

**Wednesday
16 July 2025**

**Volume 771
No. 174**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 16 July 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I would like to make a brief statement. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for Defence for his statement yesterday. This episode raises significant constitutional issues. I have therefore asked the Clerks to consider whether any lessons need to be learned from this case. If so, I will report back to the House in due course.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Nuclear Power

1. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Welsh Government on the future of nuclear power in Wales. [905149]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith): The UK Labour Government have announced the largest nuclear building programme in a generation, investing £14.2 billion in Sizewell C and selecting Rolls-Royce SMR to build the UK's first small modular reactors. The memorandum of understanding between the Welsh Government and Sizewell C Consortium could bring £900 million-worth of jobs into the Welsh nuclear supply chain. The Government also recognise Wylfa as one of the UK's top sites for future nuclear development.

John Lamont: I thank the Minister for that answer. Nuclear must be an important part of our energy security strategy. It is both clean and reliable, and creates good jobs for local communities. What more can the Secretary of State do to encourage and incentivise new nuclear power in Wales and across all parts of the United Kingdom?

Dame Nia Griffith: As the hon. Gentleman will know, Great British Energy Nuclear has confirmed that, subject to final Government approvals and contract signature, it has selected Rolls-Royce SMR to build the UK's first small modular reactors. No decisions have yet been taken on siting. We will be setting out our plans in due course. Further to that, as I have already mentioned, the project at Sizewell C will create enough power for 6 million homes and in the peak of construction support 10,000 jobs. It will boost supply chains across the UK. Some 70% of the construction value is predicted to go to 3,500 British suppliers, including companies such as William Hare Group in south Wales, supporting new jobs in construction, welding and hospitality.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I was thrilled to hear that Boccard will today be opening its new nuclear manufacturing facility in north Wales. Does the Minister agree that north Wales has the skills and the sites to realise the economic potential of our nuclear industry, and two Labour Governments ready to deliver on it?

Dame Nia Griffith: Absolutely; I agree with my hon. Friend. I am very pleased indeed today that Boccard is opening its new nuclear manufacturing facility in Deeside. This is an example of the UK Government and the Welsh Government working together to onshore our nuclear supply chain, thus safeguarding 59 jobs in this instance and creating in excess of 150 new positions.

Spending Review 2025

2. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Welsh Government on the potential impact of the spending review 2025 on Wales. [905150]

13. **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): What discussions she has had with the Welsh Government on the potential impact of the spending review 2025 on Wales. [905163]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): Through the spending review, we are providing a record £22.4 billion per year on average for the Welsh Government; investing at least £445 million in Welsh rail; investing £211 million a year in local growth funding; and providing £118 million of new funding for coal tip safety. This Labour Government are investing in Wales's economy, public services and people. We have ended Conservative austerity.

Christine Jardine: I was pleased to see funding for a number of transport projects in Wales in the spending review, not least because my city of Edinburgh is now linked directly by rail to the Secretary of State's city of Cardiff. Lumo, which runs services in Scotland through open access, is hoping to begin a service through south Wales. Does the Minister agree with me that the spending review presents a fantastic opportunity for such projects, which create jobs, strengthen the Union and boost the UK's economy?

Jo Stevens: I very much agree with the hon. Lady about the benefits to the Union of the significant investment that this Government are making in transport. I am very happy to take away her comment on Lumo and open access, and talk to the Rail Minister on her behalf.

Ben Lake: I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State explain in evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee last week that Wales will receive a Barnett consequential of some £200 million as a result of transport announcements for English mayoral combined authority areas made in the lead up to the spending review. Could the Secretary of State clarify whether she was referring to the transport for city regions funding, which was announced on 4 June? The Chief Secretary to the Treasury stated in an answer to a written question that it was not possible to identify the specific Barnett consequential arising from that programme.

Jo Stevens: My understanding is that the just over £200 million figure that I referred to in my evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee relates to the combined mayoral authority announcements that were made prior to the spending review.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee.

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I am delighted that the £500 million announced for the steel industry in the spending review has already been translated into boots on the ground and high-vis jackets with the commencement of the building of the electric arc furnace, safeguarding 5,000 jobs. Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the fantastic progress that has already been made in the steel industry and in supply chains all across Wales?

Jo Stevens: I thank the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee for her question. Monday was a really significant day for Welsh steelmaking. I was at the groundbreaking ceremony to begin construction of the electric arc furnace, which will be one of the largest in the world, securing 5,000 jobs and the future of steelmaking in Port Talbot for years to come. It has been made possible by £1.25 billion of investment, including £500 million from this Government, as well as our £80 million to support workers and the wider steel community, and will benefit not just Port Talbot but downstream sites. This has been a really challenging time for steelworkers across Wales, but I think this week marks a real turning point, securing a bright future for years to come.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): As a result of the UK Government's half a billion pound investment in the future of steel in Port Talbot, construction has now begun on the new electric arc furnace. Will the Secretary of State share what this fantastic news means for Port Talbot and the surrounding communities, like my own of Neath and Swansea East?

Jo Stevens: The Government's investment in the electric arc furnace shows how serious our commitment is to the steel industry, not just in south Wales but across the UK. It is why we have slashed energy costs for steel producers and other energy-intensive industries through the industrial strategy, strengthened procurement rules to use even more UK steel in construction, ensured that the UK is the only country in the world not paying 50% tariffs to the United States, and boosted trade defences to protect the sector against foreign imports. The steel strategy, which we will publish later in the year, will also deliver up to £2.5 billion of investment to help to maintain jobs and growth.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): The UK Government say that Wales is getting record-breaking funding to tackle NHS waiting lists, but for my constituent Melanie Walker, the reality is the opposite. After waiting 59 weeks for a hip operation, she has now been told she must wait another 45, because Powys Teaching Health Board is artificially extending waiting times for patients treated in Shropshire and

Herefordshire to match lower Welsh averages—a cost-cutting move driven by the Welsh Government. Does the Secretary of State think that is fair to Melanie or consistent with her Government's pledge to reduce waiting times?

Jo Stevens: I am very sorry to hear about Melanie's situation. However, I would say to the hon. Gentleman that his party were in government with the Conservatives during the coalition years. That Government delivered horrible austerity on Wales, which led to public services in Wales being degraded. His party was the architect of that.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Chancellor says that cutting red tape for bankers will trickle down to households. *[Interruption.]* The 2008 financial crash taught us that that is utter nonsense. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State has just mentioned things that happened in the past; in 2023, she said:

“12 years of ‘trickle-down’ and ‘trickle-out’ growth strategies have failed to deliver for Britain.”

Does she stand by what she said in opposition, or does she now toe the line for the sake of the Chancellor's friends in the City?

Jo Stevens: I apologise to the right hon. Lady; I am afraid I did not hear the start of her question. On tax and what the Chancellor has talked about, we stand by our manifesto commitment not to increase income tax, employee national insurance contributions or VAT. The Chancellor has said that it would be irresponsible to write future Budgets months in advance, especially given the global situation. There are clearly costs and implications to every decision this Parliament makes, but we remain focused on growing our economy in Wales and across the UK.

Liz Saville Roberts: That is one way of avoiding answering the question, Mr Speaker. My point is that Labour's skewed sense of fairness does not stop at prioritising the interests of the banks over others; it is also hitting our farmers and rural communities. The Farmers Union of Wales has warned that Labour's planned reforms to agricultural property relief will do irreversible damage to the Welsh family farm. Looking ahead to next week's Royal Welsh Show, will the Secretary of State agree at last that what we really need is a tax on extreme wealth, instead of a tax on those who feed us and sustain our rural economies?

Jo Stevens: At the autumn Budget, we demonstrated our commitment to our fiscal rules while maintaining high levels of investment to rebuild our public services—an investment in farming as well—after the mess that the Tories left behind. We have repeatedly said that those with the broadest shoulders should bear the greatest burden, and that has been reflected in the decisions that we have taken so far. Tax changes, as the right hon. Member knows, are a matter for the Chancellor.

Industrial Strategy

3. **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the industrial strategy, published on 23 June 2025, on Wales. [905152]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith): Our industrial strategy will unlock growth right across Wales and support tens of thousands of new jobs. We will target areas of strength from aerospace in north Wales to the world's first compound semiconductor cluster in south Wales. We have announced a new centre for doctoral training in compound semiconductors led by Swansea university, plus a new defence growth deal and £30 million for a local innovation partnership fund—to name just a few developments.

Sarah Edwards: Like many Members in this House, I welcome the Government's industrial strategy and its focus on growth for our local communities. Across Wales, we have a number of former mining towns, which face the challenge of retraining and upskilling their local workforce. My constituency of Tamworth, a former mining town, faces similar challenges. Will the Minister tell me how the industrial strategy will support former mining towns across Wales and in my constituency of Tamworth?

Dame Nia Griffith: There are many job opportunities coming to Wales through the industrial strategy. We are also ensuring that local communities have the money available to secure the safety of the coal tips, which is the industrial legacy of those communities. That means £118 million of additional funding on top of the £25 million that we have already dedicated to those areas. As my hon. Friend will know, we are also forging ahead with the industrial zones and freeports in Wales and also the supply chains for the various industries that I mentioned in my previous answer, and they will include, I know, industries in Tamworth.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Let us have some reality. Today, inflation hit 3.6%, the highest across the G7. This UK Labour Government have a glossy shine on their so-called industrial strategy, but it is simply proving that their actions and ethos deliver only worse outcomes for Wales. Businesses across Wales are now facing a disgraceful double whammy, as just this week Labour in Cardiff passed plans to impose a dire tourism tax. Has the Minister actually carried out any meaningful assessment with the Welsh Government of how many jobs will be lost, as the vital 100,000-strong Welsh tourism sector will be impacted by this tax and by the failing approach to Wales by the two Labour Governments?

Dame Nia Griffith: The Welsh tourism sector is thriving. Last year, British residents took over 7 million overnight trips to Wales and spent more than £2 billion. As the shadow Secretary of State will know, more than 40 countries and holiday destinations around the world, including Greece, Amsterdam, Barcelona and California, have introduced a form of visitor levy, and many of us have paid taxes abroad without even noticing. If a visitor levy were introduced by all Welsh local authorities, it could raise up to £33 million, which would help support the long-term thriving industry in Wales, as well as provide facilities such as toilets that local people can use. I am confident that the Welsh Government will work with businesses and tourists alike to get this right.

Cross-border Rail Connectivity

4. Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve rail connectivity between north Wales and the north of England. [905153]

9. Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking with the Welsh Government to improve cross-border rail connectivity. [905158]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): We are investing at least £445 million—an historic investment—in Welsh rail, to right the years of underfunding by previous Conservative Governments and to unleash Wales's economic potential. This funding will support the permanent closing of level crossings on the north Wales main line, enabling increased services across north Wales that will improve cross-border connectivity, create jobs and boost economic growth.

Mrs Blundell: The Chancellor's announcement of at least £445 million for Welsh rail will be transformative for Welsh passengers and Better Connect workers with jobs across north Wales and Manchester, but only if we are pulling in the same direction. What steps will be taken by the Wales Office to ensure that national Governments, devolved Governments and our combined authority in Greater Manchester are working together to improve connectivity and bring the people of the north-west and north Wales closer together?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why I was pleased to see the Welsh Government's Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Ken Skates recently launch Network North Wales in Wrexham. That really exciting plan will better connect communities in north Wales and north-west England through more rail and bus services and greater integration. Benefits will include 50% more timetabled services on the north Wales main line, boosting cross-border connectivity and driving economic growth between north Wales and north-west England. In addition, the investment in rail infrastructure will boost capacity on the Wrexham to Liverpool line.

Dave Robertson: Bore da. Does the Secretary of State agree that the introduction of the midlands rail hub project, which will see an additional train per hour from Cardiff in south Wales to the midlands, is a great sign that this Government are investing not just in Wales and the midlands but in the whole country?

Jo Stevens: I thank my hon. Friend for his question—and for his very good Welsh. The first phase of the midlands rail hub will enable additional trains between Birmingham and south Wales, strengthening cross-border connectivity between Wales and England. That is absolutely what this Government's investment is about: creating jobs and growth and connecting Wales and England.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Let us have another reality check. Information provided to us by the Department for Transport confirms that Conservative expenditure on Welsh rail exceeded £5 billion over our time in office, underpinned by our plans to

deliver the north Wales main line. Yet in a January sitting of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the Welsh Secretary roundly criticised Welsh rail before claiming:

“That is a direct consequence, I am afraid, of the last 14 years of underfunding”.

As usual, this Government’s words and beliefs and the reality are poles apart. This Labour Government are now offering peanuts—just a miserable £400 million over an entire decade. Will the Secretary of State retract her past claims to the Welsh Affairs Committee and the similar ones that have been made on the Wales Office Government social media accounts?

Jo Stevens: No, I will not.

Oxford to Cambridge Rail Line

5. Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the classification of the Oxford to Cambridge rail line as an England and Wales transport project on Wales. [905154]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): The hon. Member will know that that was an error made under the previous Conservative Government. Heavy rail infrastructure is reserved in Wales and, like every heavy rail project in England, Barnett consequentials do not apply. The UK Government’s rail network enhancements pipeline funds East West Rail—or Ox-Cam rail, as it is more commonly known—and also directly funds projects in Wales, such as the historic at least £445 million investment in rail in Wales that was announced in the June spending review.

Mr Forster: The Government have claimed that listing the Oxford to Cambridge rail line as “England-only” on past documents was just an accounting error by the Conservative Government and that the project has not been reclassified to deprive Wales of funding, but four separate Government documents list it as “England-only”, and over £1 million in Barnett consequentials were already paid to Wales on that basis. Does the Secretary of State honestly stand by her claim that it has just been reclassified and that this is not intended to deprive Wales of fair funding?

Jo Stevens: As I have just explained, an error was made by the previous Conservative Government. Heavy rail was and always is reserved. The Welsh Government will not be required to re-pay any Barnett consequentials provided to them as a result of any error that took place under the Conservative Government.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Welsh Government allocated over £1 billion to transport in their recent Budget. This investment comes after 14 years of critical under-investment by the Conservatives, and it should hopefully provide funding to stations such as Ely Mill in my constituency. Can the Secretary of State tell me why the Welsh Conservatives and Plaid Cymru voted against this investment, which would mean extra funding to fix our roads, build new trains and improve our buses?

Jo Stevens: The Opposition’s decision to vote against the additional funding was inexplicable, as was their decision to vote against extra money for the NHS, for

education and for businesses—I could go on. They stand here and criticise this Government while they vote against extra money for Wales.

Family Farms

6. Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on family farms in Wales. [905155]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith): The Government are steadfastly committed to family farms in Wales, which is why we protected the farm budget at its current level and allocated £337 million to the Welsh Government at the autumn Budget. Furthermore, at the UK-EU summit on 19 May the Prime Minister announced that the UK would deliver a new agrifood deal with the European Union. Routine sanitary and phytosanitary border checks will be eliminated, with less paperwork and fewer costs. British goods such as dairy, fish, eggs and red meat currently subject to 100% documentary checks and up to 30% physical checks will see those removed entirely.

Gregory Stafford: Although the aims of the sustainable farming scheme are laudable, many farmers across Wales are expressing real concern about its complexity, the potential reduction in food production and the adequacy of the financial support on offer. What assurances can the Minister give that the scheme will be simplified, sufficiently funded and implemented in a way that supports both the environmental goals and the economic viability of Welsh farming communities?

