If it does not do so, will the Government consider cancelling that contract and bringing those services back in-house?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: All options are always under review, but as I have said, performance under that contract is improving. The Prisons Minister in the other place is gripping this issue, and we will get to where we need to get to.

Legal Aid: Rural Areas

4. **Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): What steps she is taking to help provide access to legal aid to people in rural areas. [905070]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): People must be able to access legal aid, regardless of where in the country they live, and this Government have made substantial new investments. On the civil side, in housing and immigration, we have announced uplifts worth £20 million; in respect of criminal law, criminal legal aid solicitors will receive an additional £92 million a year. The Legal Aid Agency works hard to ensure that the supply of, and access to, legal aid is secured across the whole of England and Wales.

Victoria Collins: From the lack of a rural crime strategy to reduced access to legal aid, our rural communities are being left behind. In Harpenden, one farm alone has reported 56 fly-tipping incidents in five years, with the injustice that the most recent incident is costing the farmer around £40,000. Proper legal support for victims of rural crime could make a world of difference, so how are the Government ensuring fair access for our rural communities, including face-to-face legal aid support?

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to ensure access to legal aid for those who live in rural areas. The Legal Aid Agency was satisfied that legal aid services across all categories are adequate in her constituency of Harpenden and Berkhamsted. Digital technology is transforming access to justice through remote consultations and Government-funded websites, such as Advicenow. I encourage her constituents to access legal aid through those means, as well as through local providers.

Prison Officers: Terms and Conditions of Service

5. **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): What progress she has made on reviewing terms and conditions of service for prison officers. [905071]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): I pay tribute to the essential work that our prison officers do, day in, day out. This year’s pay award delivered another real-terms pay rise for our frontline prison staff. We are committed to effective training and development of existing staff, as delivered through the Enable programme, alongside the provision of extensive wellbeing services.

Seamus Logan: I was in correspondence with the Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending last October, but he sits in the other place. In January, I was advised by the Minister in this place that the Secretary of State was awaiting advice about the range of terms and conditions issues for prison officers. I was also advised later in the spring, again from the Dispatch Box, that it was right that the situation was being “kept under review”. I thank the Minister for the thoughtful and sincere way in which he has engaged with me in recent months, but given that I have been asking about this issue for nine months, can he provide an update today on progress with the advice, and on exactly what is being reviewed?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member and I had a useful meeting a short time ago to explore all these issues, and I can reaffirm that the Lord Chancellor and the Department are fully engaged with the Prison Officers Association on this and other issues.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): There has been a spate of attacks on prison officers in recent months by Islamist terrorists. One study even revealed that terrorists inside prisons are teaching organised criminals how to make bombs. It has got so bad that former governors believe that the threat posed to frontline staff by radicalised Islamists is now intolerable. Can the Minister tell us what his assessment is of the threat from Islamist gangs, and what on earth he is doing about it?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We are working hard to enhance security and ease crowding in order to curb violence, including through a new £40 million investment to stop contraband, which puts our hard-working staff at risk. Assaults on staff and the other issues that the right hon. Gentleman mentions are unacceptable. That is why we are firmly and securely taking action. We are mandating the use of protective body armour in the highest-risk units and on the long-term high-security estate, which hold some of the most dangerous prisoners. We are taking action, while the previous Government failed.

Prison Officer Morale: Pension Age

6. Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of lowering the pension age of prison officers on prison officer morale. [905072]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): Prison officers benefit from the civil service pension scheme, which offers excellent public sector terms, low employee contributions and a 28.97% employer contribution, but we recognise that pension age is an important issue for prison officers. That is why we are fully engaged with the unions on this issue.

Brian Leishman: The last Government hiked up prison officers' pension age to 68, and then walked away from negotiations that were set up to partially reverse that unfair and unrealistic policy. This devastated morale, which is now worse than ever, especially with violence against staff at record highs. Are this Government prepared to do what it takes and clean up yet another Tory prisons mess? Will Ministers finally get back around the table with the Prison Officers Association to negotiate a fair pensions deal for its members?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to the fact that this is yet another Tory mess that we have inherited. As I have said, we value the work of the POA, and we recognise the significant work of prison officers and the strength of feeling on this issue. We will continue to engage with the POA and others to try to find the best way forward.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): There is a problem in our prisons across the United Kingdom. It is a two-spectrum problem, in that there is an increase in turnover, with prison officers leaving

early, while the problem of the pension continues. Can the Minister increase the intensity of discussions with the POA to try to reach a more satisfactory outcome to which the Department and the prison officers concerned are amenable?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. We need to make progress on this issue, and we are determined to do so.

Violence against Women: Criminal Justice System

8. Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): What steps she is taking to support victims of violence against women through the criminal justice system. [905074]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): We are funding police support services such as independent sexual advisers and domestic abuse advisers. We have launched domestic abuse protection orders in selected areas, and, as recommended by the sentencing review, we are exploring the possibility of expanding the use of domestic abuse specialist courts. We have asked Sir Brian Leveson to conduct a review of our criminal courts with the ambition of reducing the time for which victims wait for justice.

Dr Chambers: A woman from Winchester wrote to me saying:

"It feels as though every department that should have protected us has instead failed us".

After years of high-risk domestic abuse, she went through a CID investigation to prove that she needed financial separation, but the police missed the Crown Prosecution Service investigation deadline and no charges were brought. She is now unable to secure child maintenance. Her abuser remains in financial control, which is effectively enabled by Government systems. What discussions is the Minister having with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to ensure that perpetrators of domestic abuse can no longer use financial systems to maintain power and control over their victims?

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Member has made the important point that this is not just a criminal justice problem to be solved, but a problem for every single Department. That is why we have a cross-Government strategy on tackling violence against women and girls, which includes economic abuse. Along with the Safeguarding Minister, I regularly meet Treasury and DWP colleagues in order to get to grips with the problem, and we will publish our strategy in the coming months.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I welcome all the work that the Secretary of State and her team are doing in this important area, for instance through the Women's Justice Board. At least 57% of women in prison and on probation are victim-survivors of domestic abuse, and in many cases their alleged offending is directly linked with their experiences of that abuse. What consideration has the Minister given to the introduction of an effective defence for domestic abuse victims who use force against their abusers, and for those who are coerced into offending?

Alex Davies-Jones: I know that my hon. Friend cares deeply about this issue. She will be aware of the work that the Women's Justice Board is doing with the

Department, some of the reviews by David Gauke including, specifically, the sentencing review, and Baroness Casey's recent rapid review of grooming gangs; all that work is connected with defences for victims. We are actively considering this matter, and I will happily work with my hon. Friend and the Centre for Women's Justice to develop further policies.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The whole House will remember the murder of Sarah Everard and the national debate about violence against women and girls that it provoked. Sarah's parents, Susan and Jeremy, had many positive experiences of the criminal justice system, but they were deeply upset by the restrictions that were placed on what they could say in their victim impact statements. I think that is wrong, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner thinks it is wrong, and the Victims' Commissioner thinks it is wrong. Does the Minister think it is wrong?

Alex Davies-Jones: I have been proud and privileged to meet the Everards, as well as other families who are members of Justice for Victims, to discuss how we can improve the criminal justice system for victims by putting them back at the heart of the system. As the shadow Minister will know, we debated this issue heavily in Committee during the Victims and Courts Bill, and the Department is considering it actively to ensure that the voices of victims are represented in court and at sentencing. I will happily update him on our discussions about how exactly we can do that and what is the best way of doing it.

Dr Mullan: I welcome that commitment, but the Minister failed to mention that we tabled an amendment in Committee which she voted against, along with a number of other Labour Members. Given what she has just said, will she commit herself now to ensuring that an amendment is tabled during future stages of the Bill to prevent restrictions on what victims and their relatives can say in their impact statements?

Alex Davies-Jones: Let me say yet again that, as the shadow Minister will know, we voted against that amendment because victim impact statements are currently classed as evidence in a court of law, and they have to be quite specific. We are aware of the concerns of victims; what we need to do is put forward workable, realistic possibilities for how we can best represent their voice in the courtroom. We are getting on with action, whereas the Conservatives dithered and delayed for 14 years. We are making sure that victims are represented in our criminal justice system.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I have a constituent who is a survivor of violent economic abuse, which has involved her abuser occupying one of her properties without consent and vandalising it with mounds of human excrement, rendering it unrentable at huge financial costs. The photographs are disgusting. Delays in civil court proceedings have forced my constituent to live with this for nearly three years. What steps can the Government take both to support survivors who are

living in this kind of hell and to speed up the legal proceedings that are currently preventing my constituent from being free once again?

Alex Davies-Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman please pass on my sincere thoughts to his constituent? That is a horrific situation that no one should have to face. The hon. Member will be aware of our manifesto commitment to look at co-habiting couples' rights to ensure that victims, survivors and every party have equal access to these rights. We are currently developing that policy work, as well as working across Government with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Treasury and DWP to look at how we can tackle all elements of violence against women and girls, including economic abuse, and I will happily update him on those discussions in due course.

Grooming Gangs: Criminal Justice System

9. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support victims of grooming gangs through the court system. [905075]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The sexual exploitation and rape of children by grooming gangs is one of the darkest moments in this country's recent history. In the Crime and Policing Bill, we have made grooming a statutory aggravating factor in sentencing for child sexual offences, and we have accepted all of Baroness Casey's recommendations, including changing the criminal law to ensure that adults who penetrate children under 16 are charged with rape.

John Lamont: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her response. Thousands of children across the UK have been abused by grooming gangs, yet charities still warn of victim blaming by police and those in authority. We should be clear that the problem is not children; it is those who prey on them. What are the Government doing to ensure that victims are properly supported and receive the justice they deserve?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point that was picked up by the Casey report, all the recommendations of which the Government have accepted, and I have no doubt that the national inquiry will be very cognisant of the issues that he raises. Through the Criminal Justice Board, we will ensure that every part of the criminal justice system, from policing right through to prisons, probation and courts, is aware of how we deal with victims: with fairness and justice.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Sohail Zaffer raped a child. He received 42 months. Manzoor Akhtar raped a child. He was sentenced to four and a half years. Ramin Bari was convicted of four rapes. He got just nine years—just two years per rape. These men were sentenced, but not punished. Does the Justice Secretary think these sentences represent justice? If she does not, like most people in this country, will she change the law so that rape gang perpetrators receive full life sentences?

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Gentleman will know that I cannot and will not comment on individual sentences. I urge him to live up to the responsibility of being the shadow Lord Chancellor, because commenting in the way that he regularly does on individual sentencing decisions, stripped of context and without all the information, is wrong. Those are independent decisions made by the independent judiciary in individual cases.

Prison Capacity

10. **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase prison capacity. [905076]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): We took immediate action to prevent the collapse of our prison system. The last Government added just 500 places to our prison estate over 14 years, whereas the previous Labour Government added around 28,000 places over 13 years. We intend to match the ambition of the last Labour Government, not the last Conservative Government, which is why we are committed to building 14,000 new prison places. By the end of this Parliament, we will have more people in prison than at any time in our history.

Tom Hayes: Every week brings new concerns about crime in Bournemouth, and I will pick up this issue with the police and crime commissioner for my area in my Boscombe office on Friday. Increasing prison spaces keeps dangerous people away from the public, and punishes serious crime. Increasing prison spaces stops reoffending, and I thank Tim from Athelstan Road for his creative suggestions to achieve that, which I have forwarded to the relevant Minister. Can the Minister outline the steps that he is taking to stop reoffending, especially where it applies to violent crime?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is right. Public protection is our No. 1 priority, but we are also tackling reoffending, with proper programmes in place in prison. We also need to support people when they come out of prison, and probation is part of that solution.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): In the light of the pressure on prison places, what assessment has the Minister made of the Government's early release scheme, under which nearly a quarter of those released reoffended again within just one year? Does he believe that the criteria used to determine eligibility were fit for purpose, and will he share them with the House?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Due to the circumstances that this Government found when we came into office, we had no option but to introduce a temporary change to the law to allow prisoners serving an eligible standard determinate sentence to be released on licence. This had many more constraints to it than the early release scheme operated by the previous Government, which was rushed out just before the election. Actually, the data has not yet been published, so the right hon. Gentleman will have to wait for that.

Probation Officers

11. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support probation officers. [905077]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): Me again, Mr Speaker. We are determined to back our hard-working probation staff by investing up to £700 million, which is a 45% increase in funding. We have already exceeded this year's target by recruiting over 1,000 trainees. We will recruit another 1,300 more probation officers in 2025-26.

Warinder Juss: An effective Probation Service is crucial for the rehabilitation and resettlement of prisoners to reduce reoffending. Although I welcome the number of new probation officers to be recruited, Napo reports that probation workloads are unmanageable, staff turnover and sickness are high, and probation officers are often managing cases belonging to colleagues, when evidence suggests that prisoners on licence are less likely to be recalled if they have had the same supervising officer from the day of their release. Can the Minister please outline the steps being taken to address these issues, so that morale is improved and probation officers have sufficient time for and attention to give to individual cases?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that prison officers have the time to do the job they came in to do, which is to spend time with offenders and turn their lives around. In addition, we have invested an initial £8 million in technology and launched a new programme to develop a sustainable work process that will allow probation staff to focus on the work they joined the service to deliver.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for that answer. I had the opportunity a few months ago to visit the probation office in Newtownards to get an idea of what it does. I was very impressed, first, by the quality of the staff; secondly, by the fact that they are involved in restorative justice issues relating to perpetrators and victims; and, thirdly, by the importance they give to ensuring that young people have opportunities. Can the Minister tell us, from his discussions with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, what has been done to ensure that what happens here also happens back home and that what happens back home also happens here?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I thank the hon. Member for his question. As he knows, we have regular discussions in the five nations group to ensure that good practice is shared, issues are addressed together and we learn from each other.

Prison Security

13. **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve prison security. [905080]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): This year, we are investing over £40 million in physical security across 34 prisons, which includes anti-drone measures to prevent drugs and other illicit items from entering prisons. Starting this month, we will trial the use of tasers by specialist staff, and we are increasing tactical staffing resource to strengthen prison security.

Sarah Edwards: There has been a spate of attacks at Swinfen Hall Prison, which holds young offenders, in my constituency. Drugs, phones and weapons are often dropped in by drone. The families of prisoners are concerned for their safety, and prison officers are at risk. What steps are the Government taking to prevent drones and to tackle the high levels of violence in our prisons?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Under the last Government, between 2019 and 2023, drone sightings around prisons increased by over 770%. As I have said, we are investing £40 million in bolstering security measures in our prisons, and we are currently trialling new anti-drone netting on the long-term, high-security estate to tackle drone incursions.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Prison staff are facing record levels of violence and working in such a toxic environment that, according to the Rademaker review, workers are too afraid to raise complaints about bullying and harassment. Does the Lord Chancellor therefore welcome today's relaunch of the updated "Safe Inside" prisons charter by the Joint Unions in Prisons Alliance, a coalition of 10 trade unions representing the vast majority of prison staff? If so, will she join us this evening to hear more about safer systems of working in prisons?

Shabana Mahmood: I believe the Prisons Minister may well be attending the event that the right hon. Member mentioned. I will happily pick that up in my regular conversations with trade union officials. She is right to highlight the scale of violence across our prison system. We are already taking measures, and I hope that the combination of sentencing reform and investment in our prisons will bring down the level of violence we are currently seeing.

Court Backlog and Pre-trial Waiting Times

14. **John Milne (Horsham) (LD):** What steps she is taking to tackle the backlog in the courts. [905081]

17. **Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to reduce pre-trial waiting times. [905084]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): This Government inherited a record and rising courts backlog from the previous Tory Government across every jurisdiction. Whether for a victim of crime, a parent, a business or an employee, backlogs mean waiting years for their day in court. We have taken swift action to invest in our courts, and courts in every jurisdiction are sitting at or close to maximum judicial capacity. We have announced record investment this year of £2.5 billion across all courts and tribunals, which will make a real difference to clear up the Tories' mess.

John Milne: In my constituency of Horsham, I have been asked to support a woman left in limbo regarding the trial of her ex-partner on a domestic abuse charge. When she was finally given a date, the trial was pulled as a result of an administrative error as she sat waiting in the courtroom. A new date was set for a whole year later. She suffered emotional distress and had to take

time off work, which cost her £500. She installed CCTV at her own expense and endured months of further intimidation. Will the Minister undertake to set clear guidelines about maximum waiting times for trials to solve the problem now and in the future?

Sarah Sackman: I am terribly sorry to hear about the case of the hon. Member's constituent, which exemplifies exactly why we are so determined to grip the backlog in our Crown courts. That is also why we have asked Sir Brian Leveson to recommend a once-in-a-generation reform to deliver swifter justice for victims such as the hon. Member's constituent. Ultimately, getting the backlog down so that we can look her in the eyes and say, "We can deliver swifter justice," will make the real difference.

Katie White: I work closely with fantastic local businesses across Leeds North West, and I know they already have a lot to contend with, so I am concerned to see a pattern of crime on our high streets, from burglaries to other forms of vandalism, that leaves owners in Horsforth and Adel feeling unsafe. At the same time, like most hon. Members, I am very aware that the Government have inherited a significant backlog that undermines the sense that justice will be served. How does the Minister plan to address that so the individuals responsible are dealt with and small business owners know that we are on their side?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The impact of the Crown courts backlog is being felt by domestic abuse victims and small businesses, so we have a real job to do to restore confidence in our criminal justice system. That is why we gripped the crisis by putting in place an extra 110,000 Crown court sitting days—a record number. We understand, however, that we will need fundamental reform to address the backlog, and that is what we have asked Sir Brian Leveson to look at.

Knife Crime Offenders: Rehabilitation

15. **Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to support the rehabilitation of people convicted of knife crime offences. [905082]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): Halving knife crime is a moral mission for the Government. Every young person caught with a knife is referred to a youth offending team, and Turnaround is very successful in diverting youngsters on the cusp of crime away from offending. Alongside that, the Government will roll out prevention partnerships and Young Futures hubs.

Imran Hussain: I welcome the Minister's answer. Knife crime ruins lives and devastates communities; rightly, those responsible must be held accountable. If we are serious about preventing reoffending, however, we also need structured, credible rehabilitation, the focus of which must be on prevention and diversionary activities. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on boxing, I have seen how grassroots boxing clubs offer something different—structure, community and hope—that is of particular benefit to young people. I ask the Minister to meet me to discuss how boxing can be a key part of successfully rehabilitating offenders.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is right to point to the range of diversions that can help the rehabilitation of young offenders, including boxing clubs. I am happy to meet him.

Legal Aid Agency: Digital Services

16. **James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to restore the Legal Aid Agency's digital services. [905083]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): As the House will be aware, the Legal Aid Agency suffered a criminal cyber-attack across its systems. It has worked tirelessly to ensure that those who rely on legal aid have not seen that legal aid stop and that providers are not left out of pocket. In short, it has kept the show on the road with a series of emergency contingency measures. Let us be in no doubt, however, that it suffered that attack because its IT systems had been left in a fragile state by the lack of investment from the Conservatives. We will learn from the crisis and build back better with additional investment.

James Naish: Two of my local firms—MJC Law and Nottingham Law Centre—have contacted me about this issue. MJC Law said:

“This has left legal aid law firms, often small businesses, to decide whether to take on the risk of cases and hope they will be approved and paid retrospectively”.

Cash flow could become a genuinely serious issue for such firms, so what steps are being taken to support them? For how long does the Minister envisage firms dealing with this situation? Finally, on GDPR notices, is it sufficient that the LAA has simply provided a notice on its webpage?

Sarah Sackman: I pay tribute to the legal aid providers across the country who have kept going through this difficult time and who do vital work in the sector. As part of the package of contingency business measures, we have delegated more decision making to providers and we have committed to backdating criminal legal aid applications. I must assure the House that we will turn the systems back on only when we can be sure that they are secure and we can guarantee that we are protecting people's data.

Parole Board Decisions: Serious Offenders

18. **Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure she can refer Parole Board decisions in cases of serious offenders to the High Court. [905085]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): Work to implement the power to refer cases to the High Court is well advanced, and we expect to be able to fully update the House later this year.

Danny Kruger: The Secretary of State is declining to take the power to refer to the High Court on unduly lenient Parole Board decisions in cases of manslaughter, like that of Robert Brown, who killed the best friend of my constituent, Hetti Barkworth-Nanton. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this decision and explore how we can

ensure that the Secretary of State has all the powers necessary to ensure that violent killers like Brown are not released early?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: That was a horrific case. My thoughts remain with Joanna's family and friends, specifically Diana Parkes and Hetti Barkworth-Nanton, who I met last year, and who the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), met this week. The previous Parliament carefully scrutinised the referral power and the offences that should be in scope. I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman on this matter.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): With the case of one of the killers of James Bulger, Jon Venables, coming to the Parole Board again, the need for the voices of victims' families to be heard in the justice system is coming right to the fore. My constituent Sue, who is in the Gallery today, is being supported by the James Bulger foundation. Her son died needlessly; he was not supported by the people with him, who could have offered him aid and got him medical help. Will the Minister meet me and Sue to hear the tragic details of this case and discuss the options for changing the law to ensure that victims' families are properly represented in the justice system?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend draws attention to another horrific case. I think the best way of proceeding is to take up his offer of a meeting.

Deporting Foreign Offenders: Prison Capacity

19. **Stuart Anderson** (South Shropshire) (Con): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of deporting all foreign criminals on prison capacity. [905086]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): Removals under this Government have been higher over the past 12 months than under the Conservatives. We are going further by expanding the early removal scheme so that prisoners with no right to be in this country will be deported and banned from ever returning to the UK after serving 30% of their custodial sentence.

Stuart Anderson: UK prisons are at full capacity and 12% of prison places are occupied by foreign nationals. Will the Secretary of State look to deport all foreign nationals who commit offences in our country to free up that space?

Shabana Mahmood: As I say, we have already deported more people in the first year of this Government than was the case under the previous Government, so we are going faster on foreign national offender removals from our prison estate. The legal changes we are making will bring more offenders into scope earlier in their sentence, making them eligible for deportation.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): Will the Lord Chancellor update the House on the conversation she had with international partners on the European convention on human rights during her recent visit to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg?

Shabana Mahmood: I had very positive discussions with partner countries across Europe when I visited Strasbourg, where I made a speech about how the European convention on human rights is a living instrument and therefore must keep up with the times. That is a positive conversation, and one that this Government will be continuing in the coming months.

Prison Education

20. **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the quality of prison education. [905088]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): Ensuring that prisoners have access to education is essential for rehabilitation in order to ensure that prison produces better citizens, not better criminals. New prison education service contracts will be launched later this year, which aim to strengthen the quality of delivery and provide consistent assessment of prisoners. Last week, I held a roundtable bringing together experts to drive improvement and strengthen current education provision in young offenders institutions.

Kim Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for his response. However, 82% of prisons and young offenders institutions have been rated as “requires improvement” or “inadequate” by Ofsted on education, skills and work provision. Despite that, the prison education service still outsources the same poorly performing contracts to poorly performing providers, and prison educators are paid less than educators in further education settings, causing a crisis in recruitment and retention, according to the Education Committee. When we will see the greatest insourcing in a generation, and will the Minister consider insourcing prison education with proper pay, terms and conditions for prison educators?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: All options are on the table. His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service introduced a head of education, skills and work into every prison to ensure that, across the estate, a senior member of prison staff is responsible for improving the quality of education provision. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to Ofsted reports, but there has been an increase in the overall number of “good” ratings achieved through the inspections. This is work in progress. We need to do better, as she says, and that is what we are determined to do.

Topical Questions

T1. [905089] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): It is a little over a year since this Government were elected, and ever since I have been clearing up the mess created by the previous Government, who left our prisons days from collapse. I am ensuring that we can never run out of space again. We have already opened around 2,500 new prison places, with the aim of creating 14,000 by 2031. We have accepted most of David Gauke’s sentencing review, and I will increase funding for the Probation Service by up to £700 million. In our courts, we are reversing 14 years of under-investment that left us with a record and rising courts backlog. I have funded a record number of

Crown court sitting days—4,000 higher than the Conservatives managed—and Sir Brian Leveson will soon propose once-in-a-generation reform. Make no mistake: unlike those on the Conservative Benches, I will do what it takes to bring down the backlog and deliver swifter justice for victims.

John Lamont: Under the SNP, the number of suspected criminals in Scotland being let off with a slap on the wrist has increased by 28% in a year, according to the latest data. Now the Labour Government here seem to want to copy the SNP. Why will the Labour Government not put victims first, instead of doing what they are doing now—letting dangerous criminals off with short and weak sentences?

Shabana Mahmood: What absolute nonsense. Let me tell the House the definition of soft justice: it is what the Tory party did, building only 500 prison places in 14 years in office. That is why we are in this mess and that is the mess that I am cleaning up.

T2. [905090] **Dr Marie Tidball** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Last month, a devastating report by Women’s Aid revealed that a total of 67 children have been killed over a 30-year period by a known domestically abusive parent, in circumstances related to the courts’ use of the principle of the presumption of contact. Two of those children, Jack and Paul Sykes, are the sons of my formidable constituent, Claire Throssell. All these deaths were preventable. Will the Minister update the House on the progress of the Government’s review of the presumption of contact?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): The killings of Jack and Paul were horrendous crimes and I would like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to her constituent, Claire, for their tireless campaigning on these issues. I am sure that she would agree that the guiding principle for any reform must be children’s welfare. That is why we have requested a review of the presumption of contact. We will be publishing findings and next steps very shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): In the year since Labour took office, can the Justice Secretary tell us how many individuals have been prosecuted for smuggling people in on small boats?

Shabana Mahmood: I do not have those figures directly to hand, but I am sure that if they are available, I can write to him with the details.

Robert Jenrick: I asked the Justice Secretary a very simple question about one of the biggest challenges facing our country right now, and the whole House can see that she did not have a clue. This is about not just the pathetically low levels of prosecutions under her watch, but the fact that she has waved through guidelines to shorten sentences for immigration offences. Under the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the most serious offence for facilitation carries a life sentence, but she is watering that down to between 10 and 16 years. Instead of smashing the gangs, she is slashing the sentences. Why will she not do something for once and stop this?

Shabana Mahmood: Honestly, the shadow Justice Secretary really ought to pay more attention to his day job—rather than to the job he is looking for, which the Conservative party might give him. First, had he paid any attention, he would know that prosecutions do not fall to the Ministry of Justice; they are dealt with independently through the Crown Prosecution Service. We will of course publish the statistics when we get them, and I will happily write to him with the details. We are making sure that, across Government, we are taking all the action necessary to protect our borders. He is misrepresenting what the immigration guidelines do; I have picked him up on that before. I will happily write to him again, but maybe he could actually read them and learn something.

T3. [905091] **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): PeoplePlus has just won the contract for prison education in Scotland and England. PeoplePlus was sold to Talent International, a subsidiary of swipejobs, in which US and Australian-based venture capital firm Clearsign Capital has a 40% stake, according to the University and College Union. Can the Minister explain why venture capitalists are making money out of educating British prisoners?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): My hon. Friend asks a good question. In England, prison education contracts are awarded following a rigorous commercial process that awards providers on merit. I understand that PeoplePlus has been awarded education contracts for Scottish prisons, but that would be a matter for the Scottish Government.

T5. [905093] **Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): I wish to raise the case of my constituent whose 89-year-old father was subject to serious abuse through a lasting power of attorney. It took two years and significant legal costs to get the power of attorney removed through the Court of Protection. The father tragically died, homeless and penniless. Does the Minister believe that the current LPA protections are sufficient to prevent such abuse, and will the Government consider an urgent review and reform of the system?

Sarah Sackman: I am very sorry to hear about the case of the hon. Member's constituent. We need to put this into some context. As of March 2024, over 8 million lasting powers of attorney were registered in England and Wales. They are a really useful instrument. Although concerns about misuse do exist, the sort of abuse that the hon. Member highlights is, in context, rare. The Office of the Public Guardian investigated around 2,500 cases last year. We are looking to strengthen safeguards and add more identify checks as part of a modernised service. Lasting power of attorney is a really important tool, and we do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

T4. [905092] **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): During my recent visit to Pennine Domestic Abuse Partnership in Huddersfield I heard about how long delays between CPS charges and trial dates leave abuse victims in limbo. The delays not only retraumatise victims but put a huge strain on support services that provide long-term care, so I join colleagues in asking the Government to reduce the delays as soon as possible so that victims of domestic abuse can access justice swiftly.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): My hon. Friend outlines exactly why we have asked Sir Brian Leveson to conduct a review into the criminal courts; the ambition is to reduce the length of time victims have to wait for justice. We are expecting the recommendations of that review shortly. We are supporting victims by funding key support services to make sure that victims continue to be engaged with our criminal justice system, and we are expanding the use of specialist domestic abuse courts, where trained staff can support victims directly.

T6. [905094] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I recently met Ruby Hamill—a young activist who nearly died in a Government-run prison when her severe eating disorder was ignored. Ruby is not a constituent; she wanted to talk to me because I chair the eating disorders all-party parliamentary group. Will the Minister meet me and Ruby's family to ensure that there are eating disorder guidelines in all prisons, and that the guidelines are appropriate and implemented across all prison healthcare providers?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I am sorry to hear of the case that the hon. Member outlines, and I would be very happy to meet her to explore the issue further.

T9. [905097] **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): In a recent report, the Victims Commissioner said that she feared that the delay in victims getting justice “will drive some victims to give up on seeking justice altogether—a second injustice compounding the first.”

This is completely unacceptable, and at Ipswich Crown court the backlog of open cases has more than doubled since 2016. What are Ministers doing to reverse the harm inflicted by the Conservatives not only on the justice system itself but on victims' confidence that justice will be served at all?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is right that we are seeing an increase in the number of victims pulling out of the process because they no longer have confidence in it because it is taking so long. We have funded an additional 4,000 sitting days this year and have asked Sir Brian Leveson to recommend once-in-a-generation reform precisely so that we can deliver swifter justice for victims.

T7. [905095] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) raised the issue of the presumption of contact. I have a constituency case where one parent has abused their children and the other parent has had to pay for the supervision of those children. The presumption of contact is not working in cases where domestic abuse has happened, so I echo the calls from the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge for an urgent review of it.

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Member will know that a staggering 60% of cases that go through our family courts involve some form of domestic abuse or allegation thereof. That is why consideration of the operation of the presumption of contact and wider consideration of domestic abuse allegations in our family courts are so important. It is why officials and Ministers are taking the process really seriously.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Derbyshire Victim Services does really important work supporting victims, including those who have experienced sexual assault and domestic violence, but given the court backlog inherited from the Conservative Government, the service has told me that many of the victims are in need of support for longer, with many having complex needs that public services can struggle to meet. What steps is the Department taking to help support services to provide support to victims with complex needs that are exacerbated when justice is delayed?

Alex Davies-Jones: I place on record my thanks to all the brilliant victim support services that do tremendous work in incredibly difficult circumstances to ensure that victims get the support they need to stay engaged with the criminal justice system. We have protected dedicated Ministry of Justice spending on victims of violence against women and girls by maintaining the 2024-25 funding levels, ringfenced sexual violence and domestic abuse support for this year, and commissioned a 24/7 rape and sexual abuse support line, providing victims and survivors with access to vital help and information whenever they need it. We are carefully considering how best to allocate the current budget from the spending review to look specifically at VAWG alongside other departmental priorities.

T8. [905096] **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): My constituent Andy from Offerton often plays a caring role for his adult son, as his son has serious mental ill health. During his son's recent stay in prison, Andy struggled to get quality information from the prison about his son's health situation and living conditions. What more will the Government do to ensure that parent carers such as Andy get the information they need and deserve during a child's stay in prison?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Lady is right: it is important that parent carers get the information they need that helps with rehabilitation and getting things to the right place. If she wants to write to me about that particular case, I will look into it and write back to her.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Survive is a York-based charity providing specialist services and trauma-specific interventions to survivors of sexual violence and abuse. However, it has had to close its waiting list because it does not have the capacity to meet the demand. Will the Minister look at providing additional funding, so that we can get those vital services to survivors and victims now and they do not have to wait?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend has contacted me and written to me on this issue. She will know that we in the Department are looking at the spending allocations following the spending review. However, we have protected and ringfenced special support for sexual violence victims, because we know that there is huge demand coming through the system and we need to keep those victims engaged in the criminal justice system to ensure they get their day in court and justice is served.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I read a recent BBC article about an asylum seeker who had violently raped a teenage girl. He has been convicted and given a sentence of nine years in

prison, followed by three years on licence, after which he will need to be deported. I am concerned that such individuals, during their period on licence, pose a risk to British women and girls. Does the Lord Chancellor agree, and will she ensure that people go straight from prison to deportation where appropriate?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point. It is why we are reducing the threshold for the early removal scheme and looking carefully with the Home Office at the Gauke review's recommendation of effectively sentencing to deportation, to deal with the very types of cases that she has raised.

Juliet Campbell (Broxton) (Lab): I welcome the Government's efforts to reform sentencing following the sentencing review. I am confident that those steps will end the chaos left behind by the previous Government. I am particularly interested in rehabilitation as a priority in sentencing. A troubling statistic remains: studies have shown that 30% of prisoners in the UK are diagnosed as dyslexic, and there are probably many more who are undiagnosed, meaning that the numbers are much higher. Will the Minister tell me what steps are being taken to support dyslexic people in prison and to prevent reoffending following release?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is right to emphasise the importance of rehabilitation in the panoply of things that we do in the criminal justice system. She is also right to highlight the number of prisoners and people in the criminal justice system who have dyslexia, which is one of the many neurodiverse conditions in the prison service. Every prison has a neurodiversity officer who co-ordinates activity to address that in each prison, but if she wants to write to me about the issue, I would be happy to respond in more detail.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): The Secretary of State will be aware of the deeply troubling revelations over the weekend of the so-called Halal bride website. Does she agree that such practices have absolutely no place in Britain?

Shabana Mahmood: The regulation of websites and content falls either within Home Office responsibilities for criminal law or with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and I will happily pick up with them the detail around the regulatory issues that are raised by that case.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): When I visited HMP Onley, the nearest prison to my constituency, I had the great privilege to be given a tour by the governor, Mark Allen and to see the excellent work of the staff. I wonder whether the Secretary of State would comment on the importance of offerings by organisations and companies such as Greene King which provide cafés and restaurants so that prisoners can be rehabilitated while they are in prison.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Greene King does outstanding work, as do other organisations in our prison service. They are important partners in delivering better justice.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The Lord Chancellor rightly rejected murderer Alan Jerney's Parole Board request for open conditions, for which his daughters and I are extremely grateful. I understand

that Mr Jerney is now legally challenging the decision, so will the Lord Chancellor revisit my request for a meeting with her about this issue?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member will know that, with a judicial challenge, there will be some constraints as to what I can say publicly, and indeed even privately in a meeting. I will take advice to ensure that nothing compromises the legal process.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): The Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Act 2025 has now received Royal Assent and I congratulate the Lord Chancellor on her swift action, but it would never have been necessary if sentencing guidelines were not the preserve of an unelected, undemocratic quango in the form of the Sentencing Council. Does she agree that we need a democratic lock, or even a vote in this place, to approve new sentencing guidelines?

Shabana Mahmood: I have said many times at this Dispatch Box that that whole episode revealed a democratic deficit. I am reviewing the roles and powers and we will come forward with legislative changes in due course.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): In the light of the tragic loss of young mother Sarah Montgomery, who was seven months pregnant, due to violence, which has left two young girls without a mother and impacted the entire community of Donaghadee in my constituency, do the Government agree that early interventions, particularly through early education, are essential? Furthermore, can we look at intensifying our efforts to prevent domestic violence against women and young girls and at increasing sentences to deter that type of crime?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Member for raising this case, which will have hit all of us incredibly hard. It is horrific and just goes to show that violence against women and girls is at epidemic levels in every corner of the United Kingdom, not just in England and Wales. I am due to meet my counterparts across the devolved nations shortly to figure out exactly how we can best join up to tackle this issue as a whole, because it will take a societal response. If the hon. Member wants to meet me to discuss this further, I would be happy to do so.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the recent pathfinder family court pilots have been seen as largely successful. This is an opportunity to put children at the centre of these cases and to end the presumption of contact which puts partners and children of abusers at risk. Will she please advise me as to the next steps in this process?

Sarah Sackman: I welcome my hon. Friend's question and I am grateful to him for raising the pathfinder court. These pilots are proving incredibly successful. They front-load a lot of the evidence gathering, they put the safety of children and family arrangements right at their heart, and they are proving a really successful

model, which is why we plan to roll them out further. As part of that, as he has heard, we will be publishing our response to the presumption review very shortly.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The backlog of cases in the Isle of Wight coroner service is the worst in the country, causing pain and distress to too many families, some of whom are waiting 800 days to find out what is happening to their loved ones. Will the Minister offer any comment or support to those families, and will she agree to meet me to discuss how we deal with the problem of the Isle of Wight coroner?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his engagement on this issue. He has written to me and we have had quite productive conversations about it. I recently met the chief coroner to discuss the specific issue on the Isle of Wight, because we know that the delays are causing untold turmoil to families in an already awful, traumatic process. I will happily meet the hon. Member to discuss a way forward, but I am reassured by the action being taken by the chief coroner to address the issue in the Isle of Wight directly.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): A constituent of mine who recently fled France because of domestic violence and abuse, after being a habitual resident for just 21 days, has been ordered to return to France next week under protective measures. What more can the Government do to protect women fleeing domestic violence in relation to the Hague convention and the Child Abduction Act 1984?

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Member will know that I cannot comment on specific cases, but if he wants to write to me, I will happily look at that. I recently had productive conversations about the Hague convention and others, and we will happily develop those conversations further.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): May I associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, at the outset of these proceedings about the passing of Lord Tebbit? Lord Tebbit was a great friend of Northern Ireland, particularly of the many fellow victims of IRA terrorism.

May I return the Lord Chancellor to the subject of the backlogs in our Crown courts? In Northern Ireland, we have the worst of all records; it takes an average of 551 days to conclude a Crown court case. Murder trials have been stalled since last September with no new start date. We have a Minister of Justice locally who talks the talk but never walks the walk, and particularly does not walk the walk in settling the ongoing remuneration issue that is holding things up. Would the Lord Chancellor bring some pressure to bear on the local Justice Minister to sort this matter out?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. and learned Member will know that for devolved matters it would of course be deeply inappropriate for me to try to influence or put pressure on the Minister of Justice in Northern Ireland. On a cross-UK basis, we regularly meet our fellow Justice Ministers in the devolved Administrations, and I will happily pick up those conversations in a constructive way.

Government Resilience Action Plan

12.41 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the Government's resilience action plan.

We are living through a period of profound change: upheaval in the international order, conflicts raging in the middle east, a war being waged on the continent of Europe and old norms overturned on what feels like a daily basis. Against that backdrop, the Government's first duty of keeping the public safe becomes all the more important. Resilience is a measure of deep strength and, at the same time, a measure of insurance.

By deep strength, I mean fundamentals such as a good NHS, a strong spirit of community, a secure energy system and good flood defences. All those things increase our national resilience. We saw the vulnerabilities exposed by the covid pandemic in the NHS and in the different impact it had on different workers, ethnic minorities and members of the community. Resilience has to be for all, not just for some.

By insurance, I mean the emergency systems, scientific capability, scale-up capability and other measures we would need in a crisis. Everyone knows they need insurance, but we also know that no one spends their whole income on it. That is true for a country, too. By definition, preparation for the worst has to sit alongside the week-to-week provision of the essential services that government run. There is no perfectly correct answer to the balance between those two things. What is certain is that the Government have to think through the scenarios and try to ensure that the country is as well prepared as possible.

Today we set out how we will do that with the publication of our resilience action plan, a chronic risk analysis and an update on the UK biological security strategy. No Government can stop every risk from materialising. Every Member of this House understands that we live in a world where we are susceptible to a much wider range of risks than we were even a decade ago: cyber-attacks on household names, trade measures that can trigger fluctuations in the prices of food or household goods, power outages, the possibility of another pandemic—these risks are real and are all different.

The answer to those shared challenges lies in making all parts of society better prepared: our economy, our defences, our health systems, our infrastructure, our borders, our industrial base and our energy security. Much of it comes down to the unglamorous work of delivering improved public services. That is what we might call “deep resilience”—an NHS that is strong enough to cope, an energy system that does not leave us as exposed to the spikes in the price of oil seen in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and a science base that can be called into action quickly. It depends on the whole of society—business; the public sector; local, national and devolved governments; civil society; local resilience forums; and every Member of this House—all sharing in the burden and pulling in the same direction.

The action plan sets us up to do that with a focus on three areas: first, assessing on a continuous basis how resilient the UK is, so that we can effectively target interventions and resources when and where they are needed; secondly, enabling the whole of society to take

action to increase its resilience, which will rely on us changing the culture around resilience by making it part of our everyday lives in practical and simple ways—be it the owner of a business introducing new cyber-defences, or a more informed public that knows what to do in order to prepare for different emergencies—and thirdly, improving core public sector resilience. We have thousands of frontline public sector workers who are integral to our resilience at a local and national level, from the employees who keep the energy grid running to local emergency responders. I pay tribute to them all.

The action plan brings together a range of policies. We have already set out our proposals to increase defence spending. We are earmarking £4.2 billion of funding for new flood defences and £370 million to secure the UK's telecoms networks, and opening a new resilience academy in North Yorkshire that will train 4,000 people every year from the private and public sectors. Later this year, we will have the largest ever national pandemic exercise that will test the UK's readiness for future pandemics. We are also developing a risk vulnerability map for public servants, applying one of the principal lessons of previous tragedies, which is that all too often it is the most vulnerable in our society who are hardest hit in the event of an emergency.

On top of each of those steps, the action plan and our update on the biological security strategy set out new additional measures, including a nationwide test of the UK's emergency alert. That will take place at around 3 pm on Sunday 7 September 2025, and it will involve a notification going out to 87 million mobile phones at once. It will be the second time we have used the test on a nationwide basis. It will last for around 10 seconds. The mobile phone alert system will play a critical role in making sure that we are ready for all kinds of future emergencies. In the run-up to the test, we will work with stakeholders, including domestic violence charities, to ensure that the public has as much warning as possible. As well as the alert, we will be pushing ahead with activity to promote the Government's “Prepare” website to help individuals, households and communities understand how they can be ready for a range of different emergencies. We continue to support local resilience forums in England because they are essential in planning for, and responding to, incidents whenever they occur.

Our biological security strategy includes £15 million from the integrated security fund to help address capability gaps across Government and beyond. That is in addition to the £1 billion of investment that we unveiled a fortnight ago for a new network of national biosecurity centres to strengthen our defences against biological incidents, accidents and attacks. The defence and security accelerator also includes £1 million for projects with universities such as Queens University Belfast and Cardiff University. My colleague the Health Secretary will publish a pandemic preparedness framework explaining how the Government are bringing together the vital scientific research needed to prepare for any future pandemic. I am also able to announce that soon the National Situation Centre and the devolved Governments will sign a memorandum of understanding to ensure that every part of the UK has the best data to prepare and respond to crises.

Those practical steps will help the UK to meet the moment when an emergency comes. Resilience is not a button to press; it comes from the realisation that we

[Pat McFadden]

need deep strength and the ability to scale up quickly when the situation requires it. That is why the Government's investment plans, announced in the recent spending review, and the actions outlined in this plan are so important. We will not be resilient unless we invest for the future—a stronger NHS, more and better housing, better energy security, utilising our deep research and development base—and, on top of that, have the capabilities to get going fast in an emergency. That is what this plan sets out. I commend it to the House.

12.50 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for advance sight of his statement and the associated documentation. I also thank him for the date on which the UK emergency alert will be tested—he can only have chosen it to notify the country that it is my birthday. I shall very much look forward to the alarm at 3 pm.

I understand why the Government want to plan for resilience. It is understandable that the Government would want to come forward with a plan, faced with the collapsing economy, a collapsing Government, capital flight, spiralling borrowing costs and the Office for Budget Responsibility's warning this morning that the Chancellor's latest U-turns have left Britain more vulnerable and less able to respond to future crises. As the Minister said, the plan published today builds on the work of the previous Government on the roll-out of the national emergency alert system, the expansion of biosecurity preparedness, investment in flood protection and ensuring better cross-departmental collaboration on resilience and emergency preparedness.

The Minister said in his statement that he was looking for an assessment “on a continuous basis”. The report sets out the intention for data collection in this area, but it would be useful to hear by when that new data framework will be available for us to scrutinise. He said that he wished to enable

“the whole of society to take action”,

but I rather wonder how he intends the whole of society to find out about this. The plan calls on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to provide guidance on developing cohesion strategies and to monitor tensions. However, that does not sit easily with the fact that the Government are not currently tackling Islamist extremism properly, that they dragged their feet on a national inquiry into grooming gangs, and that they seem to be bringing forward a highly controversial definition of Islamophobia.

The Minister referred to

“improving core public sector resilience”.

That is certainly to be welcomed, particularly on a day on which it has been announced that resident doctors have voted in favour of strikes, which will result in industrial action in January. It was notable that the plan does not mention an ability to deal with widespread industrial action. Are the Government planning for the eventuality of a general strike?

The Minister also mentioned the increase in defence spending, which we know is a form of smoke and mirrors. We understand that the 1.5% in addition to the hypothetical 3.5% includes things such as tunnels and

roads, but we have not been provided with a baseline for what is currently spent in those areas. How will we know when the Government have got to 1.5%, or indeed whether they are at 1.5% already?

As the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out, the previous Government took steps to extend our capabilities and published the first UK biological security strategy. I was interested that, in this strategy, there is a reference to exploring the utility of waste water analysis, which had great success during the pandemic. Does the Minister intend to bring that back on a wide scale? It would be welcome if that was the case.

I am pleased that the Government are pressing ahead with the biothreats radar, which was a Conservative idea, but two years after our announcement there is still no go-live date. This could be a major asset to national resilience, but we need to know when it will come online. The CDL also told the House that a fully operational radar will give us near real-time warning of emerging pathogens, but the World Health Organisation is still reminding China to hand over its basic virological data on covid-19. Can he guarantee that the radar will allow the UK to independently verify when a state actor chooses to withhold or delay information?

I was interested to read about Exercise Pegasus, the preparations for pandemic exercise. However, as the Minister will know, different types of pandemic behave in different ways. Which pandemics were tested in Pegasus? Which were tested in Alkarab? It is important that the House understands what the Government are looking at in that regard.

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the Opposition spokesman for his questions. Several things have contributed to the need for a fresh look at all of this: the experience of covid, the changing geopolitical situation and the changing threat picture. It is important to be both flexible and dynamic when considering resilience.

Let me turn to the shadow Minister's specific points. In advance of his birthday on 7 September, I wish him many happy returns. He asked about data collection. That does not have a date; it is a constant effort. The capacity to use data in a better way today than perhaps we could have done in the past is an additional weapon in our armoury.

In terms of the whole of society finding out about this, we have good, sensible advice on gov.uk/prepare. I encourage the public to look at it, and I hope that these preparation measures become normal for people in the future. The strength of community is very important in community resilience.

The shadow Minister referred to strikes in the NHS. We have given the NHS significant financial support and made a very fair pay offer. We very much value the work that doctors do. We hope that everyone in the NHS realises that we are a Government who support the NHS and want to work with the staff, and that industrial action will contribute nothing to that goal.

The shadow Minister referred to biological security. We are making important investments into that, including the opening of the new Weybridge lab announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs a couple of weeks ago.

Exercise Pegasus has not happened yet; it will happen in the autumn. However, the shadow Minister is right on one thing: it is important not to fight the last war and assume that the next pandemic will behave in the same way as the last one. We have to be flexible in our response and ensure that we plan for different kinds of scenarios.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome this statement. The point about Exercise Pegasus reminds me of Exercise Cygnus, the findings of which, I am saddened to say, the previous Government ignored in advance of what then became the pandemic we faced. In recent weeks we have seen attacks on Marks & Spencer, the Co-op and others, and the fire at Heathrow, so this action plan is incredibly welcome. It states that the Government will develop a

“consolidated, data-driven picture of our resilience baseline”

to show how resilient the UK is at any moment, and a new cyber-resilience index that highlights the critical national infrastructure at greatest risk. Will my right hon. Friend give the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy, which I chair, access to those indices, and may I suggest that we help him in developing them?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the Chair of the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy for his questions. The National Cyber Security Centre has been working closely with Marks & Spencer and the other victims of recent cyber-attacks. I look forward to appearing before his Committee in a few days and working closely with it in the future.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for advance sight of the statement. The world is now less stable and more insecure than at any time since the cold war. Consequently, the Government must ensure that the British people and the United Kingdom are prepared in the event that our country or an overseas territory is threatened. The Liberal Democrats therefore welcome any measures to strengthen our resilience, especially to the cyber-security threat—a new and evolving threat against which we must be armed.

While the Liberal Democrats welcome the alert test, we call for a wider public information campaign to support resilience building across the UK, and to ensure that the public are properly ready for any potential future conflict or disaster. Perhaps we could take lessons from our Scandinavian neighbours, who are always working to address future threats and providing information to their citizens. Information should be provided through a number of different means, including leaflets and traditional broadcast.

While we welcome the alert test, websites and text alerts will miss millions of British people—those without phones, or without signal or battery—so we need to be ready on all fronts, and not just rely on single text alerts. Will the Government accept the Liberal Democrats’ call to launch a national awareness campaign that draws on different modes of contact?

I welcome the talk about being more resilient to climate emergencies. We have all seen the horrifying pictures and upsetting stories from the floods in Texas

in recent days, and in this country, we have had one of the hottest starts to a summer in UK history; it is vital that the Government are not caught unawares as the temperature rises. Last week, I had a meeting in my constituency with Thames Water, which told me that it is preparing drought mitigation measures. The regular supply of water to people’s properties, businesses and agricultural land is vital to livelihoods and everyday lives. What steps are the Government taking, and perhaps putting in their new action plan, to ensure that any drought mitigation measures will not significantly impact the country in the coming months?

Pat McFadden: I welcome the hon. Lady’s questions, and join her in extending our sympathies to all those affected by the terrible events in Texas, where we saw the power of nature, and saw so many innocent lives lost.

I welcome the hon. Lady’s comments on the alert test. The test will be publicised well in advance, including through work with domestic violence charities and others, so that everybody knows what is coming. Information for the public is available on the gov.uk/prepare website.

I agree with the hon. Lady that dialogue with the public on resilience is important. In many other countries, that is absolutely normal. Perhaps it has been a little less normal in this country, but we should change that. On risks in the immediate term, our excellent Cobra team in the Cabinet Office scans the horizon constantly for these things, and it is always prepared and ready to go in any emergency.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. As a former Leicestershire county councillor, and as a health scrutineer before, during and after the pandemic, it was clear to me that local knowledge from our public health teams and NHS services played an important role; however, they know that they could have gone further and done so much more. Will he reassure me and my constituents that insights from local resilience forums and local experts will feed into planning and preparation for any future pandemic?

Pat McFadden: That is a good question. It is really important that we learn from the experience of the pandemic a few years ago, but we must not fall into the trap, as I said, of assuming that the next emergency will be exactly the same. We have to be flexible in our response. The next emergency, and indeed the next pandemic, may be quite different in character from the one that we went through a few years ago.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will the preparations take into account the lasting, disastrous consequences of lockdown, and the blithering absurdity of face coverings?

Pat McFadden: The preparations should take everything into account.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the statement. I welcome the announcement that the Government will undertake a full national test of the emergency alert system in September. How will they ensure that rural areas such as Church Eaton in my

[Leigh Ingham]

constituency, which is still waiting for its phone mast to be activated, and Maer, which has had long-term difficulties with mobile reception, can receive the message? My understanding is that the alert is dependent on 4G access.

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right. About 95% of the population is covered by 4G or 5G access, and we are working constantly with the telecoms companies to improve that coverage. That is an ongoing effort.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's commitment that resilience must be for all, not just for some. The people of Shetland will hold him to those words. A few years ago, we suffered a catastrophic power outage for about seven days in winter storms, leaving many of my constituents relying on copper wire phone lines for their connection to the outside world. If that copper wire is withdrawn without sufficient resilience being built into its replacement, the consequences for my constituents could be catastrophic. Will he, through his office, engage with private sector organisations when they are making these strategic decisions for us all?

Pat McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman represents perhaps the outermost part of the UK, and when he says that resilience should be for all, he is absolutely right. We have seen the effect of long-term—days is “long-term”—power outages, including, in recent times, during Storm Eowyn. He made a good point about ensuring resilience when systems change and new technology comes in, and we will certainly have a dialogue with telecoms companies about that.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for his statement. I was pleased to hear him reference the £370 million that the Government are investing to secure our telecommunications network. Will that extend to our undersea network of cables, which face perpetual threats from the Russian shadow fleet and others who are under a thin veil of plausible deniability? If those networks are disrupted, it will create chaos in the UK.

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that important question. Subsea cables are vital to the working of our economy and our defences, and those who wish us harm know that. It must be part of our national defence and our defence thinking to defend our international communication structures under the sea.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The tier 1 exercise that CDL mentioned in response to Baroness Hallett's recommendation 6 in module 1 of her report on covid 19 is much to be welcomed. However, he will be aware that part of the problem with Exercise Cygnus in 2016 was that the results were not made public at the time, and a lot of it remained classified. In the light of what has been said today, will he ensure that the Government's approach to this exercise is different, and that the results are made public quickly, so that they can be interrogated?

Pat McFadden: Any national exercise of this kind will show up both strengths and weaknesses. It is important that we communicate the learnings from these exercises—both the strengths and the weaknesses.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): The national risk register identifies cyber-attacks on critical national infrastructure as being of moderate likelihood but potentially catastrophic in impact. The National Audit Office has identified 58 key Government systems that have substantial cyber-resilience gaps. What more can the Government do to plug those gaps and ensure that our systems are secure?

Pat McFadden: This is very important. There is no doubt that there are gaps in cyber-defences, and there is an ongoing battle to get up to speed. Many legacy systems that have been in place for decades are difficult to replace, because new has been built on old. We are investing, but it is an ongoing effort to close the gaps to stop those who would undermine the vital public services that rely on those systems.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): One of the vulnerabilities that we saw in the pandemic, after the invasion of Ukraine and even during the “beast from the east” winter storm was to food supplies, but I did not hear the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster refer to food in his statement. Finland's national food supply can sustain the country for up to nine months; it includes strategic food reserves and grain stockpiles. Germany advises citizens to keep a 10-day stockpile of food and water. Our reliance on imports makes our food supply vulnerable to global events such as pandemics and geopolitical instability. What action are the Government taking to increase our food security?

Pat McFadden: The gov.uk/prepare website refers to having a supply of food and water in case of an emergency. We recently struck an agreement with the European Union that will remove a huge amount of the cost, bureaucracy and delay in ensuring the free flow of food to and from the European Union. That is a good agreement for food security.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. As he rightly says, planning and responding to these kinds of incidents—whether it is the pandemic, storms, flooding or major water outages, like the one that happened in my constituency earlier this year—requires people across all levels of Government to work with communities. How will the resilience plan launched today encourage closer working between the devolved Governments and the UK Government?

Pat McFadden: My experience in the year since the general election is that on matters such as this, co-operation and joint working between the UK Government and the devolved Governments is good. I am pleased to say that this is an area where party politics is usually left outside the door, and I think that is right. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: when an emergency hits, we need good co-operation and dialogue with either the devolved Governments or local authorities and local resilience forums, which I referred to in my statement.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster referenced the considerable spending on flood defences over the next few years. He will be aware that the port of Immingham and much of the south bank of the Humber was severely affected by a tidal surge in 2013. Although much work has been done in recent years, can he give an assurance to businesses and residents that the south bank of the Humber will remain a priority for increased flood defence expenditure?

Pat McFadden: We have set aside some £4 billion for investment in flood defences. The details of when and where that will be spent will be set out by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. One of the most striking conclusions from the covid inquiry was that vulnerable people were the hardest hit. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that support will reach vulnerable people much more quickly in the event of another incident?

Pat McFadden: That is a good and important question. As I said, resilience has to be for all, not just for some. This is taken very seriously at the National Situation Centre. As data gets better—as, for example, energy companies get a better map of their vulnerable customers—we are getting to a better place when it comes to knowing exactly where the Government should direct their effort when an emergency hits. It is a really important part of community solidarity that people of all income groups know that the Government are there for them when an emergency hits.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirm that climate-related emergencies are a core part of this resilience strategy? Climate breakdown has the potential to threaten our core infrastructure and poses risks to our core support systems, such as food and water, and the Climate Change Committee says that we are woefully ill-prepared for climate-related changes, so does he agree that the issue should be not a political football? Instead, it should be central to the Government's resilience plans for protecting our citizens.

Pat McFadden: I welcome that question. If the hon. Gentleman wants a full list of what is on the risk register, it is a public document, so he can look at that. I referred several times in my statement to energy security. To get the energy security that we need, we will have to invest in a lot of new kit and equipment around the country. It is really important that we are allowed to build that without people objecting to it at every turn.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I have called for a responsibility revolution in which all businesses, organisations and individuals play their part in the national interest. I have seen that in my constituency on a visit to the National Gas station, which is a part of the critical infrastructure, and when talking to the Wolston and Brandon flood action group. Will my right hon. Friend set out what steps the Government are taking to provide better information to the public so that they can play their part in making our country more resilient?

Pat McFadden: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. This issue involves the public understanding the risks, and I think we should make this conversation normal. That is why it is right that we do the second emergency test of the system. We have used it a few times in live scenarios, in two storms that posed a real risk to life during last winter and in one or two more localised situations. The public are becoming more aware, but we will continue to make more information available so that people have a greater awareness of these situations and what they might be able to do to increase their own resilience.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): It is vital that we exclude equipment from companies covered by the national intelligence law of China from being used in surveillance equipment on sensitive Government sites. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster update the House on the progress made in doing that?

Pat McFadden: As the decision maker for the National Security and Investment Act 2021, I deal with these issues every day. They involve the protection of our vital infrastructure and defences, the promotion of our economic wellbeing and ensuring that this country is a good home for inward investment.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Climate change is very real for us all, so building a resilience strategy is absolutely crucial. In a city that floods so regularly, it is drought that we are most concerned about, not least with the hosepipe ban being introduced this Friday. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster ensure that mayoral authorities introduce Living With Water plans so that we can balance flooding and drought and ensure that we have the correct supplies of water throughout the year?