Dame Nia Griffith: The scheme will have a transition period, with the basic payment scheme available for those not in the SFS, although that will be reduced by 40% next year. The Welsh Government are prioritising their money on the SFS to encourage farmers to join the scheme and start benefiting from it. The Farming Union of Wales has said that the plan provides “workable payment rates and much needed stability for the sector.”

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): The Welsh Government’s budget contains over £300 million to support Welsh farmers. Is it not the case that Plaid Cymru and the Tories put Welsh farmers’ livelihoods at risk by voting against that crucial money?

Dame Nia Griffith: Indeed, it is absolutely shocking that Plaid Cymru and the Tories in the Senedd voted against a budget that is giving that money to Welsh farmers.

Offshore Wind

7. Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for offshore wind in Wales. [905156]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): In June, the Crown Estate announced that it will partner with Equinor and Gwynt Glas to develop floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea. Those projects will create over 5,000 new jobs and will leverage £1.4 billion in private investment. This will deliver generational

change in Wales. We are supporting the industry with an £80 million investment in Port Talbot port and a £1 billion clean energy supply chain fund to support offshore wind across the UK.

Perran Moon: Meur ras ha myttin da, Mr Speaker—or should I say “Diolch yn fawr”? The proposed floating offshore wind farms in the Celtic sea lie between the two ancient Celtic nations of Wales and Cornwall. The Celtic sea not only will be a valuable source of renewable energy but has the potential to create thousands of jobs across south Wales and Cornwall. Does the Secretary of State agree that local funding for economic development is essential to realise that potential and that, working hand in hand with Cornwall, Wales will play a key role in helping to unleash the Cornish Celtic tiger?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is right that floating offshore wind presents significant opportunities for Wales and the UK. In the leasing round that just took place we had a first-mover advantage in this technology of the future. Earlier this month, the Energy Secretary granted development consent for the Mona offshore wind farm, which will bolster north Wales’s offshore wind industry. All of that is contributing to securing our energy independence and bringing down bills for people in Cornwall, Wales and the rest of the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon. *[Interruption.]*

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I know that cheer was not for me, Mr Speaker. When it comes to offshore wind in Wales, the waters in which that offshore wind energy will be generated are the same waters that flow by Northern Ireland, the same waters that flow by England and the same waters that flow by Scotland. Is it not time to have an offshore wind strategy for the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? If we do it together, we will do it better.

Jo Stevens: I always believe that we do things better when we do them together.

Defence Spending

8. **Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of increases in defence spending on Wales. [905157]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith): We are committed to spending 5% of the UK’s GDP on national security by 2035. The spending review invested to keep our people safe, with a £10.9 billion real-terms increase to the Ministry of Defence budget. This will help grow the Welsh economy and our thriving defence sector, which is home to over 160 companies employing more than 20,000 people right across Wales.

Olivia Bailey: This Government’s commitment to spending 5% of GDP on national security will be transformational for Wales and for my constituency, where thousands are employed in the defence sector and where we welcomed a £15 billion boost for the Atomic Weapons Establishment. Do the Secretary of

State and the Minister agree that both our national security and our local economies are better off with Labour?

Dame Nia Griffith: Absolutely; our ambition is to become a defence industrial superpower by 2025. We are making defence an engine for growth, boosting prosperity, jobs and security for working people across the UK. As part of this, we will establish the UK defence innovation fund, with £400 million to fund and grow UK-based companies. We are also launching the new regional defence growth deals across the UK, including a cluster in Wales.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905269] **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 16 July.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): There has always been support across this House for the United Kingdom fulfilling our obligations to Afghans who served alongside British forces. We warned in opposition about Conservative management of this policy, and yesterday the Defence Secretary set out the full extent of the failings that we inherited: a major data breach, a super-injunction and a secret route that had already cost hundreds of millions of pounds. Ministers who served in the Conservative Government have serious questions to answer about how this was ever allowed to happen. The Chair of the Defence Committee has indicated that he intends to hold further inquiries. I welcome that and I hope that those who were in office at the time will welcome that scrutiny.

President Macron’s state visit last week saw us secure historic agreements: co-ordinating our nuclear deterrents; a major investment in Sizewell C; and a landmark returns deal, which is a crucial next step in restoring order to our immigration system. Tomorrow I will host Chancellor Merz for further talks on our security and the economy. This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Jacob Collier: Families in Burton and Uttoxeter are watching their smart meters like hawks, and dreading the moment when their energy bill lands on the doormat. I therefore welcome Labour’s warm home discount, which will mean £150 off energy bills for millions of people across this country, providing meaningful support in these difficult times. Will the Prime Minister set out how that will help support families in my constituency and across the country?

The Prime Minister: I met my hon. Friend’s constituent Nicola in her kitchen, and she told me how hard she is working to support her three children, but that the past decade has let her down, with false promises and public services a wreck. She told me about the difference the warm home discount will make, and that £150 off her energy bills—she had a meter in her kitchen, if I recall, recording how much energy she was using—would make all the difference to her. I promised Nicola and my hon. Friend that there is much more to come.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Yesterday, the head of the Office for Budget Responsibility warned the Government that higher and higher levels of taxes are bad for growth. Does the Prime Minister agree?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I will tell you what is bad for growth: 14 years of a Tory Government. That meant stagnant growth for 14 years, leaving a £22 billion black hole. In the first quarter of this year we have achieved: the highest growth in the G7, which we promised before the election; investment of £120 billion in this country, which is a record in the first year of any Government; and three trade deals, all of which will boost growth.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister is talking about what he has achieved, but we have just heard that inflation is up again—the worst in the G7. We left him with 2% inflation. We have borrowing up, unemployment up and taxes up under his Government. The fact is that the Prime Minister does not get it, so let me tell him. His Budget last year had high taxes. That is why the economy is contracting. The Government have said that they will not put up taxes for people on modest incomes, but they also seem incapable of explaining who is in that category, so can the Prime Minister clear up the confusion and tell us what he thinks a modest income is?

The Prime Minister: I think of the working people across this country who put in every day and do not get back what they deserve. That is who we are working for, and that is who we are fixing the country for. They are the sort of people that work hard but have not necessarily got the savings to buy themselves out of problems. That is who we are working for, and that is why we put the national living wage up, with an extra £1,400. The national minimum wage is up, with an extra £2,500 a year. The triple lock means pensions went up by £470. And of course, we are extending childcare, opening free breakfast clubs and extending free school meals. We know exactly who we are working for. The right hon. Lady comes here every week and just talks the country down.

Mrs Badenoch: I am not talking of the country down; I am talking the Prime Minister down. I asked him what a modest income was. He answered with what a working person is. He does not know what a modest income is, and they cannot even define who working people are. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that working people are people who get a payslip, but millions of self-employed people do not get a payslip, so are the self-employed next in line for a Labour tax raise?

The Prime Minister: The self-employed were the very people who suffered repeatedly under the Conservatives' watch, particularly during covid, as I remember, when they did not get the support that they needed. The right hon. Lady talks the country down and she cherry-picks. Since we have been in government, we have created 380,000 jobs, the employment rate is up and inactivity is down—the complete opposite of what we inherited.

Mrs Badenoch: I do not know where these 3,000 jobs are coming from. Unemployment has gone up every month under his Government. Perhaps the Prime Minister

should speak to farmers and small business people and find out what those working people think about his Government. But that is not all, because we know that the Chancellor is launching a review into pension contributions. It is as clear as day why this is. It is because the Government are considering taxing them. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that a tax on pension contributions is a tax on working people?

The Prime Minister: We made absolutely clear manifesto commitments, which the right hon. Lady asked me about last week, and we are keeping to them. I am not going to write the Budget months out from the Budget. I am proud of the decisions that we took to invest in our NHS and to invest in our public services—all decisions that the Conservatives opposed. It is no wonder that after the first year of a Labour Government, business confidence is at a nine-year high. That is longer than she has been in government—[HON. MEMBERS: "Withdraw!"] I am not withdrawing that; I am going to repeat it. Business confidence is at a nine-year high.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister says that he is not going to write the Budget, but his Chancellor is on the front of the *Daily Mirror* talking about what she is going to do on taxes, so why can he not do the same in the Chamber? I asked him about pension contributions. The truth is that he does not want to talk about pension contributions. It is all right for the Prime Minister, because he has his own special law to stop his personal pension from being taxed. But let us be honest: this is really about choices. My party knows that there is an alternative to tax rises: cutting spending—something that the Government are too scared, or perhaps too weak, to do. We offered to work with him to reform welfare and make meaningful savings, but his refusal sent a signal and now the cost of borrowing is rising. The Budget is in November, which is months away and the markets may not wait. What will the Prime Minister be doing over the summer to get a grip on the cost of borrowing?

The Prime Minister: The Conservatives left the most incredible mess in the economy, and now they think that they can lecture others. Just last week their chairman said that they had done the necessary apologising for the 14 years of failure. I did not hear an apology for the lowest living standards in living history. I did not hear an apology for the £22 billion black hole. I did not hear an apology for the Liz Truss mini-Budget. Maybe the right hon. Lady would like to stand up and make that apology now.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister is not planning to do anything this summer to fix the economy. The shadow of the last Budget is hanging over the entire country. Just yesterday, only the Conservatives supported the two-child benefit cap, because only the Conservatives believe in living within our means—not Labour, not the Liberal Democrats, not Reform.

But it is the end of term, so why don't we go through the Prime Minister's end-of-term scorecard? The economy is contracting, inflation is the highest in the G7, unemployment is up every month under this Government, spending is out of control, borrowing costs are more expensive than in Greece—and this is just the first year. The Labour party should be ashamed of what it is

doing to the country. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members can shake their heads as much as they like, but the fact is that this summer they will have to go to their constituents and explain why the Government have been making such a mess over the past 12 months. And is it not the case, given that this is just their first year, that the worse is yet to come?

The Prime Minister: We are happily going to go to our constituents. We will tell them that we promised 2 million extra NHS appointments and have delivered 4 million extra appointments. I have to upgrade that—it is now 4.5 million extra appointments, so we will tell our constituents that. Then we will tell them about the free school meals we are rolling out, the free breakfast clubs, the free childcare, and school uniform costs. We will tell them about that. When we have done that, we will move on to affordable houses and tell them about the £39 billion we are investing. When we are finished with that, we will tell them about the rail and road upgrades across the country, the £120 billion investment and, of course, the three trade deals—and we are only just getting started.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): The Prime Minister will never know exactly how much it meant to victims of the troubles in Northern Ireland, from right across society, when he came, looked them in their eyes and promised them that no murderer would be immune from prosecution. Can he tell us when he last spoke to the Taoiseach about the shared approach to this issue, and will he recommit today to those victims, to ensure that no murderer will be seen to be above the law?

The Prime Minister: This is a really important issue, and can I begin by saying that I have a profound respect and debt to our veterans who served? This is a complicated issue and we have to get it right. Veterans are at risk because of the false promises of the last Government. Let us be clear: the last Government made a false promise of immunity that does not exist. It was unlawful, it was struck down, and it was undeliverable. Their failed legacy Act leaves veterans exposed with no settled process. We will create a secure, transparent system that protects veterans from unjustified persecution and gives victims, families and survivors the confidence they need in the process.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's words about the shocking Afghan data breach under the previous Government, which was kept secret for three years? He will have our support if he decides to pursue a public inquiry.

I know that the Prime Minister will agree that the shocking rise of antisemitism that we have seen since Hamas's 7 October terror attacks has no place in our society. British Jews should not have to live in fear of hatred, racism and abuse on our streets or online. A new report from the Board of Deputies' commission on antisemitism, chaired by Lord Mann and Dame Penny Mordaunt, has set out 10 recommendations to tackle this appalling scourge. Will the Prime Minister study this report, and will his Government respond to it in full?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we will. We must fight antisemitism wherever we find it, as we must fight all hate offences, crimes and incidents wherever we find them.

Ed Davey: I thank the Prime Minister for that reply. I hope that we will see more action to tackle antisemitism.

Turning to the middle east, the world is looking on in horror at the scenes from Gaza, and now Netanyahu's Ministers want to lock the whole population of Gaza into what is effectively a giant prison—a plan that would clearly amount to ethnic cleansing, as former Israeli Prime Minister Olmert has said. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is utterly abhorrent and unacceptable? Will he make it clear to the Israeli Government that the UK will not stand idly by and will act, starting by sanctioning Prime Minister Netanyahu himself?

The Prime Minister: I am appalled by the suggestions in relation to Gaza, just as I am appalled by the reports of yet more civilians being killed while trying to access aid. On both fronts, I am appalled by what we are seeing and hearing, and we raise that regularly, as the right hon. Gentleman would expect. In relation to the civilians being killed, I would expect that to be fully and transparently investigated, with full accountability for any failings. Israel must clearly put in place measures that properly protect civilians, in line with international law, and that is the case that we are pressing repeatedly. Alongside that, we want to see an immediate ceasefire, so that the remaining hostages can be brought out, aid can be got in at volume and at speed, and a political process can be opened, which in my view is the only way in which we are going to get a lasting solution.

Q3. [905271] Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): Last week, four-year-old Eli Testa was killed in Rawtenstall cemetery when a memorial stone fell on him. All of Rossendale was shocked by this tragedy, so I hope the Prime Minister will join me in offering his deepest condolences to Eli's parents and family.

Families in Rossendale are also deeply concerned about reports that Reform-led Lancashire county council is considering cuts to nursery funding, which would raise costs for working parents and might force some nurseries to close. If this is an example of the sort of efficiencies that Reform is considering, then all of Lancashire—indeed, all of us—should be worried. Will the Prime Minister join me in asking Lancashire county council to think again?

The Prime Minister: I send my deepest condolences to Eli's friends and family. I join my hon. Friend in urging the new Reform council to think again and change its mind on damaging cuts that hit children and young families. My hon. Friend is doing a much better job than his predecessor, the Conservative party chairman under Liz Truss, who has now joined Reform. That proves once again that if people vote Tory they get Reform, and if they vote Reform they get the Tories. While both parties are cutting services at home, we support families with free school meals and free breakfast clubs, and by extending free childcare.

Q2. [905270] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Jack Straw told us that the Human Rights Act 1998 places on us no expectation that we will

remedy a declaration of incompatibility issued by a court, so the Prime Minister is wrong to say that the legacy Act is struck down. His own proposals, which open the door to compensation to Gerry Adams and place in jeopardy our own servicemen, present enormous difficulty to those of us who have served—that is increasingly the case on the Prime Minister's own Benches. Will he consider that?

The Prime Minister: The failed legacy Act was struck down by the courts in Northern Ireland, and that leaves veterans exposed. We are creating a secure, transparent system that protects veterans from unjustified persecution, but that also gives victims, families and survivors the confidence that they need in the process.

Q6. [905274] Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Workers in Rochdale on the minimum wage received a much needed pay rise this summer, thanks to this Government, but honest businesses are being undermined by the menace of illegal working, particularly by illegal migrants from Iran and Iraq in bogus barber shops and fake vape shops. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to speed up the roll-out of digital IDs, particularly to help our police and immigration staff crack down on this grey market that ruins our high streets and undercuts the pay of British workers?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is an excellent champion for Rochdale and, I know, a strong supporter of his local police and trading standards teams. Since we came to power, we have ramped up enforcement raids on illegal working. Arrests have gone up by 50%, and we are tightening the law on delivery drivers. Digital ID will help us to tackle illegal working, and we are rolling out the use of e-visas to have digital records of immigration status and allowing on-the-spot checks of anybody's right to work.

Q4. [905272] James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Severe pregnancy sickness—hyperemesis gravidarum, or HG—can mean vomiting more than 20 times a day. It causes physical discomfort, acute malnutrition and severe dehydration, which often leads to hospitalisation. It has profound and long-lasting mental health consequences. It was recently reported that a woman took her own life after being denied access to the only licensed treatment, Xonvea—tragically, her unborn child died too. The drug is licensed and available, yet women face a cruel postcode lottery to access it. Will the Prime Minister work urgently with the Department of Health and Social Care to end this scandal, so that every woman who needs Xonvea can get it, wherever she lives? Will he meet with me and campaigners to look at this as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this really important issue. I am obviously incredibly sorry to hear about the tragic case that he mentions. As he will know, the availability of this drug is regulated across the NHS by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which makes decisions on which treatments provide the best care for patients while maintaining value for money for the taxpayer. I will make sure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to see what more can be done to get this treatment to patients who need it.

Q9. [905277] Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): In Stockport, approximately 20% of families live in social housing. After Stockport Liberal Democrat and Conservative councillors blocked the Greater Manchester spatial framework proposal in 2020, the need for social housing is even more critical. Far too many families are living in insecure, overcrowded accommodation and waiting years for a suitable family home. I welcome Labour's record-breaking £39 billion investment in social and affordable housing, and I want to ensure that communities such as mine in Stockport are prioritised. Can the Prime Minister confirm that these homes will be built and will be affordable? Will he look again at suspending the right to buy?

The Prime Minister: We are delivering the biggest boost to social and affordable housing in a generation, and we are proud to do so. Our £39 billion investment will deliver around 300,000 social and affordable homes, with at least 60% of homes delivered for social rent. While we do not intend to remove the right to buy, which helps social tenants to get on the property ladder, we are reforming the scheme to protect social housing stock and encourage councils to deliver more new homes.

Q5. [905273] Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): A much better understanding of the particular needs of autistic and neurodiverse children is vital to expanding capacity in mainstream education for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. As the Prime Minister looks at the SEND Bill over the summer, can I urge him to introduce mandatory training for all teachers and staff on autism and neurodiversity?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that contribution, because parents and children have been failed far too often. We are committing an additional £1 billion to SEND, but there must be meaningful reform alongside it, and new teachers must have the appropriate training. We are committed to reviewing that and to working with parents and teachers, and we will take away his suggestion. I invite him and others across the House to work with us on this important reform, because I think this issue has been raised with me more than any other at Prime Minister's questions. It is clearly a broken system; it needs reform. If we can work together across the House to get it right, I think that is the least we owe to parents and children across the country.

Q10. [905278] Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I commend the Prime Minister on his work to tackle the arbitrary detention of British citizens abroad and warmly welcome the creation of a special envoy. He will know of the anguish of the families of Jimmy Lai, Ryan Cornelius, Alaa Abd el-Fattah, Jagtar Singh Johal and others. Can the Prime Minister tell us when he anticipates the appointment of the envoy will happen? Will they have real powers, like their counterparts in Canada and the United States, to help bring our people home?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the all-party parliamentary group on arbitrary detention and hostage affairs, championing the plight of British nationals facing the most difficult circumstances

overseas? We routinely raise these cases with international counterparts, as he would expect, and we are deeply committed to getting them home and united with their loved ones. As part of our work to strengthen support for British nationals overseas, we are working at pace to get the envoy role set up, and I will make sure that he is kept updated about that.

Q7. [905275] Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Government plans for English devolution and NHS reform suggest that integrated care boards should align with new strategic authorities. The Government's plan for Bedfordshire will not currently achieve that, so what assurances can the Prime Minister provide that local NHS reorganisation will be good value for money, improve local accountability and deliver the healthcare services that are needed to serve my constituents in rural Mid Bedfordshire, including the much-needed GP surgery in Wixams?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman's points about good value for money and accountability are really important. They are embedded in the work we are doing with the NHS at the moment, which is improving on our watch—not only the waiting lists, but in other respects. The 10-year plan for the NHS, which is intended to ensure that the NHS is fit for the future, has a number of principles, including the principle of local accountability.

Q12. [905280] Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): On 11 June, Alexander Dennis announced that it was planning to stop bus manufacturing in Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and I have met the workers, the trade unions, the company and both UK and Scottish Government Ministers to see how closure can be averted. Alexander Dennis needs commitments to orders for 2025 and 2026, and elected mayors are ideally placed to do this. Our industrial strategy is right when it says that where things are made, and by whom, matters. As such, can the Prime Minister assure Alexander Dennis and the workers that he believes bus manufacturing should have a future in Larbert and Falkirk?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter. It is a deeply concerning time for the workers and their families in Falkirk. I agree with him, and we are working with mayors and local leaders to develop a pipeline of future orders for zero emission buses, which is an important aspect of this issue. The Minister for local transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), is hosting an urgent meeting of the bus manufacturing expert panel.

While Labour mayors in England are ordering Scottish buses, the SNP is ordering buses from China, just like it ordered ships from Turkey and Poland, not from Scottish shipyards. The SNP should be backing Scottish workers.

Q8. [905276] Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I begin by warmly congratulating the Prime Minister on his first year in office. I acknowledge that the Labour manifesto was beautifully written, deeply moving and, like that other great blockbuster of hope and redemption, "The Salt Path", a total pack of lies. With joblessness, inflation and debt ballooning, with

his personal ratings collapsing, and with his Back Benchers on a work to rule, could the Prime Minister recommend—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on—let us get on with the question.

Graham Stuart: Could the Prime Minister recommend a summer recess read, in order to take all our minds off the calamitous journey on which he and the Chancellor have embarked?

The Prime Minister: From looking at the Opposition Benches, I think most Conservative Back Benchers are already on their summer recess. We are very proud of our manifesto—it was a very successful manifesto, giving us a landslide victory—and now we are very proud to be implementing it.

Q13. [905281] Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let us be clear in this House: Israel is starving Palestinian children. That is a war crime. Israel is killing Palestinian children as they queue for food. That is a war crime. Our Government have quite rightly imposed thousands of sanctions on Russia for its war crimes in Ukraine. How many more horrors must we witness before the Prime Minister acts with the same scale of sanctions against Israel to stop this genocide? Do Palestinian lives not matter?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, I am appalled by reports of more civilians being killed in Gaza, particularly when they are trying to access aid. Each of those incidents needs to be fully and transparently investigated, with accountability for any failings. That, of course, has to happen alongside the ceasefire that is desperately needed and that we are working hard with others to achieve, in order to release all of the hostages who remain, but also to protect civilians and get much more aid into Gaza at speed and at volume.

Q11. [905279] Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I can see why you call these sessions Prime Minister's questions and not Prime Minister's answers, Mr Speaker.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. If this carries on, there will be no more. Come on, Lincoln Jopp.

Lincoln Jopp: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Following the magnificent success of the England cricket team earlier this week and the triumphal return of Mr Jofra Archer, does the Prime Minister agree that what he needs from his Ministers over the next 12 months is more pace and less spin?

The Prime Minister: My Ministers have delivered on the NHS, on the economy, on rail, etc. The hon. Gentleman needs a break.

Q14. [905282] Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Successive Conservative Governments failed to invest in the transport infrastructure of the north-east, but the Labour Government are already changing that with the £1.8 billion that was recently secured for the region.

Upgrading Moor Farm and Seaton Burn roundabouts can build on that, unlocking growth, and is supported by local people and businesses. Does the Prime Minister share my disappointment that rather than supporting my campaign for upgrades, the Conservative leadership in Northumberland county council is actively undermining my lobbying efforts to deliver this game changer for the north-east?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is doing a superb job for Northumberland, and I am happy to set out what we have delivered. We have delivered more than £400 million of funding for Northumberland county council this year—a 5.8% increase—as well as an 80% increase in the number of homes on which construction has started in my hon. Friend's area, a near £13 million increase in funding for Northumbria police, and 14 free breakfast clubs in Northumberland, supporting more than 3,000 children. That is the difference that a Labour Government makes.

Q15. [905283] **Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): During my meetings with guests who are in my constituency under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, they have told me that they are worried about their visas running out, even with the 18-month extension. They see reports of Ukrainians being refused asylum in the United Kingdom because it is said to be safe to return to Ukraine, even while Putin's missiles explode in record numbers in Ukrainian cities. Some of their children are working through two or three-year education courses, and are frightened of having to leave. Will the Prime Minister meet them, and me, to hear about their plight and offer them some hope in this uncertain and dangerous world?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. We are proud to have offered or extended sanctuary to more than 300,000 Ukrainians and their families throughout the operation of the visa scheme since the invasion in 2022. We do need to provide certainty and security for Ukrainians in the United Kingdom, and we will provide an additional 18 months' permission to remain in the UK as well as continued rights to live, work and study here.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): In 2017 I led a Select Committee inquiry that warned of an emerging disaster in special educational needs and disability services. Those warnings went unheeded by the Conservatives, who left behind a broken system, which even they have since admitted is, "Lose, lose, lose." Can the Prime Minister confirm that this Labour Government's rebuilt SEND system will be shaped by listening to the needs of SEN families, never again ignored but served in the best traditions of a Labour Government?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. I think there is general agreement across the House that the system is broken, just like almost everything the Conservatives touched at the end of 14 miserable years. It does not work for parents and it lets children down, and we will reform it. We are already investing an additional £1 billion, but we need a system that truly supports every child. We are developing proposals, and I want to work across the House in order to secure the right outcome.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Pippa Heylings.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Yet again, we are suffering record-breaking heatwaves and drought. That is worrying people in my constituency, which is both the fastest-growing and the most water-stressed area in the country. The proposed fens reservoir is important, but will provide water only for the already ambitious house building plans, not the thousands of new homes that the Government propose. Does the Prime Minister agree that the water crisis in Greater Cambridge is a deal-breaker for the Government's growth plans, and will he, as a matter of urgency, help me to convene a ministerial roundtable with the Cambridge water scarcity group?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the drought and, more generally, the question of reservoirs. It is shocking that a new reservoir has not been built for a very, very long time—none at all in the previous 14 years. We are building now, and we are doing that alongside the infrastructure and housing that we also need to build. We will work across the House on that.

Sudan

12.36 pm

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister if she will make a statement on Britain's response to the worsening situation in Sudan.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): Sudan is the worst humanitarian crisis on record. Over 30 million people need aid, and 12 million people have been displaced. Famine is spreading fast, and new reports confirm that the situation will deteriorate in the next three months. Cholera is also now widespread.

Lifesaving assistance continues to be blocked by the parties. Last month, five aid workers were killed in an appalling attack on a UN convoy that was delivering lifesaving aid to those fleeing violence in El Fasher. The deliberate targeting of aid workers clearly violates international law. As the United Nations Security Council penholder on Sudan, the UK led calls for accountability for such attacks, including through the UK-penned press statement on 12 June. Last week, the International Criminal Court's Office of the Prosecutor found reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity may well have been, and continue to be, committed in Darfur. The perpetrators must be held to account.

The UK continues to play a leading role in ensuring that aid gets to where it is most needed. In April, the Foreign Secretary brought together a broad coalition of partners to build consensus on strengthening humanitarian access. The co-chairs' statement called on the parties to facilitate humanitarian access in accordance with their commitments in the Jeddah declaration. Over £810 million of funding for Sudan was announced, including £120 million of UK aid, which will support over 650,000 people this year.

In the absence of a ceasefire, the humanitarian situation will only worsen. We continue to call on the warring parties to place the interests of the Sudanese people over their pursuit of a military victory. The UK is working with our international partners to push the warring parties to return to the negotiating table and commit to a meaningful, sustainable ceasefire.

Any process that follows must be inclusive. We underline the importance of a return to civilian rule that is democratic and representative of the whole country. Moves by the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces to establish their own parallel Governments will only exacerbate de facto splits, and could lead to the permanent partition of Sudan. That is in no one's interests.

We will continue to use all diplomatic tools at our disposal to protect civilians, get aid to those who need it most, and support a Sudanese-led peace process with civilians at its heart.

Sir Andrew Mitchell: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question today.

I make no apologies for raising the dire and desperate straits of the Sudanese people again in this House, not least because Britain leads on the Sudanese situation at the United Nations on behalf of all other nations. As the Minister said, the people of Sudan are in the throes

of the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world and the situation is worsening, even if such things can hardly be imagined. Earlier this month, the United Nations and international organisations reported the mass displacement of tens of thousands of people following the combatant forces advancing across the Kordofan states. There have been months of increased mobilisation of fighters, including the recruitment of children from across Darfur. As fighting expands, the Kordofan states are the next deadly front.

In the recent and welcome ministerial conference hosted by the Foreign Secretary, much-needed money was raised, but the goal of a high-level contact group to drive political efforts towards achieving a ceasefire and protecting Sudanese civilians met with an impasse. We must accept that despite our efforts the past two years have been a story of faltering international endeavour where world events have cast Sudan into the shadows as its people have faced only deepening peril.

I ask the Minister three questions. First, what lessons have the Government learned from the siege of El Fasher and the overwhelming of the camp for displaced people at Zamzam to prepare for and protect civilians from the spread of violence across the Kordofan states? How are the Government supporting the local emergency response rooms? Secondly, can she confirm that the prevention of atrocities remains a key pillar of British policy and is unaffected by the recent cuts in the development budget? Thirdly, and finally, what are the Government doing to advance international efforts to protect civilians alongside their pursuit of a ceasefire? Are we to assume the Jeddah process is dead? What discussions has she had with her counterparts in the United States over recent weeks?

Catherine West: I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for his questions and his long-standing interest not just in Africa in general, but particularly in this awful conflict in Sudan. Of course, Sudan is also a personal priority for the Foreign Secretary, which is why he brought together Foreign Ministers to try to find a resolution. The Prime Minister has reiterated that the UK will continue to play a key humanitarian role, evidenced by the £120 million of UK aid announced for Sudan this year.

On the right hon. Gentleman's question in relation to the work post-Jeddah, we are working to sustain the momentum of the actions agreed at the conference. We continue to work with multilateral institutions, including the African Union, to ensure strong African leadership in response to the conflict. We have also joined the EU-convened consultative group on Sudan in June and we have initiated a friends of Sudan grouping in Geneva to advance our work on the protection of civilians, because the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that international law in this regard places a heavy emphasis on prevention of conflict and of atrocities. We continue to identify opportunities to use our role as penholder on Sudan in the UN Security Council and to galvanise UN Security Council action on the conflict in Sudan.

The right hon. Gentleman also specifically asked about the situation in the El Fasher camps and I want to reassure him that the UK is doing all it can, but the question is always about access. We have the money, we have the workers; it is access that we need in order to provide that lifesaving aid. That is the nub of the issue, which we are working on.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Not a single person in my Sudanese diaspora community in Sheffield has not been affected by the horrific violence in Sudan, but the most harrowing part for them is not the regular communication jams blocking parent from child and brother from sister, or the multiple displacements of millions of the most vulnerable people, or indeed the famine ripping through the population; the worst part is that while this, the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, is breaking every boundary we know, world powers continue to look away.

The UK Government have a unique position as penholder for Sudan, and at the UN Security Council I appreciate that we called for a ceasefire through a resolution, but the resolution set no deadline for concluding the ceasefire and authorised no enforcement mission. So, Minister, what are we doing to enforce accountability for the shameful complicity of states backing the warring sides, and when will we push for an agreement to a ceasefire so the people of Sudan can be free from this horror?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a loud voice here on behalf her Sudanese diaspora. The most important things the UK can do to build on the momentum of the important London Sudan conference—bearing in mind that we were the first to have such a conference—are to continue to base our work on the statement from its co-chairs; to continue, as she says, to use our role at the United Nations; and to work through the new friends of Sudan grouping to keep pushing at the highest level, using our position on the UN Security Council to galvanise its action and continue the important supply of aid into the region.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for pursuing this matter.