Pat McFadden: It is really important that we have more investment in our water infrastructure. This country has not built a reservoir for many, many years, but the new investment plans reached with the water companies since the election will begin to change that picture and improve the deep strength of our energy and water infrastructure, which I referred to in my statement.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster spoke about the cyber-attacks on household names. The Business and Trade Committee heard evidence this morning from the chair of Marks & Spencer, who said that more of a two-way dialogue is needed with UK officials in which they are effectively given the offer to join and be seen as one of the team when these attacks occur. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirm how the action plan he has announced today will help with those kinds of requests from businesses?

Pat McFadden: I have had a number of conversations with representatives of Marks & Spencer since the attack a few months ago, and I am appearing before the Business and Trade Sub-Committee tomorrow to discuss economic security. It is really important not just that the companies learn from the attacks, but that the Government constantly learn from attacks on vital systems in much-loved and cherished British companies such as M&S.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): During the covid pandemic, I was a trade union official representing 200,000 local government workers across Scotland. I saw at first hand their extraordinary dedication to our public services, but I also saw when they were let down by a lack of co-operation and co-ordination between the UK Government and the Scottish Government. Will my right hon. Friend outline how the resilience action plan will encourage greater co-operation between Governments across our devolved nations?

Pat McFadden: When there is an emergency, there should be no place for performative politics from anyone. My experience over the past year has been that co-operation on these issues has been good. This is an arena in which we should be less partisan—perhaps that should be the case in other parts of our national life too—because in the end, the public who send us to this place want to know that help is there, no matter the colour or level of Government. That should be the spirit in which we approach emergency preparedness and resilience.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the Minister's statement, as well as the fact that there will be more information, not just mobile phone alerts, because those alerts do not work evenly, even in urban areas such as my constituency—there is often some delay with some phones. One of the questions that has arisen from the tragedy in Texas is whether mobile phone alerts are enough. People may not be near a phone, or they may be in a remote area, so have the Government given any thought to more old-fashioned ways—perhaps sirens, or some other way—of alerting the public when there is an emergency?

Pat McFadden: The mobile phone alert system is a significant addition to our armoury as the coverage gets better. Not everyone uses mobile phones, but a very high percentage of the population does. However, the hon. Lady is absolutely right that other media can be used, and obviously we keep these things under constant consideration.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has announced the opening of a dedicated resilience academy in North Yorkshire, which will train 4,000 private and public sector people per year. Can he give me an update on when that academy will be in place, and a surety that it will cover the entirety of the United Kingdom? He spoke earlier about the involvement of the UK Government with devolved regions, so it is critical their representatives are covered by that academy as well.

Pat McFadden: There has been a facility in North Yorkshire for some time, but I opened it as the UK Resilience Academy a few months ago. It is in place, and the plan is to train 4,000 people every year, including first responders and sometimes people from the private sector. I hope that that training benefits people from right across the UK.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The first line of defence in national resilience is us, the citizenry. The Health Secretary and the Education Secretary wrote recently lamenting the absence of much-needed grit among many of our young people. Now that that risk has been identified at the highest level of Government, does it appear on the risk register?

Pat McFadden: We talk about the whole-society approach, because we understand that the public—us, as the hon. Gentleman says—have to be part of it. Government has its role to play, but it will not do everything; the public have a really important role to play in resilience.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Somerset is so often at the forefront of climate change. Recently, Somerset Rivers Authority set up a community flood action fund to provide small grants for small-scale works to reduce flooding in Somerset. These local, community-led interventions can make all the difference on the ground, but funds are limited, so how will the new resilience action plan future-proof local communities against climate-related risk, and how will it work to support local community interventions such as the SRA's community flood action fund?

Pat McFadden: Those community initiatives sound excellent. As I said in my statement, the Government have set aside some £4 billion for investment in flood defences over the coming years. We have all seen how things have changed over the past 10 or 20 years, and it is critical that we put in place the protections that communities need.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers and his statement this afternoon. The recent cyber-attack on M&S and others has shown the devastation that can be wrought by the might of a keyboard. With trusts in Northern Ireland using Encompass and those in England using the integrated care system, what plans do the Government and the Minister have to ensure we have the capacity to be informed and to treat patients should an NHS attack or shutdown take place?

Pat McFadden: I congratulate the hon. Member on his wonderful tartan tie, which has caught my eye today—he is the best-dressed man in the House. He is absolutely right about attacks on the health system. It is frankly outrageous that people out there would seek to disable parts of the NHS as a means of extortion, and it is really important that we do everything we can to defend the NHS and stop patients from being subject to delays in their treatment because of these outrageous attacks.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for his statement this afternoon.

Road and Rail Projects

1.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on how we are reconnecting Britain.

Today, I am announcing one of the most transformative investments in our transport network for a generation. We are greenlighting over 50 rail and road projects, touching every corner of the country, from more rail capacity in Oxford and better roads in Newcastle to new stations in Devon. This is what delivering on our plan for change looks like. We said we would raise living standards, so today's announcement is about taking the brakes off growth, supporting 42,000 new jobs and slashing journey times. We said we would build 1.5 million new homes, so we are directly supporting the construction of 39,000 new properties, showing how transport can lift up communities and improve lives. We said that we would accelerate to net zero, so not only will we make our roads safer and less congested and continue the transition to electric vehicles in a sensible way; we will get more people on public transport, backing our railways with new links and more electrified track. More jobs, new housing and better journeys are the people's priorities, and they are my priorities too.

None of this was inevitable. We are here because this Government are restoring stability to our finances and honesty to our politics. Thanks to the 10-year infrastructure strategy, we are committing at least £725 billion for infrastructure over the next decade, restoring confidence, driving growth and transforming how projects are delivered. Through phase 2 of the spending review, £92 billion will be spent on getting Britain moving. We have already confirmed where some of that money is going, including billions of pounds for upgrades on the trans-Pennine route, which is the backbone of our northern cities; a commitment to build the East West railway line to Cambridge; the biggest ever investment in local transport across the midlands and the north; and over £2 billion to enable Transport for London to continue with the purchase of new Piccadilly, Bakerloo and Docklands Light Railway trains. As the Chancellor said last month, we will also be confirming plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail soon.

Today, though, I can provide more detail on how we will use our wider spending review settlement. Let me start with our main highways. It should come as no surprise when I say that the strategic road network is one of our most important national assets. Carrying one third of all traffic and two thirds of our freight and generating £400 billion for our economy, those essential arteries sustain our businesses, our trade, and our very way of life. However, with much of the network built in the '70s and '80s, not only are many routes in need of renewal; there are pinch points where nothing short of new infrastructure will do.

As such, after careful consideration, I can announce that we will fund five more strategic road enhancement projects. That starts with linking up the M54 and the M6 and expanding capacity on the A38, which means better links for thousands of workers in the midlands and supports over 15,000 new homes across Derby. We will also start work on a continuous dual carriageway on the A66 across the Pennines, which will strengthen

road safety, cut journey times by 12 minutes and get more people to the region's stunning national parks. We have set aside funding for the A46 Newark bypass scheme and the Simister Island interchange in Greater Manchester, with both schemes now awaiting the outcome of the live planning process.

Some 97% of trips directly depend on our road network. Whether it is cycling, buses, walking or cars—you name it, our roads carry it. That is why we are investing record funding, with enough to fill an extra 7 million potholes this year, and why we extended the temporary cut in fuel duty at the last Budget. This Government will always be on the side of the British people, who depend on our roads day in, day out.

Today we are going even further. I have approved full business cases on the Middleswich eastern bypass and the A382 from Drumbridges to Newton Abbot, meaning that they can now enter construction. I can also announce that we have secured funding to continue to take forward 28 schemes, from Somerset to Skipton and from Newcastle to North Hykeham. I have spoken about the dozens of schemes that will transform road journeys across the country. The decisions we have made prioritise those essential trips to work, to the shops and to see loved ones, and keep our vital freight sector moving.

Let me turn to the projects that will deliver more reliable journeys for passengers on our railways. We know that rail investment outside London is well overdue. The spending review ramped up funding for the trans-Pennine route upgrade, for new stations and capacity improvements in Wales and for East West Rail. The new midlands rail hub will see the region's most ambitious rail improvement scheme to date. Thanks to Government funding, huge numbers of additional trains and 20 million extra seats could be added to services in and out of Birmingham each year.

But it is not just about delivering big-ticket projects. I can today announce new rail stations at Wellington and Cullompton in the south-west, which will bring significant benefits to local communities. Following representations from Mayor David Skaith and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters), I have also decided to fund the reopening of Haxby station on the York to Scarborough line. We will replace the aged signalling system on the Tyne and Wear metro, securing the benefits of that service for the next generation. I have listened carefully to Mayor Helen Godwin and my hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) about the need to reopen the Portishead line, and today I can confirm that we will do just that, connecting 50,000 additional people to the rail network.

Make no mistake: these and other projects will not just improve the passenger experience; they are down payments on future economic growth, better connectivity, and the new jobs and homes that this Government have promised. I know that some hon. Members will have specific schemes in their constituencies that are at the early stages or have not been funded in this spending review period, or that were cancelled but not announced as such by the previous Government. Let me reassure colleagues that many are worthy projects, and we will keep them under review. The soon-to-be-published infrastructure pipeline will set out our longer-term outlook and give colleagues the transparency that for years they have sorely lacked.

[Heidi Alexander]

It is important to set the context. We know that critical infrastructure projects were promised. We know that expectations were raised. Sadly, we know that there was no plan to pay for them. Indeed, schemes that formed part of the previous Government's major road network programme, all of which were meant to be in construction by now, have not progressed as expected. Almost half are yet to reach the outline business case stage, despite being in the programme for six years. Years of dither and delay wasted everyone's time and left communities in limbo. That, I must say, is the tragic legacy of the farcical Network North announcement made by the previous Prime Minister. It therefore falls to this Government to make the difficult but necessary choices about future transport projects. We have to level with the British public, provide much-needed certainty and govern with integrity.

Only those projects that are fully costed, affordable and deliver a return on taxpayers' money will be given the green light under my watch. That means no more black holes, no more busted budgets, and no more promising the moon on a stick—those days are over. I have therefore taken the difficult decision on the strategic road network not to progress the A12 widening scheme. That and dualling the A66 were two of the most expensive strategic schemes on the table, and it was impossible to continue with both. We have also decided not to progress the A47 Wansford to Sutton scheme. We are already investing more than £500 million on improvements to the A47 corridor, with work to dual sections in Norfolk already under way, but it is just not feasible to support further investment at this time.

I understand that some communities will feel frustrated, but by taking this decision we are rebalancing funds towards those areas that for too long have not had the infrastructure investment they deserve. The north and midlands will now get a higher proportion of strategic road spend than we have seen in the past five years. I believe that is the right and fair thing to do.

Finally, the previous Government spent many years and a lot of money developing plans for large local schemes and major road network projects that were never going to be affordable and therefore never got off the ground. We cannot go on like that. Although I have today written to colleagues and councils about 28 schemes that we will fund, many others now need to be reviewed. My officials will work with councils on which schemes to prioritise, and I will update the House on next steps once those discussions have taken place.

We are making a once-in-a-generation commitment to get Britain moving. Better roads and new rail links will raise living standards, increase opportunity and deliver on our plan for change. Throughout, we will always put the British people first. That means being honest about the inevitable trade-offs, understanding that financial stability remains the bedrock of economic growth, and ensuring that we always deliver the best value for taxpayers' money. I truly believe that talent exists across this country, yet poor connectivity is a drag on opportunity and places a ceiling on people's aspiration. That changes now. We will reconnect Britain, and we will deliver the world-class transport infrastructure that this country needs. That is my mission. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the shadow Secretary of State, I remind the Transport Secretary that it was always open to her to ask for more time for her statement. There is a 10-minute limit—so if the shadow Secretary of State would like more time, he too will get it.

1.37 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for advance sight of it. Make no mistake: infrastructure is the connective tissue that binds our economy together. Our railways and strategic roads are the veins and arteries of our economy, connecting businesses up and down the country. That is why these announcements are to be welcomed, just as they were when they were previously announced by the last Conservative Government. For example, the M54 to M6 link road and the Portishead branch line were both announced and granted permission under the last Conservative Government. The new stations at Wellington and Cullompton and the midlands rail hub were all approved under the previous Conservative Government. The development consent order for the A66 northern trans-Pennine project was signed in March last year under the last Conservative Government. [Interruption.]

The Secretary of State calls from a sedentary position, "Where was the money?" As she well knows, that was in the last spending period, and the forthcoming spending review was always going to be after the general election. I could go on and on, because every single scheme announced by the Government today is the result of the work of the previous Conservative Government. I therefore cannot muster the same enthusiasm as her when it comes to today's announcement.

The truth, whether they know it or not, is that the Secretary of State and her Ministers have been sent to this House today to stage a distraction, because in recent weeks we have seen the economic credibility and political unity of this Government implode. We have seen the Chancellor, who promised to maintain an "iron grip" on the public finances, forced to contend with unfunded U-turn after unfunded U-turn, all because the Prime Minister has lost control of their Back Benchers. We know what it means: more taxes for families and for businesses—the Chancellor has admitted it herself.

We also know the impact that this will have on the economy. In the last few months the Office for Budget Responsibility, the Bank of England and the OECD have all downgraded the UK's growth forecasts—by as much as half, in the case of the OBR—so I am afraid that the Government are kidding themselves if they believe that reannouncing transport infrastructure projects that are already in the pipeline will revive an economy that is faltering after a disastrous first year in office. With the tax burden reaching an historic high, inflation almost double the Bank of England's target and inactivity rising because the Government are seemingly incapable of implementing any kind of meaningful welfare reform, far from fixing the foundations, they are actively undermining them.

Quite aside from the fact that these reannouncements on their own will not revive our faltering economy, no deadline has been set for the completion of the projects, and in the light of that I must question whether the

funding for them is as secure as the right hon. Lady claims. Given that the OBR is expected to downgrade growth and productivity forecasts—not to mention Labour's U-turns—we know that the Government have created a black hole of billions of pounds in the public finances, so I must ask the right hon. Lady how confident she is that funds will not be cut from these projects to fill the Chancellor's economic black hole. Does she recognise that these projects alone will not revive an economy that is faltering under the Government's economic mismanagement, and will she give a timeframe for them not just to be started, but to be completed?

What we have seen in recent weeks is the following: a Prime Minister whose unpopularity with the public is apparently exceeded only by his unpopularity with his own Back Benchers and who is now clearly at their mercy; a Chancellor who is wilting under the strain; and a Government with no new ideas, out of steam after only one year in office and forced to rely on ideas thought up by other people. It is no surprise that Ministers would like to speak about anything other than their own record in office, but Britain deserves better than this.

Heidi Alexander: Sometimes I wonder what alternative reality the hon. Gentleman is living in. Network North may have promised everything to everyone, but not a penny of it was funded, and promising local areas schemes that the Conservatives knew would never materialise was no way to run a Government and no way to run a country. This Government are now providing certainty to those areas, giving the green light to important road and rail schemes and being honest about what we cannot afford.

I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman caught what was said by the former Rail Minister Huw Merriman to the Transport Committee last week, but he had this to say about the record of the last Government:

“A lot of promises were made to MPs and others as to the ambition, but it did not match the amount that was actually being set down. By the time I came into post I ended up with a list that was much longer than could be funded.”

I rest my case.

The hon. Gentleman talked of nothing being new. Let me give him some examples of new projects that we are announcing today. We are upgrading the Tyne and Wear metro, replacing a signalling system that dates back to the 1970s and enabling the extension of the metro to Washington. We are providing new railway stations: Wellington and Cullompton in Devon, Portishead and Pill with connections to Bristol, and Haxby in North Yorkshire, which will connect tens of thousands of people to the rail network. Can the hon. Gentleman tell me which Conservative Transport Secretary committed funds to those schemes? He cannot, because none of them did.

Let me also give one of the new roads as an example: the Middlewich bypass in Cheshire. The previous Government rejected the business case for that scheme, but this Government are funding it. New infrastructure, new railway stations and new roads connecting every part of our country—that is the difference that a Labour Government make.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome the statement, and I am sure that the Roads Minister will ensure that the various road projects deliver for local residents walking along and across the new junctions, and benefit them as much as they benefit drivers. The strategic road network projects are clearly important to dealing with congestion, but can I assume that each one has been subject to robust appraisal and business case development, and may I ask when we will see the equivalent work being done to address the chronic capacity crisis on the west coast main line?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend that the schemes that are going ahead have been subject to a very robust business case appraisal. We believe that they offer the taxpayer value for money, and can unlock the connectivity that is so critical to driving economic growth across the country. My hon. Friend also asked—I think I understood her question correctly—about capacity on the west coast main line. We are aware of capacity constraints between Birmingham and Manchester, which are predicted to last into the next decade, and although we have made it clear that we will not reverse the decision to cancel phase 2 of HS2, we are reviewing options for addressing those capacity issues in the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): People around the country have been plagued and let down by a transport system that was completely neglected by the last Conservative Government. The problems have ranged from potholes to cancelled bus services, along with entirely fictional budgets for rail and other transport projects.

Given that a safe, reliable transport system is vital to economic growth, this capital investment is of course welcome news. We are pleased to see the Government answering the calls of Liberal Democrats and other campaigners for vital upgrades such as new rail investment and improvements on the northern trans-Pennine route. Given the hard-fought campaign by local people in my constituency, I particularly welcome the confirmation of new stations at Wellington—first proposed in the House by my predecessor Jeremy Browne—and Cullompton. I cannot go quite as far as the Secretary of State in agreeing to relocate Wellington in Devon—it remains in Somerset—but both those rail projects are long overdue, and I thank the Secretary of State for engaging with not just me but my hon. Friends the Members for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) and others on both sides of the House, including the hon. Member for Exeter (Steve Race), who I see is present, on the vital importance of those stations to the regional economy. The long overdue funding for the west midlands rail hub is also welcome.

Let me now turn to the road infrastructure projects. Many of the schemes announced today have been sought for many years. We are pleased to see investment in the A66, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) has consistently campaigned, as well as investment in infrastructure in Manchester, Derby and Nottingham. However, we still need clarity on exactly how the funds for these projects will be spent. After years of delays, broken promises

[Gideon Amos]

and mismanagement—not least on HS2—public confidence in the Government's ability to deliver major infrastructure is understandably low.

Given the effects of inflation during the 12-month delay of the Wellington and Cullompton stations project, among others, can the Secretary of State confirm that that project will be fully funded and completed in the two years that it will take to construct the stations? When will the Government finally publish detailed plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail? Can the Government give the country a firm assurance that all these projects will be delivered on time and on budget, in a cost-effective manner?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will do everything in my power to ensure that future transport projects are delivered on time and on budget. He asked about Northern Powerhouse Rail. As I said in my statement, we will provide further details about that in the coming weeks. He was right to mention the two new stations, Wellington in—forgive me—Somerset and Cullompton, which, being located between Exeter and Taunton, will provide vital new connections for those regional centres, supporting economic growth and planned housing in the area. As the hon. Gentleman has put the case to me directly before, I know that both towns have significant expansion plans, so those stations will be critical to giving local people access to jobs at major employment centres such as the one in Exeter.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I welcome the statement, and thank the Transport Secretary for all the positive engagement that she and other Ministers have had with the midlands rail project. At the heart of those works is the upgrade of Kings Norton station in my constituency, which is critically important for the cross-city line, and is also the birthplace of Thomas the Tank Engine. The Secretary of State will understand that we, as local MPs, are pressing for that next level of detail, so will she help to keep up the head of steam around this project, and leave commuters in my constituency feeling chuffed to bits?

Heidi Alexander: I cannot possibly compete with those railway puns, but I am delighted that my hon. Friend's constituents have such a strong advocate for public transport and investment in the rail network. He is right to say that the midlands rail hub can have transformative impacts, and I thank him for all that he has done in championing the scheme over the months. He has been such a positive Member of this House.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, but I am really disappointed that the TavyRail scheme has received a red light. We have heard quite a lot about the investment in Devon and Somerset. The Government are delivering a huge amount of investment in Plymouth, which is welcome, but without a rail link between Tavistock and Plymouth that can continue further into my constituency at Ivybridge, I struggle to see how the investment in defence and housing will be fulfilled. Given that the Secretary of State is committing at least £725 billion for

infrastructure over the next decade, I would be interested to know why she could not find £1.5 million to fund the business case for TavyRail.

Heidi Alexander: We are keeping a number of schemes under review, and we will set out a pipeline of future infrastructure schemes that we believe are worthy, but which have not been funded in this spending review. I am happy to receive more detail about the particular scheme that the hon. Lady raises.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): The announcement of upgrades to the northbound M54-M6 junction is hugely welcome. It will make getting to Stafford from Telford much easier, and have a really positive impact on our economic development. When does the Secretary of State anticipate that that work will start, so that my county can keep benefiting from this Government?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. We will set out the timetable for the delivery of these schemes as we produce the next road investment strategy—RIS3—which we will have done by the end of March next year.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): For 30 long and weary years, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and I have campaigned for a through-train from Grimsby, which would stop at Market Rasen and end up in London. We have been made numerous promises by Network Rail, which is now saying that the platform is too short, that a bridge needs to be built, and that it will cost £25 million—the usual negativity. The Secretary of State is a feisty Minister. I promise her that if she gets us our train, I will campaign for it to be renamed the “Heidi Alexander, Heroine of Lincolnshire”.

Heidi Alexander: I feel that I am making progress, because the last time the right hon. Gentleman asked me a question, I believe he suggested that I name a train after Margaret Thatcher. I politely declined. He will get everywhere with flattery. Of course, the digital signalling on the east coast main line will have a positive impact on services, but I am afraid I cannot make a commitment on the particular service that he wants at this time.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Transport is the backbone of our economy, so the record £92 billion investment in rail and road projects is hugely welcome. The Secretary of State is right to say that we need more people on public transport. Although Luton station will finally see works start on its much-needed lifts, we need to tackle the poor state of the station in order to encourage more people to use the railway. Will the Secretary of State or one of her Ministers meet me to discuss how we can do so?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend makes a fair point: stations need to be welcoming and attractive places. I am pleased that the accessibility improvements are happening at Luton station, and I would be very happy to meet her, as she requests.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): However the Secretary of State dresses this up, her Labour Government, aided by Mayor Parker, are still leaving communities such as Aldridge behind by pushing our train station project into the sidings. Given her

announcement—or reannouncement—of the midlands rail hub, can she confirm whether she is committed to fully funding the whole project, including all the chords, and when will it be delivered?

Heidi Alexander: We will set out more detail on the midlands rail hub in due course. I simply observe that when the right hon. Lady was a Rail Minister, she was unfortunately unable to deliver the station for which she now advocates.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her statement, and welcome the investments in transport. Let me take her back to the proposed Liverpool-Manchester railway line, because it is important that this delivers for my constituents in Widnes and Halewood. In her discussions with the Mayor of the Liverpool city region and other leaders in the area, will she bear in mind that one of the proposals is for a Liverpool Gateway station? Ditton in my constituency, which is the site of an oil station and has good links to both the west coast main line and the freight line, is ideally placed. Will she bear that in mind in any future discussions that she has with the Liverpool city region?

Heidi Alexander: Let me assure my hon. Friend that I am in frequent discussions with the Mayor for the Liverpool city region, Steve Rotherham, as well as the Mayor for Greater Manchester. I am aware of the proposed Liverpool Gateway station in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I hope to be able to say more on Northern Powerhouse Rail in the coming weeks.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): A few weeks ago I was in Eamont Bridge and met a retired police officer, who shared with me his experiences of visiting road traffic accidents and, indeed, of having to break the news of the death of loved ones to countless people over his career. He begged me to carry on campaigning for the upgrade to the A66. On his behalf, and on behalf of the thousands of people who are part of the campaign to see that upgrade happen, I thank the Secretary of State for committing the money to do that today. However, we have wasted a year while this has been under deliberation. Will she now give an updated timescale, so that we can get on with the work as soon as possible in order to keep my constituents safe and to boost the economy of the north of England?

Heidi Alexander: As I said in response to a previous question, we will set out the delivery timetable for all the schemes that we are announcing today when we produce the next roads investment strategy. We will produce a draft of that later this year, and the final version will be published by March.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and I particularly thank her for the announcement just a few days ago of £2.5 billion for the public transport network in Greater Manchester. That is very welcome news. I have been campaigning for a long time for the extension of Manchester's Metrolink tram network into my constituency, and I thank the Secretary of State and the Chancellor for funding the extension to Stockport town centre.

I have one ask. Reddish South train station in my constituency is one of the quietest railway stations in the UK, with just one service per week. The Friends of Reddish South Station group are very active, and I was with them on Sunday. Will the Secretary of State restore proper passenger services at Reddish South train station?

Heidi Alexander: I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend welcomes the record investment in city regions that the Chancellor announced shortly before the spending review. It is worth nearly £16 billion across the country, and the extension of the tram network in Greater Manchester is a key part of that funding. I am aware of the campaign for a full service to Reddish South, and I encourage my hon. Friend to keep working with the Mayor of Greater Manchester and Transport for Greater Manchester to build the case for it.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Secretary of State has made reference to those areas of the country that wanted transport infrastructure projects and have not got them. May I ask her to spare a thought for those places that have got transport infrastructure projects that they do not want? She knows that High Speed 2 passes through my constituency but delivers no benefit to the people I represent. In future rounds of consideration for rail and road projects, will she consider giving priority to those places that are suffering in that way, but which have a real need for other types of transport infrastructure that perhaps they deserve as compensation?

Heidi Alexander: With respect to HS2, one of the benefits is that when the high-speed trains move on to new lines, we will be able to improve other regional services on the existing line. Although the right hon. and learned Gentleman may feel that the HS2 line has limited value to his constituents at the moment, getting it up and running will open up other options for rail travel moving forward.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and for the significant investment in transport across the UK. The confirmation of funding for the A511 corridor in the east midlands is extremely welcome. For far too long, communities such as mine have been overlooked by the previous Government for infrastructure investment where we have had lots of housing growth. This funding marks a turning point, accelerating opportunity and connecting our community. Can the Secretary of State assure me that every part of my constituency will see and feel the full economic benefits of this vital investment?

Heidi Alexander: Our local roads have a key role to play in driving growth across the UK and across the area my hon. Friend represents. They will allow people to access new opportunities and a higher quality of life wherever they choose. I am pleased to confirm that the scheme in her constituency is one of 28 that the Government have secured funding for and will be going ahead.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Just one large storm could sever the rail network at Dawlish, so will the Secretary of State commit to stage 5 of Network Rail's resilience programme? In my constituency there is a

[*Steve Darling*]

need for a railway station at Edginswell, which would equally unlock regeneration. I would welcome the Secretary of State's comments.

Heidi Alexander: We have had to prioritise our funding on the schemes that will make the greatest difference for passengers and economic growth as soon as possible. Having already invested in securing the cliffs and making the coastline more resilient in the south-west, the final phase of work will be kept under review as part of our pipeline of future funding. This will be determined by the output of the cliff monitoring and drainage works that we are continuing to fund.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on an ambitious but fully funded and deliverable plan to reconnect Britain. I welcome the commitment made to me by the Roads Minister last week that National Highways will review the safety of the dangerous slip roads at East Ilsley and Beedon on the A34, following my campaign. Does the Secretary of State agree that road safety must be at the heart of our plans for Britain's roads?

Heidi Alexander: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, which is why, for the first time in years, this Government will be producing a new road safety strategy. I look forward to talking more with her and other colleagues about its contents.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is a Wiltshire MP, so she will be very familiar with the town of Westbury, which has waited for decades for its bypass. Will she assure me that she is actively looking at proposals to bypass Westbury to the west of the town, including Yarnbrook, and does she agree that the north-south strategic study provides an opportunity to get the bypass that Westbury so desperately needs?

Heidi Alexander: I will need to write to the right hon. Gentleman about the Westbury scheme. I will make sure that I look into the details of it and I will come back to him.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I welcome the ramped up spending that the Secretary of State has announced today and the £445 million for Wales that was promised at the spending review. The new station at Magor and Undy could take cars off the M4 and open doors for local people who do not have a car and currently cannot get a job because of a lack of transport. Does she agree that the Magor and Undy walkway station would be an excellent candidate for starting the five Burns stations, given the track and infrastructure that already exist at Magor and Undy?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has been a fearsome advocate for the station at Magor and Undy. She will know that we have allocated £445 million over the next 10 years to right the historic wrongs of rail investment in Wales. I am looking forward to working with the Wales Rail Board to determine appropriate priorities and ensure that the communities she represents in Wales get the infrastructure they need.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Spiralling costs mean that Wales is owed at least £4 billion from HS2, yet, as the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) said, we are set to receive just £445 million over a 10-year period, which will be used for five stations, with nothing west of Cardiff. St Clears in my constituency has been promised a station for years. Can the Secretary of State say if there will be any additional money for this vital project, or are we expected to be grateful for the continued underfunding of Welsh railways?

Heidi Alexander: We are seeing a step change in the amount of funding that this Government are putting into the Welsh rail network. The £445 million will fund development projects as well as the delivery of some new infrastructure, and that is in south Wales and also in north Wales. I would be happy to speak further to the hon. Member about the scheme in her constituency that she has mentioned.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Much of what is in today's statement is of course welcome, but for places such as Bradford that have been left behind for a generation, we need to go much further. So I again make the case for a connection for Bradford to the trans-Pennine route as part of Northern Powerhouse Rail. This, along with a new rail station and a bus station, will unlock £4.5 billion in economic output, which is growth not just for Bradford, but for the whole region. While I appreciate that the Secretary of State is saying the decision on Northern Powerhouse Rail will be announced in due course, Bradford cannot wait for that growth. Can she give a specific time when that will be announced, and can she confirm that Bradford will be included as part of the trans-Pennine route?

Heidi Alexander: I am very aware of the case that my hon. Friend and the leader of Bradford council have put forward for a new station. As he notes, we will be setting out our plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail in the coming weeks.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The largest road programme in the UK is the lower Thames crossing from Tilbury to Gravesend. It is now scheduled to cost about £10 billion, and the Government say that 90% or more of that will be funded from the private sector. I asked the Secretary of State last month on the Floor of the House which institutions exactly are going to finance that, and she replied, in essence, "I'll get back to you." So can I ask her again, because the longer the Government refuse to answer this question, the more sceptical people in Essex and Kent will become about whether that much-needed, vital strategic link is ever going to get built at all?

Heidi Alexander: One of the first things I did when I came into this post was to agree with the Treasury that we would explore private finance options for the lower Thames crossing. We are working at the moment on securing a suitable private sector partner to finance the scheme. However, I think the right hon. Member has a bit of a brass neck, if I am honest. His Government sat on a planning application for years and years. This Government, within a year of coming into office, had granted planning consent and had decided to take forward the scheme with private finance, because we

know how critical that crossing will be for people living in Kent and Essex, and also for the freight and logistics companies that will use it.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement, and I welcome the long-overdue and funded commitment to the new Cullompton train station, which will benefit Exeter. I commend the activists across the area for their successful campaign, and I also welcome the work done by the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos). Does the Secretary of State agree with me that continuing to invest in public transport infrastructure and accessibility at stations such as Exeter St Thomas will help cities such as Exeter to grow their economies sustainably, delivering jobs and better living standards for everyone in those cities?

Heidi Alexander: I agree that accessibility at railway stations is critical. Obviously, it is key for disabled members of our community, but it is also vital for young parents travelling with prams and buggies, or people going on holiday with heavy suitcases. My hon. Friend has been a real champion for a new lift at Exeter St Thomas station, and while it is not currently on the list of 50 feasibility schemes that we are doing, I am sure he will continue to make the case to me for its worth.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The M54-M6 link road in my constituency is something that my constituents and I have long campaigned for, because many residents in the villages of Featherstone, Hilton and Shreshill are currently affected by traffic trying to link on to the M6, which has an impact on people's lives. Can the Secretary of State assure us that everything will be done to ensure that the scheme moves quickly and is built as swiftly as possible?

Heidi Alexander: I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. I want to see spades in the ground as soon as possible, so that people can benefit from that vital new piece of road infrastructure.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for her pragmatic approach to government, rather than the previous "pie in the sky" approach. It would be remiss of me not to mention Broadmead Road bridge in Redbridge, which has been closed to vehicle traffic since 2023. After 14 years of austerity, Redbridge council does not have the funds to reopen it, and I am sure she knows from her previous role that the Mayor of London also does not have any money. Given that the bridge affects five constituencies, runs over the Central line and connects to the M11, the A406 and the M25, can she please include its restoration in her plans to upgrade roads and railways across the country?

Heidi Alexander: I had a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) recently, who made a similar case about Broadmead Road bridge. In the spending review, we secured funding to set up a structures fund to ensure that the Government can make money available to local authorities with failing assets where the cost of the asset is so great that it would be prohibitive for the local authority to address

it on its own. We will be issuing a call for evidence to ask for feedback on how best to structure that fund, and I hope to be able to say more about its design before the end of the year.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Improved rail links are vital to support the planned developments around Ashchurch and Northway in my constituency, including a garden community and an outlet centre that opens next week. Current services to Ashchurch for Tewkesbury station are limited and unreliable, with the nearest arterial road routinely gridlocked. I welcome the funding for the midlands rail hub, but my constituents will be eager to learn whether funding for improvements at Ashchurch for Tewkesbury will be incorporated in that funding.

Heidi Alexander: If I may, I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the details he requests.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and, more importantly, for her commitment to the midlands rail hub. That is not just warm words and empty promises, but a breakthrough moment for the west midlands, especially towns such as Redditch. The scheme will deliver extra services and millions more train seats a year for my businesses and constituents. Would she therefore like to visit Redditch to see what that improvement will mean for our town and, perhaps, to get the spades in the ground as quickly as possible to deliver the project?

Heidi Alexander: I would be delighted to visit the constituency of my hon. Friend, who is a great champion for Redditch. I know what a transformative project the midlands rail hub could be for his constituents by improving capacity into Moor Street station in Birmingham. I look forward to discussing it more when I visit.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Obviously, the Secretary of State has an open invitation to visit Crowborough and Wadhurst stations.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I will follow on from the Secretary of State's reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) about the service between Grimsby, Cleethorpes and King's Cross. The Secretary of State rightly mentioned digital signalling on the east coast main line, which will improve capacity, but five trains a day already run between King's Cross and Lincoln. All that we are asking is for them to continue the last 40 miles through Market Rasen and Grimsby to Cleethorpes. There would be minimal expenditure apart from, I think, a safer crossing at Market Rasen station, and it would help the economic growth of the north Lincolnshire area.

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman makes a compelling case. As I said, we prioritised the schemes that we have announced today on the basis of the ones that will deliver the greatest improvement to passengers most quickly. I know that there will be other schemes worthy of investment, but that is why we have not announced the particular service and scheme that he wants today.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the year of the 200th anniversary of the railways, my rail city of York will greatly welcome the announcement about Haxby station. The line in question will address congestion issues and provide economic opportunity in my constituency. The trains will arrive at York station, but the rear of that station is not yet accessible. Will the Secretary of State ensure that as we develop our network, we have real access for all disabled people and others, so that we can gain the benefits from these new announcements?

Heidi Alexander: If my hon. Friend writes to me with further details of the access issues at the rear of York station, I will be happy to speak to the Rail Minister and relevant organisations to see whether there are improvements that we can make. I appreciate that we need accessible stations if everyone is to benefit.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Residents in Somerton and Langport are isolated from the railway line that runs right through the area. Some 50,000 residents could benefit from a new station, but hopes for that station took a massive hit when the Chancellor cancelled the restoring your railway fund. What steps will the Secretary of State take to introduce train links for communities such as Somerton and Langport? In the shorter term, will she commit to expanding integrated bus routes, so that my constituents can get to the nearest railway station?

Heidi Alexander: We will publish an integrated national transport strategy later this year to address precisely the sort of issues that the hon. Member raises about the criticality of bus links to stations in the absence of a new station. My predecessor and the Chancellor took the decision to cancel the restoring your railway programme because it was unaffordable in its entirety, but where schemes offer good value for money and really transformative benefits for the local economy—such as the Wellington and Cullompton schemes, and the Portishead scheme that we have announced today—I hope that we have shown that we are prepared to look at them and take them forward.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I welcome the announcements about the A46 bypass, given that the A46 goes through my constituency, and about the midlands rail hub that will connect Nottingham to Birmingham. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the east midlands, however, I must mention the electrification of the midland main line. I believe that the Department has received representations from more than 30 east midlands MPs, the mayor's office and the APPG about the project. This feels like a missed opportunity. What steps are being taken to make sure that the project is not missed, but continues to be debated and discussed by the Department?

Heidi Alexander: I believe that my hon. Friend and some of his east midlands colleagues are meeting the Rail Minister later this week to discuss the midland main line electrification phase 3. The costs of the scheme were substantial, and we had to prioritise other schemes that deliver more tangible benefits to passengers sooner. However, we will keep the electrification scheme under review as part of our pipeline of projects for future funding.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): How can I possibly welcome the Secretary of State's statement when, by her own admission, she has cancelled the A12 widening scheme and said nothing about the dualling of the A120 between Braintree and Marks Tey? How does she intend Braintree, Colchester and Tendring to deliver the massive new housing targets imposed by the Government with no new road or rail infrastructure at all?

Heidi Alexander: The simple truth is that we inherited a series of commitments that could not be afforded, so we had to take the difficult decision not to progress some projects. National Highways will now work to bring those projects to a close. I will say that on the A12, if there are individual, small-scale interventions that could unlock or address particular problems, we would be happy to look at those.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I welcome the improvements to the A38 and the midlands rail hub, which will mean 300 extra trains through Burton every week. The Secretary of State will know that I have been campaigning for the A50/A500 corridor, which is essential for local people and businesses; the Roads Minister will remember the time when she visited my constituency and got stuck in traffic on the A50. What progress might we hear on this vital corridor upgrade?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will look carefully at the A50 scheme as part of our planning for the next road investment strategy. He will have heard me say that we plan to publish a draft of that later this year, and to have that finalised by the end of March.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): We in Northern Ireland had a salutary experience recently when a major road project on our A5 was struck down by the High Court because of a failure to comply with net zero expectations under the Climate Change Act 2008. Given that the legislation is very similar in Great Britain, is the Secretary of State satisfied that all these new road projects will not also fall foul of the net zero campaign?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the environmental impacts of all road schemes are considered carefully before business cases are approved and planning approval is given. In fact, in many cases, schemes tackling congestion hotspots will deliver environmental benefits—in particular, air quality and noise benefits. I am not concerned about the possibility of what the hon. Gentleman suggests, but I am grateful to him for highlighting that case in Northern Ireland.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): When Heathrow airport sets out its growth plans, a key component of them will be the plans for improved access by public transport. Will the Secretary of State urge it to look at the southern rail link, which should run through my constituency specifically, of course? It could have huge benefits across the south-east and would connect us to the airport.

Heidi Alexander: We expect any promoter of an expanded Heathrow to consider how people will get to and from the airport; neither my hon. Friend nor I want to see the M25 or M4 turned into Europe's largest car

park. I expect any scheme promoter to ensure that ease of access by public transport is taken into account when putting together any proposals.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I welcome the commitment to deliver East West Rail. Sticking with the railways, will the Secretary of State provide assurance to my constituents that she is committed to delivering step-free access—in particular, at Harlington and Flitwick stations? On roads, junction 13 of the M1 is desperately in need of remodelling to cope with a growing population and to ease traffic flows. What assessment has been made of the benefits of remodelling that junction?

Heidi Alexander: I would need to write to the hon. Gentleman with the details on junction 13 of the M1. I hear the case that he makes for improved accessibility at Harlington and Flitwick stations, and would be happy to correspond with him further on whether they are covered by the 50 feasibility studies that we are doing. We have funding available in this spending review to construct some of those schemes, and I would be happy to provide a written update on that.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): In my four years as shadow Transport Secretary, the issue of electrification was never far from the top of the agenda, and I very much welcome Secretary of State's announcement around the trans-Pennine route upgrade. However, may I point out that the north of England is not confined to the conurbations in that immediate area? There is more to it than that. In 2015, the electrification taskforce established that the line from Northallerton through to Thornaby and Middlesbrough in my constituency, and indeed onwards to Redcar—the heart of Net Zero Teesside—was right at the top of the tier. When the infrastructure pipeline comes forward, I urge the Secretary of State to take into consideration the gross value added that the extension would bring, because Teesside and the Tees Valley are ready to make their contribution to growing this economy, and the extension would ensure that they could.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case. That case is why, even if we are not committing funding in this spending review to electrification projects, we will keep them under review as we move forward. We are also considering and developing our strategy on rail decarbonisation more broadly. Most of our existing arterial routes are now electrified. There is also rapidly evolving technology; there are bi-mode and even tri-mode trains now. We need to consider our strategy in the round.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the Minister's statement, and it is good that Devon made it on to the map—just. Many on the Liberal Democrat Benches and others across the House travel from Paddington down to the far south-west, and we have spoken with your Department about the effects of the Old Oak Common works on that line. Can the Minister confirm that the Department is considering mitigations for the effects of the Old Oak Common development—namely, ensuring more capacity and reliability, potentially electrifying the main line to the west, and improving 4G connectivity on those trains?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): “Your Department”—anyone would assume that I was running Transport. I was a Minister in that Department once, but not any more. I call the Secretary of State.

Heidi Alexander: In the past couple of weeks, we announced Project Reach, which will improve mobile connectivity in a number of tunnels and sidings, and some of those improvements will take place over the Great Western Railway network. On the works at Old Oak Common, the Rail Minister is very alive to the question of how we minimise disruption for users of the GWR service, both in the construction phase and once HS2 is in operation, and is looking in detail at that. Of course, when it is finally open, the station will offer a valuable interchange for GWR customers, who will be able to go to Birmingham without going into central London.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Boosting growth and prosperity across the country, and especially in rural and coastal areas, is vital. What is the Secretary of State delivering for Cornwall, to help towns and villages in my area, including Saltash, Liskeard and Polperro, particularly as we work to find a long-term, sustainable and fair solution to the issue of the Tamar crossings?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend was in contact with me directly a couple of days ago about mobile connectivity improvements on GWR that improve services in her constituency. I know that an integrated bus network in Cornwall is absolutely vital to her constituents, and through our Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, we want to give local leaders more powers to shape the bus networks that communities like hers need and deserve.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, the biggest connectivity issue for the Isle of Wight is its ferry services. I welcome her engagement on that issue. Might she consider cross-Solent ferry services to be part of the UK's road and rail network? The Isle of Wight's roads and rail are connected to the rest of the UK only via entirely privatised, very expensive and completely unregulated ferry companies.

Heidi Alexander: I understand the importance of a reliable and affordable ferry service. The Isle of Wight's ferry services are obviously provided privately, and our road network, and our rail network especially, will increasingly be in public ownership in the future. While I cannot commit to doing what he asks, I can commit to working with the hon. Gentleman and his colleague on the Isle of Wight, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley), to try to improve this situation for their residents.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Today's announcement is great news for people across Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages. To the north, we have improvements on the A38, making access to the University of Derby easier; to the west, we have improvements to the M4 and M6 link road, which will be great for access to the i54, and to Telford and Wales. To the south, we have the midlands rail hub, which will be excellent for the cross-city line. All we need is for Reform-controlled Staffordshire county council to the east to sort out Chetwynd bridge; then we will have the entire compass covered.

[*Dave Robertson*]

Turning to the south, the cross-city line is the busiest commuter line outside of London, but since covid, we have had just two trains an hour from Lichfield Trent Valley to Birmingham. The midlands rail hub will get us back up to four. Will the Secretary of State come to Lichfield to meet me—potentially on her way to Redditch—and ensure that we can deliver more trains on the cross-city line as quickly as possible?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is clearly at the heart of all the action today. Having accepted an invitation to visit Redditch, how can I refuse a visit to Lichfield? I would be happy to talk to him more about the challenges of and opportunities for midlands transport when I visit.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): The Secretary of State said that she was reconnecting Britain, and then proceeded to mention Wales only once. These plans will not give us the boost that we need in Wales. We are the poorest nation in the UK. Investing in infrastructure delivers economic growth and boosts productivity—that is true—so why has she given up on Wales? Will we ever see the full electrification of the north and south main lines?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that this Government have not given up on Wales—in fact, it is the precise opposite. It is why, during the spending review, the Chancellor stood at this Dispatch Box and announced £445 million of investment into rail projects—righting the wrongs of that historic under-investment.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): The fight for the Middleswich eastern bypass started more than 40 years ago, and after all these years of false starts, dashed hopes and frustrated residents, I could not be prouder that this Labour Government are finally delivering on that project. After 14 years of under-investment in areas such as mine, it is really encouraging to see the Government delivering the funding that is needed to make such a vital infrastructure project a reality. The recent reforms to the Treasury's Green Book, championed by my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Sarah Russell) and for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae), have clearly played a crucial role in enabling projects such as this to move forward, better reflecting the needs and potential of towns like Middleswich. How does my hon. Friend see the Middleswich eastern bypass, along with the 50 other road schemes that she has greenlit, contributing to the long term economic growth and supporting more balanced and inclusive development across all parts of the country?

Heidi Alexander: I am really pleased to be able to announce today the green light for the Middleswich bypass. I know that that new 2.5 km of single carriageway bypass to the east of Middleswich will make a big difference to my hon. Friend's constituency, unlocking swifter, easier journeys and more routes to employment and opportunities for his constituents for which he so powerfully advocates.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for greenlighting the work on the A382 into Newton Abbot. That will be a massive

improvement when it is completed. May I congratulate the successful teams at Teignbridge and at Devon county council, who have been working on the project for some while? However, I am disappointed to hear that Dawlish is not on the list and will be put back. Indeed, although I am pleased that the Government will be continuing to fund the monitoring of the cliffs, may I draw it to the Secretary of State's attention that it was a single catastrophic shift, rather than a gradual increase of the situation, that caused the collapse of the cliff at Dawlish that shut the railway for eight weeks, causing approximately £1.2 billion of damage to the south-west economy?

Heidi Alexander: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), we have already heavily invested in securing the cliffs and making the coastline more resilient in Dawlish. We are keeping that final phase of work under review, and it will be possible to determine the next course of action only once that further cliff monitoring and drainage works have taken place. None the less, I can assure him that we will keep it within the pipeline of schemes that we are considering for future investment.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The previous Government dodged vital infrastructure decisions for 14 years, so I am glad that this Government are stepping up with projects such as the east coast main line upgrade, which has been announced today, strengthening connections to Leeds and West Yorkshire. However, although connections to London are important, anyone crossing the Pennines from Leeds to Manchester via towns in my constituency will know that this route is in vital need of investment. Will the Secretary of State assure my constituents that this will not be the last of the projects that she announces, and that the Calder Valley line upgrade is still very much on the table?

Heidi Alexander: As I have said, there is a number of very worthy rail schemes which, although funding may not have been allocated during this spending review period, are important to the travelling public. My hon. Friend makes a strong case for the scheme that will benefit his constituents, and I can assure him that when we have any updates on future funding availability I will come back and update the House.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Northern Ireland Minister for Infrastructure informed me this morning that her Department is working with the Department for Transport and the European Investment Bank on the recommendations in the all-island strategic rail review. One of those recommendations is the opening of the Antrim to Lisburn line, which includes the opening of three previously closed stations at Crumlin, Ballinderry, and Glenavy, with a new hall at the Belfast international airport. Can the Secretary of State provide any further update on what support the Government can provide or what engagement she has had with the Department of Infrastructure in Northern Ireland or the European Investment Bank on what will be a critical piece of investment in my constituency of South Antrim?

Heidi Alexander: Although I have not personally had any direct engagement, it may be that the Rail Minister or my officials have, and so I would be happy to write back to the hon. Gentleman to update him on any collaboration that is taking place in this respect.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): People across Cumbria will warmly welcome the decision made by the Secretary of State about the dualling of the Pennine section of the A66, which will benefit the whole county. However, I wonder whether she might also say something about another scheme that is not yet at the same level of development, which is the Cumbria coastal line, running from Carlisle through my constituency to Barrow and then on to Lancaster. Other Cumbrian colleagues and I had a very productive meeting with the Rail Minister last week, and I wondered whether the Secretary of State will help to push for the final business case to be invested in, so that we can make some progress on the upgrade to that all-important line?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has spoken to me directly about this in the past couple of days. I know that the Rail Minister found that meeting very helpful. I appreciate that there is some strategic crossover with Defence and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, but I will be sure to stay in touch with my hon. Friend as the business case develops.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The A483 that runs between Welshpool and Oswestry is a key economic artery for the Marches region, but like the rest of North Shropshire's transport infrastructure, it has been seriously neglected over many years. That has left the crossroad at Llyncllys in my constituency as one of the west midlands' worst accident blackspots. Highways England has a great plan to redesign it and make it safer for all concerned. Will the Secretary of State meet me to see how we can progress that critical improvement?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to ask my hon. Friend the Minister for the Future of Roads to take that meeting as I suspect that she will be closer to some of the detail of the work that National Highways is doing.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I welcome today's announcements that will see improvements in the performance on the west coast main line, particularly as they come during the week where, in my constituency and in many others, we celebrated Crewe Day, which commemorates the anniversary almost 200 years ago when the first rail service passed through the now strategic rail hub of Crewe. But can the Secretary of State outline how this funding will be used to ensure that freight growth targets can be met on the west coast corridor, and tell us whether new routes, such as the midlands north-west rail link are being considered to support this ambition?

Heidi Alexander: I shall write to my hon. Friend about the detail of the midlands north-west rail link. As we establish Great British Railways, we will be placing a duty on the new organisation, which will be the publicly owned organisation to bring together the management of track and train, to increase the amount of freight that we transport on the railways. We do need to get lorries off the road and move more goods on the rail network. It is a strategic objective for me and my Department to make sure that we are maximising the amount of freight that we can transport on the rail network, while also delivering excellent passenger services.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): The Secretary of State and the Minister for the Future of Roads will be surprised that I am going to break the habit of a lifetime and not talk about the Gateshead flyover for a change. But I am very interested in the structures fund, and I look forward to engaging further with the Department on how we can deliver this vital infrastructure for Gateshead. Instead of the flyover, I want to talk about the delivery of the signalling system for the metro—slightly less exciting for some perhaps, but it is incredibly important. That comes on top of new trains and £1.85 billion of investment, including in a new metro line. Does the Secretary of State agree that investment in the north-east is being delivered because we have a Labour mayor in Kim McGuinness working with Labour MPs and a Labour Government?

Heidi Alexander: I agree 100%. Mayor Kim McGuinness is a fearsome advocate for her region. The first day I met her, she managed to mention to me the Tyne bridge, Nexus signalling and extending the metro out to Washington all in about 30 seconds. I am really pleased that we are delivering these vital improvements to transport infrastructure for his constituents and the wider region.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and the Minister for the Future of Roads for her generous engagement with me regarding the expansion of the A38 in Derby, which has been greenlit today. Many residents and businesses will welcome the expansion of the A38, which is a significant bottleneck. It also means we now have the opportunity to unlock economic growth around that stretch of road. However, some residents are rightly concerned about the impact of the road on established woodland and Markeaton Park. How much biodiversity net gain will be delivered through the project, and will it be used to drive improvements in public transport, walking and cycling? Finally, can she ensure that this development has no effect whatsoever on the UNESCO world heritage status of the Derwent valley?

Heidi Alexander: I would expect all road schemes that we are announcing today to contribute to our public transport objectives and improve the walking and cycling environment. As I said in my statement, roads are used by everyone and for many different modes of transport. On my hon. Friend's point about biodiversity net gain, I am assured that all schemes have gone through a very thorough environmental assessment. I will write to him on the other issue he raises.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Markus Campbell-Savours to ask the final question.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Like many Cumbrians, I am delighted and relieved that the Government have agreed funding for the A66 trans-Pennine project. It never should have been in doubt, and it is clear to me that it would not have been were it not for the financial legacy of the previous Government. Ministers can now look forward to me lobbying for a new roundabout at Brigham and Broughton in west Cumbria—a project rejected by the previous Government. Can the Secretary of State set out what assessment she has made of the benefits to my constituents of the A66 trans-Pennine project?

Heidi Alexander: Last but not least, Madam Deputy Speaker. The A66 is a vital scheme that will not only reduce journey times but improve safety, unlock the delivery of new homes in some locations and open up access to the region's beautiful national parks. The work never stops in this job, so I note what my hon. Friend says about his campaign for a new roundabout, and I look forward to discussing that with him in the future.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my 33 years in this House it has always been the practice that a statement of this nature would be made alongside a White Paper, which would be available in the Vote Office to Members as soon as the Secretary of State sits down. There is no White Paper in the Vote Office to explain the detail of the Government's decision making. Is there anything you can do to elucidate from the Secretary of State whether a White Paper will be forthcoming and when that will be?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. That is not a matter for the Chair, but I am sure the Secretary of State will have heard his comment.

Post Office Horizon Inquiry: Volume 1

2.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Sir Wyn Williams has today released the first volume of his report into the Horizon scandal, which caused so much harm to so many innocent people. The fearless and diligent work of his inquiry has, I believe, won the trust and admiration of postmasters. The inquiry has asked penetrating questions of a large number of witnesses and has scrutinised more than 2 million pages of evidence. I know that the whole House recognises the bravery of the postmasters who fought against enormous odds to see their cause recognised.

Sir Wyn's report reminds us that blameless people were impoverished, bankrupted, stressed beyond belief, and lost their jobs, marriages, reputations, mental health and, in some cases, their lives. I am sure that the whole House shares my gratitude to Sir Wyn and his team for their work so far. This is only the first volume of their final report, spelling out the scandal's human impact and looking at the redress schemes that have been put in place in response. The second volume will in due course deal with the causes of the scandal and how repetition can be avoided.

To be clear, I am very sympathetic to Sir Wyn's 19 recommendations in the volume published today. Clearly, a number of them require careful consideration. We will respond to them promptly, as some concern the ongoing delivery of Horizon redress schemes. Sir Wyn has set us a deadline of 10 October, and we will meet it.

The House will see that Sir Wyn has accepted that "the Post Office, the Department and Ministers continue to adhere to the aims of providing financial redress, which is full, fair and prompt."

He also concludes that the majority of people who have accepted offers under the group litigation order scheme "will have done so because, for them, the offer was full and fair." That said, Sir Wyn makes some understandable criticisms, especially of the Horizon shortfall scheme, which we will need to study closely and address.

We inherited a compensation process that was widely seen as too slow, adversarial and legalistic. Well over four years after the first High Court case exposed the scandal, only 2,500 postmasters had had final settlements. There were clearly significant gaps in the compensation process, and many victims had not come forward. Indeed, there was no compensation scheme in place for those postmasters whose convictions had been overturned by Parliament.

A year ago, the Government had paid £236 million in redress. We have now quadrupled that to nearly £1.1 billion. We have launched a compensation scheme for postmasters who have had their convictions overturned—the Horizon convictions redress scheme—and have merged the Post Office's compensation arrangements for overturned convictions into it. Through the Post Office, we have delivered a £75,000 fixed-sum offer to over 4,200 victims who opted for it.

We have also launched an independent process to allow people to appeal their HSS settlements or offers. That should provide, as Sir Wyn says in his report, "an opportunity to put right any failures to deliver redress which is full and fair" for HSS victims.

We have also begun discussions with Fujitsu on their contribution to the costs of the scandal. As the House knows, and as Sir Wyn's report underlines, there is still a lot more to do. I know that the postmasters who have yet to agree final compensation are frustrated with the delay; so am I.

We have consulted regularly with the Horizon compensation advisory board and others on what more we can do to improve redress. Sir Wyn's recommendations are very helpful in that regard. Two of his recommendations address issues that we have already been working on across Government and with the advisory board. I can confirm that we accept Sir Wyn's recommendation that claimants should be able to bank the best offer that they get from the GLO process and that it should not be put at risk if they choose to go to the independent panel.

Secondly, we will provide redress for family members of postmasters who suffered because of the scandal. I have met the group Lost Chances for the Children of Sub-postmasters, which has campaigned with considerable courage on this issue. Sir Wyn rightly recognises that designing a suitable compensation scheme for family members raises some very difficult issues. None the less, we want to look after those family members who suffered most—meeting Sir Wyn's recommendation that we should give

“redress to close family members of those most adversely affected by Horizon.”

Given those challenges, we will now discuss the details of how a scheme should be run with claimants' lawyers, the independent advisory board and the Lost Chances group. It will be open to close family members of existing Horizon claimants who themselves suffered personal injury, including psychological distress, because of their relatives' suffering. Other than in exceptional circumstances, we will need contemporaneous written evidence of that personal injury.

There are some fundamental lessons to be learned, to which Sir Wyn points, about how compensation following wrongdoing on this scale should be delivered in future. In particular, the Post Office should never have been allowed to run it, decisions on funding should have been made much more quickly, and it should not have needed an ITV drama to stimulate action to overturn hundreds of unjust convictions. We cannot now turn back the clock to fix those fundamental mistakes. We must instead address two challenges.

The first challenge is to make sure that if there is ever another terrible scandal like this one—we all sincerely hope there is not—the victims do not need to bring a traumatic court case to expose it. The second challenge, if another such scandal happens, is that the Government must be set up to offer trusted redress from the very start. Sir Wyn argues that there should be a standing public body to deliver redress in any further scandal. I have a considerable amount of sympathy with that argument, but clearly we need to analyse the options fully before we commit to it. We will reflect on how to address those twin challenges and will bring back our conclusions to the House.

We can never properly recompense a person for being wrongly denied their freedom, for the humiliation of being wrongly accused or for seeing their loved ones in profound distress or worse, and neither can we recompense

them for their good reputation being taken from them. I cannot assuage the anger of the victims, nor will the anger that I feel on their behalf ever be assuaged, but we are determined to do more on redress and beyond, and to do it quickly, to give more of the victims of this appalling scandal at least a measure of the peace that they so rightly deserve. I commend Sir Wyn's report to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

2.51 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. We welcome the release of volume 1 of the Post Office Horizon inquiry final report and I put on record my thanks to Sir Wyn Williams and the inquiry team for all the work that they have done, alongside all those who gave evidence.

This inquiry lays bare one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in modern British history. Volume 1 focuses on redress and the human impact of the Horizon scandal, which has been evolving since 2000. The human impact is particularly devastating, with the report revealing that at least 13 people may have taken their own lives as a result of the Post Office Horizon IT scandal. It also recognises that family members have also suffered from this miscarriage of justice. Even though, as the Minister says, we can never recompense a person properly for this miscarriage, I am sure the whole House will want to ensure that the victims are fully compensated by the schemes, and I would like to put on the record my tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who set up this process of redress.

The report has recommended that the Government and/or the Department, and where appropriate the Post Office and Fujitsu, shall provide a written response to Sir Wyn's recommendations by 10 October. Can the Minister confirm that the Government will be able to say by 10 October whether they will accept all 19 of the report's recommendations? The report details that there is still much to be done to ensure justice for the victims, so who and how will those responsible be held answerable for the years of denial and suffering?

This was not simply a technical failure; it was a failure of oversight, governance and accountability. The report finds that the Post Office and Fujitsu knew, or at the very least they should have known, that the Horizon IT system had faults. The sub-postmasters are also described

“as victims of wholly unacceptable behaviour”

by the two companies. Sir Wyn has stated that there are still more than 3,000 claims to resolve and that there have been egregious delays in compensation. Will the Minister therefore update the House on the most recent status of the compensation schemes? What steps is he taking to address these concerns, and how are the Government ensuring that full, fair and fast compensation is delivered without further bureaucracy or delay?

Will the Minister update us on what action is being taken in relation to Fujitsu, which is still being awarded Government contracts? Fujitsu said that it would wait until the inquiry reports to offer compensation, so will the Minister confirm that there is now nothing preventing

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

Fujitsu from paying interim compensation? Will he also confirm that it will be made clear how much he believes Fujitsu should contribute to the redress scheme?

In the spending review, the Government allocated £86 million from its transformation fund for the Post Office, specifically earmarked to support investment plans, including replacing the existing Horizon computer system. Will the Minister update the House on the progress of securing a new computer system for the Post Office and whether that system will replace the Horizon system in its entirety? What assessment has he made of the earlier Capture accounting software and its legacy of problems?

Finally, to move on from this protracted miscarriage, will the Minister confirm when we will see the much anticipated Green Paper on the future of the post office network and how the public can have their say on that consultation? The time for half measures is over. Justice delayed is justice denied, and those affected by this scandal deserve nothing less than the full force of the Government's commitment to truth, reform and redress. Taxpayers also deserve to know how much Ministers think Fujitsu should pay to resolve these terrible wrongs.

Gareth Thomas: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and questions. She was right to say in her opening remarks about this being the greatest miscarriage of justice in our country's history. The responsibility is therefore on us all to do everything we can to make sure the victims receive full and fair compensation, and to ensure that there is never a repeat.

The hon. Lady specifically challenges me on the question of the 10 October deadline that Sir Wyn Williams has put in place. I can confirm that we are determined to meet that deadline. It is particularly important that we do so, as some of his recommendations concern the ongoing delivery of the Horizon compensation schemes and we do not want, inadvertently or not, to delay or hold back any of those claims.

The hon. Lady rightly gives me the opportunity to again pay tribute to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for his work when he was the Post Office Minister. Without question, we would be even further behind without the considerable amount of work and effort that he put in. There are many others in the House who have campaigned long and hard on behalf of the sub-postmasters, including the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), who I see in his place, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), who chairs the Business and Trade Committee.

The hon. Lady asked who and how will those responsible be held to account. She knows that Sir Wyn Williams is due to publish the second part of his report, which focuses on those very questions. We will consider carefully what he has to say about that when we receive his report. I suspect that she already knows that the Metropolitan police is leading an investigation into whether criminal responsibility is at play. More than 100 police officers are working on that investigation and they have identified a number of individuals of interest. We will see what they do with regard to those individuals

in due course. As the hon. Lady and the House will understand, Ministers are not in any way involved in such decisions.

What further steps have we taken to deliver and speed up compensation? The hon. Lady will be aware that we have issued the opportunity for sub-postmasters who apply to the Horizon shortfall scheme and who want to accept a fixed-sum payment of £75,000 to do so. We have put in place an appeals process to try to give those who feel they have not received a fair offer to date a chance to get full and fair redress.

There are particular challenges in the Horizon shortfall scheme. If I am honest, it is the scheme that I worry about the most, not least because there are 1,700 cases in which there does not appear to be any evidence of shortfalls. That does not mean that there were no shortfalls; it means that, at this stage, we do not have evidence of what those shortfalls were. As the House would expect, I have gone back to the Post Office and made it clear that we want it to reinvestigate, to see whether evidence can be found in as many of those cases as possible. We are looking very carefully at what we can do about the rest.

On Fujitsu, we will need to see Sir Wyn's final report to understand fully the degree of Fujitsu's culpability. I have made it clear to Fujitsu that we think it should bring forward an interim compensation payment, and I hope that it will see the report today and recognise the need to do that.

The hon. Lady also asked me about the Green Paper. We hope to publish it very shortly. One of the issues that it will consider is the future of the Post Office's IT systems, because we certainly need to move on from the past and Horizon. We will set out in a bit more detail at that point what work we are doing in that regard.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): On behalf of our Committee, I welcome this report from Sir Wyn Williams. As Jo Hamilton has said, it unmask the full horror of what was done to the sub-postmasters, including the truth that at least 13 suicides resulted from what the Post Office did to innocent people. Sir Wyn Williams echoes almost all the recommendations our Committee has now made three times to Ministers. There are 3,000 claims still outstanding, and there are, in Sir Wyn's words, "egregious delays" at every stage of the claims process, so does the Minister now accept that, as we have recommended and Sir Wyn has recommended, up-front legal advice needs to be provided to victims?

Does the Minister also accept that we must now, once and for all, strip the Post Office of any role in the Horizon shortfall scheme? Will the Minister commit to a date for getting rid of the Post Office altogether from that redress scheme? Today's report makes it clear that at least 160 people in the Post Office knew exactly what was going on, and some of them came to this House and misled Members of this House not once but twice, so is it now the moment for us to commence contempt of Parliament proceedings against the leaders of the Post Office who misled us so badly?

Gareth Thomas: I want to take this opportunity again to pay tribute to the work of the Business and Trade Committee under my right hon. Friend's chairmanship. As he has said, there has been a series of recommendations from his Committee, and I recognise that we have not always agreed with all those recommendations. For me, the question about whether to offer legal advice to Horizon shortfall scheme claimants has always been a finely balanced judgment. I say that because it has always been clear that the victims wanted a fast route to secure compensation without the involvement of lawyers, and the fact that so many have accepted the fixed-sum payment is an indication of that appetite. Nevertheless, I recognise that Sir Wyn Williams has given us a clear steer on that particular question, and we will consider that extremely carefully and very quickly.

On the question of whether the Post Office should be stripped completely of responsibility for the Horizon shortfall scheme, there is no doubt that if we were starting afresh, the Post Office would have no responsibility for any of the compensation schemes. When I looked at the question of whether to start over again in the delivery of the compensation schemes and at who should be responsible for their delivery, I recognised that to change completely the processes as they had been set up would see further delay in getting compensation to the victims. I say gently to my right hon. Friend that Sir Wyn Williams has not said today that the Post Office should not be involved in the Horizon shortfall scheme's delivery. We have been clear that we need to take away responsibility for the most complex cases, and we have set up the appeals scheme to do so. Given the numbers who have come forward with appeals on the Horizon shortfall scheme, I hope that we will be able to give confidence to those people that they will have a chance to get full and fair redress.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement. The Horizon scandal was an appalling miscarriage of justice, and today's report highlights the extent of the human suffering that it has caused. Reading the stories of some of the victims in this report was truly heartbreaking, and it could not be clearer that far too many people's lives have been irreparably affected. No scandal of this kind can be allowed to happen ever again. We warmly welcome the publication of the first volume of the independent inquiry's report, which has the full support of the Liberal Democrats, and I sincerely hope that it will focus Ministers' minds in getting victims the compensation and justice that they deserve as soon as possible. It is shocking that victims of this scandal have had to wait this long for their rightful compensation and justice. The Government need to move at speed and bring an end to this unacceptable delay.

Although we welcome the promise of full compensation, the Liberal Democrats will continue to hold the Government to account in order to ensure that victims get the payments they deserve as quickly as possible, so will the Minister confirm that the Government will implement the recommendations of today's report in full? Will they set out a timeline for when all victims can expect to receive full and fair compensation? What conversations have the Government had with the Post

Office and Fujitsu about restorative justice in the light of Sir Wyn's recommendations? Lastly, when will the Government finally introduce legislation on a full duty of candour, for which sub-postmasters and the victims of so many other scandals and disasters have so long called?

Gareth Thomas: I welcome the hon. Lady's comments, and I welcome the challenge to the Government to go further and faster on delivering compensation, not just from her and her party, but from across the House. She asked a similar question to that from the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), who spoke for the official Opposition, on whether we would accept the recommendations that Sir Wyn has set out today. As I made clear in my opening remarks, we are very sympathetic to all his recommendations. Indeed, I was able to confirm today that we have accepted two of his recommendations: to provide compensation for family members and to move on the question of the best offer. I hope that gives the House confidence that we will meet the deadline that Sir Wyn Williams has imposed on us.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) rightly joins all sides of the House in challenging Fujitsu to recognise its responsibilities. I hope it will read Sir Wyn's report and conclusions afresh and recognise that it now needs to make an interim payment. Restorative justice is one of the significant recommendations in Sir Wyn's list, and we will consider that very carefully. There is a series of options as to how one might deliver restorative justice, and there would clearly need to be consultation with the victims. We will think through the different steps that we need to take in that regard.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I add my support for the introduction of a redress scheme for close family members. On the Business and Trade Committee, and in my constituency surgeries, I have heard from family members, and it is clear that the trauma of this injustice has been passed down through generations. Can the Minister share any further details on how he expects the scheme to operate, and more importantly, who will be responsible for overseeing the schemes and any actions taken in regard to families affected by the Capture system?

Gareth Thomas: I welcome my hon. Friend's work on the Business and Trade Committee and more generally in pushing the Government to do more on full and fair compensation. On the question of family members, Sir Wyn makes it clear in his report not only that offering a compensation scheme for family members is the right thing to do, but that there will be significant design challenges in how such a scheme is put together. We will work with the independent Horizon compensation advisory board, with claimants' lawyers and with the campaign group Lost Chances on the design of such a scheme.

My hon. Friend briefly mentioned Capture, as did the hon. Member for West Worcestershire. We are in the process of working with a number of the victims of the Capture scandal and their legal representatives to design an effective compensation process for them. There are again some significant challenges around the availability of evidence, given that the use of the Capture software was before the introduction of the Horizon computer

[Gareth Thomas]

system, and so the amount of evidence available is significantly less. None the less, we are working at pace on the design of such a scheme.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): As a member of the Business and Trade Committee, I was aghast to find that the Capture system predates Horizon and goes as far back as 1992; so we are 33 years on. The Minister has touched on the difficulties of getting evidence from that time. Has he made any assessment of how many victims might be involved in this Capture scheme? It looks as though it might be a burgeoning scandal on the scale of the Horizon scheme.

Gareth Thomas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work on the Business and Trade Committee, too. He gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to the noble Lord Beamish, who campaigned for a considerable period of time to bring the House's attention to the issue of Capture sub-postmasters. No definitive number exists of how many Post Office branches used Capture. There is a rough estimate that some 13.5% of all Post Office agency branches—roughly 18,000 between 1992 and 2000—used Capture before the Horizon system was rolled out in 1999. Given the lack of evidence, we are very much trying to learn the lessons from some of the Horizon compensation schemes in the way in which we design the Capture scheme. We will take forward 150 cases almost as a pilot process and will take stock at the end of that process to see what further work and further tweaks to the design of the scheme we need to make, so that we can deliver fair redress to all those victims of the Post office scandal, too.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow and Gateshead East) (Lab): Sir Wyn rightly highlights the role Fujitsu must play in restorative justice. I remind the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), and the House that I asked the previous Government to pause and review all Fujitsu contracts, which they refused to do. I thank the Minister for all his work on the matter and for the meetings he has kindly had with me. Does he agree with me and Sir Wyn that it is time that Fujitsu contributed to the compensation and that it is also time we stopped the billions of pounds of Government contracts that it continues to be awarded, including its bid for HMRC's trader support service, which is worth £355 million alone? I look forward to a response from the Minister's office to the letter I sent him highlighting this yesterday.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend has been one of those who campaigned consistently over a long period of time for justice for sub-postmasters, in particular for her constituent Chris Head. I hope he and she will recognise that one of the recommendations in Sir Wyn's report that we confirmed today we will accept is in no small part due to Mr Head and her campaigning on that particular question.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is a moral obligation on Fujitsu to contribute to the cost of the scandal. That has been clear for a long time. I welcome the fact that Fujitsu has acknowledged that and has begun discussions with the Government. Sir Wyn's report today further underlines the case for Fujitsu to make an

interim payment towards the costs of the scandal. On her point more generally about the role of Fujitsu, there is no question but that Fujitsu wants to move out of responsibility for the Horizon system, and I suspect we all want Fujitsu to move out of working with the Post Office. None the less, we need Fujitsu at the moment to continue to maintain the Horizon system, which is key to the work of Post Office branches up and down the country in all our communities, while we work at pace to put in place a better system going forward.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): This Minister well knows that, across the House, many colleagues for years now have raised deep concerns about what happened. I raised it myself on 10 June 2020, 5 October 2020, 27 April 2021 and 15 December 2021. Many colleagues years and years ago were citing the monstrous injustice and grotesque breach of human rights and civil liberties of our fellow citizens, but it took the ITV drama of 1 January 2024 for the earth to move. That rather begs the question: what is the point of Parliament and its elected representatives? Is it not about time that the institutions of the state got out the handcuffs and held the tax-funded villains who perpetrated this monstrous injustice to full and total account?

Gareth Thomas: I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his campaigning on this issue. I know that he has continued to push different Governments and different Post Office Ministers on the issues around this scandal, and I have no doubt that he will continue to do so. He is absolutely right that the people responsible for this scandal need to be held to account. Sir Wyn's further report will lay bare who is responsible, and the work of the police is ongoing. As I said earlier, 100 police officers are working on this case. They are in touch with sub-postmaster representatives and have identified a series of people who are of interest to their inquiry. As he will understand, Ministers are rightly not involved in those specific discussions, but we are watching with great interest the progress of that police inquiry. We will certainly look to act on the recommendations that Sir Wyn makes when the final part of his report comes out.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. This scandal was a sorry chapter in our country's history, and I hope that those who were affected are compensated quickly and fairly. I am sure the Minister will know that this scandal disproportionately affected people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Of those who were prosecuted, 40% were from BME backgrounds, but I do not feel the report recognises the sensitivity. I recognise that the report cannot address every single angle, but I feel that the way BME people were affected disproportionately could have been highlighted more. What will he do to address the disparity as he moves forward in addressing this scandal?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend raises a significant issue, and one that I have no doubt had a bearing on the way in which the scandal unfolded. She will understand that for a formal view on who was responsible and what went wrong, we need to wait for the final report from Sir Wyn Williams. But it is quite clear that a significant number of sub-postmasters from an ethnic minority are

still waiting for compensation, as indeed a generally significant number of postmasters are waiting for compensation. We need to ensure that all those from an ethnic minority receive compensation, as equally we must give priority to every single person who has yet to receive compensation.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The Government have been told routinely by organisations such as Scottish Postmasters for Justice and Redress that compensation for victims of the Horizon scandal is taking too long and that the application process is akin to the trauma of a second trial for victims. We have also heard today that Sir Wyn Williams' report illustrates that victims continue to face an "unnecessarily adversarial attitude" from the Post Office and that the UK Government continue to drag their feet in offering full and swift redress. Given that the Minister previously stood at the Dispatch Box and said that

"justice delayed is justice denied",—[*Official Report*, 18 December 2024; Vol. 759, c. 373.]

and given the human toll of the scandal revealed today, will this Government finally and immediately end these obstructive processes so that redress can be tackled straight on without waiting for the second volume?

Gareth Thomas: There is no question but that the compensation process has taken far too long. The scandal could have been stopped a lot earlier. Everybody who was a victim of the scandal should have had compensation—certainly by the time we took office. Having said that, we have set out to speed up the delivery of compensation. We have quadrupled the amount of compensation paid out to victims of the scandal. We have moved at pace to plug some of the obvious gaps in the compensation process. I completely accept the challenge made by the hon. Gentleman, by others across the House, and indeed by sub-postmasters who have yet to receive compensation, that there is still a lot more to do.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his powerful words, but the publication of the report confirms the heartbreaking scale of the human impact of this shocking miscarriage of justice. The concealment and cover-up of the Horizon scandal follows a familiar pattern. Institutions deceive and distort because they put their reputation before truth and justice, as we have seen before in the infected blood scandal, the nuclear test veterans scandal and, of course, the Hillsborough disaster, among many others. The law that bears that disaster's name would end the culture of cover-ups that we have heard about today. Does the Minister agree that the report shows why the Government must honour their pledge and promise to enact the Hillsborough law in full and end the culture of cover-ups, which does so much damage to the innocent victims and their families, and to the country's reputation?

Gareth Thomas: I have absolutely no doubt that we need to see, in full, who was responsible for this disaster and why. Sir Wyn Williams's work on that is critical. We await his final report, which will look at what happened, why, and who was responsible. That transparency will be hugely important to help the Post Office, and the country as a whole, to learn lessons from this appalling

scandal. If we need to introduce measures to ensure that the Post Office is never in such a position again, we will certainly look to bring them forward.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Post Office Horizon scandal has often been compared with the contaminated blood disaster. By coincidence, this very afternoon the relevant all-party parliamentary group, led by the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), has been having a meeting with the Infected Blood Compensation Authority. Even if the Minister does not go all the way with Sir Wyn Williams' suggestion that there might be a standing body responsible for delivering compensation, will the Government look at the experience of the compensation body for that scandal rather than allowing separate disasters to be compensated for in separate stovepipe arrangements?

Gareth Thomas: To be clear, Sir Wyn Williams' recommendation of a standing body to deliver compensation is very much to ensure that if there is ever a future disaster on this scale—and we all hope that there is not—the Government are better set up to respond to it. He has not specifically suggested that we transfer into such a body the responsibility for the delivery of compensation schemes at this stage, because doing so would undoubtedly slow down the process. I think that there are parallels with the infected blood inquiry, but there are also differences. We need to learn lessons on the delivery of compensation from the infected blood scandal, the Post Office scandal and other scandals that came before. In that regard, the National Audit Office published important work last summer, which will certainly help to inform our judgment about the case for such a standing body.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments of the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), about the involvement of the Post Office—I hope the Minister has checks and balances in place to test what information it provides, because it clearly cannot be trusted. My question is about Fujitsu, which stayed quiet while sub-postmasters, including a former constituent of mine, went to prison. The Minister said that the Government are in negotiations with Fujitsu, which sounds like Fujitsu will not pay the compensation that it should. Will he say more about who will be the final arbiter in determining how much Fujitsu should pay in this scandal, which it is fundamentally at the root of?

Gareth Thomas: I take this opportunity to commend my hon. Friend for his consistent campaigning on this issue. He is absolutely right to underline the moral responsibility that Fujitsu has to contribute to the cost of the scandal. I welcome the fact that Fujitsu has accepted that it has such a moral obligation. I have made it clear to Fujitsu that I think it should bring forward an interim payment, and discussions with it have begun, as I said, but it will be important that we receive the final report from Sir Wyn Williams to understand properly the scale of Fujitsu's responsibility going forward, as compared with the responsibility of other players in this appalling scandal. I am absolutely clear that Fujitsu does have a clear responsibility. It could begin to act now, and I hope that it does so.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A constituent who I have been representing for two years was unfairly dismissed as a result of the Horizon scandal. I appreciate the effort that the Minister and his predecessor have put into this matter. The report makes it absolutely clear that the compensation system is too cumbersome and complicated for many people, and the Government have said that they will do everything they can to speed it up, but some people are waiting not only for compensation but for recognition of the injustice that was done to them. What will the Minister do to reassure those people and work on their behalf to get them the recognition that will lead to compensation?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Lady makes an important and significant point and gives me the opportunity to comment on that particular constituency case, which she and I have discussed a couple of times. She is absolutely right when she alludes to the fact that there are victims of the scandal who have not yet come forward or, perhaps for a number of reasons, put in compensation claims. I hope that the publication of Sir Wyn's report, and his comments—the criticisms and challenge to the Government on going further, as well as the reassurance that he has offered—will give those who have not yet put in a claim the confidence to do so. On the specific case that she knows very well and has discussed with me, I am determined to move forward. I have taken a number of steps to do so, and I will come back to her.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): The Minister plainly agrees that this injustice has gone on too long. Earlier today, I spoke to Janet Skinner, one of the postmasters whose life was wrecked in 2007 when she served nine months in prison after wrongful conviction. She has spent 18 years since then struggling to get compensation and is still battling for it now, forced to wade through endless paperwork and a cruel bureaucratic maze. In her own words, the compensation process has been

“harder than anything I've ever had to do before—and I've been to prison.”

That is what she said to me today.

Sir Wyn's report is welcome. I hope it ignites a fire under the Minister, although I know that he is committed to solving problems like Janet's in months, not years. Can he give me the undertaking that he will solve these problems in months, not years?

Gareth Thomas: On the right hon. Gentleman's direct challenge, I certainly want to do that. I completely share his view that every victim who still has not had

compensation has waited too long, and that I in particular, and the whole House, have a responsibility to keep up the pressure to get full and fair compensation for those victims as quickly as possible.

The right hon. Gentleman will recognise that we have made some progress in the last 12 months: we have quadrupled the amount of compensation that has been paid out and set up new compensation schemes to begin to address some of the obvious gaps. However, I completely accept the challenge that he, and perhaps Janet Skinner, posed: that we need to go further and faster.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I also welcome Sir Wyn's report. It reminds us of the cynical, dishonest and illegal behaviour of Post Office and Fujitsu officials, who caused so much misery to so many people who were doing an honest job and were wrongly accused. The Minister rightly said that he is determined to move on and get redress for those victims, but as long as Post Office officials have anything to do with this compensation scheme, I believe that his honest aim will be thwarted.

Last week I met with four postmasters in Northern Ireland, who told me that despite requests for documentation—some dating back to January—it is still not forthcoming. It is being drip-fed, which means that when new information is sought, they go back to the beginning of the 40-day period. Even when forensic economists have looked at their claims, in some cases they are discounted by up to 90%. I can only say that those are obstructionist tactics. As long as those who still believe that they did nothing wrong are in charge, we will not achieve the objective of quick redress.

Gareth Thomas: I recognise and understand why there is considerable scepticism across the House about the Post Office continuing to have any role in the delivery of any part of the compensation process. As I said, when I first came into this role, I looked very carefully at whether we should essentially start over and take the Post Office out of the compensation process. I was persuaded that if we did that, we would significantly delay still further the delivery of compensation to the victims. Sir Wyn Williams made a similar point today while making a series of recommendations to Government to go further and faster, in particular on the Horizon shortfall scheme. As I have alluded to, I am extremely sympathetic to his 19 recommendations. There are some that we need to look at in more detail before I come back to the House and, particularly, to Sir Wyn.

The right hon. Gentleman referenced conversations that he has had with a number of sub-postmasters in his constituency, or in Northern Ireland more generally. If he wants to bring those cases to my attention outside this session, I would be very happy to look at them.

Points of Order

3.33 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to make a brief point of order following the sad death of Lord Norman Tebbit last night. I feel particularly touched by it because I served with him in Parliament between 1983 and 1992, and I suppose I am one of the last Thatcherites left standing here. To us, he was an icon of everything we believed in about small government and deregulation. He was the original Brexiteer and the original campaigner against woke. He had an extraordinary ability with words. He came from humble backgrounds and summed up everything that we believed in by pulling himself up and achieving greatness.

I do not want to end on a political note; what I really want to end on is a personal note. I know that he had a reputation as a hard-hitting politician, but above all he was a supremely kind man. He was kind to us younger Members of Parliament. When Mrs Thatcher resigned, I remember sitting in the Tea Room and asking him if he would stand as leader of the Conservative party. To my regret, he felt that he could not. The reason why was those awful events in the bombing of the Grand Hotel in 1984. He showed tremendous courage and stoicism. Above all, although he led our party to victory as chairman in the 1987 election, he refused high office because he wanted to look after his wife Margaret. He devoted his whole life to her in terms of love and devotion as after those terrible events she was in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. It is a great honour and delight in this short point of order to pay tribute to my friend Lord Norman Tebbit.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his touching tribute, which is now on the record.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I started working as special adviser to Norman Tebbit in the Department of Trade and Industry on the Monday morning after the Brighton bomb. For those first few weeks, I went to visit him with members of his private

office in Stoke Mandeville hospital. The reason why he was in that specialist unit was that, while he was badly injured, he wanted to be nearby to his wife. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was completely right: he gave tremendous service to this country, but he felt that his first duty had to be to look after his wife.

It was a terrific loss to my party and to the country when he felt that he was no longer able to serve in government because of the need to care for Margaret. Had that not happened, he might well have become Prime Minister. He was a remarkable person whom we will miss greatly. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has helped to put his service on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his touching tribute.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I met Lord Tebbit only shortly after he had stepped down from this House, but even at that stage of his career he still had the inherent kindness and commitment to come to my constituency to support a relatively new Member of this House. Courage and commitment really are what encapsulated his character. He proved that when serving his country in the inherently dangerous role of a Royal Air Force pilot, and he proved it further in achieving something that Prime Ministers alone might have failed to have achieved in tackling the abuse of trade union power by unrepresentative militants. Trade unions are much more representative of their memberships today thanks to what he did.

As we have heard, Lord Tebbit proved his courage and commitment finally in his devotion to his wife, who was grievously injured as a result of a terrorist campaign, the aftermath of which our legal system to this very day still finds difficult to cope with. Altogether, he served his country magnificently, and he was a role model of integrity and courage that people can admire, even if they do not necessarily subscribe to everything in which he believed and for which he campaigned.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank all right hon. Members for their touching tributes.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (Training in Schools)

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

3.38 pm

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the evaluation of training about special educational needs and disabilities in initial teacher education; to require training about special education needs and disabilities for certain persons working in schools as part of their continuing professional development; and for connected purposes.

May I first remark on how touching the tributes we just heard were? Every child deserves an inclusive education in an environment that enables them to thrive. Every child should have teachers and support staff who understand their needs and have the professional capacity and skills to care for and teach each child. I propose this Bill because sadly that is not the experience of many children with special educational needs living in my constituency. Children in Barking and Dagenham have been let down because the national SEND system is broken. Across the country, parents feel hopeless and teachers are overwhelmed.

Last night, my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Margaret Mullane) secured an important debate in this House on SEND. She highlighted that requests for education, health and care plans in Barking and Dagenham doubled in 2022—an increase that was four times the national average. I know that improving the life chances of children, regardless of their background or needs, is central to the Labour Government's mission. However, we cannot achieve it without fixing special educational needs support. As my Bill sets out, requiring compulsory SEND training for teachers and teaching staff would provide them with the skills they need to educate our children.

Initial teacher education and continued professional development programmes have no dedicated SEND training. SEND seminars and sessions are woven into the existing curriculum but fail to give teachers the expertise they need to support SEND children. The depth and practical application of existing training is often too variable, and many teachers feel underprepared. Teachers require professional expertise to effectively provide wraparound support for all children, but I am afraid children with SEND are instead forced into an overstretched EHCP process managed by overburdened local authorities because mainstream school support has been stripped away after 14 years of Conservative cuts.

When I visit schools and meet parents in my constituency—I recently held a coffee morning attended by more than 100 people—I hear the same thing over and over again: early help makes a big difference. Early help can happen only with appropriately trained teachers with the skills to identify children in need. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that ensuring a child receives speech and language support, for example, would reduce behavioural issues in children with SEND, making a mainstream setting more successful for many children who might otherwise be excluded from school. SEND children are five times more likely to be excluded and

have some of the widest attainment gaps of any demographic, impacting on earning potential and overall life chances. It does not have to be that way.

With more than 50% of students with an EHCP being in mainstream schools, the current system is letting down children who have special educational needs and disabilities. Schools are trying their best, but the truth is that teachers feel ill-equipped to provide support for children with SEND. One teacher in Barking and Dagenham told me about the four-hour training seminar on SEND that they attended, but that was their only training, followed by a “get on with it” attitude from the education sector. The lack of training means that well-meaning teachers inevitably create an exclusive education environment, resulting in nine out of 10 children with SEND being left behind. This is a two-tier education system, working against our children who have the greatest need.

Early intervention must be at the core of the Government's SEND strategy, but it will not be successful if it is left only to special educational needs co-ordinators and teaching assistants, and this Bill seeks to address that. For most schools, a dedicated SENCO on the school's senior leadership team is a nice to have, rather than a must have. Parents—certainly those I have met in my constituency—are often left wondering who they can turn to as they fight to get the support that their child deserves. One parent in my constituency told me about the exhausting decade they have had fighting for an EHCP for their son, who has autism. After five years of school becoming too difficult a challenge for her son once he started secondary school, in 2020 her little boy was referred by the NHS to neurology. It took until 2024 for a doctor to confirm that he also had epilepsy, which was causing brain seizures resulting in short absences. The point here, which the little boy's mother made to me, is that her child was clearly struggling at school for years, finding it difficult to focus. That was apparent before the 10-year fight to secure an EHCP for her son, which she only managed to do towards the end of his time at secondary school. This little boy was in mainstream school for 10 years, being taught by teachers with inadequate SEND training. His mother feels that teachers equipped with better skills and training on SEND would have identified her child's needs sooner, and could have helped him earlier.

SEND support for children is a complicated picture that requires input from different agencies, and parents must always be at the heart of any discussion or decision about SEND support for their child. That is especially true for the many children who will, and do, fall short of the statutory duty to secure an EHCP. With the lack of specialist support or training for teaching staff in mainstream schools, those children are too often left unsupported. Of course, for some children, access to specialist SEND schools is the most appropriate fit; however, the majority of SEND children are in mainstream schools. We must therefore recognise that our schools should fundamentally shift to being better equipped to support children with SEND, with teachers who are better trained, because SEND children deserve the opportunity to succeed in our mainstream schools.

Being a good teacher, or good at any of the professions that look after and teach our children, takes a special kind of person. The responsibility these people hold is greater than their responsibility to any individual child;

they are helping raise and educate the next generation in our communities, and shaping our society—a society in which I want everyone to thrive and to which I want everyone to contribute, including those with SEND. This Bill supports teachers to do their job properly. They deserve adequate training, enabling them to deliver the early help that children with SEND need. I ask hon. Members from across the House for their support for this Bill, so that we can begin to fix the broken SEND system in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Nesil Caliskan, Anna Dixon, Chris Ward, Chris Kane, Mr Clive Betts, Danny Beales, Daniel Francis, Dawn Butler, Jen Craft, Lloyd Hatton and Sarah Hall present the Bill.

Nesil Caliskan accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September, and to be printed (Bill 281).

Football Governance Bill [*Lords*]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

ALCOHOL AT FOOTBALL GROUNDS

“Within one year of the passing of this Act the Secretary of State must consult on lifting the ban on consuming alcohol in view of the pitch in the top five tiers of the men’s game in England.”—(*Mr French.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

3.48 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Duty not to promote or engage in advertising and sponsorship related to gambling*—

“A regulated club or English football competition must not promote or engage in advertising or sponsorship related to gambling.”

This new clause prevents regulated clubs and competitions from promoting or engaging in gambling advertising or sponsorship.

New clause 3—*Free to air coverage*—

“(1) The Independent Football Regulator must require that every season—

- (a) at least ten Premier League football matches,
- (b) the League Cup Final, and
- (c) the Championship, League One and League Two playoff finals

are made available for live broadcast on free-to-air television channels in the United Kingdom.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1)(a) the matches must include a representative selection across different clubs and times in the season, subject to reasonable considerations of scheduling and broadcasting logistics.

(3) In this section ‘free-to-air television’ means a service that satisfies the qualifying conditions of such a service defined by Section 2 of the 1996 Communications Act.”

This new clause would mandate a minimum of ten Premier League matches, the League Cup Final and the Championship, League One and League Two playoff finals on free-to-air television channels.

New clause 4—*Fan representation: mandatory golden share*—

“(1) A licensed club must, as a condition of holding a licence under section 15, issue a non-transferable golden share to a recognised Supporters’ Trust or equivalent democratic fan organisation.

(2) The golden share must confer on its holder the right to veto any proposal by the club to—

- (a) relocate the club’s home ground outside its current local authority area,
- (b) change the club’s name,
- (c) materially alter the club’s primary colours or badge, or
- (d) enter into or withdraw from any competition not sanctioned by the Football Association, the Premier League, or the English Football League.

(3) A licensed club must—

- (a) consult the holder of the golden share on any material changes to the club’s ownership, governance, or strategic direction,
- (b) provide the holder with access to relevant financial and governance information reasonably required to fulfil its function, and

- (c) facilitate structured and regular engagement between the club and the holder of the golden share.
- (4) The Regulator must monitor compliance with this section and may—
 - (a) issue guidance to clubs and Supporters' Trusts on the operation of the golden share,
 - (b) impose licence conditions or financial penalties for non-compliance, and
 - (c) take enforcement action where a club fails to uphold the rights associated with the golden share.
- (5) In this section—
 - (a) 'Supporters' Trust' means a formally constituted, democratic, not-for-profit organisation that is recognised by the Regulator as representing the interests of a club's supporters;
 - (b) 'golden share' means a special share or equivalent legal instrument issued to a Supporters' Trust, entitling its holder to the rights and protections described in this section."

This new clause would give fans a veto on club proposals, exercised through a recognised Supporters' Trust or equivalent democratic fan body.

New clause 5—Protection of assets of regulated clubs—

"(1) Where any of the following assets belong to a regulated club, the asset must not be removed from the club's ownership or used as collateral for a secured loan—

- (a) any stadium,
- (b) any training facility,
- (c) any trophies,
- (d) any car park,
- (e) any hotel.

(2) But subsection 1 does not apply to a car park or a hotel where—

- (a) the regulated club can demonstrate to the IFR's satisfaction that the asset is causing financial loss or poses a material risk to the club's financial sustainability, and
- (b) the IFR has provided prior written approval for the disposal of the asset or the use of the asset as collateral.

(3) Where the current owner of a regulated club owns any asset listed in subsection (1)(a) to (c), the owner may not sell the club unless the owner has inserted the asset into the club's ownership structure."

This new clause would ensure that the club assets listed above are recognised as the inalienable property of the club rather than the club's owners.

New clause 6—Financial abuse, mismanagement or fraud: protection etc—

"(1) The IFR must, in any strategy it publishes, set out measures aimed at achieving the financial abuse, mismanagement and fraud objective.

(2) Measures to be set out under subsection (1) must include oversight of—

- (a) robust education for relevant players on matters relating to financial abuse, mismanagement and fraud,
- (b) industry wide standards aimed at relevant players in relation to those matters, and
- (c) an equitable system of support and redress for relevant players where they have been affected by those matters.

(3) In this section, a 'relevant player' means a current or former player in English football who—

- (a) has been a victim of financial abuse, mismanagement, or fraud, or
- (b) is at risk of becoming a victim of financial abuse, mismanagement, or fraud."

New clause 7—Human rights and modern slavery considerations—

"(1) When considering whether a person ('A') satisfies the requirement in section 26(7)(c), the Regulator shall have regard to (among other things)—

- (a) whether A has been complicit in any egregious or consistent violation of international human rights law, whether of any international human rights treaty, customary law, or other instrument,
- (b) whether A has been convicted, cautioned or reprimanded or complicit in any egregious or consistent violation of domestic human rights legislation, including breaching provisions in the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 or equivalent national legislation,
- (c) whether A has been subject to a Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Order,
- (d) whether A has been found liable in a civil claim relating to a human rights violation,
- (e) whether A has been convicted of an offence, cautioned or reprimanded for failing to comply with their human rights and modern slavery reporting and due diligence obligations under applicable domestic legislation,
- (f) any representations made by A or the club in accordance with the notice.

(2) In subsection (1)—

- (a) where A is a body corporate or other non-corporeal entity (including a government or nation state), the Regulator shall consider the actions of anyone who controls that body corporate or entity (and 'control' shall have the meaning given in section 255 of the Companies Act 2006), and
- (b) the Regulator shall have absolute discretion to determine whether conduct falls within any of the categories in paragraphs (a) to (d).

(3) In respect of subsection (1)(c) and (d), a risk of disrepute shall not be valid grounds for disqualification of any person if such disrepute would, in the reasonable opinion of the Regulator, be unfounded.

(4) In accordance with Schedule 2, Part 2, paragraph 15, the Regulator may establish a committee or committees to discharge its functions under this Clause."

New clause 8—Duty to address ticketing market practices—

"Regulated clubs and competition organisers must take reasonable steps to—

- (a) monitor practices in the secondary ticketing market that may lead to excessive price mark-ups or unauthorised resale;
- (b) provide transparent information about ticket pricing and resale policies, including the face value of tickets; and
- (c) provide official ticket exchange channels where reasonably practicable."

New clause 9—Prioritisation of competitions within English football—

"(1) This section applies where a regulated club is participating in a competition outside of English Football.

(2) Where the IFR considers that the regulated club's participation in the competition is damaging to the heritage of English football, the IFR must take what measures it considers necessary to prevent that damage.

(3) Measures that the IFR might take include a direction to the club that it—

- (a) prioritise any fixtures taking place in a competition within English football over those in the competition outside of English football;
- (b) cease participation in the competition outside of English football."

New clause 10—*Player welfare*—

“Within one year of the passing of this Act the Secretary of State must review how to improve the welfare of football players. This review should include consideration of—

- (a) neurodegenerative diseases incurred by heading footballs;
- (b) the number of games that footballers are required to play each season; and
- (c) the impact on the welfare of current and former professional footballers as a result.”

New clause 11—*Correspondence about the IFR*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must publish any correspondence received by the Secretary of State from the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) about the IFR’s exercise of its functions.

(2) The IFR must publish any correspondence it receives from the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) about the exercise of its functions.”

This new clause would require correspondence between FIFA and UEFA and either the Secretary of State, or the IFR, with regards to the IFR’s regulatory functions, to be published.

New clause 12—*Impact on Regulator of changes in Government administration*—

“If the Department for Culture Media and Sport is abolished, or its functions in relation to football substantially relocated, the Government must automatically review the suitability of the continuation of the IFR and the impact that the abolition or relocation will have on the IFR.”

This new clause would require the Government to review the IFR in the instance that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport were abolished, or its functions substantially altered.

New clause 13—*Neurodegenerative care scheme*—

“(1) The IFR must establish and supervise a scheme aimed at providing a high standard of care and support to any person who has developed a neurodegenerative condition linked to their career in English football.

(2) The Secretary of State must make regulations setting out—

- (a) minimum requirements for the scheme,
- (b) a timescale for the scheme’s establishment, and
- (c) arrangements and a timescale for a periodic review of the scheme.

(3) The IFR must ensure that, as a condition of organising any competition specified pursuant to section 2(3), all specified competition organisers jointly operate, manage and fund the scheme in accordance with subsections (4) to (8).

(4) For the purpose of operating, managing and funding the scheme, all of the specified competition organisers must form a Joint Coordinating Committee (‘JCC’).

(5) Any current or former player who has at any time been registered as a professional footballer is eligible for the scheme.

(6) The scheme must provide care and financial support to any eligible person who suffers from a neurodegenerative condition which is deemed, pursuant to subsection (7)(a), to have been caused or contributed to by playing or training activities within English football.

(7) The JCC must, under the supervision of the IFR, appoint a panel of independent experts—

- (a) to determine whether, on the balance of probabilities, a neurodegenerative condition of an eligible person has been caused or contributed to by playing or training activities within English football, and
- (b) to determine the appropriate provision of care and financial support required in the case of each eligible person.

(8) The IFR must ensure that the JCC acts upon the panel’s determinations.

(9) Where—

(a) specified competition owners, through the JCC, cannot agree about the operation, management or funding of the scheme, or

(b) at any time, the scheme does not meet either—

- (i) the aim under subsection (1), or
- (ii) any requirements set out in regulations under subsection (2),

the Secretary of State may, having taken advice from the IFR, make a direction about the operation, management or funding of the scheme.”

New clause 14—*Duty to vet financial investment in football clubs*—

“(1) The IFR must review and approve all proposed financial investments in regulated clubs from funds which are located outside of the United Kingdom.

(2) A review under subsection (1) must include—

- (a) assessing if any sources of revenue for such a fund is the result of money laundering;
- (b) assessing if the owner of such a fund is charged with any breaches of UK or international law.

(3) If upon completing a review under subsection (1) the IFR has determined a source of revenue for a fund is the result of money laundering or the owner of a fund is in breach of UK or international law the IFR must direct the club to reject the investment.”

Amendment 14, in clause 2, page 2, line 31, leave out subsection (3) and insert—

“(3) For the purposes of this Act a ‘specified competition’ includes—

- (a) the Premier League,
- (b) the English Football League, and
- (c) the National League.

(3A) The Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument subject to approval by both Houses of Parliament amend the competitions specified in section (3).”

This amendment would specify the leagues that are to be classed as “specified competitions” under Act.

Amendment 3, in clause 6, page 5, line 14, at end insert—

“(d) to ensure that the care and support of people who have developed neurodegenerative conditions linked to their career in English football forms part of any strategy published by the IFR, and to oversee an equitable and fair industry financial scheme to provide care for those people.”

Amendment 12, page 5, line 14, at end insert—

“(d) to take responsibility for the protection, financial welfare, and safeguarding of current and former players involved in English football who—

- (i) have been victims of financial abuse, mismanagement, or fraud, or
- (ii) are at risk of becoming victims of financial abuse, mismanagement, or fraud, (referred to in this Act as ‘the financial abuse, mismanagement and fraud objective’).”

Amendment 29, page 5, line 14, at end insert—

“(d) to ensure that the care and support of those who have developed neurodegenerative conditions linked to their career in English football is a central part of its approach to football governance, and to establish and supervise the scheme provided for under section [Neurodegenerative care scheme].”

This amendment places an objective on the IFR to establish and supervise a scheme to provide care and support to those who have developed neurodegenerative conditions linked to their career in English football (see NC13).

Amendment 25, in clause 7, page 5, line 27, at end insert—

- “(d) conflicts with any regulations or rules of international football governing bodies, including FIFA and UEFA.”

This amendment requires the IFR to exercise its functions so as to avoid conflicts with the regulations and rules of international footballing bodies.

Amendment 1, in clause 10, page 7, line 6, at end insert—

- “(d) an assessment of the impact that the IFR’s activities have had on the price of match tickets.”

This amendment would require the IFR to include in its state of the game report the impact that its regulatory activities have had on ticket prices.

Amendment 21, in clause 11, page 7, line 41, at end insert—

- “(7) No football governance statement may have effect unless approved by resolution of both Houses of Parliament.”

This amendment would require the football governance statement to be approved by Parliament before it could have effect.

Amendment 2, in clause 14, page 9, line 3, at end insert—

- “(aa) the impact that the IFR’s activities have had on the price of match tickets, and”.

This amendment would require the IFR to include in its annual report the impact that its regulatory activities have had on ticket prices.

Amendment 28, page 9, line 3, at end insert—

- “(aa) the cumulative impact of the costs imposed on clubs through compliance with the IFR’s regulatory regime, and”.

This amendment would require the IFR to include in the annual report an account of the financial costs imposed on clubs through its regulatory requirements on them.

Amendment 26, in clause 17, page 11, line 27, leave out subsection (9) and insert—

- “(9) The IFR must make the decision whether to grant a regulated club a provisional operating licence within the period of one month.
- (10) The IFR may extend the period in subsection (9) by no more than two weeks if it requires more time to consider the application due to—
- (a) unusual staffing pressures, or
- (b) discrepancies or abnormalities with the application.
- (11) If the IFR extends the period as per subsection (10), it must give a notice to the relevant club stating—
- (a) that the period has been extended,
- (b) the length of the extension, and
- (c) the reasons for the extension.”

This amendment places a time limit of one month for the IFR to decide whether to grant a provisional operating license.

Amendment 15, in clause 37, page 28, line 28, at end insert—

- “(fa) whether the individual is a member of a proscribed organisation as per section (3) and schedule (2) of the Terrorism Act 2000.”

This amendment requires that IFR, in determining whether an owner or officer has the requisite honesty or integrity, to consider whether the person is a member of an organisation proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000.

Amendment 8, in clause 46, page 39, line 5, at end insert—

- “(c) in the case of a disposal under subsection (1)(a), it has taken reasonable steps to establish that the majority of the club’s fans domiciled in England and Wales approve of the disposal.”

Amendment 9, page 39, line 5, at end insert—

- “(6A) Before the IFR grants an approval under subsection (6) it must—
- (a) consult the supporters of the body in question, the relevant competition organisers and persons representing the local community with which the body is associated, and
- (b) have regard to the views expressed by those consulted.”

Amendment 24, in clause 53, page 42, line 3, at end insert—

- “(1A) But the IFR may not require a club with fewer than 10 full time equivalent employees to pay the IFR a levy in respect of a chargeable period during which the club is a licensed club.”

This amendment would exempt clubs with fewer than 10 full time equivalent employees from having to pay the levy.

Government amendments 4 to 7.

Amendment 18, in schedule 2, page 87, line 12, at end insert—

- “(3A) Any political interests of, and political donations made by, the prospective chair of the Board, must all be declared as part of the appointments process, and published before the chair’s pre-appointment hearing with the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.”

Amendment 19, page 87, line 37, at end insert—

- “(5) No member may be appointed to the Board if they currently have any broadcast or media interests or any role in a television or media broadcast that relates to football.”

This amendment prohibits any person who currently has any interests or roles in a television or media broadcast that relates to football from being appointed to the Board.

Amendment 23, page 88, line 37, at end insert—

- “(1A) But the number of persons in the employment of IFR (including any persons seconded to the IFR) must at no time exceed 50.”

Amendment 22, page 89, line 9, leave out subparagraph (3) and insert—

- “(3) The IFR may pay a person appointed as the Chief Executive no more than £172,153 per annum.
- (3A) Notwithstanding the remuneration of the Chief Executive Officer as per paragraph (3), the IFR must pay its employees such remuneration as may be determined by the non-executive members.”

This amendment limits the pay of the Chief Executive.

Amendment 20, page 93, line 5, at end insert—

- “(4A) No member may be appointed to the Expert Panel if they currently have any broadcast or media interests or any role in a television or media broadcast that relates to football.”

This amendment prohibits any person who currently has any interests or roles in a television or media broadcast that relates to football from being appointed to the Expert Panel.

Amendment 16, in schedule 4, page 99, line 37, at end insert—

- “(f) the club’s political statements and positions.”

This amendment ensures that clubs have to engage their fans on the political statements a club might adopt.

Amendment 10, in schedule 5, page 100, line 26, at end insert—

- “(e) an Asset of Community Value condition.”

This amendment adds the requirement to attach an Asset of Community Value condition to each club operating licence.

Amendment 27, page 102, line 7, at end insert

“including the club’s official charity.”

This amendment would make clear that the activities of a football club’s official charity can be counted towards it meeting the corporate governance code.

Amendment 17, page 102, line 13, leave out subparagraph (e).

This amendment removes the requirement for the corporate governance statement to cover what action the club is taking to improve equality, diversity and inclusion.

Amendment 13, page 102, line 33, at end insert—

“(1A) The IFR must ensure that the persons referred to in subsections 1(a) and 1(b) are representative of the majority of the club’s fanbase and represent the club’s key supporters’ groups.

(1B) If it is unclear which are a club’s key supporters’ groups the IFR must consult with the Football Supporter’s Association to determine which groups apply for the purposes of this paragraph.”

Amendment 11, page 103, line 20, at end insert—

“Asset of Community Value

11A The Asset of Community Value condition is a condition requiring a club to either—

(a) obtain and maintain Asset of Community Value status for its home ground; or

(b) incorporate into its Articles of Association a restriction which substantially mirrors the restrictions placed on Assets of Community Value under the Localism Act 2011,

and the Secretary of State may create regulations detailing further the implementation of the Asset of Community Value condition.”

The amendment defines the Asset of Community Value condition that clubs are required to obtain for their home ground and is consequential on Amendment 10.

Mr French: I also put on record my thanks to Lord Tebbit for his life of service to both our country and our party. He will be dearly missed by us all. In opening today’s proceedings, I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

It is a privilege to speak on Report for the countless fans who fill the stands week in and week out, wear their club’s shirt with pride and keep our clubs alive, come rain or shine. I put on the record my thanks to all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions in Committee, and to everyone who has engaged with the process outside of Westminster. For all the high talk of regulators, quangos and corporate structures, let us never forget that football in this country is not an industry dreamed up by officials on neat PowerPoint slides or Excel spreadsheets, but a living tradition that is part of who we are and part of the fabric of our nation.

That is precisely why we must be so careful now: because this Bill, well-intentioned though it may be, risks replacing one danger—a minority of reckless owners—with another, namely reckless political interference that risks the independence of sport. This Bill, which wants to tackle cowboy owners, comes from an incoherent Government under investigation for appointing a Labour crony to be the new sheriff of football, and from a Department that has seen the Whip resign since the last meeting of the Bill Committee. We really are in “The Thick of It”.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Would the shadow Minister like to join me in thanking the shadow Secretary of State, his right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), for first introducing legislation to this House that promoted an independent football regulator? *[Interruption.]*

Mr French: As the shadow Secretary of State says from a sedentary position, “You’ve messed it all up”, and I am sure that does not apply just to football.

Before I move on to our amendments, it is worth reminding ourselves how we got here. English football was not invented by corporate lawyers or politicians. Its origins are in the history and soul of communities across our country. It is the same spirit that today sees parents across the country drive through wind and rain on a Sunday morning so that their child can run out in their local club colours. It is a spirit that does not appear on balance sheets, but without sustainable finances there is no football at all. Sadly, we have all seen those cases where financial mismanagement and reckless spending have seen clubs and fans damaged. That is why the Conservatives put fans first by launching the independent fan-led review of football governance, which focused on the long-term sustainability of the game.

We support better fan engagement, respecting the heritage of our clubs and strengthening ownership tests to help prevent the issues we have seen at the likes of Bury, Charlton and Reading. The fan-led review stated that this area of regulation should in time be returned to the Football Association and leagues. Having spoken to many football fans across the country and also in my constituency, I can say with confidence that they would agree with that even more now that Labour is trying to directly interfere in English football by appointing a Labour crony.

During the passage of the Bill, we have heard from the FA and the Premier League that they are concerned by regulatory scope creep, and we have sought in our amendments to push back on the tentacles of this socialist state seeking to strangle with red tape our beautiful game—this great British success story, which attracts millions of fans around the world and contributes £8 billion to our economy each season. Our amendments would prevent the Secretary of State from expanding the leagues in scope of the regulator under clause 2 without the approval of Parliament. We must give clubs certainty and prevent Whitehall empire building.

We must also have transparency about how much these new regulatory burdens are costing clubs and ticket prices, both today and in the future. That is why we have tabled amendments 1, 2 and 28. Every pound spent on new compliance staff is a pound not spent on grassroots players, stadium maintenance or affordable ticket prices. Every new bureaucrat is another tenner on a family’s matchday cost. In the end, the fans pick up the tab, just like always. The Government’s impact assessment suggests that these costs will be more than £125 million, with smaller clubs expecting a bill of up to £47 million. We know that many smaller clubs will have no choice but to pass that cost on to fans, and the Government and their regulator must be honest about that.

Members can help limit those additional costs by supporting our amendments 22 and 23, which would limit the size of the Government’s new regulator and cap the pay of the chief executive at the same level as

[Mr French]

the Prime Minister. The Government state that they want their regulator to be light-touch, but they vote against limits being placed upon it. That leads to the question: why are they saying one thing while doing the opposite in Westminster? Is it because of inexperience, or is the truth that this is yet another example of jobs for the boys, to the cost of fans? That is why we have tabled amendments that would limit political interference in the independence of sport.

We believe that fans should be consulted on any political statements made by clubs. Football clubs must not be mouthpieces for whichever fashionable cause of the time, and we believe that politics should be kept out of sport wherever possible. When a club speaks, it speaks for its fans and the local community. If it wants to do that on matters far beyond football, it should ask those fans first.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Would the shadow Minister mind telling the House what these fashionable causes that football clubs should not speak about are?

Mr French: I am happy to do so. Throughout Committee stage we have been quite clear—as the hon. Gentleman's colleague, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), will say—that we do not believe that that includes the likes of remembrance, which we do differ from political causes. However, as we have said, we do not believe that clubs should be getting involved in politics, and that is a hill that we are willing to die on.

My amendment 17 to schedule 5 would remove the requirement for additional reporting on equality, diversity and inclusion. We all know that football must be welcoming to everyone. Racism and bigotry have no place on the terraces, just as they have no place in wider society. Football has made huge progress by itself, with a range of initiatives already in the game including Kick It Out, Show Racism the Red Card, the Premier League Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Standard framework, the English Football League's equality code of practice, anti-racism education and mentoring schemes. The game has done that not because a Government regulator told it to, but because it is right, it works and fans support it. However, fans do not pay their hard-earned money at the turnstiles to fund diversity paperwork. Our amendment leaves inclusion where it belongs: on the pitch, in the stands and in the community.

Let me now turn to clause 7, and to new clause 11 in my name. The new clause seeks to ensure that the IFR exercises its functions to avoid conflicts with the regulations and rules of international footballing bodies. FIFA and UEFA rules are clear: national associations must be free from undue political interference. Countries that break that rules have been banned before: just ask the Greek football committee.

The Government are sleepwalking towards a giant own goal, and this time there is no VAR to save us. We already know that UEFA has written to the Secretary of State setting out its concerns about the Bill, and that the letter arrived after the Government had introduced its expanded version. UEFA writes:

“One particular area of concern stems from one of UEFA's fundamental requirements, which is that there should be no Government interference in the running of football.”

Unfortunately, the Minister could not give us enough reassurance about Government interference with English football, which is why I have re-tabled my amendment. We know that UEFA is concerned about the potential for scope creep, and that the Government's regulator may expand its mandate beyond its loosely defined current competencies. Such an expansion, intentional or otherwise, into broader aspects of football governance could undermine the established structures and processes of the sport, and amount to Government interference.

Mr Betts: I do not know whether the shadow Minister can get some help from his right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry, who is sitting next to him on the Front Bench. I wonder whether, when the right hon. Gentleman was in the Government, he received any correspondence from UEFA and FIFA. Given the openness that the shadow Minister is calling for, will he now publish any correspondence received by the last Government?

Mr French: That is quite a rehearsed line that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to play out. As we heard in Committee, the Minister has sought to reassure the House that UEFA has no problems with the Bill. If that is the case, why is the letter not being laid in the House so that all Members can vote with full confidence in what is being said? What is being briefed to the press differs significantly from what the Minister is telling Members today.

So far, the Minister has refused to allow Parliament to see that letter so that we can scrutinise the Bill properly in the fullest possible way and in the proper context. Let me ask her again now: what is she so afraid of? Is she scared that, given the Secretary of State is already under investigation for appointing one of her donors as chair, the publication of the letter will prove to be yet another nail in the coffin of her regulator?

Let me now turn to schedule 2. Any regulator must be credible, and that means independent beyond any doubt. But what have we seen? A preferred chair with a hidden political donation, a Secretary of State forced to recuse herself only when exposed, and a revolving door—

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr French: I will give way happily.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, given that he has named me. May I ask him why the previous Government—including his colleague the shadow Secretary of State, who is sitting next to him and who was the Minister responsible at the time—actively headhunted the individual in question and added him to the shortlist? [Interruption.] They can shake their heads all they like, but that is true.

Mr French: The Secretary of State has, either deliberately or not deliberately, just misled the House. The gentleman in question—[Interruption.] Let me explain. The gentleman in question has already said—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I understand that the shadow Minister may not have meant to say that the Secretary of State has deliberately misled the House; he may want to clarify that.

Mr French: I will reflect on that comment, Madam Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] And I withdraw it. [*Interruption.*] I have said that I withdraw it; I do not know what the problem is. Members can scream and shout all they want, but the reality is that in the Select Committee, the chair in question said very clearly that he had been approached by civil servants, not by the then Minister in question. The Minister in question, my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), has already said on the Floor of the House that he did not approach the said gentleman. Perhaps the Secretary of State would also like to reflect on her comments. There is a revolving door of vested interests ready to leap in. We would not let the chairman of a rival club—[*Interruption.*] You are already under investigation; I am not sure you want to make it worse. We would not let the chairman of a rival club referee a cup final, so why let—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure the shadow Minister did not mean to infer that I was under investigation.

Mr French: Of course, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise. You are not under investigation, but the Secretary of State and the Government are. That is a matter of public record. We would not let the chairman of a rival club referee a cup final, so why would we let people with political or commercial conflicts of interest sit at the very top of this new football referee? My amendments to schedule 2 are basic due diligence: they would mean no party hacks in the chair and full declarations of conflicts of interest, to avoid the mess that this Government have got themselves into. Amendment 18 would put a stop to the cronyism once and for all, and give the public proper transparency. It is not radical; it is responsible. If we do not accept it, the regulator will fail before the first whistle blows.

4 pm

We have re-tabled new clauses that we still believe would strengthen the Bill. Let me begin with the welfare of players past and present, who run on to the pitch every weekend and give us great entertainment. We cannot ignore the fact that, for too long, the welfare of players has too often been an afterthought once the final whistle blows and the crowds go home. New clause 10 calls for the Secretary of State to conduct within one year of this Bill passing a serious review of how we can better protect players past, present and future. The new clause does not dictate solutions; it demands a serious, evidence-led review. It asks the Secretary of State to bring together the governing bodies, medical experts, clubs and players to ensure that the beautiful game does not come at the cost of the minds and bodies of those who play it. We hope the Government listen.

Last but certainly not least, our new clause 1 would require the Government to consult on calling full-time on the two-tier approach to football fans. The alcohol ban, which has been in place since 1985, was introduced to help curb hooliganism on the terraces during the problematic era of British football. Forty years on, and with the modern game enjoying a more family-friendly atmosphere in stadiums across the country, clubs, fans and the Conservatives are urging the Government to consult on lifting the ban on alcohol. As football fans know, the legacy ban sees fans rushing to drink their

beer before kick-off and at half-time. This often leads to fans being delayed on entering stadiums, and to overcrowding on concourses. We have listened to clubs and fans, especially those lower down the football pyramid, and urge the Government to end the two-tier approach to football fans as part of this Bill. New clause 1 has support across this House, and we hope it will be supported today.

We are all here today because we care about English football, but there are fundamental differences between us on the Opposition Benches, who want the Bill to be delivered in a light-touch way, and the Government's heavy-handed political regulator. I stand here today because I want to see football succeed, not nationalised by stealth. We want clubs to be safeguarded from dodgy owners, but not strangled in red tape. We want fans to have a real say, not ticked off on a form buried in a filing cabinet. We want inclusion that works, not paperwork that gathers dust. Above all, we want football to remain what it has always been: something built by the people and for the people, not the political classes.