The situation in Sudan is dire. We are deeply concerned by the International Criminal Court's findings last week that there are reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity may be being committed in Darfur. The humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, with the UN warning on 30 June of drastic cuts to life-saving food aid for Sudanese refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries. Sudan has been identified as the global hunger hotspot of highest concern, and without immediate humanitarian assistance, the risk is terrible. With recent attacks on UN aid convoys, can the Minister provide her latest assessment of the situation and the extent of aid blocking? How is she ensuring that UK aid—including the £120 million announced at the April Sudan conference—will reach those who need it, and that aid workers are protected?

More broadly, what new measures are the Government taking to compel the warring parties into a ceasefire, to allow more aid in and to facilitate deconfliction for its delivery in the meantime? How has the Minister supported Sudanese civilian and political forces to engage in constructive dialogue processes such as the Cairo conference, and what is her assessment of the effectiveness of these processes? Despite the spending review, we are yet to

understand what the 0.3% figure means for bilateral aid, so will she confirm the bilateral spend for Sudan this year?

Sudan matters. It is not in the UK's national interests for the crossing of red lines in this conflict to persist, to have the displacement of people on this scale, nor to see the further destabilisation of this region of Africa.

Catherine West: The right hon. Lady asked about the last week's ICC finding. We acknowledge the ICC Office of the Prosecutor's critical findings that there are reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity may have well been committed, and are continuing to be committed, in Darfur. This is an important milestone in the ICC's investigation into crimes committed in Darfur, and the UK remains steadfast in its commitment to ensure that international humanitarian law is respected and breaches are called out and investigated. The UK remains committed to securing accountability for those responsible for atrocity crimes. This includes reporting the fact-finding mission's mandate and the ICC's ongoing investigation.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the attack on El Fasher and the targeting of aid workers. That is an absolute disgrace and a clear violation of international law, and we condemn it. She asked what more we have been doing recently. We attended the important consultative group on Sudan in Brussels on 26 June, and contributed to discussions with the UN Secretary-General's personal envoy on Sudan, Ramtane Lamamra, on his plans to convene proximity talks with the warring parties, including on protection issues.

Finally, the right hon. Lady raised the important question of the spending review. As I am sure she is aware, we have a lot of lessons to learn from last time the aid budget was reduced, because the National Audit Office criticised the way those reductions were made in-year, without consultation, and questioned whether that was value for money. Instead, the Government will take a long-term look at this, and have a glide principle over the three remaining years of this Parliament.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): That this urgent question could have been relevant at any time in the past 20 years is a damning indictment of the failure of the international community. This morning, my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) and I hosted Sudanese community voices alongside Médecins Sans Frontières, the British Medical Association and others, and we heard harrowing stories about what is happening on the ground. Medical centres and hospitals are becoming battlegrounds and, as ever, women and children are bearing the brunt of the devastation. The United Nations has called what is going on the "world's largest humanitarian crisis". There are credible allegations of genocide, backed by both the US and the UN, and there are well-documented cases of war crime. This is a war on civilians.

The UK, in its role as the UN penholder, must lead by example and convene international actors and leaders to urgent, concrete action. Will the Minister set out what urgent action she plans to take in the next week, particularly given that Parliament will not be sitting again until September, by which time many more lives will have been devastatingly lost?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for her important work in pulling together groups—in particular aid workers whose focus is on medical relief—and for her role on the Foreign Affairs Committee. I am sure she shares with me the worry about the news of a cholera outbreak in the region. I thank her for her important work in that regard. She also impresses on the House the importance of the UK's support to women and girls.

The Foreign Secretary visited the Sudan-Chad border in January to raise awareness of Sudan, speaking directly to refugees, including survivors who shared harrowing stories of sexual violence and torture, and in March, Lord Collins, the Africa Minister, chaired a UN Security Council briefing on committing to the prevention of violence against women and girls in Sudan, but my hon. Friend is quite right to say that this week, as the House comes towards its rising, we must do even more. I will undertake to share this particular dialogue in the House with the Minister for Africa, so he can redouble his efforts in the month of August to ensure that the UK is well represented in international discussions.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The ongoing war in Sudan is the world's largest humanitarian catastrophe and the biggest since aid began. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, but I regret that in the past seven months there has been only one statement on Sudan from the Government.

Local and community-led emergency response rooms are central to the on-the-ground response. Will the Minister outline how the UK is increasing support to those ERRs? Since the London conference, what bilateral conversations have the Government had with regional actors and the US about Sudan? War crimes are being committed on an almost daily basis. The two principal warring parties oppose a democratic Sudan, so what are the Government doing to support Sudanese civilian groups and civil society fighting for the democratic future?

Since 2023, *The New York Times* has repeatedly reported that the United Arab Emirates is funnelling weapons to the Rapid Support Forces, and the UN's expert panel on Sudan deemed those allegations credible. What are the Government doing to address the proliferation of outside weapons in Sudan, and to uphold and expand the arms embargo? How are they clamping down on the illicit international trade in Sudanese gold, which is financing this war? Finally, what assessment have the Government made of the American judgment that chemical weapons are being used in Sudan?

Catherine West: The hon. Lady quite rightly pushes us to say more in this House. There have been lots of questions from Members when the Foreign Secretary has been answering broader questions, such as on G7 or NATO meetings, so Members across the House have asked questions under the umbrella of international affairs and the Foreign Secretary has replied to them, but we can always do more.

As the hon. Lady is aware, we need to keep up the momentum from the London Sudan conference. She asks who we are working with. We are of course working with the African Union. This is, first and foremost, a

question of promoting leadership of African countries to deal with issues in Africa. The Foreign Secretary has redoubled his efforts as a well-respected Foreign Secretary within the African Union dialogues, and recently joined the EU-convened consultative group on Sudan in June, which I know the hon. Lady will appreciate and think is a worthwhile forum for us to be in. As mentioned, the friends of Sudan group in Geneva will also advance the work to protect civilians.

The hon. Lady mentions the UAE. Our message to any partners who may have an element of involvement in the conflict is clear: we need to press for a peaceful solution. All those supporting behind the scenes need to come together in the spirit of the London Sudan conference and talk about a peaceful solution for all.

On the hon. Lady's last question, which was about gold in Sudan, I shall have to write to her.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): In response to an urgent question in April, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer) confirmed that the London Sudan conference included a commitment from the UK Government to provide a further £120 million of aid for 2025-26 to support 650,000 people, which the Minister referenced earlier. With that in mind, can the Minister today confirm to the House what progress has been made in the intervening few months to ensure that the additional aid reaches the most vulnerable people in Sudan fleeing conflict, sexual violence and famine?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend raises the most important point. It is not just about money; it is about access, our diplomatic heft and knocking heads together so we can get that aid through to the people most in need. He mentions the £120 million for this financial year. A portion of that uplift provides support to local responders, both through the Sudan Humanitarian Fund, which supports the emergency response rooms, and the Mercy Corps-led Cash Consortium of Sudan, which provides direct cash assistance to mutual aid groups on the ground. The reason for that is that there is often a de-banking situation in conflict zones—formal banking collapses. That is why it is so important that the UK is able to assist the smaller groups on the ground to get that vital aid in.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Such an enormous civilian price is being paid in Sudan, but one of the greatest horrors is the use of rape and sexual violence against women and children as a weapon of war—and it is being used systematically as a weapon of war. I appreciate that the Minister has limited options, but I urge her to look at every single way that we can be more robust and stronger, and really lead the charge to ensure that vital aid—not only to combat hunger but to help people who have been raped and who have suffered so much—is delivered as quickly as possible. Let us please lead the way.

Catherine West: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. The UK funds support for the protection, prevention and care services responding to gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence in Sudan,

[*Catherine West*]

and they provide emergency support to survivors. Longer-term UK programmes also work to tackle female genital mutilation, and to empower women and girls.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the words of my hon. Friends the Members for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) and for Sheffield Central (Abtissam Mohamed) about the terrible and desperate suffering of women and children. I thank the Minister for her update, in which she highlighted the outcome of the London Sudan conference and the urgent need for access for aid. When I speak to my constituents from the Sudanese diaspora community, they talk about their desperate sadness in the conversations they have with their friends and family who are still in the region. Will the Minister update the House on the consular arrangements for the friends and family of my constituents?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner on behalf of her constituents in Westminster and the City. I encourage her and her staff to use the MP hotline, because that is the best way of getting through in order to get consular advice and to reassure our communities in the diaspora of Sudan.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for securing this urgent question on the world's worst humanitarian crisis. I welcome the leadership steps that the UK Government are taking, but will the Minister tell the House what conversations are being had with both the African Union and the United Nations about the possibility of surging peacekeepers into Sudan to protect civilians?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Lady for her leadership role in the previous Parliament as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan and South Sudan and as International Development Minister.

There are a number of partners; she has mentioned some of them. The participants at the London Sudan conference included Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, South Sudan, Chad, Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, and of course the like-minded: Norway, Canada, the USA and Switzerland. It was a perfect moment and the hon. Lady asks how we can continue that. We will redouble our efforts to work with the multilaterals such as the UN and the League of Arab States. There is quite a lot on their agenda at the moment, but it is very important that Sudan is not brought down the agenda just because it is in Africa. That is a fear, which is why it is so good to see the reporting in the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, and many of our other mainstream newspapers, to keep it in the spotlight. We will ensure that we work bilaterally with the countries we work with in normal times, and on a multilateral level to maintain our leadership role.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The humanitarian situation in Sudan is horrific, with the growing perpetration of atrocity crimes against civilians. This is part of a growing pattern of mass atrocity crimes being perpetrated across the world, but the UK Government's strategy on prevention of and

response to mass atrocity crimes has not been updated since 2019. Does the Minister agree that it is time for a fresh approach to this vital issue?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend knows of what she speaks, with her role before she came to this place. I shall take that as an action from today's dialogue.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Minister explain to the House what, in practical terms, the Security Council could do, even if all its members were neutral on the question of backing one side over the other? If two sides are determined to fight one another and neither is dependent on outside military assistance to pursue the conflict, is there anything practical that the Security Council could do, even if it was united and in agreement on the need for an intervention?

Catherine West: The UN Security Council is not just about military intervention, in terms of the security; as the right hon. Gentleman is aware, it is also about the impact of the diplomatic solutions. As the penholder, the UK has the most important role to try to bring everybody together around the table, which is why we had the London Sudan conference. There were some who threw their hands up and said, "We haven't achieved anything," but I think the important thing was that we laid down a marker, and that we are now following up with other partners and being seen as leaders in the area. It is by using the UN Security Council leadership role that we will eventually get to a solution. However, the right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that there are a lot of fingers in the pie.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): What is happening in Sudan—in Darfur, in particular—is one of the world's deepest and longest-running humanitarian crises. Unfortunately, we are seeing rising tensions and military action in neighbouring South Sudan, particularly in the Upper Nile region. The Ugandan army has recently entered South Sudan, and there is a real risk of regional conflict and civil war, which would create a much deeper humanitarian crisis across the whole region. What is the UK doing to de-escalate that potential conflict, such as talking to Uganda and South Sudan?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that the longer the war lasts, the greater its ripple effect. We should give credit to countries like Egypt, Chad and South Sudan, alongside others nearby, for managing this crisis and for taking so many people in. There has also been aid from countries like the UK, but the impact within the region is devastating. I will certainly take back to the Minister for Africa my hon. Friend's point about the impact on South Sudan and reply in writing with what we are going to do this month—not waiting until September, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) said.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): As a former aid worker and resident of Darfur, I feel deeply for the people of Sudan. Will the Minister say whether there are plans to increase the amount of spend for the emergency response rooms? They are clearly doing very valuable work at the moment.

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Gentleman for all the work he did before coming to Parliament and his important support for so many countries; I have been in debates with him on Myanmar and others. It is important that we lay on the record that £120 million is a lot of money, and that we have to follow that money. As I explained before, de-banking sometimes occurs in certain contexts, which is why we need to have those relationships on the ground with the sorts of aid organisations that my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow spoke about, covering the situation as it is today and how to maintain those relationships. My personal view is that it is not always just about the impact of the budget; sometimes it is about the diplomatic work that goes on around the funding so that we can maximise that money.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The brutal violence being perpetrated against Sudanese civilians is only fuelled by external actors from the UAE, Egypt, Russia and beyond. Will the Minister ensure diplomatic interventions with each of those nations and report back to the House on the outcome of those dialogues? Will she also ensure that the UK leads on banning the use of mercenaries in areas of conflict? We have not signed a convention as the UK Government, and it is time that we led a new convention on the use of mercenaries.

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for her work as the chair of the APPG for Sudan and South Sudan. We have now heard from both the former chair, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), and the current chair. I know that my hon. Friend has a Sudanese diaspora in her locality, too.

May I just emphasise that the UK is not protecting any country with an interest in this conflict? We have been very clear that we expect all countries to comply with existing UN sanctions regimes and the arms embargo, and we continue to work closely with partners at the UN Security Council to enforce them. We need to move on to the political resolution of the conflict. I also ask for my hon. Friend's patience; I will fold the second part of her question into the challenge I had from my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) on updating some of our policies and procedures that have not been updated since 2019.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers to all the questions and her strong words on our commitment. I believe those words will encourage us all, and hopefully thereby encourage our constituents. Sudan ranks fifth on the Open Doors world watch list for Christian persecution, with more than 100 churches and Christian buildings forcibly seized in the conflict, with the latest church destroyed just last week. Christians are afraid to practise their faith, and the recent murder of 300 people in North Kordofan has underlined the valid reason that they live in fear. How can the Government assist? More importantly, will the Government intervene and help the people of this region, who are being exterminated just because they are Christians?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his relentless work in this House on freedom of religion or belief. Of course, the region used to be so much more diverse, but the space for religious freedom has really

narrowed. He is quite right to challenge that. With his permission, I will share his thoughts with our freedom of religion or belief champion, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), so that we can work together on this issue and shine a spotlight on the lack of freedom for Christian communities in particular, but also for other minority communities in the Darfur region.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I am sure all hon. Members will want to praise British diplomats for all they are doing on this difficult issue. The potential catastrophic loss of ever more civilian life—not merely in the armed conflict, but in the resulting humanitarian catastrophe—means that the conscience of the world must lead to action, first and foremost through diplomacy. Have the Government considered working with allies to ensure that all options remain on the table, given concepts like the responsibility to protect? Given that Sudan has previously seen a genocide in Darfur, does the Minister agree that we must ensure that the international community does not once again have to say, “If only we had acted more robustly,” or, “Never again”?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for his extensive work in civil society on these sorts of issues. The current position is for us to engage extensively through diplomatic means to encourage all parties to come to the table. We are very aware of the complexity of this particular conflict and the fact that it is not just two sides within the region, but a lot of other players. We are uniquely positioned with our role on the United Nations Security Council and with our other partners; for instance, we do a lot with the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. We are using our diplomatic efforts double time at the moment, but I do hear what my hon. Friend says.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Given that certain UN initiatives and efforts to address this humanitarian catastrophe have encountered a degree of reluctance, if not opposition, from states such as Russia, I was pleased to hear the Minister say that the Government are working closely with regional partners. Will she elaborate on the work that is being done to support countries such as Egypt and multilateral organisations like the African Union to address this humanitarian crisis and, if not to broker a ceasefire, to ensure the unblocking of humanitarian aid?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Member for his long-standing interest in development. I know that he will be pleased to hear that the participants with whom we worked at the London conference continue to be our partners in this endeavour. They include Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, South Sudan, Chad, Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda. Within my own brief as the Indo-Pacific Minister, I am able to talk about terrible conflicts such as those in Sudan and Myanmar with like-minded people, including with those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which also cares deeply about their brothers in Sudan and Myanmar. We must redouble our efforts to have on our agenda in future diplomatic interventions those terrible ongoing conflicts that are not enjoying the spotlight of public attention.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her responses so far. She will be aware of the indiscriminate aerial bombardments in the conflict and the failure to distinguish between military and civilian targets. Are the Government considering further targeted sanctions on those leaders responsible for, or accused of, atrocities and war crimes in the area?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for his important question. Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2023, the UK has frozen the assets of nine commercial entities linked to the parties involved in the conflict. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the UK has also sanctioned two generals of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces for their crimes against civilians in November 2024. He is also right to emphasise the use of drones in this particular conflict and how difficult it is for civilians to know how to shield themselves against them. This new method of war is very much at the top of our agenda when we speak with like-minded people.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): May I take this opportunity to thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for keeping the plight of the Sudanese at the forefront of our thoughts. We often hear the adage, "out of sight, out of mind", and, unfortunately, the conflict in Sudan does not engage the mainstream media in the way that it should. We know about the recent harrowing events in North Kordofan, where 300 civilians, including children and pregnant women, were massacred. We know that, historically, there have been international peacekeeping troops on the ground. Will the Minister explore that opportunity with the relevant nations? Does she believe that that is something that can be considered?