Good regulation can help the referee to blow the whistle when rules are broken, but it should not dictate every pass, every tackle and every free kick. The amendments in my name seek to limit the damage caused by this Bill. They park the bus against political overreach, and let football play on. If, like me, hon. and right hon. Members really love football, the muddy pitches, the terraces and the songs that never change, by all means blow the whistle on the bad owners. However, we must also call time on Ministers who think they can better run leagues from Westminster.

Football does not belong to the Government. It belongs to the people who stand shoulder to shoulder in the stands, win or lose. Let us do right by them today.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I am pleased to be responding on Report as the Football Governance Bill enters its final stages in the House of Commons. I begin by sending my condolences to the family of Liverpool's Diogo Jota, who tragically lost his life last week at just 28 years of age, alongside his brother. I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our thoughts to their loved ones.

English football is one of our proudest traditions. It is more than just a game. Football brings us together, providing a source of local pride and uniting us in victory and in loss. The premier league, the EFL and the national league attract some of the best players in the world. In return, we find fans of English football clubs in almost every country. However, despite the global success story of English football, there are underlying fragilities in the game, and this Labour Government are committed to tackling them, as we are the party on the side of football fans. We have seen too many instances of irresponsible owners, unsustainable financial models and inadequate regulation casting a shadow over too many clubs, as fans of Bury, Derby County and countless others know all too well. The current issues at Sheffield Wednesday and Morecambe need resolving now, and they demonstrate the urgent need for this Bill to become law.

This change has been a long time coming, dating back in this place to the cross-party Culture, Media and Sport Committee report of 2011. The ill-fated super

[Stephanie Peacock]

league attempt led, of course, to the fan-led review, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Dame Tracey Crouch, who pioneered that work.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions that Conservative Minister, and Tory Members basically wrote the vast majority of this Bill, but then they decided to vote against it. I am confused about that, but could she explain to me why they think this is a socialist Bill and that football is being nationalised? I think it is absolutely ridiculous.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

“I hope that whoever wins the election on 4 July will see this as a good Bill to crack on with, because it is important for the future of football and, crucially, for the future of football fans.”—[*Official Report, Football Governance Public Bill Committee*, 23 May 2024; c. 244.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), for whom I have huge respect and affection. That brings me on to the points made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), and the amendments standing in his name.

Amendment 14 is on the issue of listing in primary legislation the competitions in scope of regulation. The approach in this Bill is consistent with similar sports legislation. The Opposition’s amendment would be likely to make this a hybrid Bill, which would mean years of delay, in effect killing off the Bill that they introduced and which was in their manifesto. We have been absolutely clear that the regulator will be operationally independent of Government. It will not exert any influence on the Football Association’s autonomy to govern the game.

The shadow Minister is obsessed with the publication of private communications with UEFA and FIFA. Despite his obsession and what I would say were his quite strong remarks about me at the Dispatch Box, did his Government publish private correspondence? No, of course they did not. I have been very clear throughout that UEFA and FIFA have no issue with the Bill as it is currently drafted.

Amendment 25 is simply scaremongering on the part of the Opposition. It is also curiously at odds with one of their other amendments—amendment 21. The football governance statement, which was also in the previous Government’s Bill, allows the Government of the day to set out their priorities for the regulator. This is no different from the strategic steers that the Government can and do give to other regulators, such as the Competition and Markets Authority, without undermining their operational independence. The statement will be published and laid before Parliament. Parliamentary approval is neither appropriate nor necessary, especially given the need to avoid political interference.

Amendments 24 and 28 on levy exemptions are simply not needed. The cost of regulation should not place an undue burden on clubs and costs should be transparent, as set out in clause 54. The regulator already has the power to exempt clubs from paying the levy through its levy rules.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): We had a long discussion in Committee about assessing how much this regulator was going to cost and how big it was going to be, but all the amendments we put forward were voted down. When will the Minister know that this thing has grown too big and costs too much?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his service on the Bill Committee. He is right that we had a very good debate, and the impact assessment was of course approved by the previous Minister for Sport.

On amendment 18, the governance code on appointments is clear that political activity is not a bar to appointment. David Kogan has been found appointable for the role by a panel that included a senior independent panel member agreed by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and has now been endorsed by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, adding a further layer of robustness. We will not set a new precedent with the football regulator by going further than the governance code on appointments, as the amendment proposes. More broadly, on amendments 19 and 20 on conflicts of interest, if the interests of a board or expert panel member might prejudice their ability to carry out their functions, the Bill already captures that as a conflict of interest.

On the owners and directors test, membership of a proscribed organisation is an offence under the Terrorism Act 2000, and that offence is included in paragraph 2A of schedule 1 to the Serious Crime Act 2007. Such offences would already be considered when testing an individual’s fitness, so amendment 15 is not required.

On amendment 17 on the corporate governance code, reporting on equality, diversity and inclusion is a key part of good corporate governance. Clubs will simply have to state what they are doing on the issue.

On amendment 27 on club charities, I know from my area of Barnsley the brilliant work that the Barnsley FC Community Trust does. Through changes made in the other place, the corporate governance code gives a club the flexibility to detail what action it is taking to contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of the community. That can include the work of the club’s official charity or wider work in the community, so the amendment is not needed.

New clause 1 calls for a consultation on lifting the ban on consuming alcohol in view of the pitch. That is outside the scope of the Bill, which focuses on the sustainability of clubs and the game overall. I have raised the issue with the Home Office, which is the policy lead, as I committed to doing in Committee.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with me and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) that we do need to look at alcohol sales, but that we need to do it with all stakeholders in the round—not just throw it in as a gimmick to this Bill, which is about finance and governance?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I have reflected those comments to the relevant Home Office Minister, as I said.

I will turn to the amendments in the name of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson). I thank him for his

constructive approach to the scrutiny of the legislation and for his party's support. Several of his amendments are outside the scope of the regulator, but I am sure that he will put on record some important and valid points.

On free-to-air TV in new clause 3, the Government believe that the current list of events works well and strikes an appropriate balance between giving access to sporting events and allowing sports to maximise broadcasting revenue. In domestic football, the present arrangements under the listed events regime have protected key moments such as the FA cup final, while ensuring that the Premier League, EFL and FA are able to raise billions of pounds annually, which is invested back into the pyramid. We all want to see more matches being televised free to air, but that must be balanced against investment, and not risk it.

On new clause 4 on the golden share, we expect that the regulator will welcome clubs taking any measure to improve fan engagement and protect club heritage, including a golden share, but it will not mandate them to do so. That brings me on to the issue of fan engagement, which has been raised by the hon. Member for Cheltenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) in their amendments. Let me be really clear: the Government have strengthened fan engagement. The previous Government's Bill required clubs to have a framework in place to ensure that they regularly meet and consult with a representative group of fans on key strategic matters at the club and other issues of importance to supporters. We have improved that by requiring fan engagement to continue even if a club enters into insolvency, and by introducing a requirement for consultation on ticket prices. We have not prescribed a fixed, one-size-fits-all approach to fan engagement. We of course expect the regulator to consult the Football Supporters' Association where appropriate on fan issues, and I know the shadow regulator is already engaging with it. We do not want to place an unmanageable burden on clubs unnecessarily, which is why new clause 4 is not needed.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham has also tabled amendments on protections for home grounds, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East has also raised and we have recently discussed. Home grounds are vital assets for clubs, which is why the Bill introduces protections to prevent inappropriate stadium sales and relocations. Clauses 46 and 48 require a club to get approval from the regulator before they sell or relocate their stadium.

On the sale of a home ground, let me first clarify that the legislation uses the term "disposal" rather than "sale" for technical legal reasons. For example, a club might sell a portion of the stadium, rather than the whole stadium. That is because a club might divest a shareholding, or transfer interest, in the stadium without it amounting to a full sale. Under clause 46, the regulator's approval is needed in all instances for the sale of a stadium by a club. A sale can be approved only if it would not undermine the sustainability of the club. If a sale might mean that the club will have nowhere to play a few years down the line, that means the club may not be sustainable and the regulator is unlikely to approve the sale.

Mr Betts: Does the Minister think that the regulator would take on board the views of fans as part of the process of looking at these matters and having to give approval in the normal way?

Stephanie Peacock: Yes, absolutely, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

I will move on to the issue of player welfare.

4.15 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Minister might be just about to say the thing I was going to ask her about, as she has addressed a number of the amendments that my colleagues have tabled, which is the issue of footballers suffering from neurodegenerative conditions after their time. I am sure she was about to say something about that, in which case I apologise. As she will know, the proportion of footballers suffering from these conditions is significantly greater than the proportion of the general population. Many former footballers—many without the vast incomes that people assume footballers will have had in their careers—are left in a terrible situation, not supported by their clubs or the Premier League. What can the regulator do to get groups like Football Families for Justice the resources they need to support those who suffer having given their lives to the game?

Stephanie Peacock: I really appreciate the hon. Gentleman's intervention; I know that he has worked very hard on this issue. I am hugely sympathetic to the issue of player welfare. It is important to say that the safety, welfare and wellbeing of everyone taking part in sport is absolutely paramount.

Ian Lavery: Neurodegenerative disease is a real concern of many people in the sport. I am not sure whether it should be part of the governance Bill, despite the fact that it is going to be the biggest socialist nationalised Bill there has ever been in our lifetime. *[Laughter.]* It is a very serious issue, though. Does my hon. Friend agree that it needs to be looked at, and can she assure me that the Government will do so separately to the Bill, because of the urgency and the fact that people up and down this country at different levels of football are suffering greatly, mainly as a result of heading the ball?

Stephanie Peacock: I am really grateful for that intervention. Again, I know that my hon. Friend has done a huge amount of work on this issue.

I have heard the calls from Members across the House, and indeed from retired footballers, and the Secretary of State and I recently met a small group of affected families and ex-footballers, including individuals associated with Football Families for Justice, to discuss player safety and welfare for those suffering with dementia. The Government are committed to looking further at this issue and supporting the families and football authorities to come together to address the lifelong consequences from concussion, as well as post-career mental health and financial crises. I am afraid that these measures are not within the tight regulatory scope of the Bill, although that does not mean that the Government are not aware and sympathetic to the calls being made on this issue, both in this House and from many former players and their families.

The Bill is focused on the financial sustainability of football clubs up and down the country. Too many fans have watched as their clubs make changes on which they have no say, from selling their stadium and changing club colours to, in the worst case, collapsing under inadequate ownership. This is unacceptable. It is devastating for fans and for local communities.

[Stephanie Peacock]

It is this Bill, delivered by this Labour Government, that will help to protect one of our great sporting assets and ensure that fans can focus on what is happening on the pitch, rather than off it. Today, Members across this House can vote with football fans, or they can vote against them. Today, we can deliver an independent football regulator. I commend this Bill to the House.

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

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): We welcome this Bill, as did Members across the House until a few short months ago. [Laughter.] Indeed, some of those Members even came up with the idea. Like many in the Chamber today, we are disappointed that the consensus remains broken, after an apparent direction from the Leader of the Opposition, and that the Conservatives have chosen to turn their backs on the sustainability of football quite so dramatically—perhaps it is time to sack the manager. While their time in government left much to be desired, the Conservatives had the chance to claim a statement win today. After all, as I said, this Bill was their idea: Dame Tracey Crouch initiated the fan-led review, and the previous Government started this process.

Now, however, the Conservatives have spectacularly missed an open goal, much like Ronnie Rosenthal at Villa Park in 1992. If I was generous, I would say their performance on this Bill has been like Man United in 1998—throwing away a massive points lead only to finish with nothing. Instead, I fear for the shadow Minister that they are more like Spurs in 2016, somehow managing to finish third in a two-horse race—although, I suppose coming third is the sort of result the Conservatives need to get used to.

Throughout this process, we have been clear on our position: we are in favour of the principles of protecting the heritage of our national game, of greater financial sustainability, and of greater fan involvement in the game. We applaud the Government's approach in delivering that, and we will support the Bill on Third Reading later today, because we remain consistent in our view.

None the less, we think that the Bill could go further. Let me begin with the issue of free-to-air coverage. In new clause 3, we are calling for key fixtures from the domestic football calendar to be made available on free-to-air television. This includes a selection of 10 premier league matches each season, the league cup final and the play-off finals in the championship, league one and league two. As a Charlton Athletic fan, the shadow Minister might have an interest in this one, because his team might make the play-offs one day. These would complement the existing free-to-air marquee events such as the FA cup, the World cup and the Euros. This proposal is neither about undermining private broadcasters, whose viewing figures sadly are already declining, nor about devaluing the broadcasting rights on which clubs rely, which are showing signs of plateauing, despite the addition of so many more live games to broadcast packages. Rather, this is an opportunity for broadcasters and the football leagues to innovate and to consider a more direct route to accessing fans without a paywall.

By introducing more free-to-air games, broadcasters could explore wider sponsorship opportunities tied to larger audiences, generate new appointment-to-view moments, and engage fans who are currently priced out of football not just in the stadium, but on television, too. This approach is already proving successful in other countries. For example, La Liga broadcasts one Spanish top-flight match per week free to air, helping to maintain widespread public engagement with the sport. With the rising cost of living and the growing number of subscription services required to watch live football—now totalling around £700 a year—making more matches available without a paywall would ensure the game remains accessible.

Mr French: First, Charlton did reach the play-offs and we were promoted to the championship, so I am happy to correct the record for the hon. Member. But on the broadcasting issue, what cost analysis have the Liberal Democrats done on this issue, given that we know that the premier league and the EFL have already signed broadcast deals with the likes of Sky and others? What is the economic impact for those clubs and leagues?

Max Wilkinson: A huge amount of money is already going around in football, and we know that when we get to contract negotiations with the broadcasters and the leagues, these things are chunked up into packages. And when the next contracts are up, this would be one of those packages. I do not see that there would need to be any massive economic impact.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It might seem odd that I, as a Scot, want to intrude in this debate, but the health of English football is valuable to us in Scotland as well. Does my hon. Friend agree that if football is to continue on the current scale, it needs another generation to see it, to love it and to want to take part in it. The only really successful way of doing that is to make it free to air to every household in this country at some point every week.

Max Wilkinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. The point here is that Gen Z and people younger than those in the Chamber today consume sport and media in a very different way. [Interruption.] My pronunciation of Gen Z has been corrected. It turns out that I am out of touch. Those of us in the Chamber today grew up watching football as a 90-minute game on television, many of us on free to air. Today, youngsters will be watching social media clips on TikTok. They will be watching clips of people playing games on computers as well. If we are to get the next generation of fans involved, the easiest way to make sure that they are entertained and that they are engaging is by making football free to air.

Mr French: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make. He suggests that there would not be a cost impact on the broadcasting rights, but the Liberal Democrat amendment states that a number of key matches would be required to shown on free-to-air TV channels every season. And as I highlighted in my previous intervention, those broadcasting deals are already in place. Does he not agree, therefore, that if Members were to vote for the Liberal Democrat amendment today, that would impact the broadcast deals already in play for the EFL and the premier league.

Max Wilkinson: I do not believe that that necessarily has to be the case, but we will see what happens later on if the shadow Minister votes for our new clause.

Tim Farron: In response to the shadow Minister's point, having free-to-air coverage of premier league games puts the sport in the shop window, which is actually more likely to bring money in for non-free-to-air providers. We should also remember what football is all about. It is about community. A live televised football match is a communal event that everybody watches at the same time, and it brings the country together. Having games accessible on television every week would be good for the sport going forward, and it would mean that everyone can have access to football, not only those with money.

Max Wilkinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I would reflect that Members' interest in this point suggests that we are on to something, as does the interest we have seen in the media today for the amendment.

Turning to fan representation, new clauses 4 and 5 would introduce a mandatory golden share for supporters groups to protect clubs' assets. The Bill provides some protection against some of the most egregious actions of rogue football club owners, but the golden share concept in new clause 4 would add extra protection for clubs by giving a recognised supporters' trust or equivalent democratic fan body a formal veto over decisions that could fundamentally alter the identity of their club. Such decisions would include relocating the home ground to somewhere outside the club's home area, changing the club's name, altering its primary colours or badge or entering competitions not sanctioned by the FA, the Premier League or the EFL.

The golden share concept was included in the recommendations of Dame Tracey Crouch's fan-led review but appears to have been dropped somewhere along the way. We believe it is time to bring it off the bench, because supporters are more than just paying customers; they are the living, breathing heart of their clubs. They carry the traditions, culture and local identity that connects clubs to their communities. New clause 4 would help to increase accountability and democratic oversight in club ownership and governance. The need for it is obvious when we look at past events. The attempt to rebrand Hull City as Hull Tigers would have been vetoed by fans. A fan-held golden share would have blocked the move of Wimbledon football club to Milton Keynes. The golden share could have stopped Cardiff's kit being changed from blue to red.

It is entirely right that investors and owners are part of football's future, and they already have a massive stake in this, but it is just as important to protect the people who built the clubs and supported them through thick and thin. The golden share offers a fair balance of power that protects heritage and ensures that fans are not sidelined by reckless or profit-driven decision. That is at the heart of the aims of the Bill.

Tim Farron: This is my third intervention and I have not yet mentioned Blackburn Rovers—I will now break that duck. Would the golden share allow fans to veto something like Blackburn Rovers' outrageous decision to cease funding for their women's football team? It meant that the team dropped from the championship

down to a league several layers below, simply because the owners—Venky's—disgracefully decided that they no longer wanted to pay for a women's team.

Max Wilkinson: Women's football is outside the scope of the Bill, but I believe that the golden share concept would cover that sort of decision. I agree that what has happened to the Blackburn Rovers women's team is a total disgrace.

Turning to new clause 7, our national game is something we all take immense pride in. Football is one of the cornerstones of British culture, and it should never be used by individuals or regimes to cleanse their reputations or distract from human rights abuses. That is why we have tabled an amendment aimed at strengthening ownership rules for football clubs. Prospective owners and directors should face clear and enforceable tests that include human rights considerations. The tests would help to safeguard not only the values that underpin our national sport, but the liberal and democratic principles that we as a country and all of us in this House stand for.

It cannot be right that we welcome with open arms those who preside over oppressive regimes or are linked to activity that potentially breaches the values we hold so dear. If a football club's owners are linked to actions that breach international law, can we really say that our national game or this country should be hosting them? We think not, and that is why we have tabled new clause 7.

On player welfare, which has been mentioned, amendment 3 would provide support for former professional footballers suffering from neurodegenerative conditions. While broken bones and torn ligaments can be fixed, the long-term effects of repeated head trauma often go unnoticed. Kevin Moore, Chris Nicholl, Nobby Stiles and others gave their best years to the sport, and it is a disgrace that many of them are now left facing devastating illnesses without the support that they need. Our amendment would require the football industry to allocate a small share of its considerable wealth to those affected. I also want to acknowledge the work of Michael Giles, John Stiles and the Football Families for Justice. That work must be recognised here today.

Finally, I turn to the issue of gambling in football, covered in new clause 2. Gambling-related harm is widespread and deeply damaging. Fans watching football today are bombarded with adverts encouraging betting—from TV commercials to shirt sponsorships. The influence of gambling in football has become overwhelming and dangerous. Gambling firms spend about £1.5 billion a year on advertising, much of it directed at football fans. It is unacceptable that football fans are having their game irrevocably linked to that trade.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Max Wilkinson: I am afraid that I have to make some progress. The losses are not just financial; they lead to mental health crises, family breakdown and even suicide. Public Health England estimates that there are around 400 gambling-related suicides annually. We are not calling for a ban on gambling, but on gambling advertising in football. Football must sever the link between the game and gambling.

[Max Wilkinson]

This Bill is an important step forward for our national game and we welcome it. The beautiful game needs its defenders, not just on the pitch but in Parliament. We must make the game more accessible to fans, protect club heritage and ensure democratic fan representation. We must prevent the sport from being exploited by corrupt regimes, support retired players suffering from neurological diseases and stand up to the gambling industry's grip on our national sport. That is for the sake of the fans and for fairness, but more importantly, for the future of our national game. Our amendments would do all that and I hope that Members across the House, as well as Ministers, will consider them today and in future. As we are discussing new clause 1, I finish by saying that we will vote for it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Starting with an immediate 6-minute time limit, I call Chris Evans.

4.30 pm

Chris Evans (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): I begin by declaring an interest: I am the biographer of Don Revie, the former Leeds and England manager, and the author of "The Football Battalions" about the footballers who went to war. I echo the tribute from the Front Bench to Diogo Jota, whose life was lost last week. He lit up the premier league for both Liverpool and Wolves, and we realise how short life is when we think about how he celebrated his wedding just 11 days earlier and about the three children he leaves behind. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) for doing so well when he was the right hon. Member for Pudsey in constructing the Bill when in government. It is a shame that he does not agree with his former self.

The Bill was born out of the fan-led review, but when we talk about a Football Governance Bill, footballers need to be at the heart of it. It is players who quicken the pulse and it is they who provide the memories that we cherish forever, from childhood right through to now—the memories that we pass on to our children. I therefore speak in favour of new clause 13, which I have tabled, relating to a neurodegenerative care scheme and new clause 6, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel). Just as fans are to be at the heart of the review, the game would be nothing without the players. I broadly support the Bill, but it can be made better, and if it can be made better, we should do that.

The discourse surrounding the Bill is often about the independent football regulator being a safeguard for both fans and clubs, but it should also be a safeguard for ex-players and their families if neurological conditions or illnesses are most likely caused by their career in football. Unfortunately, the Bill neglects ex-players and families who are affected by conditions such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and motor neurone disease. They must be supported through the creation of the independent football regulator.

It is evident that the effects of a career in football are long-lasting. Footballers are four to five times more likely to die from neurodegenerative conditions, often

the result of persistently heading the ball. The independent football regulator must supervise and establish a scheme aimed at providing a high standard of care.

Players and their families dedicate themselves to the game and its dangers, and it is only fair that they are looked after in return. It should not be only their burden to bear, especially after contributing so much to our society. As has already been said, football generates £8 billion annually, contributes £4 billion in tax and supports almost 100,000 jobs.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend—we hosted a Football Families for Justice event a few months ago. Most people are not aware that not all footballers make thousands and thousands of pounds a week. This is the least that we can do to ensure that the pleasure that they have given us is responded to when they find themselves afflicted with a neurological condition, such as Alzheimer's disease or Parkinson's. I hope that the Government will listen and support the new clause.

Chris Evans: I thank my hon. Friend for her support. What brought this home to me about how much players were earning was when Johnny Giles, the great Leeds midfielder of the 1960s and '70s, showed me his first contract from when he was playing for Manchester United: £18 in the winter and £12 in the summer. That sums up how much they were paid. A point that came up at that important meeting, which was attended by luminaries including Kevin Keegan, Chris Sutton, Paul Walsh and Barry Fry, was the complaints about the Professional Footballers Association. When I raised this on Second Reading, I was bombarded with emails from its public affairs arm saying, "Oh, you've got it all wrong," but the question needs to be asked. It is the PFA's members who are complaining about it and saying that it is not servicing them properly. It should be asking why that is happening. These are PFA members who have paid into its funds over the years, and if they are not being treated well, questions need to be answered.

According to new clause 13, the Secretary of State must set out the minimum requirements for the scheme, a timescale for the scheme's establishment and arrangements and a timescale for periodic review of the scheme. Furthermore, all specified competition organisers should jointly operate, manage and fund the scheme through the formation of a joint co-ordinating committee. Any current or former player who has at any time been registered as a professional footballer would be eligible for the scheme.

To me, this goes beyond football. If research is discovered that helps dementia, Parkinson's or motor neurone disease, the rest of society wins. This is something that football can lead and change society with. This scheme will provide crucial care and financial support to any eligible person who suffers from a neurodegenerative condition that is deemed to have been caused by or contributed to by playing football. A panel of independent experts must be appointed to determine whether a neurodegenerative condition of an eligible person has been caused by, or contributed to by, playing or training activities within the English football leagues. It will also determine the appropriate provision of care and financial support required in each case. The independent football

regulator must ensure that the joint co-ordinating committee acts on the panel's determinations, to ensure that ex-players and their families get the support they need.

This is a matter of urgency. Ex-players who have given so much joy should be treated with dignity and respect, and supported when they need to be. This new clause would ensure that. I pay tribute to campaigners including Michael Giles, son of Johnny, and John Stiles, son of Nobby. They have campaigned with dignity and respect and with a quiet determination, and it is time we showed the same respect to them. Denying or ignoring the link between football and neurological conditions is no longer sufficient. Recently we lost Alan Peacock, who starred for Middlesbrough and Leeds in the 1960s. He can be added to the long list of names, including Jackie Charlton and Bobby Charlton, his brother, who died of dementia; Martin Peters; Ray Wilson; and, of course, Nobby Stiles. The connection between football and neurological conditions acquired later in life must be addressed in this Bill, and if it is not, it must be addressed somewhere else.

This Government, especially a Labour Government, should treat injuries caused by or contributed to by football like any other workplace or industrial injury, and that is what my new clause would ensure. We on this side are the party for workers, and regardless of the industry, it is our job to support and protect them, especially as their union, in their words, lets them down. Since football has contributed so much to our economy and, more personally, to fans' happiness, it is only common decency to support players when they are in need. This cannot be ignored any longer. Not only must support be provided, but the independent football regulator must be there for them.

Iqbal Mohamed: I rise today to speak to the new clauses in my name and to lend my support to several of the other new clauses. Some have already been spoken about by my hon. Friends across the House. New clause 6 is about financial abuse, mismanagement or fraud and about protecting players. New clause 13, which my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) has just spoken about, deals with neurodegenerative care schemes.

Football should never be a luxury. It should be a shared national experience, accessible to families, young people and lifelong fans, but more and more it is becoming a commodity. A game that was built by and for the working class is now priced out of reach for the very people who gave it life. If I wanted to attend the first Premier League game in August, I would be looking at paying over £200 for two tickets on the secondary market. That is before travel, food and all the rising living costs are factored in. Even in ordinary times, that is a huge sum and for most people, it is simply unaffordable. Football is becoming a luxury experience, not a communal one. Historically, football thrived because it was accessible. Its rise alongside the expansion of the railway network allowed working people to follow their teams home and away. It became more than just a sport; it became a pillar of community identity and pride.

Fans—the heartbeat of the sport—are being pushed to the margins. Our current ticketing system is pricing them out. That is why I have tabled new clause 8, which would introduce a duty on clubs and competition organisers to ensure fairer access and great transparency in ticket

sales, especially in reselling tickets when fans are not able to attend. We are seeing ticket prices skyrocket while secondary ticketing platforms exploit demand and rake in obscene profits. The new clause would compel clubs to monitor the secondary market, report harmful practices and offer resale channels to stop fans getting ripped off and scammed. Fans should know the real face value of a ticket and have a safe, fair way to buy and resell them—no more profiteering or shadowy resale platforms. The price of attending premier league games is beyond the means of most fans, even more so if they want to share that experience with family members.

I should declare an interest as a lifelong Liverpool fan, and I offer my condolences to the family of Diogo Jota and his brother who tragically died recently. While I may be biased in thinking that it is the greatest club in the world, I also say with pride that Liverpool has shown what fan-focused leadership looks like. The club recently froze ticket prices for the 2025-26 season following discussions with the supporters board. That model of engagement and sensitivity to supporters deserves recognition, but not every club takes that approach, and that is exactly the problem. We want to see this culture rolled out across the country, one where fans are not an afterthought but at the centre of decision making. My new clause would make that approach a requirement, not just a gesture of goodwill.

That leads me to my second proposal, new clause 14, which would introduce mandatory vetting of foreign financial investment in football. It is about protecting the soul of English football from the corrosive influence of dirty money. We have seen at first hand how vulnerable clubs struggling under massive debts become easy targets for opportunistic investors looking to launder their reputations or gain geopolitical influence. I have raised this before: sportswashing is now one of the most insidious trends in football. Where once the term might have brought to mind the 1936 Berlin Olympics or the 2015 Baku European games, today the UK is at the top of that list. That should shame us.

I repeat the example I gave in my speech on Second Reading of Abramovich's ownership of Chelsea. While it was seen as a huge success for the club, his ties to the Russian state and his close relationship with Putin should have raised huge financial and ethical concerns, but these were overlooked. For years, he used our game to rebrand himself, shifting attention away from questions about the origins of his fortune, but it was only following the invasion of Ukraine that real action was enforced. That shows exactly why we need stronger safeguards to prevent that from happening again.

The new clause would empower the independent football regulator to block investment from funds linked to money laundering, criminal finance, human rights abuses or any breaches of UK or international law. That is the bare minimum. If Amnesty International or other watchdogs have flagged a state or source of funds for its abysmal human rights record, there should be red flags, not red carpets, for the potential owner. Let us be honest: fans sometimes embrace foreign investment out of desperation, but the independent football regulator should protect the game from nefarious funds and owners. This is not about bad actors; it is about a broken system. Club owners may not see the need for regulation. We are protecting not just finances but values. If this Bill and the independent regulator fail to

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

stop the abuse of our football institutions by criminal or oppressive regimes, they will have failed in their public duty.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am imposing an immediate five-minute time limit. I call Clive Betts.

Mr Betts: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—not for the time limit but for calling me.

The Bill is crucial because football has failed to regulate itself. It is key to ensuring the sustainability of our great game. The first aspect of it that I really commend is the move to give the regulator powers to ensure a fairer redistribution of money throughout the football pyramid—it is clearly totally unfair that money is concentrated in a handful of clubs at the top while other clubs struggle at the bottom—and to remove the enormous cliff edge between the premier league and the championship. I thank the Secretary of State and the Sport Minister for listening to the concerns raised about the powers of the regulator with regard to the backstop. In improving the backstop in terms of scope and process during the Bill's passage, they have listened and acted, which is welcome indeed.

4.45 pm

The other aspect of the Bill that addresses sustainability is that it will now give the regulator powers to deal with bad owners—not just at first instance when they are buying the club, but once they are in charge of it. I thank the Minister for writing to me and clearly setting out the powers that the regulator will have to deal with owners who no longer seem able to run a club properly, by intervening and taking responsibility for the club away from them. It would be helpful to put that letter in the public domain and the Library.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield Heeley) (Lab): Despite being a lifelong Barnsley supporter, I am still grateful to my hon. Friend for hosting the Sheffield Wednesday supporters' trust yesterday and for his leadership on this issue. What was reflected back to us by the supporters' trust is how unfair the current situation is. Clubs—and therefore the fans—are punished when irresponsible owners like the current owner of Sheffield Wednesday, Chansiri, behave appallingly and do not put the fans first.

Mr Betts: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will turn in a second to what the EFL can do now.

For all that the Minister has been helpful in explaining what the regulator's powers will be, the problem is that we are left in the meantime without a regulator and doubts about what the EFL can do in that regard. My hon. Friends the Members for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) and for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) will be very much involved with the Reading supporters' trust and can tell us all the problems that they have experienced. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) has similar problems with her club. There have been similar problems for Derby and its fans, as hon. Friends will know, and the Secretary of State will know about Wigan.

The situation at Sheffield Wednesday is dire. The owner has failed to pay wages for three months over the course of this year. That affects not just the players—some of whom may be well off, while others are not; the administrative staff, clerks and all those people have not been paid for two months in some cases. The owner has not paid His Majesty's Revenue and Customs on two occasions. It is clear that he is simply running out of money.

What actions can the EFL take? We welcome the investigation that it is now conducting into what is going on at Hillsborough, but it is clear that although Chansiri was funding the club to the tune of about £10 million a year, he has now run out of money. Rob Brookes of the Wednesday supporters' trust has done a brilliant analysis of Chansiri's companies in Thailand, which are, by and large, now losing money. He is not able to fund the club, so where has the money been coming from to keep it going for the past two or three years? Has he borrowed it? If so, who has he borrowed it from? What are the conditions on that borrowing? Are the people who lent him the money now effectively running the club and telling Chansiri that he cannot sell it? He has turned down many approaches to sell the club and is demanding ridiculous prices for it. Has the money been borrowed from reputable sources? I do not know; I am not making an accusation. The only person who can clarify this awful situation is Mr Chansiri himself, but he will not comment on it.

We welcome the EFL investigation. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) says, we want the EFL to find out what is happening, and to be transparent and open about what it knew about the whole issue. Why, when Chansiri produced a business plan in March, did the EFL accept it? How far did it question that plan? Having given the EFL a business plan saying that he was financially sustainable, he failed to pay wages hours later. He had two five-hour engagements with the fans and never once mentioned his problems funding the club.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley said, what we do not want is for the EFL to come in and its only actions be to punish the club with transfer embargoes and points deductions to the point where a sustainable sale to someone else is not possible. I say to the EFL: you are the only hope we have until the regulator comes in, so please work with the fans' trust and others to find the best way forward. Tell us what you knew and what you know now, and expose what Chansiri has been doing, because it is an absolute disgrace that a club of Sheffield Wednesday's stature should be reduced to this situation.

We have heard today that, because of the Safety of Sports Grounds Act 1975, Sheffield city council has issued a directive that unless work is done on the north stand roof, it will close part of the ground come the start of the season, but the club has known about that for three years. This is an appalling situation. I ask the Minister and the Secretary of State to talk to the EFL about how far they can work with them to save the situation.

I welcome the Minister for Sport's letters to me, the commitment to fan engagement and the commitment on the FSA's role going forward, but the regulator must have the powers to intervene if it feels that external

competitions such as the club world cup interfere with our domestic competitions. I thank her very much for her engagement right through this process.

Bobby Dean: I rise to speak in favour of the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), specifically new clauses 3 and 4.

I will start by outlining why these fan-centric measures are important to this particular fan and why football is important to me. Football has been the most constant thing in my life. When I was a young boy, my uncle called me Statto because I used to study Teletext for every bit of football information I could get—the league tables, the top scorers, all the transfer news—and relay it to my family until I annoyed the hell out of all of them. Football was also the central bond with my grandparent, or Pops, as I used to know him—so much so that when he passed, I took his ashes down the Tottenham High Road and laid them in the foundations of the new Tottenham Hotspur stadium. Football is probably the most frequent conversation I have with my dad and the thing that glues all my friendship networks together.

I have to confess that being a politician was not my first career choice. Just like every young boy, I thought I could be a footballer. Despite hours of effort after school every day, I was never going to be good enough. But I never gave up; I played football throughout my university years and formed many friendships that way. After that, we did not want to stop, so we set up an alumni football club together and carried on. Eventually, I joined Carshalton football club, whose club tie I am wearing today, and I still play on a Saturday, except for the weekends when I am injured. Those moments in Beddington park playing for Carshalton football club are some of the only moments when I get to switch off from all this—my teammates would probably say that I also switch off too much on a Saturday when the winger runs past me!

Then there is the watching of football—the lunacy of me continuing to watch. Let me tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker: the journey from Carshalton to Tottenham and back on a rainy Tuesday night is brutal, particularly when we lose the number of games that Tottenham lost this year. Yet in the same season when I have had all that misery, I had one night in Bilbao last month that was probably one of the best nights of my life. Isn't that just football—misery and sublime nights like that all in one go?

The centrality of football to people's lives is what makes this Bill so important. People have felt in recent years that the game has drifted away from them, and some people's reaction is to say, "That's the way it is." I am glad that, through the Bill, the Government are saying that we will not be resigned to that fact—we are going to fight, stop that drift and bring it closer to fans again.

That brings me to new clause 4, which is about the golden share. This is particularly important because it would lock in the fans' voice via democratically elected organisations. That would mean that clubs would not be able to simply pay lip service to the element of consultation with fans; there would be real power for the fans, with their presence inside the clubs. Of course, this does not go anywhere near as far as other countries, like Germany with the Bundesliga, but it is an important protection.

We spoke at length earlier about new clause 3 and the free-to-air element. I understand why there is a bit of controversy around that and why the Secretary of State will say that the current listings system works well. But who do it work well for? It certainly works well for the premier league, but I am not sure whether it works well for all fans. The new clause would not go as far as la liga, which broadcasts a game every single week. Let us not kid ourselves: we are talking about 10 games out of 760 available—that would be 1% of games. I do not think that would destroy the premier league's product, but it would make games so much more accessible to the next generation of fans. The premier league is a global attraction, but it is also England's product, and English fans should be able to watch those games.

There are other elements of the Bill that I could go on to support, but I am short on time, so I will just express my support for new clause 1, which is important. I end with this quote from a famous Tottenham manager, Bill Nicholson:

"We must always consider our supporters, for without them there would be no professional football. It would be better to have more fans watching football the way they like it played, rather than have a few fans watching football the way we would like it played."

Those are important words that we should all reflect on when voting today.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to speak in support of the Bill. We stood on a manifesto that promised to establish an independent regulator to ensure financial sustainability for football clubs in England. Today we will be delivering on that promise for football fans across the country, regardless of the club they support; of course, Doncaster Rovers are the only team worth noting.

Doncaster Rovers unite the community in my constituency and hold a special place in all our hearts. In fact, local artist Martin Black will soon release a song for charity called "This is my city", which is about community spirit and the hometown pride that stems from supporting your local team. It encapsulates what grassroots football really means.

The Government recognise the importance of fans in the football industry and are putting them at the heart of the game once more. As we have heard, fans should never risk losing their beloved club because of financial instability stemming from mismanagement and reckless spending. However, I would like to highlight the need to support football players from all leagues after their careers.

John Stiles, son of the 1966 legend Nobby Stiles, is one of my constituents. I first met John in one of my earliest surgeries—not long after I was elected—to discuss his involvement with the Football Families for Justice campaign, which, as we have heard, focuses on supporting ex-footballers and their families when they face devastating neurodegenerative disease as a result of their football careers. I pay tribute to John for all the work he has done on the campaign; he has really been a leader in the area.

Research shows that ex-footballers are four or five times more likely to suffer from Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, motor neurone disease and other similar diseases. Unfortunately, that was the case for Nobby. The PFA has been mentioned, so for the sake of time I will not go

[Sally Jameson]

into it any further, but it is saddening that an industry with such a vast amount of wealth offers so little support to ex-footballers when they face unforeseen health impacts resulting from their time on the pitch.

I understand that the Bill's scope means that some of the suggested changes are not currently in the legislation, but I ask the Minister and the Department to give further thought to the adequacy of support provided to ex-footballers and their families when they face neurodegenerative diseases. As has been said, not all footballers are earning millions of pounds every year; in fact, many earn very little and have relatively short careers in the context of their lives.

The football industry is carried on the skill and sacrifice of its players as well as its fans. It is disappointing that the industry does not really recognise that. If even only a small proportion of wealth in the industry was made more easily accessible to players and supported ex-professionals, that would go a long way to delivering justice for those players and their loved ones. I hope to continue my engagement with the Minister and the Department on this matter. However, I welcome this Bill and the fact that it will ensure a consistent approach in how clubs are run by implementing a club licensing regime and tackling rogue owners and directors. I am pleased that the Bill has the support of Club Doncaster in my constituency. On its behalf, I remind the Minister of the importance of ensuring that the regulator provides objective and competent oversight of the football governance model. Clubs and their system deserve financial sustainability to protect the heritage of English football.

Football is part of our culture and history. With the recent and well-deserved promotion of Donny Rovers, I am pleased that this Government are taking steps to protect its legacy and its future.

5 pm

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): I rise to support new clause 13 and amendment 29 on behalf of one of my constituents, the former Arsenal and Leeds goalkeeper John Lukic. I am grateful to John for bringing to my attention the growing number of ex-players suffering from chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a form of dementia caused by repeatedly heading the ball.

Research shows that retired footballers are more than three times more likely to suffer from dementia than the general population. CTE is a progressive and irreversible disease that leaves individuals suffering from memory loss and unable to carry out basic day-to-day activities. As a result, those around them often become their carers and have to endure watching their loved ones gradually lose their memories and independence. The modern game is awash with money; the Premier League's latest TV deal is worth £6.7 billion. Despite the huge sums of money available, only £1 million has to date been committed to supporting players suffering from neurodegenerative diseases.

As we have already heard a few times, the situation has left former players, such as world cup winner Nobby Stiles, having to sell their medals to fund their care. While footballers have always been paid comparatively well, the players from the '60s, '70s and '80s earned nothing like the sums that modern stars are paid, and their careers were short. It is worth highlighting that

this issue may not go away: although footballs are not as heavy as they used to be, they now travel faster, meaning that the overall impact of heading a ball can be similar.

I therefore support these measures in solidarity with Football Families for Justice, which I join in calling for legislation to be enacted that will ensure competition organisers are required to provide funding towards a neurodegenerative care scheme. Unfortunately, unless competition organisers are made to do it, the belief is that they will not. Just as the Football Governance Bill seeks to protect fans from profit-driven ventures such as the creation of new super leagues, it is right that the Bill should also protect the players who gave so much to make the game what it is.

I am encouraged by what the Minister has said on this matter. We rightly hear that football is nothing without the fans, but the fans turn out only for the players. Football needs to support them.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), on bringing the Bill to this point. I also congratulate them on listening to arguments about how we treat the vast resources that come in through TV deals and distribute them throughout the football pyramid, particularly in giving the regulator powers over parachute payments, if he deems it necessary—I sincerely hope he will—if we do not get an agreement between the English Football League and the Premier League. Those payments really distort competition, particularly in the championship. That needed to be addressed in this Bill, and I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister on doing that.

I support the new clause and amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). They deal with how we identify the people who really began this journey: the sports fans. This started with the super league and the fans' reaction to it. They are determined to stop clubs from breaking away from the premier league and forming a super league with other clubs from across the globe. The reaction of fans shocked the Conservative Government at the time into action; they could not really resist. The power of fans has brought us to this point. We need to understand how we can identify fans—bona fide supporters of a club—and consult them on how we regulate the game going forwards. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East is attempting to do that through some of his amendments.

My hon. Friend has identified another very important factor, which is how we prevent assets being attractive to those people who look to take over a club, not because they are interested in football in any way but because they see assets of value from which they can make money. By running clubs into the ground, they seek to make a profit from those assets. Through the "asset of community value" powers or something similar, my hon. Friend is trying to prevent that from happening. If his amendments are not accepted or voted on tonight, I would certainly commend them to the regulator, who I hope will take heed of what my hon. Friend is attempting to achieve.

One other amendment I added my name to is new clause 1, because I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), is on

to something. Why do we treat other sports differently from football—why is football singled out? Well, I think we know the story of that, but it has been a long time since the issue of alcohol at football grounds has been looked at. There is nothing unreasonable about asking clubs and the football community to look at whether we can relax those rules in certain circumstances, so that where clubs want to do it, they can do it, and should do so in partnership with their fans. A review of that issue would not be a bad thing at all.

This Bill is a giant leap forward for football in this country. I commend my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench for what they have achieved, and I wish the Bill a fair wind.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an immense privilege to rise once again to support this important Bill during its passage through Parliament. I want to draw particular attention to amendments 10 and 11, which stand in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). Those amendments would require a club's home ground to be designated as an asset of community value as part of its operating licence. I welcome the remarks made by the Minister during her opening speech about the safeguards that are already in the Bill to protect home grounds.

A club's stadium is more than its stands, plastic seats, some turf and the woodwork. It has a spirit; it is part of the club's identity. It has memories—highs and lows—soaked up in its walls. We must protect these important assets for the communities they mean so much to. In many cases, a club's stadium is inherently bound up with the place that surrounds it, and can form a link between the sport and the identity of the town or city it sits in. Crewe Alexandra's home ground, the Mornflake stadium, is named after an iconic historic local milling business and producer of breakfast foods founded in 1675, and is overlooked by the railway lines that gave birth to the town. Similarly, Nantwich Town FC's stadium sits on the banks of the River Weaver, which literally connects the club to the town centre and beyond.

I strongly believe that we can and should go further to strengthen the links between clubs and communities, which is why I was delighted recently to join Stuart Price, Trevor Griffiths and Aaron Lewis on the fantastic "Railwaymen" podcast, a dedicated fans' podcast for Crewe Alexandra FC. We discussed exactly how we might strengthen those links, working together in partnership. I am delighted to be working closely with the podcast and other key stakeholders in the town to commission a mural to the club, which could act as a bridge between the stadium and the town centre. Although it is early days for that project, I extend an early invitation to visit to the Secretary of State and the Minister—who has only just been in my constituency to open a boxing gym, but is always welcome to come back—if we are successful in commissioning that mural.

Finally, it is a great shame that the Conservative party and Reform have thus far joined forces to try to frustrate the progress of this Bill. As the shadow Minister is indicating, Reform Members are once again not even in the Chamber, although I have to say that there are not many Members on the Conservative Benches either. Our game needs an independent football regulator, the Football League needs it, and I believe the Premier League needs it too.

If Opposition Members are in any doubt, I encourage them to read the case for an independent football regulator written by Crewe Alexandra supporter Tom Kural. It sets out in illuminating clarity why this change in the law is needed, and why Members from all parts of the House should be in no doubt that fans in my constituency, and I am sure in theirs, want this change. Before Opposition Members walk through the Lobby tonight, I encourage them to think carefully about what fans like Tom in their constituencies think.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): As someone born and raised in Derby, I know how deeply our football club runs through the heart of our city. Derby County is more than just a team; it represents our identity, our pride and the strength of our community. However, like so many in this House, I also know what it feels like when that identity is put at risk. In 2021, Derby County entered administration. The confusion and lack of transparency that followed made it much harder for everybody involved, including those of us working behind the scenes to help secure the club's future. It was only thanks to the extraordinary actions of local man and lifelong fan, David Clowes, that the club was saved.

One example that highlights the need for stronger oversight is the attempted takeover of Derby County by Chris Kirchner. Despite initial approval, it became clear that Kirchner was not a fit and proper person to run the club. His financial shortcomings and failure to meet deadlines led to the takeover attempt collapsing. Later, Kirchner was convicted of fraud-related charges in the US over his business dealings and sentenced to 20 years in prison. That is why I welcome the Football Governance Bill, which offers the protections that Derby County and so many other clubs across the EFL need.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): While the facial expressions of Opposition Members are worth an intervention all on their own, does my hon. Friend agree that this Bill provides stronger financial oversight and increased fan involvement, promotes equity and inclusion, protects club heritage, and increases transparency and accountability? The reason the Opposition oppose it is because those are alien concepts to them.

Baggy Shanker: Absolutely, the faces of Opposition Members say it all. I will talk a little more about the content of the shadow Minister's speech in a second.

The EFL has needed this Bill, and it wants this Bill. It will establish the independent football regulator, introduce proper financial oversight and finally require clubs to engage seriously with the fans who give the clubs their life. We do not need to look far to see that the problems are ongoing. They are happening in front of our eyes. My own chief of staff is a devoted Sheffield Wednesday fan and is deeply troubled by the instability and uncertainty surrounding her club. Like so many fans, she sees an owner who clearly does not have the resources required to run the club appropriately. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for the work he has done and continues to do to stand up for fans and the future of their beloved Sheffield Wednesday.

This Bill is not just a policy proposal, but a vital step towards a fairer and more sustainable future for our national game. Clubs in the EFL will lose around

[Baggy Shanker]

£450 million this season alone. The level of instability is not just damaging, but dangerous. We have already seen what happens when things go wrong, from Bury to Bolton to Reading. The pattern is clear and it cannot be allowed to continue. The EFL wants this Bill. Most clubs across the English leagues support this Bill. Most importantly, fans want this Bill. I genuinely ask why the Conservatives do not.

What makes it even more frustrating is the political opportunism we are seeing. When in government, the Conservative party brought forward an almost identical Bill to the one we are debating today. Now in opposition, they seem prepared to vote against the Bill not because the policy has changed, but because the politics have changed. That is not leadership; that is putting party before the future of our clubs and the communities that they serve.

The truth is that there is more than enough money in English football to sustain the entire pyramid. The problem is how that money is distributed. Last year, 25 clubs received 92% of the game's revenue, while 67 other clubs were left to fight over the remaining 8%. The new regulator will have the tools to help fix that and to ensure that clubs are run properly, sustainably and in the best interests of the people they represent. This Bill is a chance to safeguard the heritage, the future and the very soul of English football. I support it proudly on behalf of Derby, and I urge colleagues across the House to do the same. Let us protect the game before it is too late.

5.15 pm

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Let me begin by drawing the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I rise to speak today with a sense of relief, because Reading football club has finally been sold. I was one of thousands in the stadium in my constituency during the May bank holiday weekend when we heard that the sale had finally gone through. The relief and joy in the crowd were palpable, and we all chanted, "We've got our Reading back." It was the last game of the season, and because the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), is present on the Front Bench, I will not mention the score. As well as the relief about the sale, however, I share fans' deep frustration, because we should never have had to fight so hard to save our club. I am so glad to welcome a number of Reading fans who are sitting in the Gallery, having travelled to Parliament to witness this historic piece of legislation.

Just a few short months ago, our club—one of the oldest in English football—was on the brink of expulsion from the English football league. Its decline was driven by governance failure, absentee ownership and the ultimate toothlessness of the existing regulation. We were so close to losing our club, not just to relegation but to administration or even insolvency. In the worst weeks, it seemed that I was calling the EFL and prospective bidders and other stakeholders almost every other day trying to find a solution. Thankfully, our club was finally sold, but it could so easily have gone the other way—and for too many clubs, such as Bury and Macclesfield, it has gone the other way.

More than 50 clubs in the top six tiers of the English men's game have gone into administration since 1992, which shows that the game is in deep need of repair and of independent regulation. Even today clubs such as Sheffield Wednesday suffer from similar issues, and I pay tribute to all my Labour colleagues in that city who are fighting so hard for their club, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and many other Members across the House.

Yet it should not be up to MPs and fans to mount rescue campaigns. Fans should not be the ones organising petitions, staging protests or becoming forensic accountants to hold the owners to account. Yet Reading fans did everything, from marching in the streets to working with Members from across the House. Over 10,000 fans signed my petition to hold an inquiry into Reading's absent owners, and many came to watch the Westminster Hall debate that I led in March. I even had the assistance of fans when poring over the complex corporate structure of Reading football club in the hope of finding a legal solution. Meanwhile, I relentlessly pestered Ministers, spoke to the EFL, and met the shadow regulator.

I want to say a big thank you to the Sell Before We Dai campaign, the Supporters Trust at Reading, the non-governmental organisation Fair Game, and all the MPs from all parties who worked alongside us. The burden placed on supporters by all this was enormous, emotionally, financially and physically. Fans should not have to go through this: we need stronger and smarter regulation.

As I have said before, any regulator must pass the Reading test. That means having the power to disqualify unfit owners and, crucially, to force a sale when a club's future is at risk. I thank the Minister for her constructive and serious engagement throughout the Committee consideration. I was especially glad to hear her strong responses to the amendments tabled in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on the regulator's powers to force divestment from unsuitable owners, and, having read her on-the-record responses, I am grateful for her clarification. She explained, for instance, that the regulator may appoint an interim officer to assist a club to operate effectively in the owner's absence; may require a club to change its constitution if that is the most appropriate way to secure an unsuitable owner's removal; and may, in the most extreme cases, force a rogue owner to divest at no minimum price, directing that owner to take no part in the running of the club in the meantime. I hope that the Minister will reaffirm those points in her winding-up speech today, to make it clear to all that the Bill does pass the Reading test.

This Bill has been a long time coming, and I thank everyone who worked on it, including those in the previous Government under the leadership of Dame Tracey Crouch and her fan-led review, as well as the previous Secretary of State and Minister for Sport. I am incredibly relieved that the Bill is here, and it reflects the broad cross-society consensus, and what was until very recently a cross-party consensus, that we need this regulation, which is sorely lacking from the game.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a great speech. Apparently, 80% of fans support this Bill, but recent polling had the Conservative party

at 16%. Does she agree that these facts alone should give Conservative Front Benchers pause for thought before they oppose the Bill?

Yuan Yang: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I am very surprised to see Conservative Front Benchers whipping their colleagues to oppose a Bill that they had previously introduced in part and supported. We had built a cross-society consensus because of the work of Dame Tracey and many others like her, and we should respect that work and the importance of regulating football so that it is financially sustainable.

Mr French: Anyone who has read the fan-led review will know that it ultimately suggests that football should be given back to the FA and the leagues themselves. Our position is to accelerate that now, rather than appoint a Labour regulator.

Yuan Yang: The approach of the Conservative party here and in the Lords has been to delay this Bill and any progress made on regulation for far too many months, during which my club has struggled to go on without any independent regulation. I would like to see some reflection from Conservative Front Benchers about what that means not just for Reading, but for many clubs that are waiting for the regulator to come in.

Let Reading be one of the last clubs that have to fight this hard to survive, and let this Bill be the turning point. Let us do what the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), has said: let us crack on with this Bill.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I had hoped to come to the House today with a spring in my step, having seen the sale of Morecambe FC go through. Instead, Morecambe FC and our town have been put through hell over the past week or so, and we still cannot see the end of it. More than 10 days ago, the EFL approved a buyer, Panjab Warriors, which is ready and willing to buy. Clearance has been granted, and over 14 months-worth of funds—a significant amount—have already been pumped into the football club by the new buyer.

The current owner, Jason Whittingham—operating as the Bond Group—said he was ready to sell, but instead of getting the deal done, he has, for whatever reason, stalled. He has delayed and given excuses, and he has tried to dismiss the board. In fact, it is only through the good intentions of the local board members, and the responsibility that they feel towards Morecambe, that they returned to try to facilitate the sale. But yet again, Jason stalled, so now the board has gone again.

Panjab Warriors, which has already poured a lot of money into the club, has made it clear that everything is ready from its end, but the sale has still not been completed. Most distressingly, staff and players have not been paid their full wages. I have received emails from constituents who work for the club and who are desperately worried about how they will pay their bills. Our local citizens advice bureau and food bank have had to step in, because that is what we do in Morecambe: we look after our own. Tomorrow, the club is due to pay £40,000 in VAT. Unless the sale goes through, there is no way the club can meet this obligation.

Until now, I have restrained myself from using the full extent of parliamentary privilege in this matter, because my focus has been on getting the sale done. I have held my tongue while the EFL went through its due diligence process, and I have implored Jason Whittingham directly to just get on with the sale. But my restraint has not produced the progress that I had hoped for, so I now feel duty bound to use parliamentary privilege to lay out what I see.

I suspect that Jason Whittingham has built a house of cards, and it is now falling down around his ears. There is mention of further unspecified investors, even at this final stage, and there is a suspicion that the club is being used to leverage his personal financial situation. Morecambe FC is being held hostage, and it breaks my heart. Morecambe FC is the cornerstone of our community, and what is happening in Morecambe shows exactly why this Bill is needed. The likes of Jason Whittingham should never have been allowed to buy a football club.

Last week, the Secretary of State answered a question in this House about the sale, and I thank her and the Minister for Sport for all their support behind the scenes in dealing with this unfolding disaster. This Labour Government have stood by my community and, frankly, I am baffled as to why the Conservatives are opposing this Bill. I know what a football club means to a town such as Morecambe. This Bill is a crucial step to stopping other towns like Morecambe going through this heartache. I urge Members across the House to please support this Bill, and I say to Jason, “Come on, sign the damn paperwork!”

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I also associate myself with the tribute from my hon. Friend the Minister after the tragic death of Diogo Jota. My son is a Liverpool fan, and his generation of Liverpool fans regarded him as one of the finest players in the club, so it is very sad news for them.

I rise to speak to my two amendments to the Bill: amendment 12 and the linked new clause 6. I also support new clause 13, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans).

This is a great Bill that will improve football and the financial stability of clubs, but I want to raise the failings of the great game of football with regard to the financial wellbeing of players. These amendments seek to address ongoing financial grooming and disregard for player welfare in the football industry. I believe this is an historic opportunity to reform football governance in England for the long-term good of clubs, supporters and players. However, to leave out the wellbeing, protection and long-term security of players—the very people who drive the game, whom we see week in and week out, in the stands and on television, and who are the beating heart of football—would be a fundamental mistake.

I have written a letter to the Secretary of State, supported by over a dozen Members of Parliament and 319 current and former professional players, coaches and managers across the game, including many legends of the game. Many of those have been victims of financial grooming and fraud. They have written, alongside me and other Members, to express our strong support for the introduction of an independent football regulator, and to urge that player welfare be included in the regulator’s remit.

[Alex Sobel]

The current system is failing too many players. Issues affecting player welfare span financial exploitation and mental health problems to retirement transition and dementia. The support system is fragmented, opaque and often reactive at best. Despite the Professional Footballers' Association mandate, too many players feel unsupported, unprotected or unheard.

These are not just historic problems; they are happening now. This is not simply a matter of correcting the past. New forms of financial exploitation are appearing today, particularly through digital platforms and sophisticated forms of financial exploitation and grooming. Some of the individuals involved remain active in football, and operate unchecked and outside meaningful oversight. Players, especially younger ones, continue to face avoidable risks, such as predatory financial advice and abuses, post-career mental health problems and financial crises, and in many cases the lifelong consequences of concussion.

This is a rare and timely legislative moment. The Football Governance Bill is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed protections for everyone in the game—not just clubs and investors, but players too. Including player welfare in the regulator's scope would ensure that minimum standards, transparency and accountability are applied across football. A regulated environment would provide strong co-ordination between the clubs, the premier league, the EFL, the PFA, the FA, the League Managers Association, and other associated organisations, ultimately benefiting all parties. Football must be more than financially sustainable; it must also be ethically sound. That means protecting the health, dignity, welfare and future of the players who give everything to the sport. I urge the Government to ensure that player welfare is not overlooked as this important legislation moves forward.

My amendment 12 seeks to safeguard the current and former players involved in English football who have been victims of financial abuse, mismanagement or fraud, or who are at risk of becoming victims of financial abuse, mismanagement and fraud. My new clause 6 seeks to embed measures aimed at achieving the financial abuse, mismanagement and fraud objective. Unfortunately, we see financial abuse and grooming across the sports, music, media and cultural industries; football is not unique. However, this is a unique opportunity for the regulation of football that could lead as an example for other areas.

I want to finish by saying that this is classist abuse of young and budding talent.

Lizzi Collinge: My hon. Friend talks about the class system. It is telling that in other countries that perhaps have less class-based societies, football is recognised as culture. Does he agree that football should be recognised in this country on a par with other cultural opportunities such as the theatre and opera?

5.30 pm

Alex Sobel: I absolutely do. As a Leeds United fan, I know that we definitely cross the spectrum from sport to culture—everybody has probably seen “The Damned United”. In a country such as Spain, football goes across the cultural spectrum, but the ownership of clubs

is also with the fans and not with oligarchs—as the former Chelsea owner was—or others. There is a different cultural aspect to it in other European countries.