Catherine West: Just last month, we joined the UN-EU consultative group on Sudan for the first time, alongside our partners from the US, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the African Union and the League of Arab States. That was at the top of the agenda. Our role at the moment is very much focused on being the penholder at the UN, but all channels are open and we are listening to all views. The important thing is that we try to get round the table again and maintain the momentum that we had for that brief moment at the London conference.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): With 150,000 men, women and children dead, 13 million people displaced, attacks on humanitarian workers, and reports of ethnic cleansing and genocide, Sudan is undoubtedly the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, yet almost nobody knows about it. We have had no marches on the streets, comparatively little media attention, and very few statements and urgent questions in the House. Will the Minister set out what more the Government can do to raise awareness of the desperate need to address this conflict?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for his spotlight on this issue. The UK condemns the growing body of evidence of serious atrocities being committed against civilians in Sudan: the escalation of violence;

the killing of civilians; the sexual assault of women; and the restriction of humanitarian access. That is why the Foreign Secretary visited the Sudan-Chad border to raise awareness of the conflict in Sudan and its impact on neighbouring countries. He spoke directly to Sudanese refugees, including to survivors, who shared harrowing stories of sexual violence and torture. The Minister for Africa, for whom this is probably the highest priority area, hosted an event with his Dutch and Swiss counterparts to discuss the alarming rates of conflict-related sexual violence in Sudan and the inadequacy of current responses, and we will redouble our efforts following this urgent question to ensure that we follow that up.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The unfolding scenario in Sudan almost defies description. The Minister has quite rightly spoken about the importance of accessibility. Does she agree that, for accessibility to work in terms of aid, resources and assistance, there needs to be a comprehensive international approach in order even to offer the prospect of hope and delivery within the next few months?

Catherine West: The hon. Member is absolutely right to talk about the importance not just of our bilateral meetings, but of working at that multilateral level. At the same time, we need to provide support in that important area of gathering facts as we go along, because the fog of war can prevent that. Let me give one example. The UK provided £989,000 to the Sudan Witness project started by the Centre of Information Resilience, which investigates attacks against civilians and works with Sudanese civil society organisations as well as the United Nations fact-finding mission to support evidence gathering and accountability, so that, one day, justice will be served.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her answers today, and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for bringing this urgent question to the House. The events in Sudan are undoubtedly an ongoing stain on the conscience of the global community. I am deeply concerned about increasing the accountability of those who are complicit or guilty of war crimes or crimes against humanity. Following the question of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce), can the Minister assure me and my constituents that she will leave no stone unturned in making sure that people face justice for the things that they have either enabled or taken part in?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is right to say that the reports coming out of Darfur are horrifying. Some of the violence has shown the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing and may amount to crimes against humanity. The Foreign Secretary heard this at first hand from survivors when he was in Adre in January. Irrespective of any determinations in the International Criminal Court, we know that we will strongly and always support its active investigation into the situation in Darfur, including allegations of crimes committed since April 2023, and that is why the UK has provided technical support in this regard.

Financial Services Reform

1.17 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall update the House on the content of the Leeds reforms.

The reforms encompass the Government's financial services growth and competitiveness strategy, which is our 10-year plan for financial services. This plan will make the UK the global centre of choice for financial services investment by 2035, with all parts of the country benefiting from its success, building on our thriving regional financial services clusters around the country.

The financial services sector is one of this country's largest and most productive sectors. It is worth 9% of total economic output and provides 1.2 million jobs across the UK's nations and regions. Our strategy will unleash the potential of the sector to catalyse growth, enterprise and opportunity in the rest of the economy. That will mean that working people will get better returns on their savings, that home ownership will be unlocked for tens of thousands more people, and that more businesses will get access to the capital that they need to grow.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade recently presented to this House our modern industrial strategy in which financial services was identified as one of the key eight growth driving sectors on which the Government will focus. This builds on the successes of our first year in office, which I am proud to highlight: the fastest growth in the G7 in the first quarter of this year; four interest rate cuts; faster wage growth in the past 10 months than the previous 10 years of the last Government; the FTSE100 yesterday at a record high; and business confidence at its highest in nine years. *[Interruption.]* I will not take lectures from the Conservatives, who presided over inflation at 11% and debt rising year after year.

Our vision is of an active state working in partnership with business, and the Leeds reforms were co-designed with industry. The Chancellor and I undertook extensive engagement in its preparation, and I was pleased to see financial services firms across the country and the Confederation of Business Industry welcome our reforms publicly. The reforms reintroduce informed risk taking into our financial services system to deliver prosperity for working people. We will always ensure that financial stability is a prerequisite for economic growth, and we continue to uphold our commitment to the high international standards that underpin the resilience of the global financial system.

I will briefly set out the details of our package to the House. First, the Government are delivering a competitive regulatory environment to attract investment and drive growth. We have set out plans to deliver the most significant reform to the Financial Ombudsman Service since its inception, ensuring that it no longer acts as a quasi-regulator and returning it to its original purpose as an independent, impartial dispute resolution service for complaints between consumers and financial services firms.

We are also streamlining the senior managers and certification regime to reduce the burdens imposed on firms by 50% and to reduce approval times. We have

tasked the Financial Conduct Authority to report back by September on how it plans to address concerns about the application of the consumer duty for firms primarily engaged in wholesale activity.

Secondly, our reforms unlock capital for investment into our infrastructure and businesses. We are doing this by supporting the Bank of England's changes to MREL—the minimum requirement for own funds and eligible liabilities—and by confirming our approach to Basel 3.1, implementing lower capital requirements for domestically focused banks from January 2027 while preserving flexibility in our approach for international banks to ensure that the UK remains competitive and aligned with international standards.

We are also committing to meaningful reform to ringfencing, while maintaining the aspects of the regime that support financial stability and protect customer deposits. We welcome the Financial Policy Committee's review of the overall bank capital levels needed for UK financial stability and its decision to ease its loan-to-income restriction on mortgage lending. I am delighted that this decision will enable up to 36,000 additional first-time buyers to access mortgages in the first year.

Thirdly, we are making the UK the location of choice for fintechs to start up, scale and list, and we want the wider financial services sector to embrace innovation too. The FCA and the Prudential Regulation Authority will launch a scale-up unit to ensure that fast-growing businesses have the support they need to grow. The regulators will also introduce a new streamlined authorisation regime that will enable innovative firms to start operating while they await full approval. We are modernising and future-proofing the regulatory framework for payments and e-money, including stablecoin, and we are establishing a new model to deliver next-generation retail payments infrastructure.

Fourthly, we are seizing opportunities in key areas of UK leadership, from speciality insurance and asset management to sustainable finance. Our insurance sector has been world-leading for centuries, and we are committed to staying at the front of the pack by creating a new captive insurance framework and holding an industry showcase event later this year to sell the sector globally. We are also future-proofing the regulatory regime for our asset management sector, which is the second largest in the world, and we will publish draft legislation on that early next year.

The UK is already a leading global hub for sustainable finance. We have set out plans for a stable regulatory framework, and we are giving industry clarity by deciding not to pursue a green taxonomy and by focusing instead on ambitious policies that support investors to invest in the transition. I look forward to continuing to work with Lord Alok Sharma and the Transition Finance Council, which he chairs, to make the UK the leading international hub for raising transition finance.

Fifthly, we want to go further in building a new retail investment culture and boosting our capital markets' competitiveness. We have taken great strides to reform our pensions system, led by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), so that people can have better savings in retirement. We want savers to get the best returns on their savings. For too many their money is not working hard enough, and for too long advice on

[Emma Reynolds]

investments has been the preserve of only the wealthiest in society. To address this, the Chancellor has announced the biggest reform of the financial advice and guidance landscape in more than a decade and the introduction of targeted support in time for the new tax year. The Chancellor and I welcome the steps being taken by industry to help consumers engage with investing. I particularly thank Chris Cummings of the Investment Association for the work he is leading on that.

We are also considering reforming the individual savings account system to ensure better outcomes for both savers and the UK economy. We are allowing long-term asset funds to be held in stocks and shares ISAs next year. This will allow more individuals to invest in assets that will support the UK's success while seeing better returns on their savings. To ensure that our capital markets support British business, we are announcing a new listings taskforce with the Office for Investment to attract world-leading businesses towards initial public offering in the UK. We are publishing a wholesale financial markets digital strategy to harness innovation as well as our ambitious design for the digital gilt instrument pilot.

Finally, we are taking steps to enhance the UK's leadership in financial services, ensuring that the UK remains the most open and connected financial centre in the world. We will launch a concierge service—the Office for Investment: Financial Services—to attract international financial services firms to invest in the UK and grow their business. We are further facilitating cross-border activity with the publication of guidance on our overseas recognition regimes and a memorandum of understanding with UK regulators, a copy of which I will place in the Library in both Houses.

Through these steps, the Government have placed financial services at the heart of our growth mission. Our 10-year strategy is ambitious, includes the most far-reaching reforms to financial services for a decade, and will unleash the fantastic potential of our world-leading financial services sector. We are backing British businesses, unlocking home ownership for tens of thousands of people across the country, supporting savers to get better returns, and investing in our shared future. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Economic Secretary.

1.26 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I am very grateful to the Minister for advance sight of her statement. There is much in these Leeds reforms—many of which were formerly known as the Edinburgh reforms—that can be welcomed, and some of the details were laid out by the Chancellor in her Mansion House speech last night.

The Conservatives will always support reforms to our financial sector that ensure that the City of London remains a global powerhouse, but the Chancellor's rhetoric last night about growth and stability obscures the truth of this Government's record of delivery. Inflation is now at 3.6%—the highest in the G7—and growth has all but stalled. Despite yesterday's fanfare for reform, the reality is that having run short on other ideas, the Government are now forced to turn once again to the

City of London for inspiration—a last throw of the dice, hoping that it will provide an engine for the growth that their policies are stifling.

Last night the Chancellor described her Government as a “beacon of stability”, but let us not forget the actual legacy that was handed over to her. We enjoyed near record levels of employment. Unemployment was at historic lows, and inflation was under control. That is the stable foundation on which this Government were handed the keys, yet they now preside over instability. The Office for Budget Responsibility, the OECD and the Bank of England have all sounded the alarm that our growth prospects have collapsed. The Government claim to be cutting red tape for industry, but let us remember that their plan to make work pay would in fact burden employers with over 70 new regulations, reminiscent of the 1970s.

The Chancellor's talk of unleashing the power of the City comes even as her party threatens to smother businesses in paperwork and expense. When it comes to proposals for financial services, the Conservatives welcome much that gives the sector confidence and clarity, but warm words must be matched by careful delivery. On reforms to the Financial Ombudsman Service, there is agreement that it should return to its impartial roots as a fast and effective dispute resolution service, not a quasi-regulator, but so many business and consumers are awaiting clarity, so can the Minister confirm whether these changes will limit the FOS's power to make backdated legal determinations, and what impact will the reforms have on ongoing legal proceedings, such as the crucial car finance case before the Supreme Court?

Streamlining the approach of the FCA and the PRA may remove unnecessary friction, but we must ensure that this does not become window dressing while critical challenges remain. The FCA and the PRA must accept that stability in the markets is not the only way to deliver growth. Both their objectives must be aligned and equally ambitious in their drive for reform.

The Chancellor trumpeted reforms to ISAs, including new rules for long-term asset funds, which we welcome if that broadens access to higher-return assets for ordinary savers, but there is still no certainty on the future of the cash ISA. Without clarity, the Government risk undermining their own ambition to promote home ownership and inclusive investment, which again was trumpeted by the Chancellor during her Mansion House speech last night.

On capital investment policy, we welcome MREL reform, which was a change I championed during the recent passage of the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Act 2025. This will help challenger banks to compete and expand lending.

We cautiously welcome the Government's review of ringfencing rules, but will they confirm that all options are being considered, including alignment with the US and the EU, which, as the Minister knows, never implemented ringfencing rules?

More broadly, the history of the last Labour Government reminds us that good intentions are never enough. The Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, introduced by the then Chancellor, along with the tripartite system, was well conceived but badly implemented, contributing to the events of the 2008 financial crisis. It falls to this Government now to demonstrate that they will not repeat those mistakes.

Finally, at Mansion House last night the Chancellor missed a crucial opportunity to be straight with the British people and rule out further tax rises. Will the Minister guarantee that working families and businesses will not face more tax increases? Will she rule out any further surprise raids on the British taxpayer?

Britain's financial services sector has always thrived when reforms are clear. The test of these reforms will come when the full details emerge, but ultimately growth will come only when the Chancellor realises that hard-working people and businesses across the country are the real engines of economic growth.

Emma Reynolds: Well, half of that was all right, I suppose. I do want to start constructively and thank the hon. Member for his welcome for some of the reforms. I will answer some of his specific questions before I come to the wider points.

On the Financial Ombudsman Service, we have set out in great detail what we will do. As he will be aware, some of the changes require primary legislation. We are proposing an absolute time limit of 10 years, but with discretion for the FCA to give longer periods in the case of products with a longer lifetime. I cannot comment on the ongoing car finance issue, which as he knows is working its way through the courts.

The hon. Member talked about the regulators' different objectives. We have been very clear with the regulators that we expect them to embed their secondary objective to facilitate economic growth and competitiveness while obviously complying with their other objectives. He will see that in the remit letters that the Chancellor sent to the regulators at the last Mansion House speech last November.

On ISAs, I welcome what the hon. Member said about long-term asset funds, which we think will unlock great opportunities for savers. We continue to consider reform to ISAs. We would like to ensure that more people have the opportunity and confidence to invest, which is why we hope that targeted support, which will be introduced by firms by the end of this tax year—we have worked at pace on this—will really shift the dial and give people that confidence to invest.

I think the hon. Member said he was in favour of what we are doing on MREL, and I know that he agreed with the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Act, which we put through the House and is coming into force today. I thank him for his support on that.