As I was saying, this is classist abuse of young and budding talent that exploits their lives for the benefit of financially high-powered middlemen. Labour's driving mission is to protect working people against exploitation. Let us include football players in our party's founding mission and give them the protections they deserve.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak once again on this important Bill. I happily declare an interest as a season ticket holder at Selhurst Park and long-term fan of Crystal Palace. I am still basking in the glory of our Wembley triumph in May. I promise to stop talking about it soon, but I hope to milk it for another couple of months if I can.

This hugely overdue Bill has wide support from fans and communities across our country, as evidenced by its adoption of the key recommendations of the 2021 fan-led review. The central insight of the review was that, as we all know, what is essentially true about football is that it is not like any other industry and cannot be treated as such. Football clubs are more than just local businesses. Across our country, they sit at the heart of our communities, as Dartford football club does in my constituency. They are anchor institutions, culturally and economically, and I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will support the Bill to put in place a new set of rules to protect clubs, empower fans and keep clubs where they belong: at the heart of our communities.

For that reason, it was a privilege to serve on the Bill Committee—the third of my first year in this place; I hesitate to claim that it was a parliamentary hat trick. What set that Committee apart was the Opposition's baffling approach to the legislation, as we can see on the amendment paper today. We were told on the Committee's first day that the reason the Conservative party was against the Bill, despite having introduced it in the last Parliament, was that despite it being close in spirit and letter to the previous version, it now represented a clear case of over-regulation, in the words of the Leader of the Opposition.

In the sitting days that followed, a blizzard of amendments was visited on the Committee by the Opposition, the majority of which increased the powers, scope and responsibilities of the regulator. For instance, there was an amendment to investigate and possibly cap agents' fees, which I notice has not returned on Report, and one on alcohol in football grounds, which has returned as new clause 1, as well as a range of other matters.

Chris Evans: Does my hon. Friend not think it is a bit rich of the Opposition, given the problems they had in the 1980s when they did not stamp out hooliganism and instead thought that the way forward was to pen fans in behind electrified fences and even to introduce ID cards, to claim that they are now standing up for football fans?

Jim Dickson: I do think that the Conservative Government's attitude in the 1980s was to treat football fans as less than human. I would not wish to say that Opposition Members are not football fans, but the empty terraces on their side of the Chamber bespeak a lack of interest in the Bill.

The Opposition's amendments that are designed to increase the scope and responsibility of the regulator would also increase the cost of the regulator to clubs, which was another of the Opposition's complaints. They were at pains to try to point out that the regulator will cost fans dear, but their amendments would increase that cost. What we need, and what the Bill provides, is an agile and lean independent regulator whose efforts cannot be diverted from the key objective, which is to create a financially sustainable football pyramid that is responsive to fans.

I will touch briefly on a couple of the other amendments tabled for discussion today. I am sympathetic to the aims of new clause 3, tabled by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), and I echo others' comments that the approach of the hon. Gentleman and his party to the Bill has been incredibly constructive, in contrast with that of the official Opposition. New clause 3 would set out in legislation a requirement for all these different matches to be free to air. While I am sympathetic to that, I do not think the hon. Gentleman's new clause—or indeed anything specifying such a thing on the statute books—is wise, because the Bill's intention is not to get involved in commercial deals. However, I would like to see more top-class football on free-to-air television in order to give young fans the chance to watch more than just highlights on video or social media.

On amendments 10 and 11, I must confess strong agreement with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and what he is seeking to achieve. The separation of club and home grounds, both past and present, as we see with Sheffield Wednesday—a case that I know that is very dear to my hon. Friend's heart—invariably ends in serious jeopardy for the club. As he said, it invites speculators to treat grounds as just another asset, rather than something central to their communities, and, apart from anything else, it causes major problems when clubs change hands. It is an issue that needs to be addressed.

I also agree with the points my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East made in Committee about wanting the state of the game report, which the regulator will have to produce, to be brought forward as soon as possible so that its analysis can be used to broker a financial distribution deal across the pyramid at the earliest opportunity.

In our manifesto ahead of last year's election, Labour said that we were committed to making Britain the best possible place in the world to be a football supporter. The Bill delivers this commitment for a sustainable game, putting clubs at the centre of our communities and fans at the heart of our game.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): It is a privilege to have the chance to speak in this debate on an issue of such importance in legislation—one that goes to the heart of our national identity—which is the future of the beautiful game. Football, like Shakespeare, the Beatles, and James Bond, is one of this country's greatest contributions to the world. Not just a fantastic sport, but a global phenomenon and, arguably, our most successful cultural export. English football is watched by billions globally, with some of the most exciting players, clubs and stories of any league.

However, we must not allow that success to disguise the underlying fragilities in the English football pyramid. Too many clubs have collapsed in recent years, with consequences rippling through entire communities. In my constituency, while it has not collapsed, the football club for Chipping Norton has been away from the town for more than a decade. Its ground was bought and sold off by what I shall refer to as a rather unscrupulous individual with little regard for the club, the town or its fans, and that loss is still deeply felt.

However, there is also hope. Down the road at Banbury United, supporters, fed up with mismanagement, took matters into their own hands. They have transformed the club, taking it over and turning it into a community benefit society, with revenue from shirt sales and matchday tickets now going back into supporting local groups and good causes. After two successive promotions, they have proved that this model is not a barrier to success on the pitch. I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister have many calls on their time, but I can assure them that they would both be given a warm welcome should they choose to grace the hallowed turf of the Spencer stadium in Banbury, and I once again invite them to my constituency to do just that.

While neither Chipping Norton nor the Puritans are within the scope of this legislation because they are not high enough up the football pyramid—not yet, anyway—their stories and those of countless others up and down show why this reform is so necessary.

Yuan Yang: My hon. Friend talks eloquently about the need for better regulation. We have just heard that he is a fan of Banbury United and that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) is a fan of Crystal Palace. Does that not show that there is complete agreement across the football pyramid that there needs to be better regulation in football and that that would benefit all levels of the game?

Sean Woodcock: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I also congratulate Crystal Palace on their FA Cup win and, as a Liverpool fan, I look forward to their receiving their runners-up medal in the community shield in a couple of weeks' time.

As I said in my intervention earlier, this has the support of 80% of fans, so I find it simply staggering that Conservative Members have decided that, having put forward this legislation, they are now against it for who knows what reason. Too many clubs have been left vulnerable to reckless ownership and financial mismanagement, and it simply cannot continue. The Bill is a vital step to ensuring that football is sustainable for the benefit of fans and their community—both now and into the future. It will promote financial stability, prevent rogue owners and directors from causing harm and give supporters a stronger voice in how their club is run, safeguarding both the game and the strength of community that it fosters.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that my football club, Southend United, nearly disappeared because of mismanagement. Does he agree that the Bill will make sure that we keep these football clubs at the heart of our communities, because, ultimately, that is where they belong?

Sean Woodcock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we talked about rogue owners, I was only surprised that the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), with his years of experience in this sphere, decided to walk out of the Chamber. But we will leave that for now and move on.

As I have said, the previous Government strutted on to the pitch full of promise, but when the whistle blew, they passed sideways, ran down the clock and then bottled it at the big moment. In contrast, this Government have shown intent and are driving the ball forward. I am proud to support this Bill in the Lobby tonight.

Lisa Nandy: I am so grateful to hon. Members who have not just spoken in this debate today, but brought the real-life experiences and voices of fans into this Chamber. This has been Parliament at its best, ensuring that those affected are finally heard and that action is taken. I am grateful to all Members who have spoken, regardless of whether the Government are choosing to accept the amendments that they have put forward. I wish to address some of the very many valid points that have been made during the course of this debate.

I shall start with the issue of player welfare, which is clearly of such concern to so many Members from all parts of the House. It was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson), for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby), for Caerphilly (Chris Evans), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) among others. It has also been raised by many, many other Members over the course of the past year both with me and my hon. Friend, the Minister for Sport.

I wish to reassure the House that although the amendment around player welfare does not fit within the scope of this Bill, that does not mean that the Government do not treat it with the urgency and the utmost seriousness that it demands. As my hon. Friend the Minister said, we were privileged to meet recently a number of families who have been affected by this and who have been campaigning for justice for far too long. That includes John Stiles, to whom many hon. Members have paid tribute. He spoke very movingly about the experience of his father and his family. They are not wealthy people and they deserve better treatment. As a Government, we are determined to grip this issue. We are clear that football can and must do more. I will be pleased to update the House as we make progress in that pursuit of justice.

I also thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for his points about secondary ticketing, and the associated points that he made about the cost of football, which for many fans, particularly in the premier league, is of significant concern. This game belongs to its fans; it is nothing without its fans. It is important that fans are able to access the game that they love and that they have built. He will know that the Government wasted no time in opening a consultation about secondary ticketing across the board. Our message is clear: the time is up for ticket touts. The consultation that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary and I launched seeks to work out how, not whether, to act on this issue. We are shortly about to publish the response to that consultation, and it will be before the House imminently.

I am really grateful to all hon. Members who have stood up for fans. Whether they are music fans, football fans or other fans, it really matters that they are heard.

5.45 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that this Bill puts fans at the heart of where they should be, and that had the Bill been in place earlier, clubs like mine—Bolton Wanderers—would not have come close to collapse?

Lisa Nandy: I live just down the road from my hon. Friend in Bolton and has many friends who were directly affected by what happened at Bolton Wanderers, so I thank her for her tireless support for the fans and the town. Many people do not appreciate until they have been through a situation like that, as she and I have, that it does not just affect the football fans in the town. Bolton Wanderers stands for its town, as Wigan Athletic does; it is part of our identity and our pride. It is also part of our family inheritance. The chairwoman of my supporters' club used to go to the football with her dad when she was a little girl. She now takes her children, and they will take their children. Football clubs are institutions that stand at the centre of our towns, and they deserve to be passed on to the next generation as part of our civic inheritance.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) mentioned what happened with Bolton Wanderers. Fans of Reading FC across Berkshire, including in Bracknell, experienced something similar when they were able to support the club to be saved from an unfit owner. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is so important that we pass the Bill so that we can prevent what happened to Reading from ever happening to a football club again?

Lisa Nandy: When my club Wigan Athletic was in trouble because of poor ownership for the second time, I used those precise words. I said that this must be the last time this ever happens to football fans, but as my hon. Friend rightly says, here we are with so many Members telling heartbreaking stories about the near loss of their clubs—so I could not agree with him more.

I want to acknowledge to the hon. Members for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) that although we may disagree about the best way to improve access and protect the financial sustainability of the game, I do not doubt for one moment their sincerity in wanting to make sure that far more people can experience the joy of football. The Minister for Sport said to me earlier that it has been a pleasure to work with the hon. Member for Cheltenham to get this Bill on to the statute book, so I am grateful to him for his work.

I turn to new clause 9, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who has done extraordinary work throughout the passage of the Bill. I want to address the point that he did not have time to speak to earlier. We absolutely understand why he is pursuing this matter, and he is right to do so, but we believe that the clause is not necessary. I am happy to pass on the commitment that the Minister for Sport made to me: she will write to my hon. Friend with a full

explanation of why the clause is not necessary, and a copy of the letter will be placed in the House of Commons Library. On behalf of the whole House, I thank my hon. Friend for the expertise that he has brought to bear.

Mr Betts: As I tried to set out, my intention was simply to draw attention to whether the regulator has the power—it does not necessarily have to use it—to intervene if the domestic competitions that all clubs engage in are being damaged by competitions like the club world cup, from which a handful of clubs make multimillions of pounds. I wanted to make sure that the regulator had the power to deal with that.

Lisa Nandy: We believe that it does. As I said, the Minister will write to him on that point and place a copy of the letter in the Library so that the whole House can understand the Government's position.

Let me turn to the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French). I do not really know where to start with this, to be honest, but I am determined to give it a try. When it comes to the Government's preferred candidate, I gently point out to the hon. Member that this is a candidate that has been strongly endorsed by the cross-party Culture, Media and Sport Committee. He was appointed by the last Conservative Government to the board of Channel 4 and, as I made clear a moment ago, he was on the list that I inherited from the Conservative Government and the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), who now serves as the shadow Secretary of State, along with a Conservative donor as well.

It is astonishing that the shadow Minister has come to this House, belatedly, with allegations of cronyism, and that the best and only defence that he has been able to offer for this breathtaking hypocrisy is that his right hon. Friend, the shadow Secretary of State, did not have a clue what was going on in his own Department. Can he not see how absurd that is?

Mr French: Will she give way?

Lisa Nandy: Of course I will. I would love to know the answer.

Mr French: Let me explain, for the benefit of Members who were not in the room at the start of the debate, that the discussion was about the fact that the gentleman in question said in the Select Committee that he was not approached by the then Minister, but by civil servants. The Secretary of State is trying to say now that her Department is not under investigation. Is that correct? Are you under investigation for this appointment?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. First, I am not. Secondly, the Secretary of State came very close to unparliamentary language in accusing another hon. Member of hypocrisy; I am sure she did not intend that.

Lisa Nandy: Out of respect for you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am happy to clarify. I think that the shadow Minister might be a bit confused. To add to the confusion, I refer him to a point made strongly by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) about the way in which the shadow Minister has made an astonishing

about-turn; having called for stronger regulation, he now calls for weaker regulation. *[Interruption.]* If he does not want to listen to my words, perhaps I can let him listen to his own:

“Following years of misery and uncertainty for fans...I welcome the news on an independent football regulator. Will the Minister assure my constituents that the regulator will have sufficient powers to deal with regulatory breaches and strengthen those ownership tests?”—*[Official Report, 23 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 343.]*

Well, I preferred his earlier work. Let me say that although the shadow Secretary of State no longer backs his own Bill and will not act, this Government will.

Let me turn to something that is very close to my heart: the experiences that were given voice by many Members today, including my hon. Friends the Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith), for Dartford and for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), and especially my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), who has been a tireless champion for Reading through very difficult times. She said, “Let Reading be the last”, and she is absolutely right. In the years that football fans have waited for this piece of legislation to come on to the statute book and for the promise from all those years ago to be made good, too many people have experienced the hell that she and so many others have been through.

It is only fitting that I finish with a reference to my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), who has been tireless in her defence of her club and her town. I had the privilege of going to Morecambe to meet the Shrimps and the board, which she rightly referenced and which has done so much for the club. She outlined the impact more powerfully than any of us could, as well as the strength of feeling about owners who refuse to sell their clubs even when the impact of that would be to bring those proud clubs to the verge of collapse. It has been a privilege to work closely with her, although I wish it had been on something more positive, as I know she does.

I want to make it clear from this Dispatch Box that this Government take a very dim view of owners who treat our clubs as playthings, rather than as the custodians that they are. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale and all the Members of this House—or most of the Members of this House—for a constructive debate. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Having lowered the temperature, I trust that I can now rely on the shadow Minister to maintain the lowered temperature. If not, I might have to intervene.

Mr French: With leave of the House, it is my pleasure to sum up this Report stage. We have heard today that there is common ground on many of the issues facing football, but as I highlighted in my opening speech, we disagree on the solutions. This is a Government who are currently under investigation for appointing a Labour crony to chair an independent football regulator. They may not like it, but that is the reality. Our amendment 18 seeks to end the politicisation of such roles and to ensure transparency on future appointments. We believe strongly that no Member would vote this measure down, given that it seeks to end cronyism over clubs and favours over fans.

[Mr French]

New clause 1 would deal with alcohol at football grounds, as we have heard in the debate, and we have support from the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) and from the Liberal Democrats. We believe this ban is outdated. Football fans should not be treated with a two-tier approach when it comes to being able to drink in the stands. We will be pressing this new clause to a Division because we on the Opposition Benches are on the side of football fans. We do not want this nanny state approach to continue; we want to make sure that football fans are treated with the respect that they deserve, and we will see tonight whose side this Government are really on.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 167, Noes 346.

Division No. 254]

[5.55 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Farron, Tim
Amos, Gideon	Foord, Richard
Anderson, Lee	Forster, Mr Will
Anderson, Stuart	Fortune, Peter
Andrew, rh Stuart	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Aquarone, Steff	Franklin, Zöe
Argar, rh Edward	Freeman, George
Atkins, rh Victoria	French, Mr Louie
Babarinde, Josh	Fuller, Richard
Bacon, Gareth	Garnier, Mark
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	George, Andrew
Barclay, rh Steve	Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)
Bedford, Mr Peter	Glen, rh John
Bennett, Alison	Glover, Olly
Blackman, Bob	Goldman, Marie
Bool, Sarah	Gordon, Tom
Bowie, Andrew	Grant, Helen
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Green, Sarah
Brandreth, Aphra	Griffith, Andrew
Brewer, Alex	Griffiths, Alison
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Harding, Monica
Burghart, Alex	Harris, Rebecca
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Hayes, rh Sir John
Cane, Charlotte	Hinds, rh Damian
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Hoare, Simon
Cartlidge, James	Hobhouse, Wera
Chadwick, David	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Chambers, Dr Danny	Hollinrake, Kevin
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Holmes, Paul
Cocking, Lewis	Huddleston, Nigel
Coghlan, Chris	Hudson, Dr Neil
Collins, Victoria	Jardine, Christine
Cooper, John	Jarvis, Liz
Costa, Alberto	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Jenrick, rh Robert
Cross, Harriet	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Dance, Adam	Jones, Clive
Darling, Steve	Jopp, Lincoln
Davies, Gareth	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Davies, Mims	Kohler, Mr Paul
Dean, Bobby	Kruger, Danny
Dewhurst, Charlie	Lam, Katie
Dillon, Mr Lee	Lamont, John
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Dyke, Sarah	Lopez, Julia
Easton, Alex	Lowe, Rupert
Evans, Dr Luke	

MacCleary, James	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Maguire, Ben	Slade, Vikki
Martin, Mike	Smart, Lisa
Mathew, Brian	Smith, Greg
Mayhew, Jerome	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Maynard, Charlie	Snowden, Mr Andrew
McVey, rh Esther	Sollom, Ian
van Mierlo, Freddie	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Milne, John	Stafford, Gregory
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew	Stephenson, Blake
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Stone, Jamie
Moore, Robbie	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Moran, Layla (<i>Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin</i>)	Stuart, rh Graham
Morello, Edward	Swann, Robin
Morgan, Helen	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Morrison, Mr Tom	Taylor, Luke
Morrissey, Joy	Thomas, Bradley
Mundell, rh David	Thomas, Cameron
Munt, Tessa	Tice, Richard
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Timothy, Nick
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Trott, rh Laura
O'Brien, Neil	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Olney, Sarah	Vickers, Matt
Paul, Rebecca	Voaden, Caroline
Perteghella, Manuela	Whately, Helen
Philp, rh Chris	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Wild, James
Pochin, Sarah	Wilkinson, Max
Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Reed, David	Wilson, Munira
Reynolds, Mr Joshua	Wilson, rh Sammy
Robinson, rh Gavin	Wood, Mike
Roome, Ian	Wrigley, Martin
Rosindell, Andrew	Young, Claire
Sabine, Anna	
Savage, Dr Roz	
Shannon, Jim	

Tellers for the Ayes:

Sir Ashley Fox and
Rebecca Smith

NOES

Abbott, Jack	Benn, rh Hilary
Abrahams, Debbie	Berry, Siân
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Betts, Mr Clive
Akehurst, Luke	Billington, Ms Polly
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Bishop, Matt
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Blake, Olivia
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Blake, Rachel
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Bloore, Chris
Anderson, Callum	Bonavia, Kevin
Anderson, Fleur	Botterill, Jade
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Arthur, Dr Scott	Brash, Mr Jonathan
Asato, Jess	Brickell, Phil
Athwal, Jas	Bryant, Chris
Atkinson, Catherine	Burke, Maureen
Atkinson, Lewis	Burton-Sampson, David
Bailey, Olivia	Butler, Dawn
Baines, David	Byrne, rh Liam
Baker, Alex	Cadbury, Ruth
Baker, Richard	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Ballinger, Alex	Campbell, Juliet
Bance, Antonia	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Barker, Paula	Carden, Dan
Barron, Lee	Carling, Sam
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Carns, Al
Baxter, Johanna	Champion, Sarah
Beales, Danny	Charalambous, Bambos
Beavers, Lorraine	Charters, Mr Luke (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Bell, Torsten	

Chowns, Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia

Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair

McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Seward, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David

Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad

Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:

Keir Mather and
Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negated.

6.9 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 28 April).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

New Clause 3

FREE TO AIR COVERAGE

“(1) The Independent Football Regulator must require that every season—

- (a) at least ten Premier League football matches,
- (b) the League Cup Final, and
- (c) the Championship, League One and League Two playoff finals

are made available for live broadcast on free-to-air television channels in the United Kingdom.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1)(a) the matches must include a representative selection across different clubs and times in the season, subject to reasonable considerations of scheduling and broadcasting logistics.

(3) In this section ‘free-to-air television’ means a service that satisfies the qualifying conditions of such a service defined by Section 2 of the 1996 Communications Act.”—(*Max Wilkinson.*)

This new clause would mandate a minimum of ten Premier League matches, the League Cup Final and the Championship, League One and League Two playoff finals on free-to-air television channels.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 86, Noes 340.

Division No. 255]

[6.9 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Franklin, Zöe
Allister, Jim	George, Andrew
Amos, Gideon	Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote</i>
Anderson, Lee	<i>cast by Anna Sabine)</i>
Aquarone, Steff	Glover, Ollie
Babarinde, Josh	Goldman, Marie
Bennett, Alison	Gordon, Tom
Berry, Siân	Green, Sarah
Brewer, Alex	Harding, Monica
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Hobhouse, Wera
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Cane, Charlotte	Jardine, Christine
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Jarvis, Liz
Chadwick, David	Jones, Clive
Chambers, Dr Danny	Khan, Ayoub
Chowns, Ellie	Kohler, Mr Paul
Coghlan, Chris	Lake, Ben
Collins, Victoria	MacCleary, James
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Dance, Adam	Maguire, Ben
Darling, Steve	Martin, Mike
Davies, Ann	Mathew, Brian
Denyer, Carla	Maynard, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee	Medi, Llinos
Dyke, Sarah	van Mierlo, Freddie
Easton, Alex	Milne, John
Farron, Tim	Mohamed, Iqbal
Foord, Richard	Moran, Layla (<i>Proxy vote cast</i>
Forster, Mr Will	<i>by Zöe Franklin)</i>

Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Munt, Tessa
Olney, Sarah
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Ramsay, Adrian
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa

Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Voaden, Caroline
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

Bobby Dean and
Mr Tom Morrison

NOES

Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Fleet, Natalie

Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian

Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess

Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham

Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
 Keir Mather and
 Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 59

DECISIONS BY THE IFR ON APPLICATIONS UNDER SECTION 57

Amendment made: 4, page 48, line 34, leave out “a” and insert “the”.—(Stephanie Peacock.)

This amendment corrects a grammatical error.

Clause 83

INTERNAL REVIEWS

Amendments made: 5, page 67, line 40, leave out “14” and insert “28”.

This amendment increases the time period for the Board of the IFR to carry out an internal review of a reviewable decision from 14 to 28 days.

Amendment 6, page 68, line 2, leave out “14” and insert “28”.

This amendment increases the time period for a committee of the Expert Panel of the IFR to carry out an internal review of a reviewable decision from 14 to 28 days.

Amendment 7, page 68, line 5, leave out “within” and insert “before the end of”.—(*Stephanie Peacock.*)

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the wording used in subsections (4) and (6) of clause 83.

Schedule 2

THE INDEPENDENT FOOTBALL REGULATOR

Amendment proposed: 18, page 87, line 12, at end insert—

“(3A) Any political interests of, and political donations made by, the prospective chair of the Board, must all be declared as part of the appointments process, and published before the chair’s pre-appointment hearing with the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.”—(*Mr French.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 178, Noes 338.

Division No. 256]

[6.21 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Darling, Steve
Allister, Jim	Davies, Ann
Amos, Gideon	Davies, Gareth
Anderson, Lee	Davies, Mims
Anderson, Stuart	Dean, Bobby
Andrew, rh Stuart	Denyer, Carla
Aquarone, Steff	Dewhurst, Charlie
Argar, rh Edward	Dillon, Mr Lee
Atkins, rh Victoria	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Babarinde, Josh	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Bacon, Gareth	Dyke, Sarah
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Easton, Alex
Barclay, rh Steve	Evans, Dr Luke
Bedford, Mr Peter	Farron, Tim
Bennett, Alison	Foord, Richard
Berry, Siân	Forster, Mr Will
Blackman, Bob	Fortune, Peter
Bool, Sarah	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bowie, Andrew	Franklin, Zöe
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Freeman, George
Brandreth, Aphra	French, Mr Louie
Brewer, Alex	Fuller, Richard
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Garnier, Mark
Burghart, Alex	George, Andrew
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)
Cane, Charlotte	Glen, rh John
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Glover, Ollie
Cartledge, James	Goldman, Marie
Chadwick, David	Gordon, Tom
Chambers, Dr Danny	Grant, Helen
Chowns, Ellie	Green, Sarah
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Griffiths, Alison
Cocking, Lewis	Harding, Monica
Coghlan, Chris	Harris, Rebecca
Collins, Victoria	Hayes, rh Sir John
Cooper, John	Hinds, rh Damian
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hoare, Simon
Costa, Alberto	Hobhouse, Wera
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Cross, Harriet	Hollinrake, Kevin
Dance, Adam	Holmes, Paul

Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos
van Mierlo, Freddie
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O’Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pochin, Sarah

Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Ramsay, Adrian
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

Sir Ashley Fox and
Rebecca Smith

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia

Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul

Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian

Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee

Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen

Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie

Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:

Keir Mather and
 Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negatived.

Third Reading

6.34 pm

Lisa Nandy: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It has been 14 years since the Culture, Media and Sport Committee first called for change for football fans, and four years since Dame Tracey Crouch began the fan-led review that set out to fix the foundations of football and end the misery that too many football fans have been forced to endure for far too long. We have had four years of promises, and today we make good on those commitments.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock)—the Minister for Sport—and Baroness Twycross, who have steered this Bill expertly and with care to get us to this place. I thank the civil servants in my Department, who have worked tirelessly for many years to get to this point, and I particularly thank the Bill, policy and legal teams, who will be as relieved and delighted as anybody to see this Bill finally become law.

I also thank the many parliamentarians who have worked so hard with us all to get this Bill into a better shape, particularly by strengthening the provisions for fans in order to put them back at the heart of the game and to improve the backstop process. This is a light-touch regulator that will help to enhance the game, and I am really grateful to all those parliamentarians for their support.

I pay tribute to somebody who has become not just an inspiration for a lot of football fans around the country, but a friend to us all: Dame Tracey Crouch. Her fan-led review highlighted how too many football fans have been left with nowhere to turn when faced with reckless owners, financial mismanagement and threats to their club's very existence. Her dedication and expertise have been integral to getting us to where we are today.

Although I am sad that I am unable to pay tribute to the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), who steered the Bill through its first stages under the last Government and who no longer supports his own legislation, I want to acknowledge that, from the outset, it has been a cross-party effort to stand by football fans the length and breadth of our country.

Finally, I want to address our football fans, who are the best in the world. We are doing this for you, because for too long you have been treated as an afterthought at best, or as a nuisance at worst, in a game that is only great because of you. This Bill is for Macclesfield, for

Wigan, for Bury, for Bolton, for Derby, for Reading, for Sheffield Wednesday, for Morecambe and for many, many more clubs that have had to endure the misery of being put last when they should have been put first. We promised in our manifesto that we would end years of inaction, and make the changes for which fans have fought for so long and which are so overdue. I am proud to be part of the winning team that have put our fans back on the pitch and at the heart of the game, where they belong.

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

6.37 pm

Mr French: Here we are: the final opportunity for the Government and this House to trigger a VAR review before English football fans and the beautiful game are left in tears. We cannot support this expanded Bill as drafted, and we believe that passing it tonight risks harming the very game that it claims to protect.

We all largely agree on the problems in football: we have a minority of greedy owners, with loyal fans left powerless when a proud club is torn apart for profit or by reckless management. No one in this House wants to see another Bury or Macclesfield, but let us be clear and honest with fans: this Bill will not stop a bad owner damaging a club, market failure will not be removed, and clubs will not be bailed out by this Government. The risk of a breakaway league will now grow, not shrink.

This Bill risks replacing financial mismanagement with political interference, poor governance with endless red tape, and the soul of our game with a new quango that grows year by year, unchallenged by real scrutiny or accountability to Parliament or fans.

If we vote this Bill through tonight, we will not remove unaccountable owners; we will only create more unaccountable bureaucrats. This amateur Government will strangle the growth of a great British success story, rather than enable it, while Reform still struggles to manage its five-a-side team after yet another scandal—sorry, four-a-side now. English football does not belong to politicians; it belongs to the fans in the stands, the volunteers in the clubhouse and the kids pulling on the shirt for the first time on a Sunday morning.

Yet this Bill opens the door for mission creep on an extraordinary scale, with provisions that would let any future Minister expand the regulator's powers and the leagues covered at will. As drafted, this Bill risks breaching FIFA and UEFA's clear rules against Government overreach, putting our clubs and national sides in danger of sanctions that would shame the country on the world stage. It sets up a powerful new regulator with vast discretion, but precious little real democratic control, and it piles on costs that smaller clubs and fans simply cannot bear. If the Minister thinks that big clubs will pay for this quango alone, she needs to read her own impact report. Ultimately, the fans always pay—through higher ticket prices and higher merchandise prices—all to stand on the same terraces on which generations have previously stood.

The test of a good law is whether it solves a problem proportionately and properly, not whether it lets Ministers feel that they have done something. This Bill fails that

test, and fails it spectacularly. It treats our national game not as a living tradition rooted in local pride, but as an industry to be micromanaged by the state. This is not how English football was built, and it is not how it will be sustained.

On behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition, I say clearly tonight that football is at its best when the players entertain the crowd and the referee goes unnoticed, but this Bill risks creating more referees than players—referees who answer not to clubs or supporters, but to Labour Ministers and mandarins. If this Bill passes, and we expect it will tonight, I can confirm to the House and to fans at home that a future Conservative Government will trigger a review of Labour's regulator as soon as possible, and if it is overreaching and strangling clubs—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We do not need any more of that disruption.

Mr French: If the regulator is overreaching and strangling clubs with unnecessary red tape, as we believe it will under this Government, we will act decisively on behalf of fans to promote the English game again. The real threat to football's future is not a lack of regulators; it is the erosion of competition and trust between owners, communities and supporters. We would fix that with stronger transparency rules—such as the rules that Labour Members have just voted against—as well as the better enforcement of existing laws and real fan power, not a vast new quango led by a Labour crony working three days a week on a salary of £130,000.

This shameful Labour Government are already under investigation having once again put their party first, with cronies over clubs, favours over fans and greed over the beautiful game. Tonight, the Conservatives will be voting against this Bill in good conscience, because our national game deserves better than a Government whose only knowledge of football is free tickets and corporate prawn sandwiches. It is worth noting that Labour Members have tonight voted against fans having a drink on the terraces, while their Ministers drink alcohol in their corporate hospitality boxes for free.

We will continue to stand up for the fans, not the bureaucrats creating an even larger nanny state. We will continue to stand up for healthy competition and local pride, not a one-size-fits-all state interference that will relegate English football among global competition. We will be ready to revisit this when, as is likely, it fails to deliver the promises being made, and to review it, to rein it in, to scrap it altogether and to give powers back to our sporting bodies. That was the ultimate goal of the fan-led review, as Labour Members would know if they had read it. Football belongs to the fans, and no badly drafted Acts of Parliament should ever make us forget that. [*Interruption.*]

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): They think it's all over!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, it will be for you. I know who you are. [*Laughter.*]

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

The House divided: Ayes 415, Noes 98.

Division No. 257]

[6.43 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack	Coghlan, Chris
Abrahams, Debbie	Coleman, Ben
Adam, Shockat	Collier, Jacob
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Collinge, Lizzi
Akehurst, Luke	Collins, Tom
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Collins, Victoria
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Conlon, Liam
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Coombes, Sarah
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Cooper, Andrew
Amos, Gideon	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Anderson, Callum	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Anderson, Fleur	Costigan, Deirdre
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Cox, Pam
Aquarone, Steff	Coyle, Neil
Arthur, Dr Scott	Creasy, Ms Stella
Athwal, Jas	Crichton, Torcuil
Atkinson, Catherine	Curtis, Chris
Atkinson, Lewis	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Babarinde, Josh	Dalton, Ashley
Bailey, Olivia	Dance, Adam
Baines, David	Darling, Steve
Baker, Alex	Darlington, Emily
Baker, Richard	Davies, Ann
Ballinger, Alex	Davies, Jonathan
Bance, Antonia	Davies, Paul
Barker, Paula	Davies, Shaun
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Davies-Jones, Alex
Baxter, Johanna	De Cordova, Marsha
Beales, Danny	Dean, Bobby
Beavers, Lorraine	Dean, Josh
Begum, Apsana (<i>Proxy vote cast by Ian Byrne</i>)	Dearden, Kate
Bell, Torsten	Denyer, Carla
Benn, rh Hilary	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Bennett, Alison	Dickson, Jim
Berry, Siân	Dillon, Mr Lee
Betts, Mr Clive	Dixon, Anna
Bishop, Matt	Dixon, Samantha
Blake, Olivia	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Blake, Rachel	Dollimore, Helena
Bloore, Chris	Dowd, Peter
Bonavia, Kevin	Downie, Graeme
Botterill, Jade	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Dyke, Sarah
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Eagle, Dame Angela
Brewer, Alex	Eagle, rh Maria
Brickell, Phil	Edwards, Lauren
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Edwards, Sarah
Bryant, Chris	Efford, Clive
Burke, Maureen	Egan, Damien
Burton-Sampson, David	Ellis, Maya
Byrne, Ian	Elmore, Chris
Byrne, rh Liam	Entwistle, Kirith
Cadbury, Ruth	Eshalomi, Florence
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Esterson, Bill
Campbell, Juliet	Evans, Chris
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Cane, Charlotte	Falconer, Mr Hamish
Carden, Dan	Farron, Tim
Carling, Sam	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Fleet, Natalie
Carns, Al	Foody, Emma
Chadwick, David	Fookes, Catherine
Chambers, Dr Danny	Food, Richard
Champion, Sarah	Forster, Mr Will
Charalambous, Bambos	Foster, Mr Paul
Charters, Mr Luke (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Foxcroft, Vicky
Chowns, Ellie	Foy, Mary Kelly
	Francis, Daniel
	Franklin, Zöe

Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harding, Monica
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen

Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayer, Alex
 Maynard, Charlie
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Milne, John
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina

Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smart, Lisa

Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Sollom, Ian
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Cameron
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williams, David
 Wilson, Munira
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Wrigley, Martin
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Keir Mather and
 Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin

Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pochin, Sarah
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast
 by Mr Mohindra*)
 Reed, David
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Wayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura

Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin

Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Noes:
 Paul Holmes and
 Joy Morrissey

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Online Safety Super-Complaints (Eligibility and Procedural Matters) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 9 June, be approved.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Question agreed to.

**ADJOURNMENT (SUMMER AND
CONFERENCE RECESSES)**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Tuesday 22 July 2025, do adjourn until Monday 1 September 2025; and at its rising on Tuesday 16 September 2025, do adjourn until Monday 13 October 2025.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

Question agreed to.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

[Relevant Documents: Third Report of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, Re-appointment of an Electoral Commissioner, HC 934.]

Ordered,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, praying that His Majesty will re-appoint Dr Katy Radford MBE as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 September 2025 for the period ending on 31 August 2029.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

Combat Sports for Children: Safeguarding

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

6.58 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate on safeguarding children in combat sports. I do so with a heavy heart and a profound sense of responsibility, because today I speak for a young constituent who can no longer speak for himself.

Alex Eastwood was just 15 years old when, just over one year ago, he stepped into a ring for a kickboxing bout and never returned home. He was a son, a brother, a friend—described by his family as the heart and soul of their home. He had dreams, hopes, and an infectious passion for sports. He was a boy who filled every room with laughter and warmth. His father Ste and his mother Nikita are with us today in the Public Gallery, as are representatives from Leigh Day, the law firm that represented the family at the recent inquest. I have previously met his brothers Jake and Frankie in preparation for speaking today.

Alex's family have shown extraordinary courage in the face of unimaginable grief by turning their pain into a powerful call for change. Alex's death was not simply a tragic accident but a preventable loss, and it has highlighted a dangerous gap in our duty to protect children.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Dan Carden: Alex died following an unsanctioned exhibition kickboxing match at a gym in Wigan. That means it was not sanctioned by any national governing body and fell outside the jurisdiction of Kickboxing GB—the only organisation for the sport in the UK that is officially recognised by both Sport England and the World Association of Kickboxing Organisations, which is recognised by the International Olympic Committee.

The fight was meant to be “light contact”, held as part of a charity event, but it strayed tragically and fatally into danger. Alex's opponent on the night was two years older and had experience and training in full contact fighting. As the match was unsanctioned, no independent ringside doctor or paramedics were present. Instead, there were two first responders with first aid qualifications.

Alex competed in three rounds. After becoming disoriented, he was assisted to the ring floor. He was then taken by ambulance to the Royal Albert Edward Infirmary in Wigan and later transferred to the Royal Manchester children's hospital after he was found to have a catastrophic bleed on the brain. He underwent surgery but died in hospital three days later. A four-day inquest at Bolton coroner's court, which concluded on Thursday 12 June, examined the circumstances of Alex's death, the safety measures in place at the time, and the broader regulatory environment for children participating in combat sports.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman; this is a very difficult subject and he is speaking with admirable compassion and understanding. I am sure the family appreciates that. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that while there is a moral duty and a legal obligation to protect children and young people in sport through the creation and promotion of a safe environment that protects them from harm, each sport has different requirements when it comes to fulfilling that obligation? While it is reasonable that a football coach does not need to lay hands on a child in any case, it is also reasonable that a karate instructor must position children, and that must require regulation and Government action. Does the hon. Member agree that there must be a sport-by-sport approach to safeguarding and regulation?

Dan Carden: I am grateful to the hon. Member for being here tonight, and I know that the family will be grateful for the interest he has shown. I will go on to talk about the lack of regulation and what the family are calling for.

I know that the family would want me to thank the coroner in this inquest—Michael Pemberton—for his approach to Alex's case. He described the match that Alex was part of as “chaotic and somewhat disjointed”. There was no national governing body oversight, and no clear or enforced safety standards. Gordon Mitchell, head of welfare and governance at Kickboxing GB told the inquest that the organisation would never sanction a light contact bout in a ring. He explained that such matches are permitted only on mats, where mitigating factors such as fighters stepping off the mat allow referees to step in, in the event of a mismatch or escalating risk.

On the broader framework governing children's participation in combat sports, the inquest heard that standards around safety, medical oversight and safeguarding vary widely, and in many cases are absent all together. In the words of the coroner, the level of confidence in organisational safeguards that people would expect to exist within the sport is “sadly lacking”.

If a match is unofficial or unsanctioned, there is no guideline minimum standard that must be met to provide safeguarding for a child participant, no minimum standard of medical support that might be required, no maximum rounds, no periods of rest, no welfare checks on participants, and no risk assessment and critical incident plan. It should stop us all in our tracks to learn that in this country, children can be placed in combat situations without clear, enforceable national protections.

Alex's family did everything right—everything a loving family would do. They encouraged him to get involved in a range of sports and activities and supported him when it became clear that he had a talent for kickboxing. They enabled him to thrive in what he loved doing and to become a six-time world champion. However, as the inquest made clear, they and Alex were failed by a lack of safeguarding, responsibility and regulation.

Every single day, children up and down the country take part in activities like Alex did. They lace up gloves, put on headgear and step into training halls and rings, with no minimum standards in place to ensure their safety. Parents who just want the best for their children, and who want them to be fit and healthy, to enjoy sports and to discover and nurture their talents are sending their children to participate in contact sports without

realising the risks. Many people do not know that there are sanctioned and unsanctioned bouts, or what that means in terms of safety. Many people do not know that there is no one governing body for kickboxing and that membership is not mandatory.

That is the shocking reality exposed by the inquest into Alex's death. It is the reason the coroner took the highly unusual step of issuing to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport a regulation 28 prevention of future deaths report before the inquest had concluded. In that report, he raises concerns that

"there is no guidance or regulation of contact sports involving children's participation."

He says that

"action should be taken to prevent future deaths"

and that the Government

"have the power to take such action."

I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has tasked her Department with exploring ways to urgently improve the safety and welfare of children in martial arts and combat sports and to ensure that it is always a priority. Urgent action must follow, and I would be grateful for any further update that the Minister can provide today. What Alex's family are demanding is simple: clear, enforceable national protections for children in combat sports. That would replace the current patchwork in which there is no consistency in rules, no oversight and no accountability.

From this tragedy, a better system must emerge. We owe it to Alex and to his family, we owe it to every parent who believes in good faith that their children are protected by the rules operating around sport and we owe it to every child who steps into a ring or on to a mat, trusting that the adults around them are keeping them safe. No child should lose their life participating in a sport they love.

I finish with the words of Alex's parents:

"Our lives have been changed forever. Alex's future was taken—and with it, part of ours too. We miss him every second. Now, all we have left are memories, but we also have the responsibility to make sure his death was not in vain and for his sake we will make sure we do that."

We cannot bring Alex back, but we can ensure that his legacy is one that prevents such a tragedy from ever happening again.

7.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden) for securing this important debate and for his moving speech. The death of his constituent, Alexander Eastwood, as a result of a kickboxing bout is devastating. I know that my hon. Friend cares deeply about child safeguarding and I can reassure him and the House that it is a priority for this Government. He advocates with care and thought for his constituents, making a powerful and moving speech—one that I have heard very clearly. In the time available to me, I will set out the Government's plans to strengthen safeguarding for children in combat sports. I will begin by outlining key safeguarding issues in those sports; then I will set out the Government's next steps in addressing this incredibly important issue.

First, I recognise that this is a debate that everyone would have hoped we would not have to have. The tragic death of Alexander Eastwood is something we hoped would never have happened. I am sure I speak for the whole House in extending our deepest sympathies to his family, who are here this evening. As my hon. Friend has said, they have shown incredible courage. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be meeting Alexander's family next week, and we are both committed to making sure that meaningful change happens so that no other family has to go through the pain that they have felt.

It is a priority of my Department that the safety and wellbeing of children taking part in sport are paramount. Alexander's death is such a tragedy, and it has made it very clear that more needs to be done to protect the safety of children in combat sports. Ahead of the inquest into the death of Alexander Eastwood, the assistant coroner for Manchester West filed a regulation 28 report to prevent future deaths. The report highlighted specific areas of concern for children in martial arts. In her response, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport set out plans to work with the martial arts sector to address those concerns.

In considering our next steps, we must take account of the entire martial arts sector and its complexity. The sector is made up of many different disciplines, including judo, taekwondo, kickboxing and more. Many, though not all, of these disciplines have publicly funded national governing bodies. Many providers across the sector have robust safety measures in place. National governing bodies set minimum safeguarding standards for their affiliated clubs and competitions to comply with. These standards are in line with guidance issued by Sport England, our arm's length body for grassroots sport.

Many clubs and competitions are not affiliated with a publicly funded governing body. However, many unaffiliated providers choose to sign up to the safeguarding code in martial arts. Organisations such as the British Martial Arts and Boxing Association support unaffiliated martial arts providers to adopt the safeguarding code. The code is funded by Sport England, and recognises clubs and associations that demonstrate strong safeguarding practices against a set of minimum standards. Providers with recognition under the code can display a logo on their promotional materials to show participants that their safety measures have been vetted.

The coroner's report on the case of Alexander Eastwood highlighted specific issues around clubs and competitions that are not affiliated with a national governing body. We are now looking into that as a matter of urgency. The coroner identified that without set standards, clubs and competitions may not have adequate regulations around medical checks and support, the number of rounds and periods of rest, participant welfare checks and critical incident plans. Despite the programmes in place to support robust safeguarding practices in martial arts, unaffiliated providers are not required to meet any shared safety standards. I recognise that coaches and providers work hard to make martial arts available to communities across the country, and I recognise the work done by clubs and associations to comply with the safeguarding code in martial arts, but there must be strong, consistent standards for safeguarding children across all martial arts. Clearly, more must be done.

[Stephanie Peacock]

Clubs and competitions across martial arts should share consistent standards for safeguarding children. Parents and carers should be able to trust that appropriate safety measures are in place, regardless of where their children participate. Existing safety standards for martial arts set by Sport England and its partners must be robust and fit for purpose, but national standards must also translate into strong safety practices across all martial arts. The sector should look to encourage as many clubs as possible to adopt shared safety standards. The Government will consider what more can be done in this space.

Parents and carers deserve to be able to make informed decisions about where their children participate in martial arts. Information on best safety practices and which clubs and competitions meet shared standards should be readily available to participants and their guardians. Of course, the burden of finding information should not only lie with participants and their guardians; clubs and competitions with robust safety practices should be supported to promote the standards they meet. The Government are looking at all these areas to assess what more can be done to safeguard children in combat sports. As promised in her response to the coroner's report, the Secretary of State will meet the family of Alexander Eastwood to hear about their experiences and views, and to discuss our thinking before we go into more detail publicly. I hope everyone can appreciate why that approach is being taken.

In addition, in response to the coroner's report on this case, my Department has tasked Sport England with working with the martial arts sector on this issue. It will identify improvements and present a plan in the coming months. That work will include developing guidance for the martial arts sector and reviewing the safeguarding code for martial arts to ensure that it reflects best practice and is fit for purpose. Sport England will also work with the NSPCC to help educate parents and carers on what to look for in choosing where to participate in martial arts. That will involve the NSPCC's Keeping Your Child Safe in Sport Week—a week of educational programming in October.

My Department is also exploring ways to strengthen safety standards in clubs and competitions that are not affiliated with national governing bodies. We are having conversations with the martial arts sector to understand how we can help parents and carers to be confident that their children will be safe when they participate. Our aim will be to ensure that safeguarding practices in martial arts are consistent, effective and transparent.

Dan Carden: I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State, who has been up to see the family in the Gallery this evening and who will meet them next week. I know the family and the solicitors, Leigh Day, will be incredibly grateful for the thorough response the Minister has given tonight, putting a lot of information on the record. These sports and activities for young people are so important for our communities, and we do not want to put any young person off taking up a sport, competing or becoming a professional in that sport. This is about safety; it is about giving parents the safety and security they need, and about something good coming from Alex Eastwood's death.

Stephanie Peacock: I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for his work, his moving contribution and for putting that important point on the record. As he said, sport should be a safe and welcoming environment that participants, parents and carers can have confidence in. Many martial arts providers work hard to safeguard children who participate under their supervision, and there are strong safety practices in place across many areas of combat sport, but more must be done to ensure that safety standards are strong, consistent and transparent. Standards of practice should be robust and widely adopted across the sector, and it should be clear to parents and carers which clubs and competitions comply with shared standards and which do not.

Nothing can bring Alexander back, but as the Secretary of State said to me before the debate, we are determined to work with his family to make sure that part of his legacy is real change, so that a tragedy like this never happens again.

Question put and agreed to.

7.18 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 July 2025

[GRAHAM STUART *in the Chair*]

Alcohol and Cancer

9.30 am

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered alcohol and cancer.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting us the opportunity to debate alcohol and cancer. This issue affects all of us; it affects our constituents, our families and friends, and our local health services. I thank the Alcohol Health Alliance and the World Cancer Research Fund for providing me with detailed figures and materials that helped me to prepare for this debate.

As parliamentarians, we often need to know a little about a lot, but I confess that even I was shocked at how little I knew of some of the latest alcohol harms and cancer risks when I started to investigate this issue. I find it astounding that although alcohol has been designated a group 1 carcinogen since 1988—the same grouping as both tobacco and asbestos—almost 40 years later, this is the first debate in this place on alcohol and cancer. That speaks candidly to the lack of awareness that perhaps many of us have about alcohol. Were we better informed, perhaps we would pursue more changes to the drinking culture in our workplace. I therefore sincerely hope that we can do this issue justice and raise awareness—both among Members of the House and members of the public who might be watching at home—about the harm that alcohol causes, including cancer. Given the poor record of numerous Governments on tackling alcohol harms over the past 20 years, that is perhaps the least we can do.

It is hard to argue against public health experts who say that we are amid “an alcohol harm crisis.” The figures are frightening, and they have been rising at an explosive rate since the pandemic. For any other health condition, a 42% increase in deaths over a five-year period would be treated as a health emergency, but for alcohol it feels like just another day in the office. Those statistics are only for alcohol-specific deaths, and the numbers spike even higher once alcohol-related deaths are factored in.

I will return to that later in my speech, but I would first like to set the scene on alcohol and cancer. The reality is that alcohol is toxic to our bodies. Risks are present even at low consumption levels, and they increase the more someone consumes. That has led the World Health Organisation to declare in recent years that there is “no safe level” when drinking alcohol. Evidence now links alcohol to at least seven types of cancer, including breast and bowel, which are two of the most common cancers in the UK, and oesophageal, which is one of the hardest to treat. The other cancers that alcohol can cause include mouth, throat, liver and stomach. In addition, a new study released in May by

the International Agency for Research on Cancer presented evidence linking alcohol to an eighth cancer: pancreatic cancer.

I am afraid that it gets worse. In the UK, 17,000 cancers a year are attributable to alcohol, which is close to one in 20. When it comes to breast cancer, which is the UK’s most common cancer, research figures from Cancer Research UK attribute as many as one in 10 cases to alcohol. We are already at a diagnosis rate of around 46 new alcohol-related cancers a day, and experts have warned that if the nation’s alcohol consumption does not start to return to pre-pandemic levels, we could see an additional 18,875 cancer cases by 2035.

With 46 alcohol-related cancers already being diagnosed every single day, that would add up to the equivalent of an alcohol-related cancer diagnosis for every Member of this House in just two weeks, which I find simply staggering. I know those are big numbers, but they are not faceless figures. Each is someone’s mother, father, spouse, sister, brother, colleague or friend.

The harm is disproportionate, and it is concentrated in our most deprived communities. Lancaster and Wyre is ranked worse than the national average in four of the six key alcohol harm categories, including hospital admissions, cancer cases and alcohol-related deaths. Government after Government have not got a grip on alcohol harm, and our constituents continue to pay the price.

My interest in this subject started just over 12 months ago when local stats on alcohol-related deaths were released. I was shocked to see my area at the top of the English league table. I thank the Alcohol Health Alliance for supplying me with so much information, including my constituency figures, in the lead-up to this debate, though it makes stark reading.

We are a year into this Government and, if nothing changes and we do nothing in this Parliament, my local figures suggest that I will have to explain to my constituents why we did nothing to stop another 195 alcohol-related cancer cases, as well as 225 alcohol-specific deaths and 9,400 hospital admissions in my constituency alone. Doing nothing is not good enough.

Figures in the north-west are not much better, with alcohol estimated to cost my region almost £4 billion a year. That pattern is repeated across neighbouring regions, including the north-east and the west midlands. Time and again, our most deprived communities suffer the most harm from alcohol, despite often drinking less than their more affluent counterparts.

Alcohol harm and health inequalities walk hand in hand: alcohol-related deaths, alcohol-related cancers and alcohol-related hospital admissions. Those are people’s lives. They are being chewed up and spat out by an alcohol industry whose main concern is delivering the highest profits to its shareholders and board members, at the expense of our national health.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on the timeliness of her debate. Does she agree that we need more research on the health costs endured by society and the NHS due to this problem? That has to be offset against the tax revenues that accrue from alcohol overconsumption. Those things have to be analysed and researched to address a worsening problem, to which she is right to draw attention.

Cat Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right that we should look at the cost to our communities. This debate is specifically about alcohol and cancer, but other costs beyond its scope include the impact on the criminal justice system, productivity in the workplace and violence, particularly against women and girls. Alcohol carries many costs to our communities, but I would like this debate to be tight in addressing the impact on cancer and cancer deaths.

I might sound dramatic, but I looked at a recent job advert posted by the global alcohol giant Diageo. It was bold enough to state publicly:

“Our industry is facing unprecedented challenges from the WHO and its NGO network globally and regionally.”

In response, Diageo is planning

“a global approach to member states’ engagement, to increase support for our industry at the UN/WHO fora.”

Although that is not surprising, I do not think it should be tolerated. It is for Governments to dictate our public health policies and to protect citizens’ health, as that is not in the commercial interests of multibillion-pound alcohol producers, which have no vested interest in protecting the nation’s health. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the NHS is often left to pick up the pieces of alcohol-related cancers, with preventable cancers costing the NHS £3.7 billion in 2023.

In addition, findings published today by the Royal College of Physicians from a snapshot member survey report that 25% of respondents said that at least half of their average caseload is made up of patients whose conditions have been caused or exacerbated by alcohol dependence. A third of those surveyed report seeing alcohol dependence increase their caseloads.

The Institute of Alcohol Studies reported that, in 2009-10, there were 1.4 million alcohol-related ambulance journeys—a staggering 35% of the total—and that alcohol-related A&E admissions accounted for as much as 40% of the total, approaching 70% during peak times. Alcohol is putting unsustainable pressure on our health service.

The reality is that alcohol harms will increase. The number of alcohol-related cancers will in turn increase, and therefore the price tag for our NHS will go up, too. The national cancer plan, the men’s health strategy and the work to reduce violence against women and girls are opportune moments for the Government to recognise the role alcohol plays in all three areas, and I really hope that alcohol is given the required attention.

We might expect almost 40 years of research to mean that the public are already very aware of the links between alcohol and cancer, but that could not be further from the truth. Recent polls commissioned by the World Cancer Research Fund for Cancer Prevention Action Week found that just 7% of UK adults know that alcohol increases the risk of cancer. That means that as many as 93% of us are essentially drinking in the dark, with little knowledge of the harms that our nation’s drug of choice is doing to our bodies.

Even more worrying, one in four of those polled thought that no health risks at all were attached to drinking alcohol. We have a product that is linked to more than 200 different health conditions and injuries and is the leading cause of death, ill health and disability among 15 to 49-year-olds in the UK, but that staggering lack of awareness is leaving the public unable to make informed choices about what they are consuming.

The situation is compounded by the fact that the alcohol industry is still not required to display the health risks of alcohol on product labels. It can pop a quick “Drink responsibly” line on the label, ignoring the addictive, harmful nature of its product, and walk away, washing its hands of the consequences. The industry has no interest in putting health information on product labels and, in fact, it is actively mobilising against it.

I hope that the Minister, a strong Lancashire woman, will hold her nerve in the face of the alcohol industry’s activism. We have previously seen such activism from the tobacco industry and in relation to anti-obesity food labelling. For the benefit of public health, I urge my hon. Friend to hold her nerve and stand up to it.

I now turn to the factors driving alcohol harms, which, if left unchecked, will continue to fuel more alcohol-related cancers, bringing misery to individuals and families caught in the crossfire. I for one am increasingly frustrated by the lack of motivation shown by one Government after another in tackling alcohol harms. Back in 2012 we had a promising national strategy, which over the course of that year was eroded and undone until very little remained. There has since been no national alcohol strategy, and the 10-year health plan’s prevention measures on alcohol fall far short of what is needed. With harm rates continuing to skyrocket, it is time to look again at what we can do to reverse that alarming trend.

The UK has astoundingly few alcohol control policies to mitigate the harmful effects of high alcohol consumption. The World Health Organisation recommends policies to tackle the price, marketing and availability of alcohol, which it describes as the “best buys” for Governments to deploy to reduce alcohol harms. Looking at all three, I am afraid my analysis is that we continue to fail miserably, and I will address them in turn.

In the UK, alcohol is more affordable than it has ever been. Overall, it has become 14% more affordable since 2010, but we can go back even further. Since 1987, off-licence wine and spirits have become 163% more affordable. Drinking patterns have also changed in that time. Almost 80% of alcohol is now purchased from supermarkets and off-licences for home consumption. That is driving people out of supervised and safer community drinking environments, such as pubs, bars and restaurants, and into the unseen confines of the home, where harms stay hidden.

Policies such as minimum unit pricing in Scotland have been bold steps to tackle the affordability of alcohol. Public Health Scotland’s comprehensive evaluation of MUP concluded that it has resulted in alcohol-specific deaths reducing by 13.4%. Were the Government to implement MUP in England, it could be a public health legacy we could be proud of. Instead, we are watching as first Wales and then Northern Ireland are moving to implement MUP in their respective nations, leaving England as the outlier. I was baffled to hear rumours about MUP being included in the 10-year health plan and then subsequently removed. Will the Minister share her thoughts on that?

Availability is the second of the WHO’s “best buy” policy areas, but I am afraid we are not doing much better on that. Without public health as a licensing objective, local authorities have their hands tied when it comes to rejecting licensing applications on public health grounds, including in respect of moves to sell alcohol in

areas where there is a real and persistent public health concern, or in areas that are already saturated. Licensing laws also struggle to keep up with newer forms of consumption. Rapid home deliveries and online sales mean that those who are already struggling can have alcohol delivered to their door at any time, day or night, with almost no protections or safeguards in place.

The WHO's third "best buy" policy idea relates to marketing. I have particularly grave concerns about this, because we are lagging behind other countries when it comes to alcohol marketing restrictions. We do not have so much as a 9 pm watershed, despite alcohol being an age-restricted product. I started to prepare for this speech on my journey from Westminster back home to Lancaster last week, and it was shocking how many times I saw alcohol advertised on that one reasonably short journey. It was on billboards and bus stops, and I walked past posters on the tube platforms and in the walkways.

On the final train, an advert on the screen advertised a thirst-quenching summer drink that was alcoholic. We all know the advertisements on the train Tannoy: "The café in coach C is open for alcoholic beverages"—they often come at 9 or 10 o'clock in the morning. Alcohol advertising is absolutely everywhere, and we know it works because companies spend millions of pounds on it. Advertising is doing one thing: it is driving people to drink more, more frequently, and exposing them to far more harms, including alcohol-related cancers.

I suspect we will hear arguments in the debate about the nanny state and the importance of free choice, but in a world where we are surrounded by relentless messages to drink alcohol, are we really making a free and informed choice? We are bombarded by industry advertising, sports sponsorships, celebrity endorsements, influencer partnerships, brand logos and product placements in everything we see day to day. Is it surprising that consumption and the related harms are rising? The industry has been allowed to go far too far for too long, and it is fuelling alcohol-related health risks. There is now a serious need for the Government to step in.