On ringfencing, we have detailed which areas we will look at. I am happy to write to him further on that, but one area, for example, is sharing resources across the ringfenced and non-ringfenced parts of banks. We want to ensure that we strike the right balance between growth and stability.

I turn to the hon. Member's points about economic stability. I will take no lessons from the Conservatives—I hate to say it. We had inflation at 11%, people paying extremely high mortgage rates and debt rising year after year. The only thing that was stable under their Government was wages, which were flatlining.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the statement and look forward to the Treasury Committee talking to—or

interrogating—her, and indeed the Chancellor, about the detail as it emerges. Since the election, one of the things the Government have been talking about, leading on from the previous Government, is the secondary remit letters to the regulators about encouraging growth as a secondary objective. Can she tell us when the Government will be clear about their own appetite for risk in the sector so that both firms and the regulators know how far the Government will be prepared to go? She and I know from our experience in this place that if too many consumers suffer under any changes, this place is where that will be raised, and then there is a tendency for the Government to turn around and say, "Well, you went too far." For the sake of the sector, the regulator and our constituents, will she tell us—or will she tell us when she can—where the Government's line on risk will fall?

Emma Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for that thoughtful question. I am happy to talk to the Committee about that in more detail. What I will say is that the Leeds reforms regulate for growth instead of seeking to eliminate risk from the system altogether. We know that in order to get greater returns, there is a need to take informed risk. The reforms will enable firms and consumers to take informed risks. But we will always support the regulators and legislate in a way that protects consumers from bad practices and bad actors.

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

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): There is much to welcome in the statement. I hope that it sends a strong signal to the fintech sector and sustainable finance that UK plc is open for business, but it is important to get the balance right between growth and risk.

We Liberal Democrats welcome the announcement of a scale-up unit. Will it have a mandate to look at liquidity and valuation, which are two of the challenges that prevent British start-ups from scaling up here at home?

On the retail investment culture, we welcome plans to reform financial advice and guidance and to launch a national advertising campaign. We believe that we should trust people to weigh up the risk and rewards of investment, if they are properly informed. But we also know that money habits are formed at a young age. Will the Minister advise whether the Government have any plans to introduce financial literacy as part of the school curriculum—indeed, from cradle to grave? Will the Government confirm when they will bring forward any reforms at all to cash ISAs? The uncertainty around the issue is undermining their own goal of incentivising more investment.

On mortgages, many renters have been crowded out of getting on to the housing ladder, so this announcement will sound exciting to them, but what reassurance can the Minister provide that this additional lending will not result in boom and bust? With inflation jumping today, how many of those up to 36,000 first-time homeowners will realistically get on the housing ladder in the next year?

We welcome the streamlining of checks on senior managers, but will the Government confirm that those changes will not expose financial firms and their customers

[Daisy Cooper]

to greater risk? If the Government want a step change in economic growth, this is a start, but they must go further and faster by having a better trading deal with the EU.

Emma Reynolds: We have a very good deal with the EU, which we agreed in May this year and will continue to build on. I was pleased to have invited the European Commissioner for Financial Services, Maria Luís Albuquerque, who was at the dinner last night at the Mansion House. I will try to get through all the hon. Member's questions.

On liquidity and valuations, I point out that we have some of the deepest capital markets in the world. Last year, the amount of equity capital raised in London was larger than in the next three European exchanges put together. However, I recognise the issues she talked about.

On the advertising campaign, Chris Cummings of the Investment Association is leading the secretariat. He will also be looking at risk warnings. That is not to say there should not be risk warnings, but that there should be a balance in risk warnings to ensure that warnings are also informing people of the benefits of investing over the long term.

The hon. Member rightly talked about the importance of financial education and capability. We will put forward suggestions on that in the financial inclusion strategy, which we will publish in the autumn. However, as this is a cross-Government effort, I reassure her that I am speaking and meeting actively with the Minister for School Standards so that we are aligned with the Department for Education's curriculum review.

The hon. Member asked about mortgages. May I reassure her? Obviously, we have had extensive regulations since the global financial crash and we are not going back to the bad old days when there were no verification checks on affordability and 125% mortgages. But the system we have got means that people on modest incomes are unable to get on the housing ladder. Nationwide has said that because of the Bank of England's recent decision, it will be able to help an additional 10,000 people a year with its helping hand mortgage to fulfil their dream of home ownership. I think that is a great step forward and will mean that people across the country, like many in this House, can benefit from the security of home ownership, and particularly those on modest incomes and in generations that are being deprived of such opportunities.

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

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): The reforms are targeted at getting greater investment into British infrastructure and cutting red tape. Does my hon. Friend agree that it was a little bit rum for Opposition parties to criticise our Government for introducing red tape when they voted against the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which creates projects that people can invest in and provides houses, which are a key restraint on house price inflation?

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We are intent on building the 1.5 million homes that we promised at the election. I remind the chuntering hon. Gentlemen on the Opposition Front Bench that even before the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, the OBR scored the first stage of the planning reforms as the largest increase in GDP by the end of the scorecard of any non-fiscal lever in its history.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Economic Secretary may want to have a look at *Hansard* and make sure she got the right soundbite on the record about the 10 months of wage growth and the comparison. My understanding is that wage growth was indeed slow after the financial crash. We tried to compensate for that by increasing personal allowances, but wage growth has bounced back since the pandemic. She may want to correct the record if that is the case.

On the reforms, which have migrated from Edinburgh down to Leeds, the Treasury Committee will scrutinise the implementation. Is it her vision that they should be implemented over the next year, before the next Mansion House speech, rather than on the 10-year basis of the strategy as she outlined?

Emma Reynolds: I refer the hon. Lady to page 63 of the strategy, which is very useful. It sets out an ambitious timeline for implementing the reforms that the Chancellor set out at the Mansion House last night and in Leeds yesterday morning, and shows her that we have already taken action to implement some of the decisions we took in November last year, such as introducing the private intermittent securities and capital exchange system. PISCES is a new private intermittent securities market that is open for business, and for which we legislated in May. That demonstrates how we are working at pace. Other things will take a little longer, and her extensive experience in this place and in government means that she will understand that some of those things require primary legislation. However, she will see through the two-page summary at the back of the strategy how we plan to implement the reforms at pace to unleash the potential of the financial services sector.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Too many of my constituents are trapped in the rental market, paying off someone else's mortgage instead of saving for a home of their own. Average rents in Birmingham have now passed £1,000 a month for the first time, driven sharply upwards since the mini-Budget. I strongly welcome the Chancellor's Leeds reforms, which will help 36,000 first-time buyers on to the housing ladder. Will the Minister say more about what the Government are doing to boost housing supply so that home ownership can become a reality for more people in cities such as mine?

Emma Reynolds: As was said previously, the package that we announced yesterday, as well as the announcement by the Bank of England and the FCA's discussion paper, go to the heart of making sure that we have the right balance between ensuring people have affordable mortgage products and ensuring that those products are accessible to more people up and down the country. As she will know—I am sure that she is referring to this—the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and some of the other planning reforms that we set forward are some

of the most ambitious for a generation. They will unlock the potential for those homes to be built so that we can get more and more first-time buyers on to the housing ladder.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call a Treasury Committee member, John Glen.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I warmly welcome the Leeds reforms; they build on many of the things that were done under the previous Administration and I acknowledge the consumer-facing changes on mortgages and ISAs and the aspiration to get more people investing. Those are positive things.

I will just say two things. First, on the listing review, we did one about four years ago and it is all just about implemented. I urge the Minister to look at culture and fiscal issues as much as at regulatory issues. Secondly, on the PRA and the scale of ambition on that side of the regulatory framework, in conversations with senior leaders at Mansion House last night, it was felt that the FCA's level of ambition is high but that there must be wariness about a constant shifting of the goalposts and a lack of real change, particularly on the internal rating base and how banks can get their regulatory capital treated differently more quickly. It is taking too long and that needs to change urgently.

Emma Reynolds: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we have not announced a listing review; we have announced a listings taskforce—[*Interruption.*] It is different, if hon. Members will let me explain. It is a joint piece of work between the Office for Investment, His Majesty's Treasury and other Government Departments to make sure that we attract the best and brightest companies to list here in the UK. He is correct, though: many reforms were undertaken by his Government on listings, taking forward the Jonathan Hill and Mark Austin reviews, and we welcomed and supported those.

The right hon. Gentleman will have seen that yesterday the FCA published its final prospectus rules. Of course, we have to get the regulatory side of the equation right, but he is correct that there are other factors at play, which we are looking at. On the FCA and the PRA, all I will say to reassure him is that, as he knows, I hold the relationship with both those regulators as the Economic Secretary. We will continue to push them to be ambitious in supporting our growth agenda.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I just want to confirm that my name is Clive, not Cassandra, Lewis—and yet, I feel like the Trojan princess, forever warning of things that will go wrong but being ignored. Will the Minister provide reassurance, given that the Bank of England has repeatedly warned that loosening mortgage lending standards and allowing more people to borrow larger sums relative to their income can push up house prices and increase financial instability? I appreciate that these are not the same deregulations that took place before the 2008 crash, but given the state of the global economy, surely she will understand that many of us on the Government Benches are cautious about deregulating at a time of such instability. I understand that we want to get more people on the housing ladder and to increase growth, but there is a risk. I wonder whether that risk has been duly appreciated.

Emma Reynolds: I reassure my hon. Friend that our agenda is to streamline regulation and make it more proportionate, and that there remain firm guardrails and affordability checks for mortgage providers. At the moment, the level of repossession is very low and banks and other mortgage providers do all they can to avoid repossessing people's homes. As I said before, we will not go back to the bad old days of 125% mortgages and no verification of affordability. This is about rebalancing the system to make sure that more people can afford to buy their own home, but it is also about striking the right balance between ensuring that we take more informed risk while ensuring financial stability. He is right to ask the question.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call a Treasury Committee member, Bobby Dean.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Chancellor announced quite a list of reforms yesterday. I note that many were on the shopping list of industry, so the Committee will examine them closely to make sure they also work for the consumer and for the long-term stability of the economy. One change in particular, on ringfencing, will worry those with strong memories of the 2008 financial crash. The shadow Economic Secretary indicated that perhaps we need to look at removing the ringfencing entirely. That would be a big step backwards. These reforms were driven by the Liberal Democrat Vince Cable, and the idea was to separate everyday customer deposits from the risks of investment banking. Will the Minister give us assurances that the hard-earned savings of families across the country will not be put at risk by the speculative activity of people playing with other people's money?

Emma Reynolds: It is always a great pleasure to come and give evidence to the hon. Gentleman's Committee. I reassure him that the Government are upholding the ringfencing regime. We must strike the right balance between protecting financial stability and safeguarding depositors. Equally, we think that there are some flexibilities that should be explored within the ringfencing regime that will allow further growth and further capital to be deployed in the real economy.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and commend the work that she and the Chancellor have done on the wider Leeds reforms. I want to pick up on the forthcoming campaign to promote retail investment, which has the potential to reshape public understanding of risk, reward and financial planning. The problem with many similar campaigns is that they have failed to reach the people who most need them, so can the Minister provide a bit more detail about how the Treasury intends to work with both the financial services industry and civil society to ensure that the campaign delivers measurable benefits and improvements in financial capability across the whole population?

Emma Reynolds: My hon. Friend is a great campaigner on this issue, and he is absolutely right: this is not an easy nut to crack. We will work closely with the industry-led campaign. We need to give people who want to invest and save for the longer term the confidence to consider whether they can secure better returns through investing, rather than just holding large amounts—if they have those large amounts—of money in cash.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Whenever I listen to the excellent Times Radio and other commercial broadcasters, I am always favourably impressed by the fact that at the end of every positive advertisement for a financial product, three words are said: “capital at risk”. Can the Minister assure the House that in the review of risk warnings that will be undertaken, that fundamental red flag, at the end of people pushing us to invest our money in some grand and profitable enterprise, will not be left out?

Emma Reynolds: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are not suggesting getting rid of risk warnings. I think that is what he was asking me most directly. One of the investment platforms did some research into the wording of risk warnings, and he will probably know that there is quite a gender gap. If we look at the figures from the Financial Conduct Authority’s financial lives survey, we see that more men have the confidence to invest than women, for example. There are other demographic factors, too. We want to give people the option and the confidence to invest, but of course there will always be risk warnings. However, there is also a risk if someone holds all their savings in cash over the long term, due to inflation.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The Science, Innovation and Technology Committee’s inquiry into regional innovation and growth has repeatedly heard that access to capital outside London and the south-east is the biggest barrier to start-ups scaling up and delivering growth and jobs. The reforms that the Minister has set out to reintroduce informed risk taking, which I am sure will be prudently implemented, should realise capital to catalyse growth. Can she say a little about how this will deliver more capital investment into the productive economy of the north-east?

Emma Reynolds: I might not be able to give my hon. Friend the specifics about her region right now, but I will say that my colleague the Pensions Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), has secured an ambitious industry-led accord—the Mansion House accord—that commits 17 pension funds, representing 90% of active defined-contribution savers, to invest 10% of their funds in private assets, half of which are to be in the UK. They will be on the hunt for good firms that could be successful in the future and that need capital to start up and scale up. We are also working closely with the British Business Bank on these issues, as my hon. Friend will know.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): After 20 years in the City of London, over the last year I have had to endure a stream of what I would call financially illiterate verbal baby food. Today I hear the Chancellor talk about regulating for growth. You do not regulate for growth; you deregulate for growth. The genesis of our problems are the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority, which sprung from the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. This was a Labour Act that created the Financial Services Authority, which turned into the PRA and the FCA. Those two organisations have shut the City of London down. We are now a shadow of our former selves in terms of raising global capital, and I heard you say the opposite—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Please be seated; I am on my feet. You heard the Minister say that. You do not refer to the Minister as “you”. Please come to the question.

Rupert Lowe: My question is this: is the Minister aware of the concept of buyer beware, or caveat emptor, which used to be the basis of financial regulation? It is very risky to force people into more and more high-risk investments as you hollow out our economy with higher taxes and regulation.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. You meant, “as the Minister hollows out”, not me. Minister—a swift response.

Emma Reynolds: Well, what do I say to that? I think there is, with the exception of the hon. Member, cross-party support for the twin peaks financial services regulation that we have. Of course, we need proportionate regulation to ensure that there are protections in place for consumers. He seems to be suggesting that we get rid of the regulators altogether, which I think most Members of this House would be opposed to. I have heard of the concept of caveat emptor, and I am suitably patronised by him.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): One of the first visits I undertook after the election was to my local branch of Nationwide, which for generations has been providing good financial advice and advice to first-time buyers in my seat, as have many other mutuals. In one of the previous periods of financial deregulation by the Conservative party, we saw a movement that led to the demutualisation of the building society movement, creating uncertainty for thousands upon thousands of potential homeowners and people looking for financial support. Can the Minister reassure the House today that the co-operative and mutual sector will remain absolutely essential to the everyday financial services that working people need?

Emma Reynolds: Absolutely. This is something that the Chancellor and I—and indeed the Business Secretary and the Business Minister—are passionate about, and we are making sure that we deliver on our manifesto commitment to double the size of the sector. We have asked the financial services regulators to report by the end of the year on what more they can do to support the growth of the sector. We are supporting the industry-led Mutual and Co-operatives Business Council, which is chaired by the chair of Nationwide, Kevin Parry, and we have recently concluded a call for evidence on the credit union common bond, which is another form of mutual. We will be setting out our response on that issue in due course.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Given the news on inflation today, along with the ongoing increases in unemployment and the downgrading of growth forecasts, it is quite right that this Government are looking for other ways to stimulate growth. One of the reasons being put forward for these reforms is the poor rates of return on ordinary bank accounts and savings accounts, but what my constituents want are just decent rates of return on ordinary savings accounts. Martin Lewis and others have pointed out that that market remains stubbornly resistant to passing on interest rate savings and offering competitive rates. I understand why the Government want to encourage people to

invest in other types of savings, but what plans do they have to tackle the poor rates of return that people are getting from their ordinary savings and bank accounts?