I fear that, four years from now, colleagues and I will not be able to defend decisions on alcohol harm to the electorate if the current alcohol trends persist and nothing is done. Although I welcome the measures in the 10-year plan to address alcohol labels and improve consumer awareness, in some respects a lot of the damage has already been done by decades of inaction, misinformation and spiralling consumption. Forty years on, the public still do not know the real risks to their health or the growing evidence that links drinking alcohol to cancer. In this environment, alcohol-related cancer cases will continue to rise. It seems that the horse has bolted, and we now need robust prevention policies, alongside the promised improvements to alcohol labelling, to even begin to reverse the damage.

The consumption of alcohol must be an informed choice. I acknowledge that some people are predisposed to the disease of alcoholism, and society must do more to support and better understand that, but those who decide to consume alcohol still do not have sufficient information to make that a fully informed choice. There is no safe level of drinking alcohol. As I have pointed out, alcohol is linked to at least eight cancers, and every day 46 people are diagnosed with alcohol-related cancers.

My ask of the Government is no more than to give the public information about alcohol and clear labels that make the link between alcohol and cancer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate.

9.49 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) for setting the scene expertly with all the detailed information we need. Before we started, she told me that this is our first debate together in Westminster Hall for some time, and it was a real pleasure to see her in full flow again.

This issue affects so many people in every constituency. The debate is an opportunity to explore the issue further and see how we, and ultimately the Minister, can inform and aid people to make good choices about nutrition and health. I am not in the business of telling people what to do. I do not think that is the way to do it; we should try to coax. If we raise awareness of the issues, as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre has done incredibly well, we will have a better way of persuading people to be careful and not excessive. I welcome the Government's excellent 10-year NHS plan, which was announced last Thursday. All of us in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland should be encouraged by the Government and Minister's commitment to it.

It is estimated that nearly 40% of cancer cases in the United Kingdom are currently preventable, caused by known, modifiable risk factors such as the food we eat and what we drink. I am a diabetic, and that is because of my own circumstances—I would not recommend Chinese and two bottles of Coke five nights a week, and lots of stress. It does not work. Unfortunately, I did not have the wherewithal to understand that it was the wrong thing to do. It caught up with me when I was 17 stone and heading for type 2 diabetes, as a doctor told me. The point is that I did not know, but I should have known, because the symptoms were there.

It is the same for the symptoms of cancer. There is convincing evidence that being overweight, obesity, processed meat consumption and drinking alcohol are associated with increased cancer risk. Suggestions have been made that being overweight and obesity—this is really worrying—could overtake smoking as the greatest cause of preventable cancers in women in the United Kingdom by 2043. Some of the stats are incredibly shocking.

Cancer research has highlighted that there are many ways that alcohol can cause cancer, such as through damage to cells and changes to hormones. Alcohol can increase the levels of some hormones in our bodies such as oestrogen and insulin. All alcohol has an effect, even a small amount. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre is right that it is better if we do not drink it. By the way, I am not telling anybody what to do, to make that clear, but it is about advice.

Mr Gregory Campbell: My hon. Friend is talking about an educational approach and trying to advise rather than force people; does he agree that the younger we start doing that, the better? Although they are not

[Mr Gregory Campbell]

exclusively the target audience, we need to focus on teenagers and those in their early 20s, because lifestyle choices are made when we are very young.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those are, by and large, the factors that will indicate where someone goes in adult life and further afield. It is important to do that at an early stage, whether at school or in young adulthood.

Hormones are chemical messengers, and high levels of oestrogen and insulin can make cells divide more often. That increases the chance that cancer will develop. Alcohol can make it easier for cells in the mouth and throat to absorb harmful chemicals that cause damage. There are signs that alcohol can exacerbate the chances of different types of cancer such as breast cancer and bowel cancer—two of the most common types—and mouth cancer. It can also increase the chance of some types of throat cancer, including cancer of the oesophagus, or the food pipe; cancer of the larynx, or the voice box; cancer of the pharynx, or the upper throat; and liver cancer. All those are potential issues.

Cancer Focus Northern Ireland has highlighted on its website the fact that the consumption of any amount of alcohol increases the risk of developing cancer, as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre said. Cancer Focus Northern Ireland also says that the more alcohol a person drinks, the higher the risk of their developing cancer. Reducing consumption or, even better, avoiding alcohol completely will help to reduce the risk. Cancer Focus Northern Ireland also highlights the fact that drinking and smoking together multiplies the risk of developing certain cancers.

It is essential that we get the message across that just as we need to modulate our eating habits, we need to consider alcohol not simply from an addiction point of view but knowing that the links to cancer are clear. As with all things, it is important to educate young people, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said. We need to give them the understanding that alcohol intake is linked to overall health. This is a cross-departmental undertaking, with the Department for Education having a role to play alongside the Department of Health and Social Care. Perhaps the Minister could give us some ideas about how those two Departments could work better together to ensure that young people have a healthy approach to alcohol and less of a binge mentality.

British women are the biggest female binge drinkers in the world. That is what the stats say. More than a quarter of British women consume more than six drinks at least once a month, according to a 2023 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which compared alcohol consumption across 33 countries. Although the proportion is much higher for men, at 45%, the proportion for British women is still unmatched among female populations anywhere else in Europe. So we have a big job to do in encouraging a healthy attitude to alcohol. We must ensure that the messaging shows that it is an issue of long-term health, as well as one of short-term sobriety.

To conclude, people must be free to enjoy their lives and have a taste of things in moderation, but the health of the nation depends on a healthier approach to alcohol.

The statistics outlined in this debate, by others before me and by those who will follow, show that this is a matter of urgency. As always, I very much look forward to the Minister outlining how the Government can—with us MPs, on behalf of our constituents—change the approach to the health of this great nation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

9.57 am

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart, and to speak in this important debate. I congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) on securing it, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It is always a mistake to start a speech with an apology, but I have a terrible cold and I can hardly hear, so please forgive me for my diction.

I have a particular interest in this subject: I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on drugs, alcohol and justice, so I was keen to support the application to the Backbench Business Committee. I would like to make a number of points to the Minister on behalf of the all-party group, but I will also reflect on the impact of alcohol in the north-east, and particularly in my Easington constituency, where alcohol is devastating lives and families. In my constituency, the rates of alcohol-related hospital admissions, deaths and traffic collisions are all worse than the national average.

We often obsess over statistics, but behind them are real people, families and communities, who are suffering from largely preventable harms. That is the thing about both drug and alcohol deaths, and cancers related to drugs and alcohol: they are preventable. My argument, and that of the all-party group, is that we must take the risks of alcohol far more seriously. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre said, alcohol is the No. 1 risk factor for ill health, death and disability among those aged 15 to 49. That is incredible—we are talking about the 15-to-49 age group. There is also a clear correlation with cancers; as my hon. Friend indicated the types, I am not going to repeat them.

Although alcohol has always been a part of society, the rates of higher risk drinking soared during the pandemic. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre mentioned that. Perhaps that is understandable because circumstances had changed, many more people were working from home and consumption at home increased. However, we have seen little sign of returning to pre-pandemic levels of alcohol consumption. If those trends continue, experts predict an additional 18,785 cancer cases—a very precise prediction, I know—by 2035. The predicted rise is deeply concerning, given that the NHS is already struggling to deal with the UK's current cancer burden.

The hon. Member for Strangford and I have a particular interest in the all-party parliamentary groups on cancer, particularly the one on radiotherapy. We are aware that in April this year only 70.8% of cancer patients in my constituency were treated within the 62-day target, compared with the operational standard target of 85%. Once again behind the missed targets, people in my constituency, across the north-east and across the country are waiting anxiously for diagnosis and treatment.

There is a clear correlation between deprivation and alcohol consumption. The two seem to go hand in hand. Researchers connect alcohol consumption to inequalities in life expectancy. People in poorer areas tend to live shorter lives than those in more affluent areas. There is also a link with violence, especially against women and girls, with a decline in social and emotional wellbeing, and with child development. The human cost is immeasurable, but the financial cost is also huge. It is possible to calculate it.

Alcohol harm costs County Durham £277 million a year—over £530 per head. Across the north-east the total cost is estimated at £1.49 billion—almost £1.5 billion per year. The figures are stark, but not inevitable; all the costs are avoidable. Research by Cancer Research UK shows that around 2,700 cancer cases in England could be avoided by 2040 if just 10% of those drinking above the recommended levels reduce their intake by one intake category by 2030. There is no doubt about it—cutting down on alcohol can reduce our risk of cancer.

How do we reduce alcohol harm? The Alcohol Health Alliance and the World Cancer Research Fund have both set out clear solutions: tackling affordability, promotion and availability. Although I acknowledge and welcome the Government's 10-year health plan, which was released last week, it announced only limited measures on alcohol. Commitments on labelling are welcome, but they do not go far enough and are not proportionate to the scale of the crisis. I respectfully urge the Minister to consider further measures in advance of the national cancer plan, which is expected to be published in the autumn, and to work with harm reduction organisations, the experts in the field, and go further.

Waythrough provides treatment and support to those suffering from the excesses of alcohol. It is also involved in the APPG that I chair. The chief exec, Paul Townsley, said:

"Alcohol treatment and recovery support has a transformative impact on people, families and communities—we urgently need government to commit to a national Alcohol Strategy that increases investment in treatment and recovery, evidence based prevention, and addresses the root causes of alcohol harm that devastates our communities so unequally."

A little later today the all-party parliamentary group on drugs, alcohol and justice, which I chair, will launch a new "Action on Alcohol" document, which echoes the calls that have been made here and elsewhere for an alcohol strategy. In 2018, just next door in the Jubilee Room, I attended the launch of the "Alcohol Charter", which made the very same demand. Let us not forget that, as the hon. Member for Strangford reminded us, the last alcohol strategy was issued in 2012, and since then the alcohol death rate has spiralled, so I would be grateful if the Minister outlined any plans she has to develop a cross-departmental alcohol strategy.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): In Scotland, we have minimum alcohol pricing per unit. Will the Minister and the APPG consider that when making future interventions?

Grahame Morris: A number of positive suggestions have been set out by my hon. Friends during the course of the debate and by some experts in the field, and that includes the suggestion that my hon. Friend made in her intervention. I hope the Minister is considering the benefits and potential of them all.

Will the Minister meet me and treatment providers who support the all-party parliamentary group on the issue to discuss solutions? I gently remind her that she agreed back in March to meet the APPG about drugs policy, and we still have not been able to finalise the date for that meeting.

In my region, the organisation Balance does exceptional work in reducing alcohol's harm, and it is the UK's only regional alcohol prevention programme. Alcohol abuse is a huge societal problem in the north-east, and it should be at the forefront of shaping policy to reduce alcohol harm. Balance joins many voices across the sector in calling for a new dedicated alcohol strategy that prioritises proven measures to reduce the affordability, availability and promotion of alcohol. There is a clear consensus among alcohol and cancer charities that that is urgently needed.

The Government must introduce a comprehensive alcohol strategy without delay. The UK has not had a national alcohol strategy since 2012, and we must catch up with global leaders and show that the Government are serious about tackling alcohol harm. I urge the Minister to commit to a comprehensive alcohol strategy that tackles the crisis head on, protecting lives, reducing cancer risk and lifting the burden from our NHS and our communities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I will call the Liberal Democrat spokesman at 10.28 am.

10.7 am

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) on securing the debate.

Colleagues have rightly focused on the policy requirement of addressing alcohol harm, not just for the health of our constituents but to address the seismic burden that the effects of alcohol place on our public services, particularly the NHS. As my hon. Friend mentioned in her excellent speech, inaction is not acceptable or sustainable. This debate is especially pertinent, as we now understand that at least eight cancers can be linked to alcohol following new research from the IARC showing the link, as my hon. Friend mentioned, between alcohol and pancreatic cancer.

I would like to focus on the importance of early intervention in tackling excessive alcohol consumption. The UK consistently tops the table for binge drinking, and Scotland has long had a higher rate of alcohol-related death than the rest of the UK. More than one in four alcohol-attributable deaths were due to cancer. Furthermore, public awareness of alcohol harm is low, with polling research suggesting that 50% of people are unaware that alcohol causes cancer. Sadly, 53,000 people are hospitalised in Scotland due to alcohol each year.

Although we may be tempted into complacency by data that suggests that young people are drinking less than preceding generations, the stakes really are too high when we look at the figures. That is why early intervention initiatives, such as the work of Community Alcohol Partnerships, are so essential. Early intervention can prevent such health challenges from arising in later life. Their work is driving young people away from alcohol in 300 areas across the UK. My constituency is

[Frank McNally]

home to the View Park and Bellshill community alcohol partnership, which was recently recognised as Scottish CAP of the year. It has gained recognition for its approach to engaging young people while also partnering effectively with the police, NHS, local authority, residents groups and retailers to tackle under-age drinking head on. The impact of that work is significant, with the latest national figures from CAP showing a 63% reduction in drinking among 13 to 16-year-olds. We know the impact of under-age drinking on those under 15, and the consequences that it has.

There is, however, much more to do. I was pleased to sponsor the launch in Parliament of CAP's report on the parental supply of alcohol recently. The report highlights that too many parents still believe that giving alcohol to children at home will teach them to drink responsibly or reduce the risk of them getting alcohol elsewhere. The report shows that every year earlier that a child is given alcohol, their risk of binge drinking, alcohol harm and health-related consequences as an adult increases significantly. CAP is set to launch a new pilot programme in 2026 aimed at preventing the parental supply of alcohol in six areas. I am very pleased that my area is one of those that is being looked at.

Early intervention is critical in the battle against alcohol-related cancers. I commend the CAP report to the Minister and all Members, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre for bringing forward this debate and highlighting the importance of this subject for my constituents and for people of all ages across the United Kingdom.

10.12 am

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) for securing this incredibly important debate. Having represented the Fleetwood part of my constituency prior to the boundary review, she will know the way the health service in that part of Lancashire has suffered from chronic underfunding throughout the 14 years of Conservative austerity and neglect.

My constituency suffers from more alcohol-related hospital admissions, cancer cases and deaths than the English average. It is a symptom of a community held back by low investment, industrial decline and neglect from national Government. I know at first hand the harm that alcoholism causes in communities and families; I have lost four members of my family to alcohol-related deaths. It was therefore extremely welcome to see the Government announce the 10-year health plan, but the plan must go further on alcohol-related diseases and cancers.

Although measures such as new standards for alcohol labelling and supporting the growth of low and non-alcohol sectors are welcome, we should be far more ambitious. We have not had a dedicated alcohol strategy since 2012. The Government should rectify that as part of the 10-year health plan. However, there are immediate measures that the Government can take, for example, ensuring that new alcohol labelling includes an explicit warning about the link between alcohol and

cancer; strengthening marketing restrictions by classifying alcohol as an unhealthy product; and acknowledging the detrimental impact of the industry's involvement in policy development.

It is clear that our current policy is woefully inadequate. Alcohol-related deaths are at an all-time high. We cannot be satisfied with our approach until the numbers begin to fall. We cannot afford to miss opportunities. Announcements such as the 10-year health plan must include a clear strategy to reduce alcohol-related deaths in future. That means introducing measures such as those I mentioned in my speech, but it also means addressing the root causes of poverty and under-investment.

10.15 am

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I very much appreciate the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) securing this important debate.

We vets often treat liver disease and cancers, but in animals they are rarely caused by excess intake of alcohol. On the few occasions that we use alcohol in veterinary medicine, it is therapeutic. It is quite common for cats to drink antifreeze, which causes kidney damage, and one way of treating that is to hook them up to a drip with vodka, because it is the antidote to antifreeze. That has probably saved the lives of thousands of cats in the UK over the last few years.

I remember that when I was a student there was a particularly vicious boar that everyone was too scared to go anywhere near, but its feet needed trimming. The only way to get anywhere near it was to give it a huge amount of beer. It would get completely drunk and pass out, and then we could safely go and trim its feet. We had to repeat that performance every six months. That is my own experience of using alcohol in veterinary medicine.

The point of this debate—highlighting the link between alcohol and cancer—has been made repeatedly by other Members. Most people are aware that alcohol causes liver problems, but so many people are not aware of the proven link between alcohol intake and cancer. We have listed at least seven related cancers, including breast, bowel and liver cancer. It does not matter whether the alcohol consumed is beer, wine or spirits; the risk it poses is real and increases with consumption.

The mechanisms are well understood. We know that alcohol gets metabolised into toxic chemicals. It damages DNA and has effects on other hormones in the body that increase cell division. These are well-evidenced biological processes. Indeed, the *British Journal of Cancer* has found that between 2% and 4% of cancer cases in the UK are attributable to alcohol, which means that thousands of lives are affected every year, many of which could be saved through better public health, education and early intervention.

I pay tribute to Professor Julia Sinclair, who lives in Winchester and works at the University of Southampton. She is a professor of addiction psychiatry and focuses very much on alcohol. I have worked closely with her, even before I was elected. We have had roundtables here in Parliament, including with the British Liver Trust; its headquarters are in Winchester, so I have worked closely with it. I have also spoken on panels at the Royal College of Physicians.

All those experts discussed alcohol and alcohol-related harms. There is not only a human cost but an economic cost. Alcohol-related harms cost the NHS £4.91 billion every year, and that is before we even consider the wider cost to families, employers and society. Other hon. Members pointed out that the misery and loneliness of the pandemic resulted in people increasing their alcohol intake, and that intake has not really decreased since that time. That has resulted in alcohol-related deaths increasing by 42% since 2019, which means that over 10,000 lives were lost in 2023 alone.

Along with the Medical Council on Alcohol, the Liberal Democrats are calling for a comprehensive national alcohol strategy that is properly funded, cross-departmental and informed by the latest evidence and public health expertise. Part of that strategy must be rebuilding and reintegrating alcohol treatment services, ensuring that addiction support is fully joined up with mental and physical healthcare.

We have heard from so many doctors who talk about people being admitted to hospital for their physical symptoms to be treated, but once they have been detoxed, essentially, they are discharged without any automatic mental health support. Of course, that means that they eventually come back in for further physical treatment. They can be treated as many times as they need to be when they get to a physical crisis-point, but we are never treating the underlying mental health issue that needs to be addressed.

We need to restore the public health grant so that social services can run alcohol cessation and early intervention programmes. We also need to invest in digital tools, including a kitemark for apps that are clinically proven to help people reduce their alcohol intake and live healthier lives.

We must recognise the wider context in which alcohol causes harm. Alcohol misuse does not happen in isolation; it is often closely linked to trauma, poor mental health, loneliness and disadvantage. Crucially, alcohol harm is not equally distributed. As the Medical Council on Alcohol's research shows, rates of alcohol-related cancer, liver disease and premature death are highest in the most deprived communities. This is a matter of health inequality, and it should shame us that we have allowed those disparities to grow.

I was on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill Committee for several weeks. Fascinatingly, Professor Whitty told the Committee that the Bill was not only the single biggest piece of public health legislation in about 30 years, but probably the most impactful piece of legislation in addressing inequalities, because health inequalities between the wealthiest and most deprived postcodes are so large partly because of smoking rates—and, we also know, partly because of patterns of alcohol drinking.

We must see alcohol harm and alcohol-related cancer as preventable public health issues. That means that we need the political will to expand social prescribing to reduce isolation, deliver mental health MOTs at key life stages, open mental health walk-in hubs in every community, and legislate for a cancer survival Act to ensure that patients start treatment promptly and that research is funded for cancers with the poorest outcomes.

Alcohol is a legal product, but it is not harmless. People have the right to know the risks and get support

when they need it. We need to stop treating alcohol-related cancer as an inconvenient truth and recognise this as a crisis of alcoholism.

10.21 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) on securing the debate, and declare an interest as an NHS consultant paediatrician.

We have a complex relationship with alcohol. On the one hand, it is a very social drug that is associated with celebration, religious observance in some cases, and small amounts of alcohol with meals. In other respects, it is an antisocial drug that is associated with violent crime, domestic abuse—particularly in cases of binge drinking—and, in some cases, addiction and dependency.

Does alcohol cause or increase the risk of cancer? Yes. We know it is metabolised into acetaldehyde, which can damage our DNA and reduce our cells' ability to repair themselves. Alcohol changes chemical signals, particularly of oestrogen and insulin, causing increased cell division, and it increases the ability of the mouth to absorb harmful chemicals. It is therefore associated with seven types of cancer: breast, bowel, mouth, larynx, pharynx, oesophagus and liver.

Risk also increases with consumption: small amounts of alcohol are not as risk-provoking as very large amounts. The medical officers recommend a limit of 14 units of alcohol per week, shared over three-plus days a week, with some drink-free days. One in five people in the UK drink more than that. Risk is dose responsive. Education is important; we heard earlier that only 7% of people know that alcohol is a risk factor for cancer.

I was on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill Committee with the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers). I personally promoted the Bill very strongly, but smoking is different. It is exceptionally addictive and kills two thirds of users if used correctly, whereas alcohol does not have that level of risk for people who use small volumes of alcohol infrequently, and in most cases does not provide the level of addiction that nicotine does.

Life is full of risk. Obesity, processed food, ultraviolet light and infections all cause forms of cancer. Exercise is good for us, but again, it is not without risks to our health. I am not saying that we should not reduce the use of alcohol, but we must understand the risk in relative terms, and ensure that the population are educated about it and can make informed decisions about their lives.

In understanding that risk, evidence is important, so I have some questions for the Minister. What is she doing to improve the evidence that we have on the risks of drinking and the risks related to different levels of consumption? How does she intend to ensure that the public are able to make educated and informed decisions? The "Fit for the future" document published last week talks of labelling coming in on nutrition and calory content. When does she expect that labelling to appear on packets?

Hon. Members have talked about the number of units of alcohol that people drink. Many people do not understand what comprises a unit of alcohol and how to measure it relative to the different types of alcoholic drink. How does the Minister intend to improve understanding of units of alcohol?

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

I was shocked by the statistic in the “Fit for the future” document that 4% of people drink 30% of alcohol. That is a really shocking statistic, and it is worth repeating: 4% of people drink 30% of the alcohol in this country. There are, to my mind, two issues for the Minister to consider: how the Government can reduce the consumption of alcohol across the board and how they should treat heavy drinkers and dependent alcoholics.

Turning to the latter first, 4% of people drink 30% of alcohol and one in five drinkers drink more than 14 units per week. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) talked about an alcohol strategy; I would like to know whether the Minister plans to develop one. One of the disappointing things about last week’s long awaited “Fit for the future: 10 Year Health Plan for England” document was that it did not contain the cancer plan, the workforce plan, the dental contract information or the HIV plan, which are all set to be published in due course. Perhaps an alcohol strategy could join them.

The previous Government rolled out alcohol care teams, which were designed to provide the patient and their family with hospital-based community support, as well as data collection and research. It was found that, for every £1 spent on alcohol care teams, £5 was saved. Those teams supported excessive drinkers and focused on those with the greatest need. Can the Minister talk about how she intends to support those with alcohol dependency and high levels of drinking?

Advertising is an interesting one. The newspapers trailed a suggestion that the Government would ban alcohol advertising. That was, perhaps, an informal U-turn, as it was trailed in the papers rather than announced to the House. We know from the evidence that alcohol advertising can influence brand choice, but it does not appear to affect overall alcohol consumption. Could the Minister enlighten the House as to whether that is why she dropped that measure? We need to be careful with the hospitality sector, which we know is reeling from the changes to the minimum wage and taxes such as national insurance contributions. We do not want people to be put out of business at the scale at which that is currently happening.

It is important to note that general alcohol consumption in the UK is steadily declining. Between 2019 and 2023, the alcohol sales volume in the UK declined by nearly 10%. Revenue from alcohol duty is also projected to fall by 5% this year, according to data from His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. That shift is particularly observable among younger adults. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a cultural shift. Gen Z, as it is known, is the most teetotal generation in recent memory, and a quarter of 16 to 24-year-olds do not drink at all.

A study produced by KAM and Lucky Saint found that moderation of alcohol has also become a habit for UK adults, with three out of four adults who drink alcohol stating that they have been actively moderating their consumption across 2024. Although raising awareness of the health risks associated with heavy drinking is an important part of the strategy, we must avoid punishing responsible drinkers and damaging the hospitality industry, which is already under significant pressure.

NoLos, no and low-alcohol products, can currently be sold to under-18s. The Government have talked about banning that, which seems sensible to me when it comes to low-alcohol products, but how will the Government define a no-alcohol drink and when do they intend to introduce a ban? There is some evidence that no and low-alcohol beverages displace higher-percentage alcohol drinks, and therefore reduce alcohol consumption. What are the Government planning to do to increase sales of those products?

The previous Government were planning to change an EU directive preventing wine from being described as wine if it did not contain more than a certain percentage of alcohol. I believe that fell due to the general election. Do the Government intend to bring that proposal back?

Personally, I also welcome policies under which the Government plan to define no and low-alcohol products clearly, so that the public can be well informed on what constitutes “low” and “no” alcohol. I had presumed, before reading this, that no alcohol meant no alcohol, but it does not; it means a very low percentage of alcohol. It is important that people are aware of that.

The Government have rightly emphasised the importance of parity between mental and physical health, and socialising and being part of a community are vital components of positive mental wellbeing. Pubs and social venues play a central role in our communities. In a recent survey, 73% of respondents agreed that pubs in the area have helped to combat isolation; 72% that they have a positive impact in the communities; and 81% that they are important in bringing people together.

Ultimately, with more than 80% of the population consuming alcohol within Government guidelines, our focus should be on helping the minority who drink at harmful levels, and on improving decision making and education for those who drink at lower levels. We must work with industry to avoid policies that jeopardise the survival of community spaces, or lead to higher taxes for the majority of people who drink low levels of alcohol responsibly.

10.30 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart, as ever. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) for securing this important debate during Alcohol Awareness Week. The Government recognise that for too long there has been an unwillingness to lead on issues such as alcohol harm. It is unacceptable that alcohol-specific deaths are at the highest rates on record, having increased dramatically during the pandemic.

As my hon. Friend stated, alcohol is a type 1 carcinogen, meaning there is strong evidence that drinking alcohol can cause several types of cancer, as well as contributing to more than 200 other health conditions, including liver disease, high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease. That places an incredible and preventable pressure on our NHS: in England alone, of more than 1 million hospital admissions last year, 103,000 were due to alcohol-related cancers.

Today, we have heard from many colleagues about the variety of issues that alcohol can cause. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) talked about the cost to Government and to society, which

I will address later; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) discussed information and the importance of education; my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) mentioned the real impacts on communities and families in the north-east; my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Bellshill (Frank McNally) talked about how important early intervention is; and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) raised the links to poverty and under-investment.

As for the impacts, alcohol kills. Last year, in England, more than 22,600 deaths were alcohol related, with more than 8,000 entirely due to alcohol—an all-time high, with rates still increasing by 4% each year. The rate of alcohol-related deaths is 1.7 times higher in the most deprived local authorities, meaning that alcohol is a major contributor to the levels of health inequality in this country. Alcohol also kills young—in 2015, in England, an estimated 167,000 years of working life were lost due to alcohol-related deaths. That amounts to about 16% of all working years lost.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry asked about the cost to Government and society. Alcohol harms us massively. The estimated annual cost of alcohol-related harms in England is £27 billion, driven by the impact of alcohol-related illnesses and injuries on NHS services and alcohol's high contribution to levels of economic inactivity, crime and disorder. Each year, £13 billion is raised in tax revenue from alcohol.

The guideline on alcohol consumption produced by the four nations' chief medical officers advises that drinking any level of alcohol increases the risk of a range of cancers, including mouth, bowel, stomach, liver and breast cancers, and that the risk of harm increases with the frequency and quantity of alcohol consumed. In 2020, alcohol was estimated to have caused about 17,000 new cases of cancer in the UK. One study estimated that between 2015 and 2035 there would be 135,000 cancer deaths due to alcohol in England. In terms of cancer risk, drinking a bottle of wine is the equivalent of smoking five cigarettes for a man, and 10 cigarettes for a woman.

We also cannot overlook the impact that being exposed to multiple risk factors has in increasing the risk of developing certain conditions. For instance, the risk of developing head and neck cancer is 3.8 times higher among those who drink and smoke than those who partake in only one of those behaviours. That is why a holistic approach is needed to our health, with people supported to address all risk factors for poor health together.

We are continuing to invest in local alcohol treatment services to make sure that people have access to the treatment they need. While those services are primarily focused on supporting people to become free from alcohol dependence, they are also an important setting for providing health information for people with alcohol dependence, identifying alcohol-related health conditions and ensuring that people can access specialist assessment and care.

In the 12 months to February 2025, nearly 140,000 people were treated for their alcohol needs—9,000 more than in the previous year. In the coming months, the Department of Health and Social Care will publish the first ever UK guidelines on alcohol treatment. The guidelines will include recommendations on healthcare assessments

for alcohol-related conditions and will strengthen pathways between specialist alcohol and drug treatment services and the wider healthcare system.

The incidence of liver cancer has increased by 50% over the past decade and is expected to rise further. A large percentage of liver cancer is caused by alcohol-related liver disease, which in its early stages has no outward symptoms. If we can find liver disease by screening at-risk populations, there is an opportunity to halt its progress and monitor for the development of cancer. To identify people at high risk of liver cancer due to liver cirrhosis or advanced fibrosis, the NHS in England has been piloting community liver health checks in 20 areas, and liver primary care case-finding pilots across 12 primary care networks. Those pilot sites have screened nearly 125,000 people, and over 9,000 of them have been enrolled in liver cancer surveillance.

As the Secretary of State has made clear since we came into power, one of the three big shifts that we want to see in the NHS is a shift from treatment to prevention. The complex challenge of cancer prevention will not be solved by a single solution.

Grahame Morris: I am listening intently, but I may have missed an important point, so I wonder whether it would bear repeating. The Minister indicated that a treatment framework will be published very shortly. Will that be informed by an alcohol strategy that the Government will also produce? We have not had one since 2012.

Ashley Dalton: A number of hon. Members have asked about a national alcohol strategy. We are continuing to work across Government to understand what other measures might be needed to reduce the negative impact of excessive alcohol consumption. I meet regularly with Ministers from across Government to discuss how we take that forward.

The drug and alcohol area of work is led by the Home Office. There are no plans to introduce such a strategy at this stage, but I expect further information on how we will deal with alcohol prevention and cancer in the national cancer plan, which, as I was just about to state, the Government will publish later this year. This plan will build on the progress of the 10-year health plan, which was published last week, and will continue the work to shift from treatment to prevention, including for alcohol-related cancer risks.

We are taking steps now. The 10-year health plan for England includes an important commitment to ensure that health warnings and nutritional information are legally required on alcohol labels. That is a crucial step in supporting people to make healthier choices when it comes to alcohol. There is international support for that approach. The World Health Organisation's "Global alcohol action plan 2022-2030" recommends that countries should implement labelling requirements to display relevant information to support health protection.

Despite the fact that alcohol is a group 1 carcinogen, alcohol labels are currently required to display far less information than those for food, soft drinks, alcohol-free products or tobacco. We know that voluntary regulation does not lead to consistently good practice in alcohol labelling, so we need to ensure that there is a legal requirement to display certain information on alcohol products. We also know that consumers want more

[Ashley Dalton]

information on alcohol labels: a 2021 survey showed that 75% wanted unit information, 61% wanted calorie information, and 53% wanted sugar content to be displayed. Those results are supported by those of the 2023 alcohol toolkit study, which found that public support for health warning labels was 61.5%, and that 78% supported nutritional information labelling.

There is widespread awareness among people in the UK that smoking causes cancer. That information is important to supporting behavioural change. But public awareness that alcohol is carcinogenic is far too low. In a 2016 study of 2,100 adults, only 13% named cancer as a health risk from hazardous drinking. Another recent international study found that only 15% were aware that alcohol can cause breast cancer.

We will soon share details of our consultation to determine the best ways to get the necessary information to consumers. We welcome the support and input of parliamentarians in taking that important piece of work forward, but let me be absolutely clear: we will consult on how we will implement mandatory labelling, not whether we will do so. This Government are determined to introduce mandatory labelling for alcohol.

We have also discussed various other options available for controlling alcohol consumption. My hon. Friends the Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor), for Easington and for Lancaster and Wyre talked about minimum unit pricing. The Government are acutely aware of the cost of living pressures being felt by families and individuals, and the difficult economic conditions facing the country. Although interventions that affect the price of alcohol have been shown to be effective at directly reducing alcohol harms, the Government have chosen not to pursue policies that could exacerbate economic issues at this time, although we will continue to keep those options under consideration.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is the branch of Government responsible for advertising and marketing. The Advertising Standards Authority is responsible for regulating advertising through codes set by the Committee of Advertising Practice and the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice. Those codes are enforced by the ASA, include specific rules about how alcohol can be advertised, and recognise the social imperative of ensuring that alcohol advertising is responsible.

We will continue to work across Government to consider what other measures might be needed to reduce the negative impact that excessive alcohol consumption has on health, crime and the economy. The Government are committed to shortening the amount of time spent in ill health, and to preventing premature deaths. The commitment to labelling in the 10-year plan is a crucial first step to support people to make healthier choices about alcohol. It is the beginning, not the end. We will continue to work across Government to consider what other measures might be needed to reduce the negative impact of excessive alcohol consumption.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre also talked about public health as a licensing objective. Evidence to support its impact is, at the moment, somewhat limited, but we continue to work with the Home Office to consider how best to use licensing powers to support local leaders to address alcohol-related harms. I thank

my hon. Friend the Member for Easington for his leadership on this important issue. Officials are considering that report from the APPG on drugs, alcohol and justice. I recently met the Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), who leads on alcohol and drugs policy across Government. I will soon meet Lord Timpson to discuss those areas and their impact on prisons. We are working across Government. I would be happy to meet the APPG, as I have previously agreed. Diary pressures are very high at the moment, but I am confident that we will soon find time to do that.

We have also talked about preventing under-age drinking, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Bellshill. There is a commitment in the 10-year plan to make the sale of alcohol-free drinks also illegal to under-18s, ensuring that no-alcohol and low-alcohol products do not become a gateway to standard-strength alcoholic drinks. On alcohol misuse and mental health support, raised by the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), we totally agree on the importance of mental health support. The Government are committed to recruiting 8,500 new mental health workers, and have already recruited 6,700.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), cheerily reminded us that all activities are risky. She talked of improving the understanding of alcohol dependency. She focused broadly on alcohol use, but did not necessarily mention cancer. To avoid digressing from the debate, I commit to writing to her further on the areas she raised more generally on alcohol policy.

I thank everyone for their contributions to this important debate. We will continue to work across Government to reduce the negative impact that excessive alcohol consumption has on health—including cancer—crime and the economy.

10.46 am

Cat Smith: I thank all hon. Members for making time to take part in the debate. I am disappointed that there are no plans from the Government at this stage for a national alcohol strategy. I urge the Minister to take a message back to the Department that such a strategy would be an important tool for improving health outcomes and reducing cancer diagnoses.

The debate has been specifically about alcohol and cancer and how to prevent that link. Many hon. Members have personal reasons for taking part. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) has been a good friend for 20 years. I know her family well and the impact on them. She is not the only person to come to the debate with a personal motivation to drive down the harm caused by alcohol in our communities.

I welcome what the Minister said about labelling, which is an important first step to reducing alcohol harms. At the moment, alcohol needs to display only alcohol by volume, product volume and allergen information; even the pregnancy warning is optional for the industry to add. Anyone going into a pub or bar in this country today to buy a bottle of beer and a Fruit Shoot, will find that the latter provides more nutritional and health information than the beer, which is unsustainable.

Labelling should be clear that there is a link between alcohol and cancer, because it is easy to play that down. I believe in freedom of choice—I am not trying to restrict anyone’s right to drink alcohol, but that needs to be an informed choice. We should know that there is no safe level of drinking alcohol when it comes to its potential to cause cancer. At the moment, with only 7% of our constituents knowing that fact, they are not able to make that informed choice.

I hope the Government’s actions on labelling that the Minister is taking forward will see that figure of 7% massively increase, so that our constituents will make informed choices about what they put in their bodies. I again thank everyone for making the time this morning to take part in this important debate, and I thank you, Mr Stuart, for chairing it so ably.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered alcohol and cancer.

10.49 am

Sitting suspended.

Local Government Reform: Cambridgeshire

11 am

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I remind Members that they may only make a speech with prior permission from the Member in charge and the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government reform in Cambridgeshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. Following the publication of the English devolution White Paper in December 2024, on 5 February Cambridgeshire and Peterborough’s district councils were invited to develop proposals for the introduction of unitary authorities within the county, expected to come into effect in April 2028. A detailed collective proposal for what the future unitary authorities in Cambridgeshire should look like is to be submitted to the Government by 28 November.

I applied for this debate to outline the sizeable concerns in Huntingdonshire about local government reorganisation. These concerns are potentially echoed across other areas of Cambridgeshire, and I encourage other MPs to whom I have spoken about the proposals also to voice their concerns.

Cambridgeshire residents have been presented with just three options on which to give their opinions. Proposal A is referred to as the north-west, south-east option, with Peterborough, Huntingdonshire and Fenland in the north, and Cambridge, East Cambridgeshire and South Cambridgeshire in the south. Proposal B is the north-south option, with Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire together, and then Peterborough combined with everywhere else—Huntingdonshire, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire. Proposal C is east-west, with Peterborough, East Cambridgeshire and Fenland in the west, and Cambridge, Huntingdonshire and South Cambridgeshire in the east.

These proposals were apparently narrowed down from six options. However, these have not been published, and it is difficult to know, even as an MP, how they were decided and why the possibility of a breakdown by Westminster constituency, county division or district council ward was ruled out. My own Huntingdonshire district council stated that:

“We are taking an evidence-based approach. Inevitably, the different needs and local identities of our areas will have a significant impact on the preference of our own councils, and we must respect that”.

However, what evidence is there? The consultation by each of the district councils appears to be little more than a paper exercise. How are residents expected to feed back an informed decision regarding a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape the future of local government without any actual information on what the impact of expressing their preference might mean? Martin Hassall, the independent councillor for Buckden, Diddington and Southoe, said:

“The proposals are complex, poorly communicated, and offer little reassurance that the end result will mean better services or genuine value for money.”

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

In a written answer, the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), said:

“We expect there to be wide engagement with local partners and stakeholders, residents, workforce and their representatives, and businesses on a proposal.”

But how can Cambridgeshire’s district councils credibly be expected to develop a robust proposal without realistically understanding the preferences of their residents? The only feedback prior to the final proposal being submitted is an engagement survey that bears little resemblance to the three options that have been put forward. They are in effect situating the estimate, having already decided one of three answers, and will tailor the results to fit.

How will the Government ensure that any decision reflects the wants and needs of local residents? Moreover, if the Government overrule the proposals submitted by the council, upon which evidence will they ensure that the voices of local people are considered?

The Huntingdonshire district council website says:

“All proposals will be assessed against all the criteria in the invitation. Decisions on the most appropriate option for each area will be judgements in the round, having regard to the statutory guidance and the available evidence. That evidence will include information provided by the councils as part of their proposals, representations received during the statutory consultation, and other relevant information available”.

A written answer to me on Friday said:

“a consultation could be launched in early 2026, likely closing at some point after the May local elections”.

Could the Minister clarify whether impacted residents across Cambridgeshire will have their say? If so, is the late May date the first opportunity they will have? If the statutory consultation is not until after next year’s local elections, can we assume that district council elections in Huntingdonshire will definitely go ahead?

The Government are in the process of botching this local government reorganisation with their hands-off approach. Every question to the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution has so far been met with a deflection to the relevant local authority, but this has left a situation where local authorities seem unsure of the detail, local residents have endless unanswered questions, and we are on the cusp of making enormous changes that will have a lasting impact on people’s lives, their prospects and their quality of life, all because nobody had bothered to think through the detail.

In March, a joint statement from council leaders across Cambridgeshire stated:

“We look forward to further discussions with each other and with government, and when the time is right, with residents, Members of Parliament and our partners”.

When will Members of Parliament be engaged on the initial proposal? I have not been engaged thus far, and I do not believe any of Cambridgeshire’s other MPs have been officially engaged either. What is the plan? I appreciate that is more of a rhetorical question than one for the Minister, but the point still stands. I am sure this debate will be watched by council leaders, and some of my questions are more for their benefit.

Last week, I wrote to each councillor in my Huntingdon constituency to seek their input on the potential impact of the changes, and hon. Members will hear a selection of quotes peppered throughout my speech. I was very

pleased to receive a range of responses from across the political spectrum, with Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and independent councillors highlighting their concerns. Councillor Nathan Hunt, Liberal Democrat, Huntingdon East ward, said:

“throughout the process, communication from central government seems to have lacked required detail and has generally been poor”.

It is highly notable that, despite our political differences, the responses highlighted the same broad concerns: a rushed process, short timelines, lack of rigour, unclear criteria, poor communication, inadequate information, analysis and evidence, and no clear identification of what is best for residents.

The engagement survey currently in flight, led by East Cambridgeshire district council as communications lead, is not clearly signposted or easy to locate. It will be interesting to see once it closes whether there has been significant uptake. There has been no indication from Huntingdonshire district council of whether there is a minimum viable response rate. If sufficient responses are not received, will they be considered at all? Will that extend to the whole of Cambridgeshire and to other district councils? Prior to the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough combined authority mayoral election in May, a booklet was sent to every household, so why has a similar effort not been made to engage residents with a posted survey? Most people have no idea that the local government reorganisation is happening, and that is as much the fault of the Government as of the local authority.

The engagement survey closes on Sunday 20 July, so in less than two weeks, residents in my constituency and across Cambridgeshire will have had what initially appears to be their only opportunity to influence the process, and it will have passed most of them by. The three shortlisted options were sadly published only as maps and with no additional information, and all local authorities published the same survey at the same time. To what extent will the Government take into account the results of the engagement survey from residents in each district council area? To what extent will the Government take into account the submission from the district councils regarding the preferred option? If the Government decide that they simply do not like the unitary structure proposed by the Cambridgeshire district councils, which criteria will they use to override them and impose their own solution?

It is inconceivable that residents are being asked to make a decision on the future structure of Cambridgeshire without any financial information. No information is publicly available that compares the finances of councils, and we have seen no information on council income, expenditure, debt or council tax.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): My neighbour and hon. Friend is making an extremely effective case illustrating just how cosmetic the consultation is. His councillors’ concerns are shared by councillors in Fenland. Specifically, there is no detail on the different assets of local authorities, and no detail on key services that matter hugely. In Fenland, for example, we have free car parking. It is strongly valued by residents, but there is no indication of how that would be protected. There is no alignment across the strategies. The council tax relating to Fenland has been frozen for the last

seven years, but the approach in Peterborough has been very different. This lack of detail makes the consultation deeply flawed, and my hon. Friend is right to set out his concerns.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. I will come on to the division of assets. There is such a staggering lack of detail that I do not know how residents can possibly hope to make a good decision based on all the information.

To gain an insight into the current finances, I have had to turn to the House of Commons Library, a resource to which the vast majority of people do not have access. Huntingdonshire, which my Huntingdon seat sits completely within, is the second largest non-metropolitan district council in the country. Last year, it had a negligible notional overspend, with a £2.175 million contribution to general reserves. It also has £35 million in the earmarked general fund reserves. To our north, Fenland has a growing budget shortfall from an overspend of £350,000 last year to a projected £1.4 million this year, rising to over £4.5 million by 2029-30. Nearby Peterborough has a projected budget gap of £4.1 million next year and £7.3 million the following year.

It is unacceptable that my constituents should have to bail out the spiralling debts of other councils. This would see revenue raised in Huntingdonshire being largely spent elsewhere. Cambridgeshire residents should be aware of the projected budgetary overspend of these councils before they are asked to express a preference on how they would like the new unitary authority to be structured. It is frankly irresponsible for councils to gloss over the financial implications of this decision without full transparency.

From the look of the finances as they stand, Huntingdonshire could well find itself propping up financially unviable unitary authorities, meaning that the work we have done and are doing to make Huntingdonshire a fantastic place to live and work may be undone, with revenue raised here used to pay for services elsewhere. Councillor Ian Gardener, Conservative, Alconbury and Kimbolton division, said:

“The major concern for me is that HDC could lose control of its well managed financial reserves, which could be used to mitigate the losses of less well run councils in the newly formed unitary authorities. Which would be to the detriment of HDC residents.”

Councillor Simon Bywater, Conservative, Sawtry and Stilton division, said:

“There is a real risk that HDC’s reserves could be pooled and redirected...forcing them to subsidise areas that may not have shown the same level of financial responsibility.”

What steps do the Government plan to take to implement a pre-nup so that current districts are protected? If they choose not to do so, we are likely to see a spending splurge, lest we have to spend money elsewhere after the reorganisation. It is imperative that it is clearly explained to residents how the different combinations of district councils will look from a financial perspective. How will the assets and liabilities of Cambridgeshire county council be disaggregated? On the one hand, a lot of the assets are held in South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge city, including development opportunities; on the other hand, there is circa £450 million-worth of damage on Fenland’s roads. Are assets and liabilities to be shared equally or kept in their geographical location?

I am keen to hear from the Minister on whether the Government will write off any of the debt currently held by district councils or the county council. What work have the Government done to look at how that will be distributed? Can he address my concern that this is being hidden from the general public, and that it should be made statutory that finances, particularly inherited debt, be published? To that end, what transitional support will be available to new unitaries that inherit significant debt, or are projected to inherit significant debt, between the decision this year and the implementation in 2028 and beyond?

Furthermore, a new funding system will be implemented in the 2026-27 financial year, with fundamental changes in the needs distribution, council tax equalisation and, crucially, a business rates baseline reset. It is therefore essential to model the proposed options on these forthcoming changes in order to understand how they will impact each unitary in 2028. Initial independent modelling suggests that Cambridge city council may lose 25% of total resources and South Cambridgeshire district council 35%—combined losses of £18 million due to the baseline reset.

That illustrates just how important a published impact assessment will be. To date, no impact assessment has been published. Cambridgeshire residents have no idea how local services will be impacted, for better or worse. Given that the issue is regularly raised by constituents in my mailbag, it is difficult to see how councils could fail to engage with their MPs as key stakeholders. We have no idea how the differing combinations of district and county council wards and divisions will be affected.

How will the new unitary authority boundaries affect school places? Will parents suddenly find themselves outside the catchment areas for their desired schools? Will a school on the other side of the unitary boundary suddenly no longer be an option? How will special educational needs and disabilities provision work? Will the two new unitaries be resourced adequately to enable the timely provision of education, health and care plans? Cambridgeshire currently has a terrible reputation for meeting the statutory timeframe.

Social care is a key factor and consideration for any new unitary authority. Cambridgeshire as a whole is lucky in that it has lower social care needs than many other areas of the country. However, given how other formulae work against Cambridgeshire, owing to the area’s population growth outstripping the outdated modelling for these formulae—often by 10 to 20 years, when we look at the Carr-Hill formula, fire and rescue service funding formula or police allocation formula—the impact of social care costs on Cambridgeshire should not be underestimated, even if the relative needs formula looks more favourable. With regard to the proposed options, what consideration will district councils be obligated to give to service scale versus financial viability?

From a healthcare perspective, we have already seen that Cambridge and Peterborough integrated care board is set to merge with Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB and Hertfordshire ICB. The 10-year health plan, announced only last week, makes it clear on page 13 that, under the proposals for a new operating model, the Government

“will streamline how local government and the NHS work together and make ICBs coterminous with strategic authorities by the end of the plan”.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Part of the Government's plan for local government reform is to align the ICBs with new mayoralties, as he just mentioned. Does he share my concern that the plan to merge Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB with Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Milton Keynes, despite there being no plans for a mayoralty to cover that area, is a complete waste of time and money that could be better spent fixing local healthcare gaps and patient care?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I wholeheartedly agree. We saw that only last week, when the 10-year health plan was rolled out. The Government would have known full well that this contradicted their previous stance. How does the Government's merging three ICBs together to make one of the largest in the country chime with the need to reorganise those same ICBs to reflect the 10-year health plan? Can the Minister confirm what the future of the new mega-ICB that includes Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB will be under local government reorganisation? Currently, this is completely contradictory.

Analysis of the proposed Greater Cambridge unitary of Cambridge city and South Cambridgeshire has shown that it would have a high share of total relative needs formula from environmental, protective and cultural services. Greater Cambridge would have the highest total share after the City of London, and it would be ahead of Westminster. The same analysis shows that the balance of service in any unitary containing Cambridge city would be very focused on non-demand-led services, and thus there would be a greater share of service delivery based on resident services and services for visitors and commuters.

Huntingdonshire district council states on its website that the new unitary authority should have a population of around 500,000, though that has since been confirmed by the Minister as a "guiding principle", not a target:

"We understand the need for flexibility, especially given our ambition to build out devolution and take account of housing growth".

Given the proposed housing growth across Huntingdonshire, it is vital that the council does not max out the population size.

Huntingdonshire's projected growth shows that it will be one of the fastest-growing regions in the fastest-growing county, but with several parts of Cambridgeshire expected to grow in the near term, with an increasing tax base and business rates, what modelling have the district councils conducted to ensure that the proposals put to the general public are balanced? The Government have suggested that population size is the main measure of sustainability for new unitaries, but to what extent has the projected growth been factored into those current proposals, particularly on the question of whether two or three unitaries would be preferable within Cambridgeshire? Even if the option were taken for three smaller unitaries, each between 275,000 and 300,000 people, what assessment has been conducted to ascertain the population size of each unitary in 2028, when they would actually come into effect? Furthermore, what would their size be once we see some of the projected growth? We could easily see the new smaller unitaries approach the 350,000 minimum size quite quickly.

Between 2021 and 2041, the Greater Cambridge unitary is projected to grow from 318,000 to 381,000. We could potentially see comparative growth across other parts of Cambridgeshire, where development continues at pace. In Huntingdon alone, we will see another 4,000 houses built at Alconbury Weald, with no commitment from the Government regarding a new east coast main line station at Alconbury Weald—a request I have made multiple times. I have discussed that with the Transport Secretary and asked for the current status of the plans from Network Rail, sadly to no avail. We will likely see up to 4,500 homes at RAF Wyton, now that the surplus Ministry of Defence land there has been designated as an MOD Trailblazer site. Between the two, we also have potential development at Hungary Hall. In excess of 10,000 homes in the area potentially means 20,000 to 40,000 additional people over the next 10 to 20 years. Coupled with the new defence technology cluster nearby, the travel to work areas will likely change dramatically. Going forward, we will potentially see Huntingdon as a centre of employment rather than a dormitory town for Peterborough, Cambridge or even London.

In 2032, we should theoretically be due a constituency boundary review. We will then see further disruption as constituency boundaries straddle new unitary boundaries, meaning yet more burdensome administrative upheaval, potentially leaving residents confused about who is representing them. Can the Minister confirm the smallest size of unitary that the Government will accept? To what extent will the Government include projected growth in their decision-making process, and over what period? In the event that current and/or projected growth figures do not meet the threshold, to what extent will a sound business case outlining the financial viability of the unitary take precedence?

There is much to cover on the various pitfalls of LGR—too much to cover today, arguably. There are still significant questions about how new unitaries will affect travel to work from one extreme to another, for those whose work takes them to Cambridge or Peterborough. There are questions about how unitary boundaries will impact school places and catchment areas for pupils close to the boundaries, how the availability of social housing will be impacted by different combinations of districts, with some owning their social housing stock and others not, and how South Cambridgeshire district council's ridiculous new four-day week for five days' pay will translate to the new unitary. Will the new unitary be a four-day week, or will those now on four-day week contracts be mandated to work five days? Will the whole thing be ripped up because SCDC will not technically exist any more?

Brett Mickleburgh, Liberal Democrat councillor for Godmanchester and Hemingford Abbots ward, has raised concerns that,

"a unitary authority will have huge seats/divisions with a single councillor struggling under an unreasonable case workload—compounded if they have a cabinet role. I fear the members allowance will only be sufficient to allow those retired, of independent wealth or aspiring career politicians to take office".

Brett makes an important point. To what extent have the Government considered that? How big will each unitary council seat be? How many councillors will there be? How will the seats be divided and boundaries drawn? Will they be bigger or smaller than the county divisions? Will there be one, two or three councillors per

area now that district and county council functions will be merged? Will we have district council elections in 2026? If we do not get an answer until the end of the year, we are doing a disservice to the candidates, who could have had months' more time in which to campaign.

I could go on. To roll out LGR with such little detail and so few answers does not augur well. It gives me and other Cambridgeshire MPs and councillors little confidence that this will be a smooth transition to larger councils that everybody feels is an improvement on the current structure.

I will leave the last word to one of our local councillors, and my main opponent in last year's general election, Labour and Co-operative Councillor Alex Bulat for St Ives South and Needingworth division:

"Among all these voices, Huntingdonshire local voices seem sidelined at best, if not ignored at worst."

11.19 am

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) on securing this debate on local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire. His speech was very thoughtful. He covered quite a lot of ground, including ICB boundaries, devolution and the fair funding review, so it might not be possible to get through all of it. However, I am sure that we will communicate further—maybe in writing—as a follow-up on matters that we cannot cover here today.

This debate is an opportunity to look ahead to what the future holds for the hon. Member's constituency, and indeed for local government across England. The Government are committed to resetting the relationship with local government, empowering local leaders to make the right decisions for their communities. We will work together to grow an inclusive economy, to reform public services and to secure better outcomes for local people.

As the Deputy Prime Minister said in her speech at the Local Government Association conference last week, true reform of local government means taking a long, serious look at the plumbing of local government, and we will not shy away from shifting local government on to a stronger footing. It is clear that the two-tier system of local government just does not work. We have heard from many councils that unitarisation or council mergers can help to strengthen local leadership, improve local services, save taxpayers money and improve local accountability.

Our plans for reorganisation will create structures that are simpler, more efficient and clearer to the public that local government is there to serve. This means that residents can access good public services without paying, as they do today, the two-tier premium. We must take the brilliant leadership being shown by district and county councillors across the country, and move it into local government structures that are simpler and more sustainable.

Local government reorganisation is already well under way. In March, we received interim plans for the 21 counties in the two-tier system that will undergo reorganisation. We have provided feedback to all areas as they develop their own proposals. Councils in Cambridgeshire and neighbouring Peterborough have a deadline of 28 November for final proposals to be

submitted to Government. After that date, the Government will consult on selected proposals, before making a final decision on which proposals to implement. The fastest possible timetable has elections to new authorities in May 2027 and the new authorities will then go live in April 2028.

I am sure the hon. Member will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to comment now on the specific boundaries that he mentioned or the proposals that have been developed at a local level, because that would run the risk of pre-empting decisions that are being made later in the statutory process. However, I can give clarity on some of the specific points that he raised.

First, the consultation that is taking place at local level by the councils as they develop their proposals ahead of submission to Government is important. Many councils are conducting such consultations. To be clear, such consultation does not replace the statutory consultation that the Government will conduct with the public in those areas that are affected, to ensure that we can gauge the public view on the range of proposals that are viable and meet the criteria.

On the question of whether elections will take place, which I know is an issue affecting many district councils, there is no intention, as things stand, to cancel or postpone any of the 26 programmed elections.

I suppose there is a challenge, and perhaps even a tension, about the degree to which Government here in Westminster should dictate to local areas across 21 counties—covering a third of the population of England—what is right for their area. However, we have said that we will reset the relationship, and that we trust local people to know their areas better. So, we want local councils and councillors to lead local government reorganisation in their area.

Of course we have a statutory role, and we will make sure that the criteria are adhered to and the consultation takes place. Surely, however, the hon. Member will agree that it is for local people, who know their area better than people outside it, to determine what type of councils, in terms of their size and coverage, are right for their area. That should not be determined centrally.

Steve Barclay: If it is the Minister's argument, as he has just set out, that it is not for Government to dictate the territory that would be covered, why do two different Government Departments appear to be dictating two different things? On ICBs, there is one geography, and then from his Department there are three options that cover a different alignment.

I will just take the example of transport. In Cambridge, there is the Greater Cambridge Partnership, which covers transport. Also in Cambridge, there is the metro Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, who covers transport, too. Cambridge city council and South Cambridgeshire district council also cover transport. The Oxford to Cambridge authority is looking at the rail link between the two. There are so many different bodies dealing with transport into Cambridge. We should avoid that situation for health, and make sure that health organisation aligns with local authorities.

Jim McMahon: I think we can agree on that, which is why the White Paper published in December said that we need to reconcile things now and have a much simpler system of regional government in this country.

[Jim McMahon]

The truth is that because it has been so fluid—some might say ad hoc—it has been allowed to develop in different ways in different parts of the country where there are overlapping boundaries when it comes to transport, the economy, the health service and local government. It does not make sense and makes it difficult for local people to know who to hold to account politically for decisions made on their behalf.

The White Paper is clear that we want to see boundaries aligned with ICBs and other public services. There is a role for local government in reorganisation. New unitary authorities will be created where workforce transfers take place, but there is no reason why authorities cannot work in partnership. There is no reorganisation taking place in Greater Manchester, for example, but the local authorities in Greater Manchester are today working on building a better model for children's residential care because they recognise that across the 10 councils they can provide a better service at a better cost with better outcomes. So we encourage partnerships to align across boundaries, and over time that will develop.

We recognise that a lot of boundaries across England have never quite made sense; they have always overlapped and been a bit disjointed, but we are starting from the founding principle that alignment makes sense. We should be careful, though, not to conflate. I find that quite a lot of conversations in Parliament conflate or amalgamate the conversations about mayoral devolution and local reorganisation. They have a relationship, of course, but they are quite separate processes.

On reorganisation, it is important that local people and local councillors are given the freedom and flexibility to do what is right for their area and put their best foot forward to make a submission to the Government. We will then consult on the proposals that meet the criteria in good faith. We will listen to what local people say, and that will be taken into account. There are a range of factors that we need to consider, which I will come on to shortly, but I think it is the right approach. This is not the Government letting go. We have defined the criteria in this round of local government reorganisation in far more detail than any other round of reorganisation in the last 20 years, because we know how significant it is to that reorganisation's covering 21 counties. But within those criteria and that process we have to allow for local areas to determine what is right for their area in partnership with local people. That brings me to another point.

The hon. Member for Huntingdon mentioned how disconnected Members of Parliament feel from the process. In every consultation and communication that

we have had in webinars, written confirmations and statements to Parliament, we have been absolutely clear—this is a minimum expectation—that when local authorities, particularly lead authorities, are developing proposals, going out to consultation, firming up their evidence base, and testing founding principles themselves, it is a minimum expectation that Members of Parliament will be part of that conversation. It is not acceptable, regardless of political affiliation at a local or national level, for MPs who have been democratically elected, and of course have an interest, not to be part of those conversations. I am happy to put that on the record, and to follow up with local authorities that Members of Parliament should be included. That does not mean that Members of Parliament will have the ability to prevent a submission. A local authority has to follow the statutory process. There could be points where there is disagreement, but at the very start they should at least be in good faith and discussions should take place. We extend that, by the way, to police and crime commissioners and other interested parties at a local level, too.