Emma Reynolds: I am engaging with Martin Lewis, who is a doughty champion of consumers across the country. I say to the hon. Member that, due to the consumer duty, banks and other providers have a duty to ensure that they deliver the best outcomes for their consumers, but I note what he has said.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, and I note especially the new concierge service within the Office for Investment that will both court international development and act as a one-stop shop to promote the UK. What regional dimension might be considered within that for places such as the east midlands—the region for which I am an MP—where there is significant potential for jobs and investment?

Emma Reynolds: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the concierge service will be working across the country. This is about ensuring that the UK has a single shop window for international firms looking to either set up or invest further in the UK. As we set out in the Leeds reforms, the benefits of that investment and of unleashing the potential of the financial services industry should be felt across the country, in the east midlands and beyond.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The grim truth is that people's living standards in Wales have still not recovered from the 2008 crash, which resulted in a Labour Prime Minister bailing out the banks and the Tory austerity experiment, so why are the Government risking a repeat of the mistakes of the past when all the evidence shows—this is important—that growth will not trickle down from poorly regulated bankers?

Emma Reynolds: I gently say to the right hon. Member that we are not talking about going back to 2007—we have come a long way since then. Of course, after the crash, financial services regulations and a new system of financial services regulation in terms of the twin peaks of the FCA and the PRA—conduct and prudential—were introduced. We are not talking about going back to then. We are not bringing back 125% mortgages, as I have repeatedly said. We are simply saying that we need to reassess where we are and that the pendulum has swung too far the other way. We need to rebalance the system so that both consumers and firms can take informed risks to drive growth across the country. That will make people better off and give them the opportunity to secure better returns on their savings. I encourage her to look at the detail of this. We are looking to rebalance the system, not go back to where we were.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial technology and a mother to a 17-year-old daughter who turns 18 this year and is considering how she can best save for and secure her future, I welcome this news with real joy as we try to bring more wealth to more people. I suspect this joy is shared by Ayesha Ofori, the founder of Propelle, a platform that encourages women into retail investing, which can start with some very small

sums indeed; Nina Mohanty, who founded Bloom Money, which supports people from ethnic minority communities to build generational wealth through group savings and budgets; and Georgia Stewart, founder of Tumelo, which has a mission to bring shareholder democracy to the digital age, giving everybody a seat at the table, whether that is an institution managing billions or everyday savers. Does the Minister agree that this Government's approach of encouraging investing should in turn give confidence to those who are considering investing in these female-founded fintech companies, so they can scale and reach more people to help them become wealthier and more secure?

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic champion of fintech. We already have a thriving fintech sector, which is the second largest in the world—second only to the US—and we are determined to ensure that those companies access the capital and the authorisations and licences that they need from the regulators. Obviously, that is a decision for the regulators, but it should be done at pace so that these companies can get off the ground and start to scale, providing the opportunities for retail investment and, critically, providing innovative products for consumers across the country.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her statement. The No. 1 thing that my constituents raise with me is the soaring cost of the private rented sector. Does she agree that these reforms will help first-time buyers in Harlow get on the housing ladder? Working alongside the £39 billion of investment in social housing, that can only be good for my residents.

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We want to ensure that the dream of home ownership is expanded across the country, including to his constituency of Harlow. Because of the reforms we are taking forward, and there will be more to come, the estimate is that 36,000 new first-time buyers will be able to buy their homes in the first year of this reform being in place.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In her statement, the Economic Secretary was right when she alluded to the FTSE being at a record high yesterday, though many international indices, whether in the US, the far east or Europe, are also at record highs since the April low. She also alluded to the cash ISA problem. What will be done to instil confidence among the wider public who hold money and cash assets but are reluctant and fearful of investing, even in lower-risk collective investments that, over the longer term, would produce much better returns than cash ISAs, which are subject, as she rightly says, to inflation?

Emma Reynolds: I thank the hon. Member for his thoughtful question. We are doing a number of things. First, we are working at pace with the FCA to ensure that targeted support is in place by the end of the tax year and in time for the new ISA season in April next year. We are looking at the risk warnings and at the industry-led campaign on advertising the opportunities of investing. We are doing all that we can. It is good that hon. Members on different sides of the House are supporting us.

[Emma Reynolds]

Obviously, different people will be at different stages in their journey through life. People who are retired may not want to invest in the stock market. I can understand that, from their perspective, they need more readily available cash, but if people who are younger or middle aged—I do not know where I fall in those categories—[*Interruption.*] Thank you. If people can even put a small amount away, they can invest in their future. It concerned me recently when a report suggested that many people did not know that their pensions were invested in the stock market and that that is how they get better returns in their retirement. We need to run a huge campaign with the private sector to educate people about the opportunities and to give people the confidence to invest. At the end of the day, it will obviously be down to people about how they choose to invest.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I welcome the Leeds reforms today. Like many of the best things, they started in West Yorkshire—[*Interruption.*] I see Conservative Members are still chuntering from a sedentary position. The reforms underline the important point that financial services are not just the preserve of the City of London, but of communities around the country, including many of my Calder Valley constituents who work for Lloyds Bank. Does the Minister agree that one of the most important things we can do to grow the economy is to focus on things that this country does well, including our financial services?

Emma Reynolds: That is absolutely right. We were at Lloyds Banking Group yesterday in Leeds, and Lloyds employs thousands of people in Leeds and the wider region. There are some great opportunities in not only the establishment firms, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) said,

some of these new firms outside of London that are growing and providing innovative products. I was recently in Scotland talking to a group of fintechs about the support they are getting to work closely with some of the banks in Scotland to drive further investment into fintechs. That collaboration between the more established players and new players is positive to see.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I commend the Minister for her statement. Listening to my neighbour on the Front Bench, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), as charismatic as he is, he did not convince me that 11% inflation, a £200 increase in my mortgage payments and a revolving door of Prime Ministers and Chancellors is a record to be particularly proud of.

My question is about the 29 million people in this country who have deposits in low-yielding current accounts, while people who invested in the stock exchange over the last 10 years saw yields of 9%. How do we convince and educate those customers to give them the confidence to be able to reveal much better outcomes from their investments?

Emma Reynolds: That is similar to what the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) asked. There has been lots of different research, but AJ Bell recently found that if people had put £100 a year into ISAs for the past 25 years, they would be better off if they invested in a stocks and shares ISA than a cash ISA, so it is perhaps about showing people that sort of evidence. Obviously, the stock market ebbs and flows and can fluctuate, but if people are saving for the longer term, they should certainly consider investing. The industry-led campaign will look at how we can advertise the benefits. Of course, there still will be risk warnings, but we need to ensure that we get the balance right between telling people that there are risks and telling them that there are great benefits of investing, too.

Points of Order

2.7 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek your guidance? The NHS announced yesterday morning the closure of the Mount Vernon hospital minor injuries unit in my constituency, which also affects my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden), my hon. Friends the Members for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) and for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and the hon. Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales). The decision flies in the face of the 10-year plan for the NHS announced recently to this House. My letter of 24 April to the Secretary of State about the matter has gone completely unanswered. Given the impending recess, how can I place my concerns on the record and hold Ministers accountable for this action?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. The Chair is not responsible for Ministers' replies to correspondence from hon. Members, but colleagues in all parts of the House are entitled to expect a timely response to their letters, especially from Ministers on constituency matters. He has put his point on the record, and I am sure that the Treasury Front Bench will have noticed his remarks and will pass that on forthwith.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance regarding the accuracy of the official report in *Hansard*. In my speech on Wednesday 2 July 2025 during the debate on the prevention and suppression of terrorism, I said the words, "We are all Palestine Action." The video and audio recordings clearly confirm that the full sentence was spoken before the Chair intervened. However, *Hansard* has omitted the final word of that sentence. I have been advised that this is due to a long-standing convention not to report words spoken after the Chair intervenes, but in this case the record omits words spoken before the Chair's intervention. I am also aware of precedents, which I can provide, where Members' final words immediately preceding or overlapping an intervention have been included to preserve the accuracy of the record. Despite that, *Hansard* has not only refused to amend the entry, but has since removed the sentence entirely.

That blatant attempt of censorship and rewriting the record is deeply concerning and undermines the integrity of the *Official Report*. Can you therefore advise me and

the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, on whether there are formal mechanisms to challenge omissions of this kind, reinstate the accurate record and ensure that *Hansard* fulfils its duty to provide a full and accurate record of proceedings in this House?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member has now twice put her words on the record, no doubt. If she is not aware—and for colleagues across the House who may not be aware—*Hansard* has its own editorial policy. If she wishes to have her words corrected, she needs to take that up directly with *Hansard*. That is not a responsibility of the Chair.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will be most grateful for your advice, because during Prime Minister's questions earlier today the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) misled the House—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We do not use language such as "misled the House" when talking about colleagues. The hon. Gentleman will have to check his words if he wishes to continue.

Richard Tice: I am most grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen may have possibly inadvertently misled the House with regard to Lancashire county council and nursery funding. The reality is that, unfortunately, as a result, the Prime Minister gave an answer based on that possible inadvertent misinformation. The truth is that Lancashire county council is carrying out a statutory consultation on whether to follow the example of Labour-controlled councils such as Blackburn and Blackpool in having a small, modest processing fee.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will no doubt have already contacted the Member he referenced. If not, I have no doubt that he will do so forthwith. If only the Chair were responsible for the content of Members' questions and answers, but unfortunately it is not. The hon. Gentleman has now put his words on the record and will no doubt get a response privately.

BILL PRESENTED

INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE ADVISORY OPINION
ON POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF ISRAEL (SANCTIONS
AND OTHER MEASURES)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Richard Burgon, supported by Imran Hussain, presented

a Bill to require the Secretary of State to take steps to give effect in the United Kingdom to the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice issued on 19 July 2024 entitled “Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem”, including provision for sanctions and for other measures to give effect to that advisory opinion; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September, and to be printed (Bill 288).

Managing Agents (Regulation)

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

2.13 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an independent regulator of managing agents; to make provision about the powers and duties of the independent regulator; to require managing agents to comply with a code of practice and to make provision about that code of practice; to make provision for a licensing scheme for managing agents; to make further provision about the regulation of managing agents; and for connected purposes.

Labour Governments past and present have been underpinned by a motivation to stand up for the voiceless and disempowered—those let down by broken systems—so that they can take control over their own circumstances. I present this Bill to the House because the failure to regulate managing agents has rendered leaseholders—ordinary hard-working people—voiceless, let down and disempowered.

This Government’s commitment to end the broken leasehold system is a welcome pledge for many, including leaseholders in places like my Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituency. Many have long been held hostage by exploitative management companies. In this Bill, we have the opportunity to take a further step forward in rebalancing the system, improving management standards and empowering leaseholders to hold their managing agents to account.

The Bill would establish a new independent regulator of managing agents. It would require managing agents to have mandatory qualifications and to pass a fit and proper person test. The regulator would be empowered to impose continuing professional development requirements. That would be underpinned by a clear code of practice set in statute, of which leaseholders would have clear sight and knowledge. The Bill would provide legal obligations and create a mechanism for redress for concerned leaseholders. The regulator would have powers to enforce compliance against managing agents and, ultimately, to remove them from the register of regulated agents. This would all be funded by the firms and individuals that are regulated. Those are reasonable and sensible steps forward.

Colleagues across the House have highlighted the plight of constituents who fall victim to unregulated managing agents, laying bare the failures of the current system. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) and for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward) for their support and advice on the Bill. In my constituency, I have been supporting residents living in Union Park in Cowley. The developer has walked away from that development, and the residents are being presented with a bill of £100,000 by the managing company, Ringley. Communal boilers have been left broken for two and a half years, and leaks under floorboards remain unfixed.

Although my team and I continue to work to support and advocate for those residents, the reality is that without a proper regulatory framework, managing companies like Ringley—which are appointed by freeholders—remain free to provide inadequate customer service, charge extortionate fees without justification and ignore residents. They seemingly serve vested interests,

not the leaseholders who pay their fees. I am proud to be a member of the Labour for leaseholders group, working with hon. Friends to advocate for leaseholders in our constituencies and put pressure on managing companies to do better. We need a clear and robust legislative and regulatory framework, such as the one suggested by Lord Best and proposed in this Bill.

Of course, the leasehold system is not new, but the challenges that it presents today require the Government to act. Without mandatory qualifications and regulatory oversight, leaseholders remain vulnerable to inconsistent service quality, opaque charges and a lack of recourse when things go wrong. Managing agents are responsible for a variety of complex and important areas, including health, fire and structural safety, building maintenance, major works projects, and handling building finances and insurance. In leasehold blocks, managing companies hold substantial sums of leaseholders' hard-earned money. The current system—or lack thereof—not only allows but empowers unqualified and incompetent managing agents. The Bill is not about extending red tape for red tape's sake; it is about protecting hard-working people and their money.

Let me be clear: I am not attempting to tarnish all managing agents with the same brush. I know that some leaseholders have had positive experiences. The Property Institute—the professional body representing 7,000 property managers and over 360 managing agent firms—seeks to deliver safe, secure and well-managed homes. Members of the TPI are required to obtain accreditation and follow a consumer charter that demands honesty, fairness, openness and transparency. However, when distressed leaseholders sit across from me at my advice surgeries, those are not the words they use to describe their managing companies.

I commend the TPI for its work to stand up for leaseholders, and I welcome the supportive role it has played in the Government's consultation on leasehold reform. However, a voluntary accreditation system in place of regulation exposes serious failures in the current framework. Relying on good faith actors to seek accreditation voluntarily means, by definition, that bad faith managing companies continue to operate freely in this country. We cannot accept that. For every managing company failing in its duty, there are multiple leaseholders being ripped off. The facts are clear, and inaction is not an option.

Earlier this year, FirstPort had its TPI accreditation stripped due to breaches of membership rules. Yet just three months later, it was readmitted. I recently visited Sherleys Court, a retirement complex in Ruislip managed by FirstPort. I heard stories from residents who, after a lifetime of hard work, moved in expecting to enjoy the next chapter of their lives. Instead, they were met with extortionate service fees with little to no explanation or itemisation. Their serious concerns about how their money was being managed were falling on deaf ears, and their feedback on shoddy maintenance work was once again ignored.

The story of the St Andrew's Park development in Uxbridge—which is also managed by FirstPort—is just as dire. Residents report flooding, damp and mould issues that are not remedied. I recently conducted a

survey of residents; a staggering 50% of respondents said that they had not received a response from FirstPort following attempts to communicate with the company. If I went to those residents and told them that, in just three months, their managing company had lost and then regained accreditation, I am sure they would question what had actually changed, and they would rightly ask what process had led to that decision.

The readmission of FirstPort lays bare the limitations of the current system and the urgent need for a clear regulatory framework to define and enforce the standards expected of all managing agents. The Bill will introduce an independent property regulator, grant licences to agents based on checks, including the fulfilment of legal obligations, and mandate qualifications to ensure minimum competency standards for agents and property managers. Without those provisions, leaseholders and the sector as a whole bear the financial burden of a lack of regulation. Research by the TPI shows that introducing an independent regulator would be largely cost-neutral, with the benefits of improved professionalism, accountability and consumer confidence offsetting any additional administrative costs.