On the criteria that the hon. Member for Huntingdon mentioned, in the invitation that went out to local authorities on 5 February we set out the statutory guidance to support councils informing their submissions. The first was on population size. We said that as a founding principle 500,000 was where we wanted councils to start from, but it is clear that some have gone lower than that. If it is right for their area, they can make the best case in that context. Some have gone higher, and we want to allow that flexibility in the system.

On the point that the hon. Member mentioned about population size and population forecasts, it is for the local area to determine what their own housing growth forecasts are. If they want to take that into account as part of their submission, we would be open to that. I say that only because different areas are at different points in the process. Some have local plans, for instance, and some do not have local plans, but efficiency and financial sustainability, local public service delivery, community engagement and devolution should be supported, too. We are taking a partnership approach.

Of course we shall give guidance, and we have set that out clearly. We have been clear about what the Government's role is and what the local authority's role is. We believe that is the right thing to do. Ultimately it leads us to sustainable public services that are there to serve the public, who we are all here to serve.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Generative Artificial Intelligence: Schools

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of generative artificial intelligence in schools.

It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. You will not be presiding over a heated political debate this afternoon, and I hope this is a good opportunity to openly discuss the enormous change that is upon us. Throughout the education world, a lot of thinking is being done about artificial intelligence and its implications. Most of that thinking is being done by teachers, and I hope we will contribute to some of the wider system and policy questions today.

In a November 2024 omnibus survey, half of teachers said they had already used generative AI in their role; about a quarter said they had no plans to; and the rest either planned to or did not yet know. The most common uses of generative AI are creating resources, planning lessons and communicating with parents.

In the same survey, 6% of teachers said that pupils were permitted to use AI in the work they are set. It is hard to pinpoint an exact number, but it is fairly safe to say that the proportion of pupils actually using AI to some degree in their work is rather more than 6%. The survey data that we have, incomplete as it is, suggests that somewhere between one in three and three in four children are using AI to some degree, with some frequency, in their homework.

In this rapidly changing world, I commend the Department for Education for its guidance update in January and the materials that came out on 10 June, made by the Chiltern Learning Trust and the Chartered College of Teaching. Those materials are easily accessible, but that does not mean that masses of people have seen them. This remains an area in which a lot of communicating remains to be done.

The DFE guidance talks about balancing the safety considerations of AI with the opportunities. Those are definitely two considerations, but they are not the only considerations, nor are they the most obvious. We always have to remember that at whatever pace we work at in this place, or that Whitehall works at, kids will work at about six times that pace.

The four areas I will briefly cover today are two areas of opportunity and two areas of risk, where we need some caution. The areas of opportunity are workload and enhancing learning, particularly for children with special educational needs. The areas of risk are the need for discerning and careful use of generative AI by pupils and, finally, the impact on homework, assessment and exams.

Workload is a big issue for teachers. Historically, along with pupil behaviour, it has often been the No. 1 issue in teacher retention. In a 2019 survey, it was encouraging to see that the reported workload had reduced by about five hours a week, or an hour a day. However, workload remains a stubborn issue, and the biggest contributors have been planning and preparation, marking, and data entry and analysis. There is also

communicating with parents, dealing with behaviour issues and so on, but those first three all lend themselves to artificial intelligence.

In particular, the creation of teaching materials seems to be an enormous area of opportunity. Too many teachers spend their Sunday evenings at home, trawling the internet for resources to use during the working week, when much of that work could be done for them. I commend Oak National Academy for its work on the AI learning assistant.

As the Education Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), discussed just this morning, the national curriculum is, of course, a framework. It is not a precise set of things that children will learn, because we need diversity in provision. We therefore need to think about how AI can support that diversity. I hope the Minister will give us an update on the content store announcement of August 2024.

AI has plenty of other potential uses, such as for timetabling, for letters and emails home—although my special request would be that we do not add to the volume of communications that have to be consumed—and for report writing. But we need a clear code of practice, because for the trust of parents, and indeed of pupils, there needs to be clarity about when and in what ways generative AI has been used. Care will still be needed. How does a teacher tell children that they must write their own work, if that teacher is generating text through a machine?

The second area of opportunity is in supporting learning. There is clearly a lot of potential for learning personalisation, especially for certain types of special educational need, alongside the role of assistive and adaptive technology. For some subjects, AI will also be useful for dynamic assessment. But schools will have the same issue with AI as with all educational technology, which is that they generally do not have much idea which bits of it are any good. There are both great products and pretty low-grade products, and discerning one from the other is notoriously difficult. As with edtech in general, but even more so with AI, product development cycles do not lend themselves to randomised controlled trials to try to establish what is good. I suggest that schools require an extension of the principle established with the LendED product, which is made with the British Educational Suppliers Association: a sort of forum where teachers can see these products, distil the good and bad, and crucially get recommendations from other schools and teachers, because teachers tend to trust teachers.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): With the input of biased data, large language models are liable to produce inappropriate, biased or factually incorrect outputs. Does the right hon. Member agree that if generative AI is to be rolled out to schools, actions such as introducing statutory regulations must be taken to limit any bias or misinformation taught to children and young people?

Damian Hinds: Funnily enough, I agree with the hon. Member, though not necessarily about statutory requirements. It is certainly true—in fact, he inadvertently leads me on to my next point—that we need to be

[Damian Hinds]

careful and discerning in using these products. There are many risks, including the safeguarding risks inherent in technology, hallucinations, dud information and, as the hon. Member rightly says, biases.

There are some very direct and sharp risks to children. I am afraid that many misleading, unpleasant and cruel things can be done with AI. They can be done already but, as with so many other things, AI magnifies and turbocharges the problem. Some of those things can be done by adults to children; some of them are done by children to other children. We need to be very aware of those risks, some of which relate to existing practices and policy questions, such as how to deal with intimate image abuse and sexting. The problem further supports the case for a comprehensive school-day phone ban, to take cameras out of schools.

More generally, there is a need for media literacy and general discernment. I am reluctant and nervous to talk about media literacy, and more so about the phrase “critical thinking,” because it is too often conflated with the false dichotomy that occasionally comes up in the educational world: knowledge versus skills. Clearly, we need both. We need both in life, and we need to have developed both in school, but knowledge precedes skills because we can only think with what we know. However, it is really important in this context that children know how AI can make mistakes, and that they come to trust and know to look out for the correct primary sources, and trusted brands—trusted sources—rather than just stuff on the internet.

In the 2019 guidance on teaching online safety in schools, since updated, a fusion of the computing, relationships and citizenship curricula was envisaged. Children would be guided through how to evaluate what they see online, how to recognise techniques used for persuasion, and how to understand confirmation bias, as well as misinformation and disinformation. The new edition of “Keeping Children Safe in Education”, which came out yesterday, lists disinformation and misinformation as safeguarding concerns in their own right for the first time. The online safety guidance also included the importance of learning why people might try to bend the truth on the internet and pretend to be someone they are not. That was a start, but at this technological inflection point, it needs a huge scaling up.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern about some of the dangers of using generative AI in the classroom, particularly around harmful content and activity? I read the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children’s “Viewing Generative AI and children’s safety in the round”, which gave examples of children creating deepfakes of other children in the class.

Does the right hon. Gentleman also share my concerns about children’s privacy and data protection, and the extent to which many of these edtech applications are created with the aim of minimising data protection? I understand he has concerns about regulation, but this seems to be almost entirely unregulated in the classroom. There is certainly a case for, at the very least, regulating data protection, data to third parties and—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. That was either several interventions or a speech, neither of which is permissible. I urge all participants to keep interventions brief.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) should not misunderstand me, as I am not against regulation. His points about data protection and privacy are really important, although they are probably too big to fold entirely into this debate. His first group of points and what the NSPCC talks about are the same risks that I am talking about.

There is an even broader point, as there is already a lot of blurring between fact, fiction and opinion online. There are all manner of news sources and influencers, network gaming, virtual reality and augmented reality, the metaverse—the whole concept of reality is a little hazier than it once was. With these machines, which in some cases almost seem to have a personality of their own, there is a danger of yet more blurring.

We all shout at our PCs sometimes. Indeed, adults using AI may start to give human form, which is called anthropomorphism, to the machine they are interacting with—I occasionally try to be polite when I interact with one of these interfaces. Apps such as character.ai take that to another level.

We have to think about the impact on children in their most formative years—on their sense of self, their understanding of the world and their mental wellbeing. That includes the very youngest children, who will be growing up in a world of the internet of things and connected toys. It will be that much more important to draw a line between what is real, what is human, and what is not. In time, when the system has had enough time to think about it—we are not nearly there yet—that may be yet another area for regulation.

Finally, I come to the most immediate risks, around homework, assessments and exams. Colleagues may already have had a conversation in which a teacher has said, “Isn’t it brilliant how much so-and-so has improved? Oh, hang on—have they?” They now cannot be absolutely certain. There are AI detectors, but they are not perfect. They can produce false positives. In other words, they can accuse people of plagiarising using AI when they are not. In any event, there is an arms race between the AI machine and the AI detector machine, which is deeply unsatisfactory. Of course, that is where the teacher’s skill comes in, because there is always classwork to compare. Most importantly, there is always the exam itself, and we need to keep it that way.

The safest way to protect the integrity of exams is for them to be handwritten in exam conditions, with a teacher walking up and down between the desks—not quite for everybody, but for the vast majority of children, except where a special educational need or disability requires another arrangement. There are also subjects, such as art, design and technology and computer science, where it would not be appropriate.

There is already a big increase in access arrangements for exams. A particular type of adjustment, called a centre-delegated arrangement, does not need approval from the exam board, so no data on it is available. One such centre-delegated arrangement is to allow the child to use a keyboard—in the rubric it is called a word processor, which is a delightfully archaic term.

If children are allowed to use a keyboard, spellcheck and AutoText are disabled, to ensure safeguards are in place—but it is still true that most people can type faster than they can write, so there is a disparity in the two formats. The regulations require a school's special educational needs co-ordinator to decide whether a child is able to use that facility, but they are still quite loose in that they refer to the keyboard being the child's "normal way of working at school".

I would love the Minister to say a word about that. The Department for Education should be clear that, where such arrangements are made, it should be because of a special educational need or disability.

Afzal Khan: One concern I am beginning to feel is that, while acknowledging that the technological development is important, an over-reliance on generative AI runs the risk of limiting open-mindedness, independent thinking, literacy and creative skills. Does the right hon. Member agree that we must protect key critical thinking and reasoning skills in children and young people, for their future and ours?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman makes his point lucidly and well, and I think it stands on its own feet.

The bigger issue with more children taking exams on a keyboard rather than on paper is that exam boards would like to move entire exams online for all children. In a sense, that would be better because it would be equal; there would not be any difference in the speed of writing and typing.

Some might ask what is wrong with that, as long as it is the same for everybody, and as long as the internet, spellcheck and autocorrect are disabled. I suggest there would still be multiple types of security risk in having exams done en masse online. There is also a wider problem: if a GCSE is done online, how will students do a mock GCSE? They will do it online. How will someone do a year 9 exam? Hon. Members can see where I am going with this. It cascades further and further down the age range, until eventually people question why they are learning to write with a pen at all. Some are already asking that question.

By the time my child is an adult, people will not even be using a keyboard, but other types of communication and interface, and this will seem very archaic. There are important advantages to learning to write by hand, however. Handwriting and writing are not the same thing. The way someone develops their handwriting, learning the strokes and patterns and how letters join together is an important part of learning the skill of wider writing. There is also plenty of evidence that making marks on a page by hand aids visual memory. Handwriting helps us to understand things because, as we write, we synthesize what we are reading or hearing into our own words. There is even evidence to suggest that people do better in tests and have better recall as a result. Maintaining handwriting is therefore important in its own right, quite apart from maintaining the security and integrity of examinations.

DFE guidance states that teachers should keep up to date with this rapidly changing world. That is a tough ask. Over the months and years ahead, the Department will have to do a lot to provide teachers and school leaders with bite-sized, easily digestible chunks of information to keep them up to date with this rapidly

changing area. A recent Ofsted report, on 27 June, said that there was not yet enough evidence to conclude what constitutes a good use of AI in schools, but that one common approach among schools that seemed to be using AI successfully was to have a champion who spreads good practice throughout the school. That seems to me a good approach.

Sarah Hannafin of the National Association of Head Teachers stated:

"The technology should be introduced gradually...to maximise its potential and mitigate the risks."

That is an important point. Most immediately, I implore the Minister not to allow all exams to go digital en masse, except for certain subjects where that makes sense, and except, of course, for an individual child for whom that is the right thing because of their special educational need or disability.

I contend that there should be no rush to move to online exams. There might be opportunities, lower costs or easier administration involved, but there are certainly also risks, some of which are immediate and some of which would manifest only over time and might take us a long time to spot. If we do move en masse to online exams and away from pen on paper, I promise hon. Members that we would never go back. A cautious approach is what is required.

2.52 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on securing this important debate.

The use of generative artificial intelligence in education is a critical challenge of our time. As parliamentarians, we bear the responsibility for ensuring that this new technology is harnessed to support teachers and examining bodies and to enhance learning, while safeguarding our children's intellectual and emotional growth and not undermining the critical skills and values they need for the future.

Although generative AI presents some distinct challenges, it sits within a suite of technology-related issues that have all significantly changed the landscape in which our children are growing up and being educated, including the use of smartphones and other devices and engagement with social media. Every generation of parents and teachers has to support children and young people to navigate something that they did not have to contend with in their own childhood—and so it is for our generation. We must understand the power and potential of AI and other technologies, and we must understand in detail the risks and threats. We must also give our teachers and school leaders, our children and young people the tools they need to harness its potential with good ethical and critical thinking, while safeguarding their wellbeing.

Generative AI holds immense promise across a range of applications in our schools. There are important potential applications in the context of rising teacher workloads, which it is vital to address if we are to improve the recruitment and retention of teachers in our schools; but the use of AI for lesson planning, assessment and marking cannot be a substitute for subject experts who work in person with their students, providing tailored teaching to meet the needs of individuals in the classroom.

[Helen Hayes]

It is important that older pupils have a good understanding of the benefits, weaknesses and threats of emerging technologies such as generative AI. At its best, generative AI offers the potential to accurately summarise lengthy and complex technical texts in a way that is easy for a layperson to understand, or to generate computer code to achieve much more than an experienced computer scientist could over a period of months. There are potential applications for children with special educational needs and disabilities, too.

However, the promise of AI comes with potential peril. Over-reliance on generative AI risks eroding children's critical thinking and independent learning. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology warns that AI tools, if misused, can reduce students to passive recipients of unreliable, biased and potentially hallucinated pre-generated content, undermining the cognitive struggle essential for deep learning. Studies suggest that excessive dependence on AI for problem solving can weaken analytical skills, as students bypass the iterative process of reasoning and reflection. The ability to assess ideas critically for their origin and value could be fundamentally affected. That is particularly concerning for subjects requiring interpretive or creative thought, where AI's efficiency may shortcut the development of original ideas. If children lean too heavily on AI, we risk nurturing a generation skilled at consuming information, but less adept at questioning, critiquing or innovating.

Beyond our schools and classrooms, generative AI has potential in aiding and assisting exam boards in the accurate and fair assessment of public examinations and becoming an invaluable tool in our universities and workplaces. However, alongside the potential benefits, we are already seeing significant harms that AI can inflict through the generating of convincing altered deepfake images and their use in the appalling bullying and exploitation of some children and young people.

That concern is amplified within the broader context of screen time. Our predecessor Education Committee's inquiry into screen time last year revealed a 52% surge in children's screen use from 2020 to 2022, linked to declines in attention, sleep quality and mental wellbeing. Generative AI, which is often accessed via screens, must be integrated thoughtfully to avoid exacerbating those trends. Vulnerable children, those facing socioeconomic hardship, neurodiversity or mental health challenges, are particularly at risk. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology briefing on AI and wellbeing notes that those students may benefit most from AI's accessibility, but they are also most susceptible to its potential harms, such as reduced agency or exposure to inappropriate content.

We are already seeing the profound impact of AI in education, from schools rethinking their approach to homework to universities reverting to traditional in-person exams. Sam Illingworth of Edinburgh Napier University has argued that we need to think about how we can tailor the assessment of students and provide better and more creative support for their learning, and work to that end is ongoing in universities. These shifts may signal that we need a more fundamental re-evaluation of how we design learning and assessment in this new technological era.

What must be done? First and foremost, the Department for Education must provide clear and robust guidance on the ethical use of generative AI in schools. Our predecessor Committee rightly called for urgent legislation to regulate AI, warning that the pace of technological advancement risks outstripping our ability to legislate effectively, with potentially harmful consequences for children. It is imperative that AI developers are held accountable for how children's data is used, particularly where those children are below the digital age of consent. Indeed, there are strong arguments, which I support, for increasing the digital age of consent from 13 to 16. Safeguards must be put in place to ensure transparency in AI-generated content, prevent over-reliance on automated tools and preserve essential skills such as critical thinking.

Secondly, my Committee has recently heard about the importance of prioritising digital literacy across the board. Teachers, students and parents need training to understand AI's mechanics, biases and limitations. An informed educator can guide students to use AI as a tool for exploration, not a crutch for answers.

Finally, we must champion the irreplaceable value of human connection. No algorithm can replicate a teacher's empathy, a student's curiosity or the spark of collaborative discovery. AI must be used to enhance those relationships, not to supplant them.

The choices we make today will shape the minds of tomorrow. If we fail to balance AI's potential with its risks, if we fail to regulate appropriately, if we fail to fully understand this technology and the opportunities and risks it presents, we may compromise the critical thinking skills that define an educated society and we may undermine the values that we seek to promote. Let us act decisively to harness generative AI as a servant of learning, not its master.

3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy, and I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for leading the debate.

I have to confess that I do not understand all about AI, but I do understand the need for it and that the technology is changing. Modern society has a new way of doing things, and I am not against the idea of doing that; it may just not be for me. But I do have children, and grandchildren in particular, who are so technically minded at a very young age. The knowledge they have absolutely overwhelms me, as they look to a society in which they want to play their full part.

I was just sitting here thinking about an Adjournment debate in the main Chamber a couple of years ago. Kevin Brennan, now in the House of Lords, gave a speech, and he never let on till the end of it, when he said, "That speech was written by AI." Kevin was sitting behind me; I said, "Kevin, what do you mean?", and he told me what he had done. His speech was a normal speech, except for one thing: it did not have the characteristics of Kevin Brennan. Those of us who know him know that Kevin is quite a witty guy, and his humour and other characteristics were not present in that speech. But it was a speech, done by AI, and he did that, not because he was committing himself to doing all his speeches with AI; he did it because he wanted to show the potential of AI. I always remember that. I said

to him afterwards, “Kevin, I’ll always be writing my speeches. I’ll never be doing what you’re doing,” but that is just me talking personally.

We are seeing a progression within our schools, which must be used safely and appropriately, so it is great to be here to discuss this. My key issues are the very issues of protection, safeguards and using AI as we can, with the good potential that the right hon. Member referred to, but, at the same time perhaps, with that wee question mark in my mind. To give the Northern Ireland perspective, as I always do, only last month in Northern Ireland—just four weeks ago, to be precise—Ulster University, in conjunction with the Education Authority, launched a study whereby 100 teachers would trial Microsoft Copilot and Google Gemini in the classroom. So, it is part of life—and I suspect it will become a big part as we move forward. The study indicated that teachers themselves reported time management benefits, especially in admin and planning, but they also referred to a strong need for professional and thorough training. In a way, it was perhaps very much a first experience—or maybe not for them all, in all honesty. They outlined that this is something that needs to be done very thoroughly, with great protections and safeguards.

My colleague the Minister of Education in Northern Ireland, Paul Givan MLA, has announced a literacy programme in which 15,000 pupils will use the Amira Learning AI tutor to assess how AI can support literacy training, especially with disadvantaged children and SEND children. This is an area where we can potentially do better, and AI could be the means to ensure that SEND children and disadvantaged children have that opportunity. Again, the potential benefits are there.

Although the prospects of benefiting children with this sound wonderful, and while Northern Ireland very much seems to be taking a giant step in this transition, there are undoubtedly concerns that teachers, parents and, indeed, pupils may have. For example, staff have raised concerns about accessibility for them personally in their job. For teachers from other generations, such as my own, AI is a minefield. I suppose what I am really saying is that we need to be taking small steps, maybe not giant steps, to make sure that the way forward is measured carefully, in the way that I would like it to be. In addition, I am sure parents want reassurance that their children are being taught properly and that a computer program is not their only source of learning. We need to make sure that does not happen and that if children need personal support from a teacher, they are still able to get it. Although AI will undoubtedly take steps forward, the old way of social interaction and being taught by teachers, and classroom assistants for those with special needs, must also be there.

We had a discussion with some American students recently about the use of AI. It was clear that, although AI can prepare a great briefing, it does not give one the knowledge found in reading and in finding pertinent reports. The hard graft of investigation and studying that we do for our speeches is an example. Although AI could give me a speech for this Chamber, it could not give me the secondary knowledge that I have gained in preparing for the debate. AI has a role, but it can never be a stand-alone role.

Many will share concerns similar to mine. We should be proud of the fact that we are able to progress digitally but also safely. The Minister is a good man,

and he understands this issue much better than me, but I hope he can understand my concerns about safeguards, protections and the ability for the right information to feed into the process. I seek that assurance from him, especially in relation to educational settings across the United Kingdom.

We are doing some things on AI in education in Northern Ireland through Paul Givan. I know that the Minister talks to Paul Givan on a regular basis, but I think it is important in any debate on any subject that the interaction between the four regions is constructive and positive. I have to say—I am not being disrespectful—that I find the Minister is all here, and I wish to see more engagement with Northern Ireland Ministers from him.

Children need to be equipped for an AI world, but also for the real world. Face-to-face interaction and the need to think outside the scope of a question is simply non-negotiable, and I am pretty sure that the Minister will agree with me on that.

3.7 pm

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing this debate. I know he is incredibly passionate and pretty knowledgeable about this subject. I also thank the Government for the AI opportunities action plan.

I appreciate that there is a lot of fear around AI. Did we not learn from “Terminator” 1, 2 or even 3? However, AI does exist, and generative AI is already reshaping education whether we legislate for it or not. It is our duty to ensure that these technologies are used ethically and deployed equitably, and that they enhance the role of educators, not replace them.

We are seeing countries around the world use AI in schools. South Korea is leading the way: 30% of its schools now use AI-powered digital textbooks; AI is already being taught as part of the national curriculum; and it is considering making it a separate subject at all levels. Its goal is to become a global leader in AI talent, and I believe that the UK can learn a great deal from it.

We cannot ignore AI. It is changing how students learn and how we assess them. We need to think carefully about our current exam systems and whether they are still fit for purpose in this new world. Generative AI could be a big part of the answer. It could help teachers by saving them time, tailoring lessons to each student and making them more engaging, especially for students with SEN. That is a massive issue in Swindon. We are seeing a rise in children who have SEN. They need tailored lessons and support, so I really believe that this is something that we should be doing.

Almost half of teachers and most young people are now using these tools. Many teachers say that they help them to create lesson plans and materials and reduce their admin work. I think we can all agree that that is good, but with the opportunity comes responsibility. There are serious concerns around academic integrity and data privacy. I want to highlight the work of the Institute for Ethical AI in Education, which has created a practical framework to help schools and Governments use AI safely and fairly. This is not just about schools, but about holding companies to account. If the product is not ethical, it should not be used in education. AI is still new and evolving, but with careful planning, training

[Will Stone]

and investment we can make sure it becomes a tool for inclusion and creativity. We owe it to our young people to get this right.

3.10 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing this important debate.

AI use in schools has reached a critical juncture. According to Ofcom, 50% of children aged eight to 17 have already used AI tools. The Alan Turing Institute and LEGO report that 60% of teachers actively use generative AI. We have heard many colleagues across the Chamber today reference that. AI is everywhere, whether through explicit choice or integration into Google Workspace, Microsoft 365 Education and countless educational tools. The Government have funded AI development for teachers to speed lesson planning and reduce workloads, positioning AI as central to educational transformation. Yet, as 5Rights highlights, no statutory standards currently govern genAI use in schools.

The Government's own AI opportunities action plan fails to address children and their rights and development needs, despite encouraging schools to

"move fast and learn things"

when piloting these technologies. With AI's undeniable rise, the Government really need to address this head on, hence today's debate is incredibly important.

We have heard across the room today that AI presents genuine opportunities for education. For teachers struggling with budget cuts from the last Conservative Government, AI can ease the burden of lesson planning, marking and administrative tasks. For students, responsible engagement with these technologies prepares them for tomorrow's world of work. Those who understand technological change and harness AI effectively will thrive in today's and tomorrow's economy. They will be prepared for an AI-dominated world where critical thinking and analysis become even more vital.

However, serious concerns are emerging about generative AI's impact. Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology research indicates that

"over-reliance on AI tools could lead to the erosion of teaching, writing and reasoning skills".

The MIT Media Lab recently released a study that was so urgent, it published it before peer review. The study showed that students using ChatGPT showed dramatically lower brain activity than those writing without AI. Brain scans revealed a 32% drop in cognitive load. After just weeks of use, 83% could not even remember what they had supposedly written. That is really concerning information. We can understand why it was so keen to publish it, despite the fact that it had not yet been peer reviewed.

The voices of concern grow louder, UNESCO warns that AI roll-out is

"outpacing the adaptation of national regulatory frameworks."

Even industry leaders in the Alan Turing Institute acknowledge we have

"limited evidence on the impact of AI use in education on learners' development".

Evidence mounts about the negative effects of an unsafe online world. Research by 5Rights and the London School of Economics found that

"EdTech products used in schools are highly invasive of children's privacy and rely on the extensive collection of children's data."

As we heard earlier, the NSPCC has documented cases where generative AI created deepfakes of children in schools, and the Children's Commissioner has called for urgent action. This is particularly concerning given that many AI tools have not been developed with the younger audience in mind.

We Liberal Democrats call for a public health approach to the online world, including AI, to ensure that children remain safe online and can enjoy their childhood as intended. We also call on the Government to introduce a safer screens taskforce that would be empowered to ensure a public health approach to children's social media across all Government Departments, and lead research into social media's impact on children. We believe that the UK must lead the world in building a future where AI is developed and deployed ethically, transparently and in the public interest. We favour a workable and well-resourced framework for AI that can promote innovation and protect individual rights and freedoms. We call on the Government to establish a cross-sector AI regulator, combining flexible, ethical oversight and technological expertise to ensure that the UK keeps pace with rapid technological advances.

As Liberal Democrats, we also believe that we should modernise our curriculum to face 21st century challenges, offering an approach that allows students to explore pathways in science, maths and the arts without prejudicing their learning in other disciplines. Such a curriculum must embed digital and data literacy throughout children's learning experience, preparing every single student for a future shaped by AI and new technologies.

I have a few questions for the Minister, which I hope he will answer in his remarks. What skills audit has been done to ensure that we have the right skills for AI, and for working alongside AI, such as critical thinking? We welcome DFE guidance that pupils should only be using generative AI in education settings with appropriate safeguards in place, such as close supervision. But where is the implementation guidance, and where are the resources for schools to achieve this? Finally, how will this Government prevent AI from widening inequality between those with access and those without?

Once again, I am grateful for being able to take part in this debate, and I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire for bringing it to this Chamber. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments, which I hope will be just the start of an ongoing conversation on this incredibly important issue, as we look to the future of our young people.

3.16 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I knew as soon as my brilliant and learned right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) secured this debate that it would be well worth attending and very interesting, and it has proved to be exactly that. It builds on important work that has already been done by POST and Ofsted, as well

as by the DFE officials who wrote the recent guidance, and it further increases the level of public debate and improves our knowledge.

I would echo a lot of what other Members have said about the pros and cons, the opportunities and threats, because there is a delicate balance between those things. We heard really good speeches from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Swindon North (Will Stone), as well as a brilliant intervention from the hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm). There was a particularly good and thoughtful speech from the Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), with which I agreed 100%, as indeed there was from the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin).

Of course we want students to learn about AI and how to use it effectively. It is a very effective research tool in the right hands. On the other hand, we want them to understand that it is not always right, despite its godlike quality and the incredible smoothness with which it lies. We must also teach them to understand that it is not a substitute for original thinking. They must have the ability to do their own research. We must avoid having cardboard cut-out students who regurgitate a particular way of framing issues.

We heard from the hon. Member for Guildford about the MIT study that used brain measurement experiments to show a decline in critical thinking. Of course, this debate is nested in a wider debate about the use of screens and technology by our students and educators, and that study reminds me of a similar one, which discovered that a student's simply having a smartphone on them reduced their retention of information from an educational video. The effect of these things can be quite subtle. It was not being on the phone, but just having it on them that reduced their attention. The wider rewiring of childhood and of the student experience is operating on several levels, of which AI is just one.

According to a study by the Higher Education Policy Institute, more than half of HE students now use AI to help write essays—I suspect that figure is rather higher by now. One vice-chancellor I spoke to said that he thought we would end up going back to more handwriting in exams to avoid cheating, which is now incredibly present. I was amused by a social media post the other day that said, “Lots of discussion about how on earth we will spot AI cheating,” with an image of an essay that began with the wonderful words, “I cannot help you to write this assignment. It would be wrong of me to do so.” It had clearly been written by a very honest AI, but it had been handed in by the student none the less.

It is perhaps more important than ever that we teach students to understand what is real and not real in the online world. There has recently been discussion about a new band called The Velvet Sundown. Sir Jeremy, I cannot quite place when you came of age—perhaps somewhere between the new romantics and the grunge period. I will not assume where you stand on that spectrum, but this band sounds a bit like a mashed-up version of Creedence Clearwater Revival. It sounds okay—it is not bad—but it is very derivative, and all the pictures of the band look kind of AI-y. However, the band denies it. The interesting thing about the episode is that it is not possible to say definitively whether it is

real or not—and there will be many such cases, some of them very important. We see AI-generated images from the middle east; people are told that things have happened when they may not have happened. We see fake bot accounts playing a role in our politics. A surprising number of accounts in the UK suddenly disappeared during the recent Israeli strikes on Iran. What does that tell us about the interference in our democracy empowered by AI?

Of course, there are opportunities in students' use of AI, but there are also risks. There are important benefits from learning to handwrite. A surgeon I spoke to recently talked about his worries about the future, with fewer children learning the fine motor skills that are learned with handwriting.

Let me turn to educators' use of all this. It is very exciting. If someone had asked me 15 years ago about AI in schools, and technology in schools and universities more generally, I would probably have been unabashedly, straightforwardly enthusiastic. The attractions are obvious, whether for the production of lesson plans, the personalisation of learning, the translation of languages, the avoidance of marking and repetitive work or the reduction of workload, which is crucial for teacher retention. It is all very exciting, but of course there are risks, which have been illustrated well in the debate.

I am excited by some of the models that bring human judgment together with AI. It is probably slightly invidious to single out a particular group, but No More Marking is an interesting model. It is doing lots of things that bring together teacher judgment and AI tools. It talks about “human in the loop” models, and that is potentially the way that these things will need to move forward.

Of course, we have also heard about the difficulties of assessment in the new era. We have talked a bit about the dangers of AI use in exams in which computers are used. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire talked about the quaint language in the legislation, which refers to “word processors”. Perhaps word processors are exactly what we need. For those who really need it, we should dig out some of those things from the '80s and '90s that can do nothing other than function as a typewriter. However, it is not just about exams. The interim curriculum and assessment review included a suggestion that we might have more coursework, but while there was always scope for cheating and social biases in coursework, those dangers have increased. I think that Becky Francis, who is running that review, is conscious of the risk. I share my right hon. Friend's scepticism and concern about the move to an all-online examination system, and the way that would iterate back through our school system. I think that is a very dangerous way to go.

The Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, brilliantly explained some of the wider concerns about cognitive and attention damage caused by some of these tools. There is a famous philosophy experiment by John Searle called the Chinese room. He talks about what machines do and do not experience, and what they can and cannot do. In the experiment, Chinese characters are fed into one end of a box, somebody looks them up in a table and feeds Chinese characters out of the other end of the box, and nothing is truly understood inside the box; it is just inputs and outputs. In a sense, we run the risk of putting all our children in the Chinese room,

[Neil O'Brien]

where they are set a task, perhaps even using AI, they go away and use AI to find a plausible answer for their coursework, exam, homework or whatever, and the real cognition—the real learning—does not happen in the middle of that process.

We have also talked about some of the other risks, and that brings me to the final thing that I want to talk about: the fact that this debate is nested in a wider set of discussions about screen time, social media and students' relationship with technology, all of which are magnified by AI. I will not relitigate the discussions we have had with the Government about our case for a complete ban on phones in our schools. I think that the AI dimension makes the argument stronger.

AI makes some of the issues about deepfake porn and intimate image abuse even more acute than they already were, but this thing about cognition and AI that we have talked about is also an issue about technology more generally. It is known that people understand better and take in more information from material written on a piece of paper than that on a screen. There are wider issues, to which I have already referred, about what the excessive use of technology does to a person's ability to take on board information—and, indeed, to present it.

Recently, the DFE surveyed last year's GCSE students and their parents about the things they wanted students to have done more of at school. One of the things at the very top of the list was presenting information, public speaking and marshalling an argument. That is one of the great 21st-century skills—it is what we are all doing now. I pity the wonderful and long-suffering people who write *Hansard*, because my speech today consists of a series of scrawls and arrows; it looks like a Jeremy Deller painting, and they will never decrypt it. The ability to put together an argument, and not just to use Ctrl+V and Ctrl+C, is one of the critical skills of the 21st century. It is vital that we do not drift into a world in which we do not learn those skills because we outsource our thinking to an outboard motor in the form of AI.

I hope I have brought out some of the pros and cons in this important debate. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said at the very start, this is not an issue on which there is a great degree of partisan conflict. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about how we can make the best of these exciting new technologies and avoid some of their downsides.

3.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. I thank my near-ish neighbour, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), for securing a debate on this important subject and for the constructive and collegiate way in which he has sought to conduct it. I thank all other Members for their interventions and contributions, including the Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for her insightful comments on challenges and opportunities and her helpful reminder of the Committee's work on screen time.

The Government believe that generative artificial intelligence presents exciting opportunities to improve people's lives, including by making our public services better. AI will support the delivery of the Government's plan for change and our opportunity mission. I agree with the comments of hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Swindon North (Will Stone) and for Dulwich and West Norwood and the right hon. Member for East Hampshire, about the potential for AI and technology to support children with special educational needs. There is a strong evidence base for the impact that assistive technology such as screen readers and dictation tools can have in breaking down barriers to opportunity for children with SEND.

If used safely, effectively and with the right infrastructure in place, AI can support every child and young person, regardless of their background, to achieve at school and college and develop the knowledge and skills that they need for life. AI has the potential to ease workloads, assist with lesson planning and free up time for high-quality face-to-face teaching. That is why we have put AI at the forefront of our mission to modernise the education system, to support our teachers and school support staff and to enable them to deliver better educational outcomes for our children. The Department's approach to generative AI in education is not static. It will continue to develop as our evidence and understanding grow.

The Government are leading the way. As announced at the Education World Forum in May, we will host an international summit on generative AI in education in 2026, bringing together education leaders from around the world to implement global guidelines for generative AI in education. We are committed to taking action that considers the risks, such as safety, and challenges, alongside opportunities and benefits. I assure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that those discussions include ministerial colleagues across the UK. He will know that education is a devolved matter, but I can confirm that I had discussions with my ministerial equivalent in Northern Ireland during my visit to Belfast last month.

We have taken action to make sure that AI can be effectively used in schools. We have funded Oak National Academy's AI lesson planning assistant, Aila, which helps teachers save significant time with lesson planning. Teachers report time savings of around three hours per week.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire was right to mention support through the effective use of AI. Further, we launched the content store pilot in August of last year, aiming to make available the underpinning content and data that are needed for great AI tools. Coupled with investment in the AI tools for education competition, we are supporting edtech innovators to develop effective AI tools that can reduce the burden of feedback and marking on teachers.

Last month, I attended London Tech Week and announced an additional £1 million in contracts to further develop existing prototype tools so that they are ready to be used in the classroom. I saw demonstrations of tools developed at a hackathon using our innovative education content store. I also saw at first hand the value of that store and the importance of making available the underpinning content and data to develop excellent AI tools for education.

We know that any advancement in technology presents risks as well as opportunities, which is why we are taking steps to manage these proactively, including through safeguards and by gathering robust evidence on AI use.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Morgan: I will give way, but I am conscious that the right hon. Gentleman was not here at the start of the debate.

Graham Stuart: I apologise for not being here at the start, and I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. To what extent is he concerned about biases within the models? Most of the major generative AI models are not produced in this country; they are developed in highly competitive circumstances and tend to be secretive about the data used to train them. Is that an area of concern? If he thinks there are going to be more applications in the education sphere and others, should the Government take steps to ensure greater transparency about the data upon which these models are trained?

Stephen Morgan: I will certainly take that back. I have had discussions with colleagues at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and others about reliability, safety and biases.

In November last year, with the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), I met leading global tech firms, including Google, Microsoft and Adobe, to agree safety expectations and to ensure that AI tools are safe for classroom use. We are also supporting staff to use AI safely. In partnership with the Chiltern Learning Trust and the Chartered College of Teaching, we have published online support materials to help teachers and leaders to use AI safely and effectively, developed by the sector, for the sector. They supplement the Department's AI policy paper—which we updated in June—alongside the information for educators about using AI safely and effectively, and the toolkit for leaders to help address the risks and opportunities of AI across their whole setting.

To develop our evidence base, we have launched two pilot programmes, the edtech evidence board and the edtech testbed. The first is to ensure that schools have the confidence to secure edtech products that work well for their setting, and the second is to evaluate the impact of edtech and AI products on improving staff workload, pupil outcomes and inclusivity. I want to assure all hon. Members that we will continue to work with schools to support them in harnessing opportunities and managing potential challenges presented by generative AI.

A number of hon. Members, including the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin), spoke about social media, and “Keeping children safe in education” is statutory guidance that provides schools and colleges with robust information on how to protect pupils and students online. The guidance has been significantly strengthened with regard to online safety, which is now embedded throughout, making clear the importance of taking a whole-school approach to keeping children safe online. The DFE is

working across Government to implement the Online Safety Act 2023 and to address technology-related risks, including AI in education. I can assure the hon. Member for Guildford that it is a priority for us to ensure that children benefit from its protections.

On the point that a number of hon. Members made about the impact on qualifications, assessment and regulation, the majority of GCSE and A-level assessments are exams taken under close staff supervision, with no access to the internet. Schools, colleges and awarding organisations are continuing to take reasonable steps to prevent malpractice involving the use of generative AI in formal assessments. Ofqual is, of course, the independent regulator of qualifications and assessments, and published its approach to regulating AI use in the qualifications sector in 2024. Ofqual supported the production of guidance from the Joint Council for Qualifications on the use of AI in assessments. That guidance provides teachers and exam centres with information to help them to prevent and identify potential malpractice involving the misuse of AI.

More broadly, the curriculum and assessment review's interim report acknowledged risks concerning AI use in coursework assessments. The review is taking a subject-by-subject approach to consider assessment fitness for purpose and the impact of different assessment methods on teaching and learning. I assure Members that the review is considering potential risks, the trade-offs with non-exam assessment such as deliverability, and the risks of malpractice and to equity.

Damian Hinds: There are two simple safeguards against misuse of AI in exams here in front of me. Will the Minister recognise that the best way to ensure the security and integrity of exams, and how assessment is done lower down the school, is—for the great majority of children, in the majority of subjects—for exams to be handwritten in exam conditions?

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): For the assistance of *Hansard*, I point out that the right hon. Gentleman was holding up a pen and paper.

Stephen Morgan: I will absolutely take away the point made by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire. I mentioned the role of Ofqual as the regulator and the role of the curriculum and assessment review, which is independently led. I look forward to hearing the outcomes of that review in due course.

In conclusion, I thank the right hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members for their contributions on this important topic. As I set out, the Government are committed to working with the sector to harness technology, which presents new and exciting challenges for the sector. We are also committed to ensuring that that technology is used safely and effectively—never to supplant the irreplaceable face-to-face work of our teachers and educators, but to support them to spend more time doing what they do best: teaching.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): The right hon. Member for East Hampshire, who moved the motion, has the right—if he wishes it—to wind up the debate, and he has about 20 minutes in which to do so. He is, however, under no obligation to use all or any of that time.

3.36 pm

Damian Hinds: I was happy not to wind up, but you have now made me stand up, Sir Jeremy. We have had a good and constructive debate. I am grateful to the Minister for his engagement, and to all colleagues for taking part.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Please accept my apologies for my late attendance in the Chamber. I was at the statement in the main Chamber on the Horizon scandal, which is perhaps another example of overreliance on technology—the human eye was identifying issues that people could see. My experience comes mostly from the higher education sector, where colleagues I have spoken to report far greater incidence of the use of AI. It is so clever that it is generating false sources to back up incorrect claims, but with incredibly plausible use of academic names in order to make profound points. I wonder whether we now face a reality in which AI might be used not only for marking, but for the marking of AI-generated material.

Damian Hinds: Indeed—computers talking to computers, with us as the facilitators. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

I will conclude by repeating something I said much earlier in my remarks. We should always remember that, at whatever pace we, the education system or, certainly, Government can work, young people will work at a pace six times faster. I am, again, grateful to the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered the use of generative artificial intelligence in schools.

3.38 pm

Sitting suspended.

Military Helicopters: Blood Cancers

4 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered military helicopters and blood cancers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I am here because of someone who joined the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm at the age of 19 because he had always wanted to fly. He always had the vitality to attack life and live it fully. He flew everything from Hawks to helicopters, and was a talented and committed pilot. By the time I met him, he was teaching new recruits to fly at RAF Cranwell, and was Navy snowboarding champion. In 2005, he went to Cornwall and was stationed at Culdrose, where he flew search and rescue on the old Sea Kings. I represent Truro and Falmouth. Cornwall is rich in forces personnel and veterans. Five and a half per cent of people in Truro and Falmouth have served, which is a much higher percentage than the national average of 3.8%. In Truro and Falmouth, 4,160 houses—more than 10%—have at least one veteran living in them.

He was living in Dorset when he suffered strange symptoms of blood clots in his lungs and legs in the spring of 2022. It took some time and persistence, but he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a rare blood cancer that affects only 5,000 people a year in the UK and is most common in men over the age of 85. He was lucky to have some pioneering treatment in Dorset and later at the Royal Marsden hospital, and he was able to trial drugs that were not yet available in the UK. Treatment is developing for blood cancers all the time, and it is important that people in the UK have access to new treatments. The cancer, however, returned, and he died a year after diagnosis, not long after his 54th birthday. His was not an isolated case. Last Tuesday, in the Welsh Senedd, Julie Morgan led a debate very like this one about RAF winchman Zach Stubbings. Zach died from multiple myeloma at the age of 46, after working many hours on Sea Kings.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her excellent, sterling efforts to advocate on behalf of serving personnel and veterans, seeking answers on the important matter of military helicopters and blood cancers. Does she agree that although the current in-house testing of in-service helicopters is welcome, we must ensure full transparency on the matter so that there is work done for those who have previously worked on those helicopters? The health and wellbeing of our serving personnel must always be front and centre.

Jayne Kirkham: I agree absolutely. The health of our serving personnel is and always must be paramount. I will move on to previous cases shortly.

I know of 180 cases with solicitors of crew working on military helicopters who have contracted cancers, many like those of the two people I mentioned. They worked on the Sea King particularly, but also the Westland Wessex, the Puma, and the CH-47 Chinook. Many of the crew affected were in touch with each other, as there seemed too many of them, and the cancers too rare, to be pure coincidence.

Last July, a report was written by the Independent Medical Expert Group on medical and scientific aspects of the armed forces compensation scheme, and was published in November last year. There was a section at the end on the potential link between exhaust fumes such as benzene from helicopters and blood cancers such as multiple myeloma. The findings were that the evidence and data available did not meet their threshold to establish a causal link between Sea King helicopter exhaust fumes or benzene and multiple myeloma, leiomyosarcoma, and soft tissue sarcomas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for introducing this debate. In the short time that she has been in the House, she has made a real name for herself as an assiduous MP, and I wish her well in her efforts. I concur with her comments. For us in Northern Ireland, helicopters were a part of life for getting troops in, and the police in and out. Numerous cases have been settled out of court for aircrew who developed rare cancers after being exposed to helicopter exhaust fumes. Given that certain types of blood cancer can take 10 to 20 years to manifest themselves, does the hon. Lady agree that steps should be taken to encourage those who served in specific aircraft types to seek screening and early intervention to provide better outcomes?

With your indulgence, Sir Jeremy, on the question I asked earlier, there is a specific case of the Royal Ulster Constabulary in Northern Ireland. Those who did undercover work carried battery packs on their backs by their kidneys. Of a patrol of 12 policemen who did undercover work, 11 are dead. There is a big case to answer for all that happened in relation to helicopters and service in Northern Ireland.

Jayne Kirkham: I thank the hon. Member. He is correct that some cancers can take a long time to manifest. Personnel, veterans and those around them in their communities have to be aware that this could show itself much later in their lives.

Solicitors for some of the personnel point to an RAF Institute of Health report dated March 1999. Although it did not establish a causal link, it contained recommendations to reduce crews' exposure to exhaust fumes. I understand that modifications to the aircraft to do that were not made, although they did take place on some other countries' military helicopters.

Six cases in this country, including Zach's, have so far been settled, and compensation paid by the Ministry of Defence without admission of liability. The Sea Kings were taken out of UK military service in 2018, and the Westland Wessex in 2003. Pumas and Chinooks are still in service, although the older aircraft have recently been retired. Sea Kings, however, are still in service in the private sector, and in military use in other countries. Three were donated by the UK to Ukraine in 2023. The MOD started testing exhaust emissions from military aircraft this February and has started the process of checking the records of personnel and veterans, to assemble data about how many have subsequently developed cancer. That will provide crucial data about who and how many people may have been affected.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for bringing this important matter to the attention of parliamentarians. It is not just about those who have contracted cancer. We know that other respiratory

problems may also occur. Does he agree that our veterans, who do so much for our country, need the benefit of additional research to ensure all aspects are covered, not just those who have suffered cancer? I pay tribute to her late husband for his effort and involvement in the military.

Jayne Kirkham: I agree with the hon. Member that all manner of injuries may have occurred due to people's military service. It is important that every single one is investigated to check if there is a link. I thank him for reminding me of that.

Due to the sheer number of records and the way they are stored, I understand that checking them could take weeks, if not months. There are a number of things that could be done by Government or further afield that could help people who are affected now or in future. First, the Government could help to spread awareness of this potential link. There will be men and women with initial symptoms of these cancers that can easily be missed. If the serving personnel and veteran communities, who served with or on these aircraft, are alive to the possible risks, they will know what symptoms to look out for and to raise with medics.

Secondly, GPS should be educated in places where there are clusters of personnel and veterans who have worked with these aircraft, so that they know to look for a military record when assessing symptoms that could indicate blood cancers. Thirdly, as well as signposting for veterans, a screening scheme for blood cancers could be set up for those who may be most at risk.

Fourthly, the MOD can move faster on assembling, analysing and releasing the data on how many service personnel and veterans have subsequently developed these cancers, so that more research can be done on causation, action can be taken and cases can be quickly concluded. The five-year survival rate for multiple myeloma is 50%, so people are dying before their cases are settled and many are still being turned down for compensation.

Fifthly, testing exposure to emissions must be done to take into account and replicate the real-life conditions that personnel were working under while undertaking search and rescue and military combat sorties. Sixthly, crews should still be advised to take sufficient precautions around aircraft, such as not standing directly in exhaust fumes and wearing personal protective equipment. Private companies and other countries that still use these aircraft need to be informed of the potential risks so that they can take steps to modify the aircraft and take other preventive action.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for bringing us this really important debate. Does she agree that the Ministry of Defence has a duty not just to those people who have already died or those people who are currently suffering but to their family, friends and loved ones? They are the backbone of so much of our armed forces. We need to make sure that this issue is dealt with efficiently and in an open environment so that if there is an ongoing issue, it is dealt with transparently.

Jayne Kirkham: I agree that these things should be dealt with as swiftly as possible and that it is not just about current personnel and veterans but people who may be affected in the future.

[Jayne Kirkham]

Military personnel think they know the risks of what they are taking on when they sign up to fly for the military or work as aircrew. What they could not realise is that there were, and possibly still are, other hidden risks. The people who risk their lives in the service of this country are courageous men and women, and they deserve the very best care and the very best chance.

4.11 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I thank you for allowing me to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) for securing this debate.

I begin by paying my deepest respects to the families, veterans and friends of all those who have tragically lost their lives to rare cancers in any way, shape or form. My hon. Friend's great courage in sharing her story and her wider efforts to raise awareness of the issue, about which we have talked many times in the past, are both humbling from my perspective and inspiring to us all.

I also thank Members of the House and of devolved Parliaments who have engaged on this issue, from Scotland to Wales and back again, particularly my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan). Their voices are vital to raising awareness, ensuring that robust debate takes place today and that actions that will come from it. This debate has highlighted the significant contribution of those who serve, and not just those who serve but the whole family who serves with them.

Although in some cases there are differing views, the debate has also been a stark reminder that the health and safety and wellbeing of our personnel must remain at the very heart of everything we do in defence. Our people are the backbone of our armed forces. As an individual who served for 24 years, I can guarantee that. They are the guardians of our national security and the embodiment of all our values. Their health and safety and wellbeing are not just priorities; they are at the heart of all defence work.

I have stood shoulder to shoulder with many colleagues in times of both triumph and sad adversity and have spent thousands of hours on helicopters and on the Sea King when it was in service—yes, I am that old. I know the pride of service but also the weight of its demands. That is why I am personally committed to ensuring that every individual who serves the country is treated as a highly valued member of our defence family.

The Ministry of Defence has made significant strides over the past year to enhance the support we provide to our personnel. We are working tirelessly to modernise and to improve our environment in defence, so that everyone can truly thrive and reach their full potential, but we are certainly not complacent. We know that there is more to do and accept that there is further ground to cover. Defence must continue, however, to do everything it possibly can to prevent, protect and defend our personnel from illness or injury in whatever form. We owe it to our people, their families and their loved ones to do that.

Beyond policies and programmes, our commitment must be reflected in our actions and our attitudes. Hopefully, Members have seen that in the last 12 months. It is about fostering a culture of care and respect where every individual feels valued and supported, and it is about recognising that our people are not just sailors, soldiers or indeed airmen; they are fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, friends and neighbours. That is why in February, after discussions with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, we launched a comprehensive programme to test the engine exhaust emissions of all our in-service helicopter fleet. That work builds on several sampling surveys—I note they were sampling surveys—conducted on Sea King helicopters between 1999 and 2015. Those previous surveys were part of the Ministry of Defence's long-standing commitment to our people, and to ensuring their safety at work. The surveys found no conclusive evidence to suggest that aircrew were subject to exposure levels above UK and international safety standards. I must emphasise that in most cases there is no evidence, in any way, shape or form, to suggest that aircraft today are causing issues with safety at work.

Jim Shannon: If the Minister does not mind my saying so, does he, and the Government, not have an obligation to ensure that all those who suspect they have blood cancer, or are worried that they may have it, are notified so that they are aware? They could then go and check, if they had not already done so. That at least should be done out of courtesy, good manners and respect, and for the protection of those who have served in uniform.

Al Carns: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Various programmes reach out to those serving, and those who are ex-serving, to highlight the risks of serving in defence. The lack of evidence linking the two together withholds us from being very specific but, generally, we push really hard for everyone in defence with any indication of an issue caused by service to get it seen to, and make sure that a claim goes forward.

The testing programme that we are putting in place is a proactive measure, reflecting our commitment to the highest standards of health and safety. It involves rigorous analysis of emissions from all operational helicopters, conducted in accordance with approved methodologies, ensuring that we have a clear understanding of any potential risks. We will not hesitate—and I will review this regularly—to take swift action if required, once that data is compiled.

This is about more than compliance: it is about meeting existing safety standards, and about trust. It is about demonstrating to our personnel that their safety is our unwavering priority. As part of that commitment, the independent medical expert group, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, was asked to review not just the UK but worldwide medical literature on this issue. It concluded that there was no evidence of a medical, causal link between helicopter exhaust fumes and rare blood cancers.

But, as I have mentioned to my hon. Friend, although that provides an element of reassurance, we remain vigilant and committed to monitoring any emerging evidence. That is critical. With the Department, I have been exploring options for a broader holistic review of

cancer diagnosis in service personnel, which should give us an iron-clad view of certain groups across defence. Throughout that process, we will keep personnel, their families and this House informed, but that is quite a comprehensive study.

Ayoub Khan: As a lawyer, I know there are always complexities around causal links, statistics and experts. There will always be a differing opinion. Does the Minister agree that anyone who has been part of the military should have available to them a legal team, funded by legal aid, to progress a claim—as opposed to a lawyer in a no win, no fee arrangement, which can bite into a substantial chunk of any compensation?

Al Carns: I will need to come back to the hon. Member on the specific legalities around that issue; I am not a lawyer. The war pension scheme and armed forces compensation scheme for individuals provide a route for compensation, in any way, shape or form. If there is a cause, as far as I am concerned there will absolutely be a redress or compensation scheme to support that, but I will write to the hon. Member on that issue. I want to be really clear on that last point. Although the IMEG's findings provide some reassurance, I want to be absolutely clear that I have been exploring options for a broader, holistic review of the cancers. We talk about the simplicity of finding the data, but I want to give hon. Members the scale.

There are 2.1 million veterans in the UK. We do not track cancers post-service for those veterans. In some cases, we do not even know where those veterans are. We do not know where the pockets sit. We can have a rough view, and make a guess, but we do not have the statistical data. The Valour programme, which we launched a while back, should help build up a clear understanding of our veteran demographic and the issues that veterans face, and help address them in the most programmatic way.

At the moment, the data does not exist. We will continue to work with independent experts in both the UK and, importantly, the US, to closely monitor and understand any emerging evidence around aircraft exhaust fumes and cancers. Let me reiterate: we will continue to monitor the data. We will monitor this issue closely and act decisively if concerns are identified.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his incredibly detailed and helpful responses. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) for raising this important topic with such clarity and compassion. She has been such a strong champion for our armed forces and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Her words today carry real weight. Does the Minister agree that there is clearly further vital work to do to ensure that all those who have served can access the care and support that they so need?

Al Carns: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. That is why we brought the armed forces covenant into law just two weeks ago, which now increases the number of Government Departments that have a responsibility to ensure that no one is disadvantaged because of their service from four to 14. That is fantastic.

It also enhances the support that we can give to those serving, their families and loved ones, the bereaved, and our veterans in general.

The safety of our people is non-negotiable. To the families who have campaigned so passionately to raise awareness of this important topic, I say this: “You have sparked a conversation. It has resulted in action. That action and detail will follow through in due course.” But we must make an active move now to collect the data, as broadly as possible.

Perran Moon: It is good news that the Minister has identified the requirement to collect data, but data collection can take a long time. Is he able to give any comfort on the timescale for building up the evidence base to determine whether there is a direct link one way or the other?

Al Carns: Unfortunately, we do not have a timescale at the moment. The scale of the task is hard to define. In terms of where the records sit, no one keeps records on veterans when they leave, apart from the NHS. Those records are held in different buckets all over the UK. It is going to take some time to pull that together and analyse it, and to work out whether there are pockets of very rare cancers from one part of defence, another part of defence or from other industries. Unfortunately, we just do not know. I will endeavour to get back to my hon. Friend once the scale of the task, which is gigantic, is conceptualised into time.

I come back to some points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth. On spreading awareness of a potential link, we work really hard to ensure that all service personnel have access to national cancer screening programmes. The MOD regularly runs health education campaigns—I hope that answers her earlier question—that encourage participation in national cancer screening programmes and raise awareness about cancers. Any veteran listening to this debate who has a cancer or a suspicion of cancer should please ensure they get it checked out and get the details recorded medically so that, if there may be a claim of any shape or form, that can be processed and they have the evidence, and it can get dealt with in the fastest and most efficient manner.

Educating GPs in places where there are clusters of personnel and veterans also goes back to data. There are clusters of veterans everywhere, ranging from 1,000 to 17,000, to 33,000 in Portsmouth. I will refrain from speaking about healthcare professionals any broader than the MOD in this forum, but I expect every defence medical service doctor to work in accordance with best practice, particularly National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, to identify individuals with symptoms that could be caused by cancer and to arrange the appropriate speedy follow-up for a specialist referral.

As well as signposting for veterans, a screening scheme for blood cancers could be set up for those who may be at most risk; that point was mentioned earlier. The current medical advice from IMEG is clear, but I am mindful that there is also no UK screening programme for multiple myeloma or other rare cancers. I have read some of the medical advice, and it looks like some of those screening processes can cause a percentage of harm—I will need to look at that in a bit more detail. Any harm from screening must be outweighed by the

[*Al Carns*]

benefits of screening. I go back to causation, and a focus on getting data on who needs to be screened and who does not. This is a deeply complex problem. I am not trying to confuse or confuddle the debate. We need to get to the bottom of this, but we need to do it the right way, and in the speediest, most efficient way.

The real-life replication of testing conditions was also mentioned. I want to reassure hon. Members that the testing we do on aircraft mirrors real life. In some cases, it is on the sampling equipment that is carried on the person, on the air crew and indeed the ground crew as well, because not just the pilots are involved, but the broader group. On whether they should still be advised to take sufficient precautions, I should say that I have spent a large proportion of my career in helicopters and stood in the exhaust fumes, which often used to heat us up in cold environments, which I would not recommend. I can attest to the quality and professionalism of the air crew. Indeed, the air crew as a whole are absolutely prepared with both PPE and understanding.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for his clarification about the testing of helicopters currently in service. But could he clarify something? Are there any provisions to conduct tests or derive data on previous models and those not in service?

Al Carns: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. Several studies were conducted on the Sea King. In 2010 a study was conducted during operational flying in Afghanistan—I was out there at the same time and probably on them every now and again. It found notable levels of exposure to carbon monoxide and nitrogen monoxide. However, all exposures were below levels considered to be harmful to health.

In 2013, there was a study on search and rescue Sea Kings that found exhaust gases were below levels considered harmful to health. A 2014 study measured exposure to elements of carbon. That was found to be well below the German exposure standard; unfortunately, no UK standard existed at the time. The highest exposure

was found to be at least less than a third of the concentration at which, based on the scientific knowledge, long-term repeated exposure could potentially cause ill health.

On the private companies and countries that still use these aircraft, the previous testing of the Sea King helicopters, which I just mentioned, did not have conclusive evidence that air crew were exposed to substances above UK-wide international limits—those German studies. Third party operators and countries may operate the aircraft differently and for different purposes, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth that they should ensure that they appropriately manage potential risks. I think we can help with that.

Although views differ, some of the evidence is over a long period of time. The subject group is huge, but it could be quite concentrated in some areas. I accept that we differ on some of the points today. I think we are united in our commitment to the health and safety of our armed forces and the protection of our people, our territories, our values, and indeed our interests, both at home and overseas. It is the most fundamental duty of defence. But that duty is only as strong as the people who uphold it. Our armed forces are not just a source of national pride; they are the lifeblood of our security, admired across the globe for their expertise, professionalism and unwavering commitment. Together we will ensure that the Ministry of Defence remains steadfast in its commitment to the health and safety of its people. Their safety is non-negotiable. Their wellbeing is not optional. It is an obligation.

I want to be clear that we are conducting testing now. We have looked at the reviews of previous testing, and there are options for understanding the broader cancer demographic among our veterans population. I have taken that on after the discussions with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth. We will do everything in our power to ensure that everyone who wears the uniform of this country is protected, respected and supported, because they deserve nothing less.

Question put and agreed to.

4.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

Down's Syndrome Regression Disorder

4.30 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Down's syndrome regression disorder research.

I am honoured to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy.

Down's syndrome regression in a mild form is not uncommon among people with Down's syndrome. It represents the loss of previously acquired developmental skills, which can include a slight decline in the ability to speak, reduced interest in social activity, or increased dependency on caregivers. With the right care or behavioural support, people experiencing mild regression often make a complete recovery, and yet in a small proportion of people with Down's syndrome, there is a much more dramatic and devastating loss of skills.

The regression such people experience is profound and the onset stark. Typically, it occurs in young adults, who almost overnight can retreat into themselves and become uncommunicative, catatonic and uninterested. As more medical professionals have encountered that aspect of Down's syndrome in the past 20 years, it has become known as Down's syndrome regression disorder.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. My constituent Ruth's son has DSRD, which has impacted his mobility, and means that he is prone to outbursts and is struggling to access education. It took a long time for Jude to be diagnosed. In the UK, I understand, no diagnostic or treatment plan is in place. Does my hon. Friend agree that research into the area is critical and that, were a neurotypical person to present with such regression, it would be treated as the medical emergency that it is?

Jen Craft: Without wishing to get ahead of myself in my speech, I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I also add my thanks to Ruth for sharing her and Jude's story. It had a significant impact on me when I heard it.

As I was saying, the condition is truly horrific, and it has been largely under-researched and overlooked. Existing studies of Down's syndrome regression disorder are few and far between. A study in 2021, "A systematic review" by Walpert, Zaman and Holland, examined the existing body of work. It identified that cases of extreme regression have often been wrongly dismissed as a late diagnosis of autism or early-onset dementia, but the nature of those conditions and the age at which they present are categorically distinct from regression disorder. Symptoms of autism present in early childhood, while dementia typically causes a gradual loss of skills from the age of 40 upwards. Neither of those condition profiles matches the dramatic loss of developmental skills in young adulthood caused by Down's syndrome regression disorder.

While no single cause has been identified, a clear trend is that significant life events can closely precede the onset of regression disorder. The 2021 review found that the most common example was a change in environment, such as leaving school, moving home or being separated from parents. Other life events, such as a death or serious illness, were also identified in the data. The lack of research presents challenges in diagnosis.

There is no consistency in the naming and definition of regression, hindering the clinical recognition and study that is a necessary precursor to evaluating treatment. As a result, no condition-specific care is available in the NHS.

Without proper understanding and in the absence of treatment, the human impacts of the condition are terrifying. Families helplessly watch their child become almost unrecognisable in the space of months, weeks or even days. Young people who have previously held down jobs or voluntary positions, and who led rich lives with interests, hobbies and friends, lose everything.

I will mention the story of Fran, who had just started secondary school when she was involved in an incident when one of her peers hurt and threatened her. As her mum Cristina described, the altercation caused Fran to shut down. Over a few days, she refused to engage in anything. Cristina was alarmed and took her daughter to the GP, who found high thyroid levels. Fran was prescribed thyroxine, but that only made her condition worse. She soon stopped talking altogether, and she only signed. Having been attending a mainstream school, she lost her independence. She wanted to be held the whole time, would not make eye contact, and was vacant behind the eyes. Cristina said she looked lost and sad.

After many more blood tests the thyroxine was stopped, and a referral to Great Ormond Street hospital was made for specialist help. As time went on, Fran slowly began to talk, read and write again, but nowhere near her previous standard. Great Ormond Street has carried out further tests, and the doctors believe that she has suffered trauma, which has caused her regression. Cristina says she just wants the old Fran back.

For Olivia's story, she was 16 when she began to display symptoms of regression. As her parents Dimitri and Viviana have set out, Down's syndrome regression disorder transformed their once vibrant, semi-independent daughter into someone they barely recognised. Prior to the onset of symptoms, she was engaged in school, participating in swimming lessons and actively engaging in family life. Now, her parents say it is as if she exists in a parallel world, spending most of her time isolated in bed and disconnected from life. She becomes distressed doing basic daily tasks, with screaming and physical resistance. They said their happy, loving daughter who once thrived has disappeared.

Through research online, Dimitri and Viviana identified Olivia's condition as potential regression, and found themselves in the unprecedented position of having to educate healthcare professionals about the condition. Since, the paediatrician and neurologists have agreed with that diagnosis. As the mother to a daughter with Down's syndrome, I cannot begin to imagine the torture of seeing your child's personality slip away before your eyes, to then be met with only confusion and uncertainty when seeking professional support.

Parents of children with regression disorder often describe being bounced around the system between NHS services and staff, as few practitioners have the expertise to diagnose properly. When they finally manage to speak to the right clinician, some are even told to take their child to A&E. I do not say that to criticise healthcare professionals, but rather to highlight that they need to be given the right tools for the job—the right guidance and training—and to suggest that doctors

[Jen Craft]

should be able to say, "I do not know what this is," when faced with a seemingly unique condition, instead of attempting to rule out every practical possibility.

The challenges faced by parents of children with regression disorder speak to a wider point: people with learning disabilities can be treated differently by our healthcare system, with their needs all too readily overlooked and their symptoms far too often attributed to their disability by clinicians who simply do not know them. As we all know, if a neurotypical child stopped eating and speaking overnight, or if they became incontinent, catatonic and lost all their personality, they would be in an ambulance straight to the hospital and it would be treated as a medical emergency.

I am glad that the Minister is here today to hear these testimonies, and some that my other colleagues will be sharing, because it is important that we understand the terrible effects of this condition. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Down's syndrome regression disorder is destroying lives.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. In Birmingham, we certainly have hundreds—I do not have an exact figure. Does she think that those who are suffering from Down's syndrome should have a letter written to their GP outlining that there is this other condition—one of regression? This is so that, when and if the worst occurs, at least the general practitioner's notes, which are now shared across the NHS, would reflect that potential scenario.

Jen Craft: I will just say with kindness that people do not suffer from Down's syndrome—I know it was a turn of phrase—but we tend to say they have it. It is a condition; it is a disability and is part of the make-up of what makes a person a person. I think it is fair to say that people do suffer if they have Down's syndrome regression disorder, and their families do as well.

The hon. Member touches on a wider point—the real need for education of healthcare professionals and those who come in contact with people with Down's syndrome to be aware that this regression can occur, in order to spot the early signs, because the earlier they intervene, the better the outcomes. They need to understand that it might not be attributable to late autism or early dementia, but is something in and of itself, and we need to look at how we spread that knowledge more widely.

As I have said, Down's syndrome regression disorder is destroying the lives of those it impacts, but there is hope for those affected. Trials of treatment in the USA have produced positive results: the use of intravenous immunotherapy was shown to help approximately 20% of individuals who are experiencing regression.

I will not wade into the complex debate about the merits or otherwise of specific types of medication or treatment, but what I am calling for, and asking of the Minister, is a commitment to action. We must work towards the creation of a clear assessment pathway, with uniform diagnostic criteria, to improve the identification and awareness of regression. Health and educational practitioners working in the space of special educational needs and disabilities need guidance to fill the current void in knowledge. Anyone who might come in contact

with a young person with Down's syndrome needs to be aware that regression can occur, whether in mild or more severe forms.

We desperately need to research regression further to understand its causes, investigate the mental health dimension of the condition, interrogate the efficacy of potential treatments and roll out treatments where they are determined to be effective. I look forward to hearing the Minister's thoughts on how we might work together to achieve that, and I would welcome a determined commitment to meeting those who are already deeply involved in the research, treatment and experience of Down's syndrome regression disorder.

I thank those who brought the condition to my attention, the Down's Syndrome Association for its ongoing work in this space, and the Down Syndrome Medical Interest Group. I also thank the clinicians, including Dr Ella Rachamim for her work in this area, and my friends at Upwards with Downs. To the families who have shared such personal accounts of this horrifying condition, I hope that today is a start of a long-overdue and much-needed process of getting recognition of the condition and the treatment pathway that families and people with Down's syndrome deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I remind all colleagues that they should continue to stand if they wish to be called.

4.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for raising the issue, and for how she participates in all debates—with obvious knowledge, compassion and understanding. We thank her for that. Having this debate enables us to contribute.

I am going to give an example of a constituent in Newtownards who went through Down's syndrome regression and describe the impact that that is having on mum, dad and child. The condition is not always understood—it is only understood by those it directly affects. Down's syndrome regression disorder is a condition in which individuals with Down's syndrome experience a sudden loss of previously acquired skills and abilities. I am going to explain that in relation to the couple in Newtownards and their child—she is a young lady now, to be fair. The condition may involve a change in eating patterns, such as not wanting to eat, and extreme slowness and low energy, which may or may not be associated with weight loss. These are things that their child never had before, but all of a sudden they do. There can be enhanced insomnia, obsessive-compulsive behaviours, a loss of independence in activities or a need for significant assistance with activities. Problematically, the person may also be aggressive, not because they are aggressive, but because their frustration sometimes leads to that. They may display anger or frustration, with or without behavioural outbursts. Those are all things that happened.

When I think about this condition, I think of a family I helped last year with their daughter's disability living allowance renewal. They are in their late 70s and care for their daughter, who has Down's syndrome. She walks

the floors, night and day, in pain. She is in her 50s, and her joints are reacting to the continued walking. Because she is in pain, she has begun to lash out, not because that is her nature—that was never her nature. Her mum and dad have lovingly cared for her for more than 50 years, but their age and the regression mean that they cannot do so in the way that they did. They find it more difficult.

This week, I had the awful news that the father has been diagnosed with cancer. The question for the family is this: how will they cope without their dad? I helped them with the DLA renewal—I understood the issues and tried to put them across as best I could—but I often wonder why someone has to have a DLA or personal independence payment renewal for Down's syndrome. It is almost inconceivable to me that it happens. But the question is not just about that. What happens while the dad, nearing 80, is battling cancer? What happens if he passes on from this world? Those are questions not simply for that family in Newtownards, but for families throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland who are ageing and wondering what the next step will be for their adult vulnerable child—an adult in so many ways, but also a child in others.

The underlying need for that family, and for so many others like theirs, is support. They do not know how to handle their child who has stopped responding to them, and feel alone with the changes. As a society, we have rightly moved away from institutionalising Down's syndrome children. But, with great respect, I believe we have also abdicated our responsibility towards adults with Down's syndrome and their families—and that needs to change.

In Northern Ireland, the incidence of Down's syndrome is one in 770 births. That shows the level of support needed for families, and for us back home. My gut feeling is that the numbers are probably the same over here on the mainland. It is not acceptable to throw PIP at a family and walk away. They need respite care for weeks, maybe longer, and day support classes to give their child routine and something to live for.

I am involved with an organisation called East Coast Day Opportunities. It is run by two ladies, Janine Patton and Llewellyn McClurg, in Portavogie in the Ards peninsula where I live. They worked for 20 years at the Tor Bank special school and were touched by the fact that after their education ended at the age of 18, vulnerable adults were left at home all day, so they fought for a form of funding. I know it is not the Minister's responsibility—it is not about that—but they are still fighting to ensure that individual young people receive their funding. There should be no battle. Dedicated support should be available to enable families to keep their child at home with them. I think in particular of that family in Newtownards who are under such pressure.

In conclusion, support and succour are needed, and that is what we look to the Minister to provide. Regression must not necessarily mean the end of home care. The only way around this is to acknowledge that we have a hard obligation that we must do better in fulfilling.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Three Back Benchers are seeking to speak. I hope it will assist colleagues if I say that I intend to start calling Front Benchers at about 5.08 pm.

4.47 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Down syndrome, along with the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this important and timely debate on Down syndrome regression disorder—a subject on which she always speaks with authority. I thank her for so eloquently explaining the devastating impact it has on families, the difficulties around its diagnosis, and the need for greater awareness and action.

We have already heard that Down syndrome regression disorder is a heartbreaking condition that affects around 1% to 2% of young people with Down syndrome, typically during adolescence and early adulthood. Despite the profound effects it has on many families across the country, it remains largely in the shadows and is widely under-recognised in our healthcare and support systems.

Down syndrome regression disorder is marked by a sudden and often severe loss of previously acquired skills—language, mobility, self-care and social interaction. Imagine a young person who once spoke fluently, dressed themselves and engaged joyfully with others suddenly becoming mute, withdrawn and dependent. For many families, this is not a nightmare: it is their reality. For them, it is like watching their loved one vanish before their eyes.

The emotional and psychological toll on these families is immense. A recent study published in the *Orphanet Journal of Rare Diseases* found that the caregivers of individuals with DSRD experience significantly higher levels of depression, financial strain and social isolation compared with the caregivers of individuals with other neurological conditions. Many parents described the experience as traumatic, grieving the loss of the child they once knew while navigating a healthcare system that often lacks answers. That is because in the UK awareness of DSRD is limited.

We have excellent support networks for individuals with Down syndrome, but DSRD falls into a blind spot. There are no standard diagnostic criteria in current NHS guidelines, research funding is scarce, and few clinicians are trained to recognise or treat the disorder. The referral pathways are often unclear, leaving families in limbo during what may be the most frightening period of their lives.

We must recognise that this is not just a medical issue; it is a human one too. One of the greatest challenges with DSRD is the difficulty in diagnosing it. For many parents, their first concern is dismissal by medical professionals. When a young person with Down syndrome begins to show signs of regression, the common response is often that it is simply part of their developmental journey—a phase that will pass. Concerns are too often brushed aside, leaving families feeling unheard and helpless. This dismissive attitude can delay proper diagnosis and treatment, worsening the young person's condition.

Medical professionals, although experts in their field, may not be aware of this specific disorder and, as a result, may not recognise the signs when they appear. For parents who already face the complexities of raising a young person with Down syndrome, having their

[Andrew Cooper]

worries minimised is an additional burden. Their instinct is to protect and advocate for their child, yet they find themselves in a constant struggle for acknowledgment.

But there is hope, if we act. We need more research in the UK that investigates how this disorder presents in our healthcare and social environments. We must also push for clinical trials in the UK, because similar trials in other countries, particularly the US, have shown that with the right interventions it is possible to help children with this condition to return to their baseline level of functioning.

We need clear diagnostic and treatment pathways to be developed by the NHS and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, in collaboration with experts in Down syndrome. Doctors and mental health professionals must be trained to identify the early signs of regression and respond with urgency and compassion.

We must listen to parents. When they voice concerns, we need to take them seriously. They are experts on their children, and dismissing their worries can delay crucial intervention. Families deserve real support, not dismissal. They need practical guidance, better access to care and peer networks that they can turn to during moments of crisis.

The public need to hear more about this condition, because the more we talk about it, the closer we get to funding solutions and saving futures. Every person with Down syndrome deserves the chance to thrive without fear of losing the progress they have made, and every family deserves to be believed, supported and empowered when regression strikes. Let us give Down syndrome regression disorder the attention it desperately needs before more voices are silenced, more smiles fade and more potential is lost.

4.52 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I rise to speak briefly in support of the case put so comprehensively and powerfully by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft).

The APPG on Down syndrome, of which the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) and I are both members, was given a very striking presentation on Down syndrome regression disorder by Dr Ella Rachamim. We were told of the case of a young person with Down syndrome who went from being socially and physically active, able to get dressed, have a shower and enjoy swimming and playing basketball, to becoming stiff and catatonic, losing the ability to balance and walk upstairs, soiling and wetting himself frequently, and refusing food and drink to the extent that he became so dehydrated as to need hospitalisation.

As colleagues have said, Down syndrome regression disorder is a sudden loss of previously acquired and present social, motor and language skills. It is clearly a devastating development for any family, and it is often compounded by a lack of awareness and misdiagnosis. As the hon. Member for Thurrock said, it is taken for autism or early-onset dementia. We are all very grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this important debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I know that she intended to raise awareness of Down syndrome regression disorder in this debate, and she has certainly done so.

Clearly, more research is needed. Dr Rachamim shared with us various treatments, advocated for work-up and treatment plans to be put in place, along with trials and treatment options, and argued that to help this community, increasing professional awareness is key—key to preventing misdiagnosis and to ensuring that patients receive the right care and support. By increasing awareness of Down syndrome regression disorder, more support can be put in place both for the individuals affected and for the parents and carers who are so heavily impacted. This debate is part of that work. Again, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Thurrock, and I hope the Minister will take note.

4.55 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing the debate, and for her opening words on Down's syndrome regression disorder.

As we have heard, Down's syndrome regression disorder is a little known but deeply distressing condition that affects between 1% and 2% of young people with Down's syndrome, typically between the ages of 10 and 30. It is sudden and life altering. Young people who have developed essential social, motor and communication skills can rapidly lose those abilities, sometimes in a matter of weeks or even days.

One of the greatest challenges facing families is the lack of awareness. It is often misdiagnosed as early-onset Alzheimer's, late-onset autism or schizophrenia. Without accurate diagnosis, access to the right treatment is often delayed, leaving families to navigate a terrifying and bewildering situation on their own.

I would like to share the story of one of my constituents, whose son Ewan experienced not just one but two severe episodes of this regression. Each time, his descent was sudden. He became consumed by paranoia, withdrew from his life, took to his bed and suffered significant mental health distress. His personality changed dramatically: once a happy, sociable young man, he became fearful and was convinced that Government agents were following him. His family described feeling shocked, heartbroken and completely unprepared. Despite persistent efforts, they struggled to get timely support. They battled to ensure that they were included in care decisions, and had to fight hard for regular reviews from the specialist.

While Ewan has since made a remarkable recovery—I pay tribute to him, and I am proud to say that he has just celebrated one year of work experience, part time at Lidl—and he is now once again his warm, bubbly self, his family's ordeal has left a permanent impact. They now view his happiness as their priority, recognising his enduring vulnerability.

Research into DSRD remains limited. Though the condition has been recognised since as far back as 1946, there is still no national diagnostic pathway, no agreed treatment protocol and very little professional training. However, 80% of those who receive appropriate and timely treatment show significant improvement. To get there, we need to raise awareness. We must improve diagnostic clarity and ensure that support services are properly resourced and accessible, and that families are listened to, because they know their young people best.

Today, along with colleagues, I am calling for greater clinical awareness of DSRD across health and social care; the development of UK-wide diagnostic and treatment guidelines; and investment in further research to better understand this condition and its triggers. For the families affected, timely intervention can mean the difference between recovery and long-term suffering. I hope that this debate will be a step towards giving young people like Ewan and their families the understanding, support and hope that they deserve.

4.58 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this important debate, and for her ongoing advocacy on behalf of people with Down's syndrome and those with special educational needs. The hon. Lady was in the Chamber yesterday when the Secretary of State made her statement about Best Start centres, and her contribution was really valued across the House. Her commitment to raising these issues, both in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber, does not go unnoticed, and the voices of the individuals and families she raises, who are too often overlooked, are heard loud and clear.

I am grateful to Members from across the House for their contributions to this debate, and for shining a light on the often overlooked but deeply distressing reality of Down's syndrome regression disorder, which is a little known but profoundly distressing condition that affects individuals when they are at a vulnerable point in their life, often during adolescence or early adulthood. As the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) said, it can be sudden and life altering for those with Down's syndrome and for those who love them. This is not a rare curiosity that can be quietly ignored. It is a heartbreaking and complex condition that strips people of skills, independence and identity, often rapidly and with devastating consequences—and right now, families are being left to navigate it alone.

Regression in this context is the sudden and unexplained loss of previously acquired developmental abilities, including speech, motor skills, self-care and social interaction. It is not autism or dementia—it is entirely different—and it is something that we must understand far better than we currently do. There is currently no single known cause for the regression, which can be triggered by significant life stresses, mental health deterioration, underlying medical issues, infections, nutritional deficiencies, exposure to toxins or, as the hon. Member for Thurrock spoke about, extreme moments of stress. She shared a heartbreaking story about the young person who had a heartbreaking moment in school and did not really recover from it.

Despite its impact, frontline care staff have often never heard of the condition, and when symptoms emerge, diagnosis is often delayed or missed entirely. We need urgent investment in research to better understand the condition and develop evidence-based responses. It is a crisis of unmet need, because 80% of young people can make huge progress if it is caught and supported early enough. Families describe watching their loved ones retreat into silence, lose mobility or withdraw emotionally, often over just weeks or months.

I do not have a child with Down's syndrome, but I think it is the same for every parent—watching their child change in a way that is indescribable, losing all the

things that make them who they are, must be the most distressing thing that they can go through. The impact must be devastating. These families need answers; they need access to specialist assessments, co-ordinated care and, above all, hope that with the right support, their loved one might regain some of what has been lost. Right now, there is no clinical consensus on treatment, no national guidance and very little research funding.

In Chichester, my constituents are very lucky to have an incredible charity, the Chichester and Arun Down Syndrome Support Group, which works tirelessly to fill the gaps left by failings in public service provision. Ahead of this debate, the charity highlighted to me many of the challenges that their young people with Down's syndrome face, particularly in accessing the support that they need throughout their education. Families have told me that, in hospital, when their Down's syndrome child was born, they were presented with information from the Down's syndrome group in Portsmouth, but were unable to access that service because they do not live there. Nationally, there needs to be support for every single child who is born.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for three clear things. First, we would like regression disorder to be embedded in professional training for care workers, supported by new national standards set by a national care agency and a professional framework overseen by a royal college of care workers. The frontline workforce needs to be equipped to recognise and respond to the condition early and effectively. Secondly, we need the Down Syndrome Act to be properly resourced. That means far more than just warm words: it means access to speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, mental health support, physiotherapy and primary care. It means making good on the promise of joined-up, lifelong support, not just at school age but well into adulthood. Thirdly, we need real action on social care. We need bold, cross-party agreement on a long-term settlement now—not in a decade—and we must give unpaid family carers the deal that they deserve, with paid leave, guaranteed respite and long overdue recognition.

Healthcare provision is also lagging. The NHS rightly recommends access to a wide range of specialists for people with Down's syndrome, from physiotherapists and occupational therapists to speech and language support and mental healthcare, but too often families report waiting lists, postcode lotteries and providers that are simply not equipped to deal with complex needs such as regression. People with Down's syndrome are often more likely to become seriously unwell from common infections such as flu and pneumonia, yet we are still not doing enough to ensure vaccine uptake. That is why we are calling for everyone with a disability or chronic health condition to have access to a named GP, to ensure early intervention, better diagnosis and ongoing support.

Too many people with Down's syndrome are being let down by the education system, the care system and the NHS. The regression that some experience in young adulthood is not inevitable; in many cases, it can be managed or even reversed with the right support, but that support needs to be in place for every young person. In my constituency I have seen the strength of local charities such as the Chichester and Arun Down Syndrome Support Group, and organisations such as

[*Jess Brown-Fuller*]

Together Our Community, but we cannot continue to rely on charitable good will to cover the cracks left by a failing system.

When a young person with Down's syndrome starts to withdraw, lose speech or motor function or disconnect from their surroundings, their family do not need to be told to wait in a queue. They need a co-ordinated, knowledgeable and compassionate response, and they need it fast, so the question we must answer in this House today is simple: are we content to let families carry the burden alone, or are the Government ready to put in place the policies, funding and professional care that people with Down's syndrome deserve? What steps will the Government take to drive forward research into Down's syndrome regression disorder, get stronger training into the hands of those who need it, and guarantee that the joined-up care that people with Down's syndrome so desperately deserve is finally delivered?

5.5 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this debate. We thought we were going to have it a few weeks ago, and then things moved around, so I am pleased that she has been able to secure this time slot, because the issue is extremely important. I would not normally speak in Westminster Hall as the shadow Secretary of State, but this is a very important issue on which I know she has spoken powerfully since her election to this House.

This is not only an important debate, but one that has been conducted in a tone that does credit to this House, without party politics. Instead it has focused on those who are genuinely impacted by the topic we are debating. This Chamber so often succeeds in giving a voice to those who might not normally have their voice amplified in political debate, or indeed in the main Chamber, to the extent that it should be. In that sense, this is extremely useful. Although Down's syndrome has been debated in the broadest sense by this House on numerous occasions, Down's syndrome regression disorder has been debated rather less so. I recall that in March the hon. Member for Thurrock talked about it in a speech. Today's debate has helped do something that was among her objectives, which is to raise the profile of this very important issue and draw greater attention to it.

Right hon. and hon. Members have already highlighted the nature of Down's syndrome regression disorder, how it works, and what happens. It is important to note that, according to research, 1% to 2% of young people with Down's syndrome between the ages of 10 and 30 can experience it. As the hon. Member for Thurrock and others have highlighted, one of the great challenges, and one of the most impactful parts of this, is the speed with which regression can occur, often without warning, or possibly with warning for those who know what to look for, as she touched on. She spoke very movingly about Fran, giving a real life example of how regression can happen, its impacts, and what can bring it about. It is important to remember, as hon. Members have highlighted, the impact on family when regression disorder occurs.

The hon. Member for Thurrock set out clearly the challenges: the speed with which regression can occur; the lack of knowledge among many, including some in the medical and caring professions, of Down's syndrome regression disorder; and the challenges around getting a diagnosis and treatment. Like others, I pay tribute to the work of the Down's Syndrome Association for its campaigning on the broader issues, and specifically on this one, and the helpful briefing and advice that it sent to right hon. and hon. Members.

It is a pleasure to serve opposite the Minister for Care. Although we might occasionally tussle on some things, I know he is a very thoughtful Minister who understands his brief. I therefore look forward to his response; I know it will be considered and measured. I have a few questions for him, which will come as no surprise. First, in 2021, the Down's Syndrome Association supported research undertaken by the University of Cambridge. I would welcome from the Minister his thinking on how that can be built upon, and what further work can be done around that. Having been a Minister in the Department, I know that it is not always directly within the Minister's gift to do x and y, because often it will be undertaken by arm's length bodies or different parts of the system, but I would be grateful if the Minister could set out how the Department can drive forward an increased focus on research.

We have heard about some trials—some treatments—in the US that may offer a positive way forward. To echo the words of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), I would be grateful if the Minister could set out what more can be done to create clearer diagnostic and treatment pathways for young people with Down's syndrome regression disorder. I am conscious that, in 2022, Sir Liam Fox secured the passage into law of his Down Syndrome Act, but the guidance on it is still outstanding. Does the Minister have a timeline for when that will be produced, and might that guidance offer an opportunity to wrap in some of the issues around Down's syndrome regression disorder, to better inform people and raise awareness?

I am conscious that the Minister needs time to reply, and I suspect the hon. Member for Thurrock will want to have a few minutes at the end. I will therefore conclude here. I hope that today's debate is one of those in this place in which we can see broad agreement across both sides of the House and, in the Minister's remarks, the potential way forward. As well as debating this and raising awareness, what we all want to see is progress. I very much hope that the Minister will be able to give me succour in that respect.

5.11 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this important debate. I commend her for the work she is doing to raise such an important issue, and for sharing her personal experiences in a moving and powerful way, as a parent of a child with Down's syndrome. I also pay tribute to all the hon. Members who have spoken so powerfully and movingly in this debate.

Last week, we launched our 10-year health plan for the NHS, which creates a new model of care, fit for the future. The neighbourhood health service will help to improve life outcomes for disabled people, including people with Down's syndrome, by providing access to holistic, ongoing support that is closer to home. Through local commissioning, we will ensure that neighbourhood health services work in partnership with family hubs, schools, nurseries and colleges to offer timely support to children, young people and their families, including those with special educational needs and disabilities.

We have heard powerful testimonies about the challenges associated with Down's syndrome regression disorder, both for people with Down's syndrome and for their families and carers. As we have heard, regression describes the loss of previously acquired cognitive and developmental skills in an individual. Down's syndrome regression disorder is a specific, rare type of regression, which usually presents in adolescence or early adulthood.

People with Down's syndrome can live full lives pursuing their personal interests, taking up employment, and living independently. However, regression can have a devastating impact for people with Down's syndrome; the loss of developmental skills can affect daily living, language, motor abilities or social interaction. We know that symptoms can often be overlooked, or misdiagnosed as dementia. We have heard that further awareness and understanding of the disorder is needed. Like with other support for people with Down's syndrome, it is important that care for regression disorder is personalised and takes into account the specific needs of the individual.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock so clearly explained, there is currently limited understanding of Down's syndrome regression disorder. We know that experts in the field have looked into regression and developed a position statement on regression in adolescence and early adulthood experienced by people who have Down's syndrome. This includes recommended healthcare actions for people with Down's syndrome who show signs of loss of skills or cognitive decline.

There has been some academic research into regression, but there is still much to learn about this disorder and why it happens to some people. We understand that many factors may come into play in causing regression, but the specific underlying cause of Down's syndrome regression disorder is still unclear. Through its research delivery arm, the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Department of Health and Social Care welcomes high-quality funding applications from researchers seeking to better understand this condition, and to inform enhanced management and care.

More broadly, patients will receive the most cutting-edge treatment years earlier than planned under the Government's 10-year health plan, which will speed up clinical trials so that the UK becomes a hotbed of innovation. Millions of people will now be able to search for and sign up to life-changing clinical trials via the NIHR Be Part of Research service on the NHS app, allowing patients to browse and find the trials best suited to their interests and needs.

The Government are committed to improving life outcomes for people with Down's syndrome, including those who have regression disorder. In order to achieve this, it is vital that we raise awareness of the needs of

people with Down's syndrome. We know that despite many positive developments, such as increased life expectancy, people with Down's syndrome do not always receive the care and support they need to lead the lives they want to lead in their communities.

Ayoub Khan: First, I apologise to the hon. Member for Thurrock for using clumsy language—I meant no discourtesy. We have been discussing PIP and how it could impact many people who require care. Regression can happen very suddenly for people with Down's syndrome, which is concerning because we are still looking at research and the methods for getting a final determination. Will the Government incorporate something, such as financial care packages and so forth, to deal with the additional care required by those individuals?

Stephen Kinnock: As the Government have made clear throughout the debate on reforming the welfare system, those who need to be supported and protected will be supported and protected, so I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on that point. There is clearly a lot of work to do through the review that will be led by the Minister for Social Security and Disability, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). This will be an important part of his work.

Through the implementation of the Down Syndrome Act 2022, we will improve awareness and understanding of the needs of people with Down's syndrome and how to meet them. The Act requires the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to give guidance to relevant authorities, including local authorities, education and housing services, on the appropriate steps they should be taking to meet the needs of people with Down's syndrome in exercising their relevant functions.

Work to develop the statutory guidance under the Act is being taken forward as a priority, with a view to issuing it for consultation in the autumn. The shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), asked about that. We looked at publishing it over the summer, but we received feedback from stakeholder groups that parents in particular are often busy with their kids over the summer, so it is better to wait until the autumn. That is what we are doing, and we will be publishing it as soon as the school holidays are over.

Officials have considered a range of evidence and engaged extensively with sector partners to inform the development of the guidance. This includes a national call for evidence, which received more than 1,500 responses. A summary report of its findings will be published ahead of, or alongside, issuing the draft guidance for consultation. Based on what we were told during the call for evidence and our subsequent engagement with sector partners and experts, a needs profile has been developed setting out the different needs of people with Down's syndrome, including people with Down's syndrome regression disorder. We intend to publish the needs profile paper alongside the draft guidance this autumn to ensure full transparency.

The guidance itself will raise awareness of the specific needs of people with Down's syndrome, including health needs such as unexplained regression. The guidance will also set out practical steps that relevant authorities should take to meet the needs of people with Down's syndrome.

[Stephen Kinnock]

We have made significant progress in developing the guidance. We are working closely with relevant Government Departments and sector partners to ensure that it is helpful, accurate and fully reflective of the latest developments in Government policy. Crucially, that engagement has involved people with lived experience of Down's syndrome, as well as organisations that support people with Down's syndrome, other conditions and/or a learning disability.

On 4 June, I met the all-party parliamentary group on Down syndrome and provided an update on the latest progress on the guidance. We discussed how we can ensure that the guidance is as effective and impactful as possible. The latest version of the draft guidance, which has had input from all relevant Government Departments, was also shared with sector partners in June for their feedback.

Officials are reviewing that feedback ahead of issuing the guidance for consultation this autumn, which will provide a further opportunity for individuals and organisations to share their views. We remain committed to delivering high-quality guidance that supports improved outcomes for people with Down's syndrome, while bringing wider benefit where possible. To support implementation of the guidance, NHS England published statutory guidance on 9 May 2023 requiring that every integrated care board must have a named leader for Down's syndrome.

The 10-year health plan will ensure a better health service for everyone, regardless of condition or service area. We want disabled people's access to and experience of healthcare services to be equitable, effective and responsive to their needs. Significant engagement took place as part of the 10-year health plan's development, and informed the final plan. That engagement included a roundtable on learning disability, at which we heard directly from people with Down's syndrome about their experience of the NHS. We also received contributions from organisations that support and advocate for Down's syndrome across the health and social care sector.

The 10-year health plan sets the vision for what good, joined-up care looks like for people with a combination of health and care needs, including people with Down's syndrome regression disorder or other disabilities. The neighbourhood health service will support disabled people to be more active in the delivery and management of their own care. That includes increasing uptake of personal health budgets, which provide individuals with greater choice and flexibility on how their assessed wellbeing needs are met. We know that there are many disabled people, including people with Down's syndrome, who want to work. The 10-year plan will break down barriers to opportunity by delivering the holistic support that people need to access and thrive in employment.

A number of hon. Members raised questions about training. The guidance will raise awareness of the specific needs of people with Down's syndrome, including people with regression disorder. We understand that training is an important part of that picture. Under the Health and Social Care Act 2008 and the Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014, providers registered with the Care Quality Commission must ensure that staff receive appropriate professional development necessary for them to carry out their duties.

Specific training on learning disability and autism, appropriate to the staff member's role, is also mandated under the Health and Care Act 2022. We expect that providers should consider whether specific training on Down's syndrome is required for their staff.

Members also raised questions about funding research into regression disorder. The Department funds health and social care research through the NIHR. The NIHR welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health and care, including Down's syndrome regression disorder. Such applications are subject to peer review and are judged in open competition, with awards made on the basis of the importance of the topic to patients and to health and care services, value for money, and scientific quality. That enables maximum flexibility, both in the amount of research funding that can be awarded to a particular area, and in the type of research that can be funded.

The NIHR works closely with other Government funders—including UK Research and Innovation, which is funded by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and includes the Medical Research Council—to fund research to improve care and prevent poor health outcomes for people with Down's syndrome.

The shadow Minister asked a couple of specific questions. I think he mentioned Down's Syndrome Association-supported research by Cambridge University, and the trials in the United States of America. If it is okay, I will write to him on those points. I am not in a position to address them today.

I hope I have addressed the points raised by hon. Members in this debate. I end by thanking all those who have committed so much time and effort to supporting the development of the guidance under the Down Syndrome Act. We are grateful for the invaluable input that individuals and organisations continue to provide on the draft guidance. Their feedback has been, and is, instrumental in helping us to ensure that the final guidance has maximum benefit. Officials will continue to work with sector partners to ensure that the communities they represent are aware of the forthcoming consultation and can share their views.

I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock for securing this important debate, and for all the incredibly important work that she is doing in this area. I also thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

5.26 pm

Jen Craft: I thank all colleagues who have taken part in today's debate. I hope it has been a chance to raise awareness of this much overlooked and under-researched condition. I thank colleagues who shared stories of their individual constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) shared the story of Ewan, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) shared Jude and Ruth's moving story.

I also appreciate the contribution of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who talked about the wider implications for families of caring for someone with Down's syndrome, as well as the contribution from the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), who raised the need for more awareness of Down's syndrome regression disorder.

I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), for her kind words and for talking about the need for co-ordinated care and lifelong support for those with Down's syndrome. I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for his contribution. He spoke about the need for more research, and for better support and care for the families of people with Down's syndrome.

My thanks also go to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) for sharing a passionate plea to listen to parents and families, as we are the real experts. That is something I would like the Minister to embed in the guidance under the Down Syndrome Act—listening to those who are experts in the condition. Fairly often, when a person does not receive timely treatment for things like Down's syndrome regression disorder, it is because those who know them best are not listened to. They are seen the way they have presented on the day, without their entire history being taken into account.

I also thank the shadow Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), for saying that this is very much a cross-party issue. I hope we can move forward in that spirit and see it as something that is beyond the political sphere. We need to act on it so we can come to a resolution for those who are affected by this horrifying condition.

Finally, I thank the Minister for his comments, and particularly on his commitment to publishing the Down Syndrome Act guidance in the autumn, which I am sure

will be welcomed by many. I hope there will be specific measures to raise awareness of Down's syndrome regression disorder, and a pathway so that parents, carers and those with Down's syndrome regression disorder can get support. Signposting can often be helpful in showing them where to go.

One thing that comes up time and again, when speaking to parents of children or young people with Down's syndrome regression disorder, is that they are often unaware of it until it happens. It is helpful to understand that what is happening to their child is not unique, and that it is a recognised condition for which treatment is available. That is one of the more helpful things that the Government can do.

Again, I thank everyone for taking part in this debate, and I hope this is the start of real progress on the issue.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I add my thanks to all who participated.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Down's syndrome regression disorder research.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 8 July 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership: Costa Rica

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): Today, the Department for Business and Trade is publishing a summary of and response to public engagement on Costa Rica's CPTPP accession working group.

At the CPTPP ministerial commission meeting in November 2024, CPTPP Ministers, alongside the UK, formally decided to commence an accession process with Costa Rica, establishing an accession working group. As part of this, the Government launched a public engagement period that ran from 29 November 2024 until 24 January 2025, to understand business, civil society and public views and insights on Costa Rica's potential membership. Twenty-eight responses were received in total, including from businesses, trade bodies, international stakeholders, public sector organisations and individuals.

The document published today summarises the feedback received, and provides a response setting out how the Government intend to approach the accession negotiations with Costa Rica. This feedback is actively informing the Government's approach to negotiations, including during the first in-person discussions with Costa Rica, which recently took place between 9 and 11 June 2025 in Brisbane, Australia.

CPTPP parties, including the UK, are committed to maintaining the agreement's high standards, and to further expanding trade ties to drive economic growth. I look forward to keeping the House updated on future CPTPP developments.

[HCWS786]

Post Office Horizon Inquiry Report: Volume 1

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Today I welcome the publication of volume 1 of Sir Wyn Williams' Post Office Horizon IT inquiry report. This volume will illustrate the human impact of the scandal on victims and outline recommendations for the redress schemes set up to compensate victims.

Once published, a copy of the inquiry report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and made available on www.gov.uk.

I would like to thank Sir Wyn and his team for their tireless efforts since the inquiry was first established on 29 September 2020, and all those who have provided evidence. In particular, I pay credit to and thank those victims who have engaged so courageously with Sir Wyn, providing evidence of their experiences of one of the worst miscarriages of justice we have seen.

The Government will thoroughly consider the findings presented today. We will provide a response to the inquiry's recommendations in due course.

[HCWS790]

CABINET OFFICE

UK Government Resilience Action Plan

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Today I have updated the House on the publication of the UK Government's resilience action plan, this Government's strategic approach to resilience. It is the outcome of the resilience review, which I announced to the House in July last year.

Alongside this, we have also published our chronic risks analysis, the UK biological security strategy implementation report, and an update on the implementation of the commitments made in the covid-19 inquiry module 1 Government response.

[HCWS793]

TREASURY

Fiscal Risks and Sustainability Report

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): At the Budget last October, and again in the spring, I made the necessary choices to fix the foundations of our economy, to put the public finances on a sustainable path and to support growth. The 2025 spending review delivered on this strategy, underpinning fiscal plans with firm spending plans, and providing the certainty and stability essential for growth. These spending plans are only possible because of the decisions taken in the autumn to raise taxes, and the changes to the fiscal rules.

The Office for Budget Responsibility's 2025 Fiscal Risks and Sustainability Report (FRS), which has been laid today—CP 1343—is an important part of the Government's effective fiscal risk management framework. The report fulfils the OBR's obligation, set out in the charter for budget responsibility, to examine and report on the sustainability of, and risks to, the public finances. This year's report examines climate change, the public sector balance sheet, and pensions.

The OBR notes in the FRS that the Government's reforms to improve the fiscal framework have strengthened fiscal policy making and reduced fiscal risks. This includes legislating for the fiscal lock to ensure that no Government can announce fiscally significant measures without being subject to an independent assessment by the OBR, as well as introducing extended departmental spending planning horizons by committing to hold an SR every two calendar years, setting departmental expenditure limits for a minimum of three years of the five-year forecast period. The Government also introduced robust new fiscal rules that embed stability.

The FRS also highlights that recent global shocks have resulted in greater uncertainty and fiscal pressures amid a shifting international landscape. The Government recognise these challenges, which is why we have acted decisively to strengthen our partnerships and grow the economy, including through recent trade deals with the US, the EU and India. National security is the first duty of the Government, and we have responsibly responded by committing to increase spending on defence to 2.6% from 2027, funded from reductions in the official development assistance budget, with an ambition to reach 3% in the next Parliament.

Making Britain a clean energy superpower, which will be achieved through delivering home-grown clean power by 2030 and accelerating to net zero, is a key mission in the Government's plan for change. Building on previous analysis, the 2025 FRS offers an assessment of the fiscal risks posed by climate change and the transition to net zero, concluding that the UK faces increasing costs from climate-related damage. The Government recognise this, which is why SR 2025 allocates £9.4 billion to carbon capture, usage and storage over the SR period and invests more than £8.3 billion in home-grown clean power through Great British Energy and Great British Energy-Nuclear. We will set out further details in the updated carbon budget and growth delivery plan in October. The Government are also investing more than £4.2 billion over three years, from 2026-27 to 2028-29, to build and maintain flood defences.

The OBR also highlights the risks associated with the public sector balance sheet, which is why it is more important than ever to have a robust fiscal framework that addresses long-term challenges and provides greater transparency of the public finances. That is why the Government announced the financial transaction control framework at the autumn Budget 2024, ensuring that investments generate either a financial return or a clear benefit for taxpayers, and committed to publishing an annual report on the performance of the Government's financial assets.

The FRS also examines the potential fiscal risks from the UK's pensions system, noting the challenges presented by an ageing population. The final report of the pensions investment review was published in May, setting out the Government's plans to drive investment and higher returns through large defined-contribution schemes and reforming the local government pension scheme to improve sustainability and support regional growth. However, further work is required to tackle systemic issues and inequality. The next phase of the pensions review will focus on the adequacy of pensions outcomes.

The changing structure of the pensions market is affecting demand for gilts from the sector, and the Government have therefore adjusted the maturity split of gilt issuance to account for this trend, with the proportion of long-dated gilt issuance reduced materially over recent years. The Government continue to monitor market trends.

I would like to thank the OBR for its efforts in producing this report. The Government are required to respond to the FRS within a year.

[HCWS788]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Resources Infrastructure: National Policy Statement

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): In line with the Government's ambition to update relevant national policy statements within their first year, today I intend to lay an update by way of non-material amendments to the national policy statement for water resources infrastructure.

Growth is one of the Prime Minister's five defining missions of this Government.

This update will support growth by making planning decisions for water resources infrastructure quicker and easier.

This will provide certainty to the water industry and support the delivery of nine new reservoirs and the Government's plans to get Britain building 1.5 million new homes by the end of this Parliament.

Water resources management plans determine what additional water resources infrastructure is needed for at least the next 25 years and are comprehensively revised every five years. The plans are publicly consulted on and the options within them are scrutinised by regulators before being approved by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The updated national policy statement provides a clearer link to final water resources management plans, as part of the water resources statutory framework, so that the "need" for any project within these approved plans will not need to be reassessed at the examination stage of a development consent order application.

This national policy statement also makes clear the Government's commitment to the water and development sectors, and that water resources projects are critical to growth.

[HCWS792]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Clinical Indemnities Reform

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): My noble friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health (Baroness Merron) has made the following written statement:

I am pleased to report that through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, my Department has commissioned an independent evaluation of the sector-led voluntary code of practice launched by medical defence organisations on 6 January this year.

The intention to develop a sector-led code to address concerns highlighted by the Paterson inquiry report was previously announced in March 2024. The code has now been launched as planned by the Medical Defence Union, Medical Protection Society and Medical and Dental Defence Union of Scotland.

Clinical negligence cover is the system that enables patients to receive compensation if they are harmed during treatment through the cover held by regulated healthcare professionals such as doctors, nurses and dentists. The code aims to improve the transparency and clarity of MDOs' operations and the discretionary indemnity they provide healthcare professionals whose activities (e.g. private practice) are not covered by state schemes. With these improvements and healthcare professionals' better understanding of the appropriate cover required for their scope of practice, there will be greater protection for patients' access to compensation if harmed during treatment.

The full code, which can be accessed on the MDOs' websites, sets out seven core principles described under the following headings:

Corporate governance

Fair member treatment

Scope of benefit available to members

Decision making
Independent complaints review service
Financial attestation
Statement of adherence

This short-term evaluation focuses on the implementation of the code. We will be exploring a further commission to assess impact and whether further interventions are required.

We continue to consider further policy options to reform the clinical negligence cover system such as addressing cover for criminal acts to improve patients' access to compensation, and I will provide an update in due course.

[HCWS791]

NHS Dental Contract Reforms: Consultation

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): As set out in the 10-year health plan, the Government are launching a public consultation on a package of reforms to improve the current NHS dental contract, representing the next step towards delivering a dentistry service fit for the future.

Satisfaction with NHS dentistry has fallen to a record low, from 85% in 2019 to 69% in 2024 and the British Dental Association estimates that 13 million adults—over 1 in 4—are struggling to find NHS care. Poor oral health can have a devastating impact on individuals, yet is largely preventable. We inherited a broken NHS dental system, and we are committed to fixing it, so we can deliver more care to those who need it.

Our plan to stabilise NHS dentistry is already under way. From April 2025, integrated care boards started making available the 700,000 additional urgent dental appointments that we promised in our manifesto. As set out in the 10-year health plan, training a dentist costs the taxpayer up to £200,000 and we believe it is fair to expect graduate dentists to invest their skills and expertise in the NHS in return. Having consulted on the principle, we will now make it a requirement for all newly qualified dentists to practice in the NHS for a minimum period. We intend this minimum period to be at least three years. That will mean more NHS dentists, more NHS appointments and better oral health.

We are today launching a public consultation, running until 19 August 2025, on a package of reforms to improve the current NHS dental contract and improve the experience of NHS dentistry for patients. From 2026-27 the proposals are intended to:

Make it easier for those who need dental care and treatment to get it by requiring all practices to provide an agreed amount of urgent and unscheduled care which is accessible to all who need it, irrespective of whether they have been to the practice before.

Deliver improvements in the clinical care and treatment received by people with complex care needs. We will do this by introducing new care pathways which integrate prevention and treatment, with fairer payment arrangements for the professionals treating them, and without fear of excessive charges for patients.

Deliver improvements in preventive oral care for children, including through the promotion of fluoride varnish treatment.

Reduce the number of people in good oral health being recalled to the dentist too frequently and the costs to patients associated with that. Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence states that people with healthy teeth and gums should be seen every 12 to 24 months. Making this a reality will enable practices to provide better care to those patients who are most in need.

Make dental staff feel valued members of the wider NHS and able to focus on quality of care. We will do this by developing minimum terms of engagement for dental associates, supporting performance evaluation through appraisals, and extending eligibility for discretionary support payments.

This consultation is an important step towards the fundamental reform to the dental contract that we committed to in our manifesto, for which the process will begin this year. We want a contract that matches resources to need, improves access, promotes prevention and rewards dentists fairly, while enabling the whole dental team to work to the top of their capability.

We will also deliver a step change in prevention, which is key to good oral health.

On 7 March 2025, we announced £11.4 million to implement the manifesto commitment for a national, targeted supervised toothbrushing scheme for three to five-year-olds. In addition to this investment, we have secured an innovative partnership with Colgate, which has generously committed to donate over 23 million toothbrushes and toothpastes over the next five years. Together we will reach up to 600,000 children, with the first donations being made before the school holidays.

Following public consultation, we also announced the expansion of community water fluoridation across the north-east of England, which will reach an additional 1.6 million people.

Taken together, these reforms represent vital steps in our plan to build an NHS dental service fit for the future.

[HCWS794]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Fire and Rescue Best Value

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): All right hon. Members will recognise the importance of having well-functioning fire and rescue services that provide essential services that local communities rely upon, and that lives ultimately depend on. Today, I am announcing to the House a best value inspection of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority.

The relationship between the authority and West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service has come under intense local and national scrutiny in recent months. While the service continues to protect and respond to the needs of its local community, there is concern that the authority, in its oversight and scrutiny of the service, may have failed to deliver against its key best value functions of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In response to this, the Secretary of State, under section 26 of the Local Government Act 1999, has ordered a best value inspection of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority. This independent inspection will examine the authority's compliance with its best value duty to ensure that any failings are identified, addressed and rectified. This focus on governance differentiates this inspection from His Majesty's inspectorate of fire and rescue services' report, published on 18 June 2025, which focused on operations. The inspection's recommendations may additionally identify broader lessons that can be applied across other fire and rescue services.

The Secretary of State has exercised her powers in section 10 of the 1999 Act to appoint Fenella Morris KC as the lead inspector, Anna Bicarregui and Gethin Thomas as assistant inspectors, and Tasnim Shawkat as assistant inspector (monitoring officer). It is intended that the inspection will deliver its recommendations during the first quarter of 2026.

Conclusion

I want to acknowledge the work of the dedicated staff of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service, who continue to deliver this vital service for their local communities. This inspection will ensure that the lessons from the past are learned and any improvements that need to be made are swiftly implemented.

I will place in the Library of the House copies of the terms of reference and, in time, reports and associated materials.

[HCWS787]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reviewer for National Security Arrangements: Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):

The role of the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements in Northern Ireland is to monitor compliance with annex E of the St Andrews agreement 2006, reviewing the relationship between MI5 and PSNI in handling national security matters.

Dr Jonny Byrne, the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements in Northern Ireland, has sent me his report for 2024. Due to the classification of the report, I am unable to deposit a copy in the Libraries of both Houses, but I am able to provide the House with a summary of its content. What follows is a summary of the main findings of the report covering the period from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024.

Dr Byrne states:

“My role is to monitor compliance with Annex E of the St Andrews Agreement (2006) reviewing the relationship between MI5 and PSNI in handling national security matters. The role seeks to provide assurance that MI5 and PSNI operate together within the letter and spirit of the St Andrews Agreement. In order to meet the Terms of Reference, I reviewed documents and had a series of meetings with senior members of the PSNI and MI5 along with political and policy stakeholders.

There were no national security attacks in Northern Ireland in 2024. This is compared to one in both 2023 and 2022. There were none in 2021 and 2020, five in 2019, one in 2018 and five in 2017.

In 2024 there was one security-related death (the murder of Kevin Conway), compared to none in 2023. There were six bombing incidents and seventeen shooting incidents in 2024, compared with eight bombing and thirty-three shooting incidents in 2023. There were twenty-three casualties of paramilitary style assaults (seven in Belfast), compared to thirty-one in 2023. There were five casualties of paramilitary style shootings, compared to nineteen which occurred in 2023. There were sixty-seven security related arrests under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000, with nine persons subsequently charged. This is compared to one hundred and four arrested in 2023 with twenty-one charged.

On 6 March 2024 and for the remainder of the year, Northern Ireland-related Terrorism (NIRT) threat level in Northern Ireland was lowered from SEVERE (an attack is

highly likely) to SUBSTANTIAL (an attack is likely). It is important to note that from the first time a NIRT-specific threat level was published in September 2010 to March 2022 the threat level remained at SEVERE, it was lowered to SUBSTANTIAL between March 2022 and March 2023, and then increased to SEVERE until March 2024.

It is apparent that security statistics along with the approach to measuring the threat level, fails to adequately capture the transformation Northern Ireland has gone through since 1998. Since 2010, the threat level has fluctuated (in a small part) between SEVERE and SUBSTANTIAL yet the policing and security landscape in 2024 is very different and significantly closer to one envisaged through the peace process. There is a risk that Northern Ireland is solely defined through these indicators and that they have a significant influence on current and future security-related policy.

There is a lack of agreement among politicians, policy-makers and the community as to what constitutes a ‘national security issue’. There is also a reluctance to engage on the issue in a public way as most people align it with the conflict and part of our past. As a result, there are limited discussions about national security within the context of public health, the economy, climate change and the environment, migration and immigration, cyber threats and extremism.

In 2019 MI5 in oral evidence to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament responded to a question about the security environment by saying “do not proceed with an assumption that we (MI5) can continue to drive (NIRT attacks) down to zero. That looks to us to be an undeliverable goal, albeit one we should always strive towards.” If this is the case then there should be focused discussion as to what normalisation looks like and what security indicators are best placed to measure it and reflect the situation. My concern is that we use the current security indicators and threat level to justify why we cannot ‘move on’, which makes any further move to normalisation challenging.

During the November 2024 public session of the Northern Ireland Policing Board the PSNI Chief Constable indicated that due to changes to historical arrangements for assigning Close Protection (namely the dissolution of the Northern Ireland Committee on Protection, NICOP), that the organisation was required to develop a policy to govern the assessment and delivery of such protection. The media interpreted this as the PSNI significantly reducing the level of close protection they provide for members of the judiciary because the degree of terrorist threat had diminished. If this were to happen it may have implications around the justification and rationale for additional funding for security related issues. It may also engineer a more public debate around vulnerability, harm, threats and national security.

Annex E sets out five key principles identified as crucial to the effective operation of national security arrangements between PSNI and MI5. My conclusions in relation to these are as follows:

a) All Security Service intelligence relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland will be visible to the PSNI.

It is evident that the PSNI have sight and access to all Security Service Intelligence relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland. There is compliance.

b) PSNI will be informed of all Security Service counter terrorist investigations and operations relating to Northern Ireland.

There are a number of processes and protocols in place to ensure that PSNI will be informed of all Security Service counter-terrorist activities relating to NI. There is compliance.

c) Security Service intelligence will be disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using police procedures.

All Security Service intelligence is disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using current police procedures. There is compliance.

d) The great majority of national security CHISs in Northern Ireland will continue to be run by PSNI officers under existing police handling protocols.

It is apparent that the overwhelming number of what are considered national security Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHISs) in Northern Ireland continue to be run by PSNI officers under existing handling protocols. There is compliance.

e) There will be no diminution of the PSNI's ability to comply with the HRA or the Policing Board's ability to monitor said compliance.

It is evident that there has been no diminution of the PSNI's responsibility to comply with the Human Rights Act or the Policing Board's ability to monitor said compliance throughout 2024. There is compliance.

I wish to note the full co-operation extended to me by both MI5 and the PSNI and the support of the NIO in compiling the report.

It is my conclusion that there is full compliance with Annex E of the St Andrews Agreement between MI5 and PSNI."

[HCWS789]

Petition

Tuesday 8 July 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Early detection of pancreatic cancer

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom

Declares that there are life-threateningly few tests for early detection of pancreatic cancer therefore reducing the availability of life-saving early treatment to patients.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the resource needs in relation to the research and development of tests for the early detection of pancreatic cancer, and ensure the appropriate tools are available to General Practitioners across the NHS.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Wendy Chamberlain, *Official Report*, 4 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 426.]

[P003080]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton):

The Government recognise that pancreatic cancer is one of the most difficult cancers to diagnose early. Its symptoms are often vague and non-specific, meaning that many patients are diagnosed at a late stage when treatment options are limited and outcomes are poor. This underlines the critical importance of improving routes to earlier diagnosis.

To address this challenge, the NHS has implemented non-specific symptom (NSS) pathways across England. These services support faster and more accurate diagnosis for patients who present with symptoms that do not clearly indicate a specific type of cancer, including those often seen in pancreatic cancer. There are currently 115 NSS services operating, ensuring that more patients benefit from quicker access to the right investigations.

Awareness campaigns such as NHS England's "Help Us Help You" aim to increase public knowledge of cancer symptoms, including those related to pancreatic cancer, and encourage earlier engagement with health services. NHS England is also working with Pancreatic Cancer UK to develop a public-facing family history checker tool, enabling individuals to assess inherited risk and access further support, including referral into surveillance research studies.

For those at inherited high risk of pancreatic cancer, the NHS is providing a route into surveillance to help detect lesions before they develop into cancer. In addition, the Government have expressed interest in participating in an upcoming national case finding pilot to explore further approaches to improving earlier diagnosis of pancreatic cancers.

The NHS has launched a £2 million initiative, funding 300 GP practices to identify pancreatic cancer early by screening high-risk patients over 60 with new diabetes diagnoses and unexplained weight loss for urgent testing. More than 300 GP practices across England will begin using the initiative, with dozens rolling it out now, and the rest up and running in the autumn.

The Government support research and innovation through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, which backed 73 clinical research studies into pancreatic cancer between 2018-19 and 2022-23. On average, 84 additional studies annually were supported by NIHR biomedical research centres and related infrastructure, with contributions from industry and charity partners.

We recognise the importance of giving GPs the tools they need for timely investigation of symptoms. That is why we are increasing direct access to key diagnostic tests in primary care, particularly those relevant for detecting cancer at earlier stages.

Through the recently announced cancer plan and through ongoing reforms to cancer pathways, we remain focused on accelerating diagnosis, boosting survival rates and reducing inequalities in outcomes for people affected by pancreatic cancer.

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PETITION

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**not later than
Tuesday 15 July 2025**

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