There is a significant cost of inaction: a human cost. Too many people have been ripped off for far too long, but after years that have been financially difficult for so many, this Government have a drive to make people better off and feel listened to, and when it comes to the plight of leaseholders, this Bill is a necessary step in doing just that.

Since this Government were formed, we have rightly heard a lot about the housing crisis and how it is our responsibility to fix it. The crisis does not begin and end with bricks and mortar, although building 1.5 million homes is an absolute imperative. It also comes down to a deeper concept: security in our homes, for those in the private rented sector and in social housing, and for homeowners too. This Bill can help towards delivering security for leaseholders, who for far too long have been left in a crippling insecure and exploitative situation. The total failings of the leasehold system extend beyond that which can be fixed by one piece of legislation, but the Bill will be a vital step forward in the Government's mission to deliver justice for all leaseholders.

They say that your home is your castle, but for too long leaseholders have often felt that their home is a prison. They feel under attack by their management companies—the companies that are there to serve and protect them, and to whom they pay a significant sum in management fees for the pleasure. With this Bill, we can build defences through a proper regulatory framework, and by ensuring that companies are properly qualified and an accountability mechanism clearly exists. Those measures are all desperately needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Danny Beales, Joe Powell, Nesil Caliskan, Chris Bloore, Chris Curtis, Dr Rupa Huq, Sarah Russell, Rachel Blake, Andrew Cooper, James Naish, Daniel Francis and Cat Eccles present the Bill.

Danny Beales accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September, and to be printed (Bill 287).

Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill [Lords]

2.22 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill is a pivotal step in the evolution of our legal system—one that ensures that the law remains relevant and pre-eminent in the digital age. As we set out in our plan for change, this Government are fully committed to providing investors and businesses with stability and certainty. This Bill will help to provide that certainty for people and businesses who own and transact with digital assets. This will help drive economic growth by encouraging innovation, attracting investment and reinforcing the UK's position as a global hub for digital finances and technology.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree with me that although the Bill is small, it is very much mighty? It is important that we get the Bill on the statute book because we want this country to be ahead of the game on these issues.

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is right. We want the UK to remain the pre-eminent jurisdiction of choice for legal services, as it currently is. This evolution of our law will enable it to remain a global hub for digital finance and tech. Overall it is a Bill that reflects our legal heritage, embraces technological innovation and prepares our nation for the future.

To appreciate the significance of the Bill, we must begin with the foundations of property law in England and Wales. For centuries, our legal system has categorised personal property as two distinct types: first, things in possession—tangible items that can be physically held or possessed, such as a book, jewellery or gold; and secondly, things in action—intangible rights that can only be claimed or enforced through legal action, such as debts, shares or contractual rights. These categories have served us well for hundreds of years, providing clarity in ownership and facilitating commerce. They have helped to create legal certainty in matters ranging from succession and insolvency to trust structures and collateral arrangements.

The digital revolution introduced a new class of assets—digital assets—that do not fit neatly into either of the traditional categories. As things stand, we look to 19th-century case law, which sets out that a thing can only be property if it fits into the two traditional categories of things in action and things in possession. The unique characteristics of digital assets, like crypto tokens, challenge the boundaries of these legal categories.

Unlike physical objects, digital assets cannot be held in one's hand. Unlike debts or contractual rights, digital assets have an independent existence in the world that is not dependent on their recognition by a legal system. Yet certain digital assets possess the characteristics that the common law recognises as making them suitable to attract property rights. For example, certain digital assets, like crypto tokens, are rivalrous, meaning their use by one person prevents simultaneous use by others. By contrast to crypto tokens, some digital things, like Word documents, are not rivalrous and so are not

recognised by the common law as being capable of attracting property rights. For example, if I were to send you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a Word document, I retain a copy, but if I transfer a crypto token, I no longer possess it. This is due to the underlying blockchain technology that ensures immutability, scarcity and non-duplicability—features that make certain digital assets capable of attracting personal property rights even if they are not a thing in possession or a thing in action.

Recent case law has begun to recognise that certain digital assets can attract personal property rights. However, these decisions have not come forward in precedent-setting courts, and thus the legal landscape remains uncertain. This ambiguity risks stifling innovation, as innovators are unsure what protections they have or whether they will be able to monetise their creation. It also puts off investors from investing in crypto tokens in favour of more traditional and predictable forms of investment. If we do not act, we risk our global competitors getting ahead and putting in place the kind of certainty in their own legal systems that will divert investment away from this country.

Recognising the urgency of this issue, in 2020, under the previous Government, the Ministry of Justice commissioned the Law Commission to review the legal framework surrounding crypto tokens and other digital assets. The commission's 2023 report was unequivocal: certain digital assets should be recognised as capable of attracting property rights, and legislation was needed to reflect this. The Government have responded decisively. The Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill is the result—a concise yet powerful piece of legislation that affirms our commitment to legal clarity, economic growth and technological leadership.

The Bill contains a single operative clause. It recognises that a thing, including a thing that is digital or electronic, is not prevented from attracting personal property rights merely because it is not a thing in possession nor a thing in action. The Bill allows the courts to develop a further category of personal property through our common law.

Importantly, the Bill does not attempt to define which digital assets may qualify, nor does it prescribe the legal consequences of falling within this category. These matters are rightly left to the common law, which, with its flexibility and nuance, is best suited to assess each asset on its characteristics. This is in accordance with long-established common-law tests for property. This approach reflects the strength of our tradition. It capitalises on the adaptability and flexibility of the common law by empowering the courts to apply established legal tests to emerging technologies. This ensures that our legal system remains responsive, relevant and resilient.

We stand today at the intersection of law and innovation, where centuries of legal tradition meet the boundless potential of the digital age. The Bill is not just legal reform: it is an important step for our law and for the global digital economy, because digital assets are here to stay. From crypto tokens to voluntary carbon credits, these assets are reshaping how we transact, invest and interact—and yet, until now, our private law has struggled to keep pace. This Bill changes that.

First and foremost, the Bill provides legal certainty. It confirms that certain digital assets can be recognised as personal property. This is a fundamental shift. It means that individuals and businesses can now rely on clear

legal rights and protections when dealing with things such as crypto tokens. That is because certain digital assets can now attract the same legal protection as other forms of property, which means that owners of things such as crypto tokens can enforce their rights if the asset is stolen. Whether it is theft, insolvency or inheritance, the law will now stand ready to protect those property rights.

By clarifying the legal status of digital assets, the Bill reduces ambiguity and streamlines litigation. That is because the courts will no longer have to spend time debating whether further categories exist or trying to force digital assets into the traditional categories. That clarity will save time, reduce costs and ensure fairer outcomes for all parties involved.

As I have said, the Bill also supports our ambition to be a centre of innovation and growth. It encourages fintech start-ups, scale-ups and global enterprises to choose English and Welsh or Northern Irish law for their transactions, knowing that these legal systems are equipped to handle the complexities of digital assets. The Bill thus unlocks practical economic benefits. It assists in allowing digital assets to be included in estates for inheritance and claimed by creditors in insolvency. These capabilities will fuel innovation, support new financial products and drive economic growth.

Crucially, the Bill does not attempt rigidly to define every type of digital asset. Instead, as I have said, it allows the common law to evolve, giving our courts the flexibility to adapt to technologies that have not yet even been imagined. That is one of the hallmarks of a progressive, forward-thinking legal system such as ours.

This Bill attracted significant cross-party support in the other place. For example, it was described by Lord Holmes as

“a short Bill, but one with significant impact for the UK, and indeed beyond our shores”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 May 2025; Vol. 845, c. 1695.]

It was also described as a Bill that

“sends a signal to all those involved in digital assets”

that

“London and the United Kingdom is an excellent place”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 May 2025; Vol. 1696, c. 845.]

to do business.

In the same vein, Lord Sandhurst noted that the Bill was “small but perfectly formed” and that it will

“make an important contribution to the development of the law...and assist judges and litigants in ensuring that necessary protection is given to activities and things in the digital sphere...which might otherwise fail to be protected”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 May 2025; Vol. 845, c. 1696.]

Those are not just words of praise: they are affirmations of the Bill’s importance, clarity and potential to shape the global legal and economic landscape. One noble Lord remarked on Third Reading that “the world is watching”, and rightly so.

We have a proud tradition of legal excellence and a thriving fintech ecosystem. With trillions of pounds in global economic activity expected to be transacted via digital assets by the end of the decade, we must ensure that our legal infrastructure is not only fit for purpose, but fit for the future. This Bill is a critical step in realising that potential.

Of course, the Bill underwent much scrutiny in the House of Lords, and two amendments were made to it. The first extended the territorial scope of the Bill to include Northern Ireland. We are glad that our laws can be aligned in this area and that the benefits of this Bill will be felt more widely. The second amendment was to the Bill’s long title. That was to ensure consistency between the title and the Bill’s operative clause. I am certain that we now have the best possible version of this Bill before us.

The Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill is a testament to the strength and adaptability of our legal tradition. It reflects our commitment to innovation, our respect for the rule of law and our ambition to lead on the global stage. It was described in the Lords as

“future facing, future-proofing, growth enabling ground-breaking and good for innovation, investment, citizen, consumer and the country”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 April 2025; Vol. 845, c. 1297.]

I could not agree more. It is a Bill for the future—a future in which digital assets play a central role in our economy, our society and our lives. By passing this Bill, we are not only clarifying the law, but shaping that future. Let us seize this opportunity and send a clear message to the world that we are ready, willing and able to lead in the digital age.

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

2.33 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I rise on behalf of the official Opposition to express our support for the Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill. I do not have the benefit of being a learned Member like the Minister, so I have enjoyed getting to understand what property law looks like in the UK.

As the Minister said, this Bill comes before this House from the other place, where it has already received careful and considered scrutiny. I particularly acknowledge the contributions made there by the noble Lord Holmes of Richmond, whose deep expertise in digital and emerging technologies greatly enriched the debate, and the noble Lord Sandhurst, who rightly described this Bill as

“a necessary but appropriately constrained measure.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 November 2024; Vol. 840, c. GC284.]

This Bill both preserves the inherent flexibility of the common law and provides just enough statutory clarity to support continued innovation and legal certainty in a fast-moving world.

Recognising the need in 2020, the previous Conservative Government asked the Law Commission to examine how the law of personal property should respond to digital assets. The commission undertook extensive consultation and concluded that some assets defy current classification. In response, it recommended confirming in statute that assets need not be things in possession or in action to attract property rights, paving the way for a third category of personal property and ensuring that our common law can continue to evolve with confidence and coherence.

This may be a short Bill, but it carries significant weight for not just the UK’s legal framework, but our global reputation as a leader in digital innovation. As other jurisdictions watch how we respond to technological

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

change, this Bill reaffirms the UK's commitment to legal clarity, innovation and economic competitiveness. We have a world-leading fintech ecosystem, and with trillions of pounds in digital asset transactions expected globally by the end of the decade, the UK must ensure that it remains at the forefront, supporting innovation, financial inclusion and the future of capital markets.

This Bill also complements a wider programme of regulatory reform already under way in the UK. Since 2023, firms promoting crypto assets have been subject to Financial Conduct Authority rules, including mandatory risk warnings and a 24-hour cooling-off period for new consumers. Anti-money laundering rules apply, and crypto firms must register with the FCA. In 2025, the Government published draft legislation to bring a wider range of crypto assets activities, such as trading platforms and custody services, under full financial regulation. The FCA and the Bank of England are also consulting on new rules for stablecoins, prudential safeguards and the safe custody of digital assets, while the Bank explores the future of a potential central bank digital currency, the "digital pound". Those efforts, taken together with this Bill, represent a joined-up and forward-looking approach to digital asset regulation in the UK.

As the Minister explained, for centuries the law has recognised two traditional categories of personal property: things in possession, referring to tangible objects such as a bar of gold, and things in action, such as debts or contractual rights enforceable only through legal process. However, the rise of the digital economy has introduced a growing range of assets that defy those historical classifications.

From crypto tokens and digital files to in-game items and carbon credits, individuals and businesses now interact with a third category of asset. This Bill introduces that third category of personal property by confirming what the courts have been increasingly willing to suggest: that a thing is not precluded from being treated as property merely because it does not fit the traditional mould. It does so in a deliberately modest way, allowing the common law to evolve with technological change, rather than attempting to predict or prescribe it.

As Lord Sandhurst put it in the other place, we should champion the flexibility of the common law and legislate only to reinforce and clarify developments already emerging within it. This Bill strikes the right balance: it is principled in substance but careful in its implications. It gives confidence to our courts, clarity to commercial actors and reassurance to individuals navigating digital ownership. We welcome the Government's amendment in the other place to extend this legislation to Northern Ireland and the agreement of the Northern Ireland Assembly to that extension. I understand that the Scottish Government have consulted separately on the question of recognising crypto tokens as property under Scots law.

Let me take a moment to welcome the Government's stated intention in the impact assessment of reducing the burden on businesses by improving clarity in this space. At a time when digital assets are increasingly used as a means of payment, representation or value storage, it is vital that our legal architecture keeps pace—not to control innovation, but to support it with the rule of law. We on the Conservative Benches are

committed to ensuring that our legal system remains fit for the 21st century and can accommodate new technologies while safeguarding rights and responsibilities.

While we are pleased to support this Bill, let us not lose sight of the broader context. After a year of downgraded growth forecasts, our economy contracting, unemployment and inflation rising and borrowing costs creeping up, the UK urgently needs legal reforms that drive up competitiveness and economic growth. Like the recent reforms to our international legal procedures, it is no coincidence that this Bill stems from a review commissioned by the last Conservative Administration—a Government who really understood the importance of forward-thinking legal reform to support technological and financial innovation to drive economic growth.

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

2.38 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I rise in support of the Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill, which stands to bring our legal framework into the 21st century and better equip it to meet the challenges and opportunities of the digital age. This Bill is firmly rooted in the rigorous work of the Law Commission, which was followed by careful scrutiny in the other place. I thank peers for their work on the Bill, particularly Lord Tim Clement-Jones for scrutinising it on behalf of the Liberal Democrats.

This Bill confronts the long-standing legal ambiguity about how our common law system treats digital assets. As the Minister explained, and as I vaguely remember from my days at law school, the law as it stands recognises two primary forms of personal property—things in possession and things in action. However, we live in an ever-changing digital world, in which everything is much more based on digital than that common-law approach allows for. Digital assets, which cannot be physically possessed and often do not constitute a claim against another person, do not fall into the two traditional categories. Without clarity about the law, we risk undermining individual rights and weakening legal solutions in cases involving crypto assets, non-fungible tokens and other digital holdings. That is why this Bill matters; it ensures that digital things are not denied property status simply because they do not fall into the two normal categories. That is why the Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's decision to accept the Law Commission's recommendations.

This Bill is appropriate at this time, when we are seeing a growing use of digital assets across a variety of sectors. They are being used as investments, stores for value and tokens of identity and ownership by more and more people than ever before—recent figures from the Financial Conduct Authority indicate that nearly 12% of UK adults now hold crypto assets, a figure that has more than doubled since 2021. However, victims of fraud, those seeking restitution in cases of insolvency, or simply those wishing to assert ownership over what they rightfully hold have been operating in a murky legal landscape. This Bill leaves room for common law to develop in that sphere of property. That will help the law to reflect the ever-evolving nature of technology, but it must be monitored over time to ensure that regulation ultimately aligns with the need to protect individuals' rights and support the economy.

We know that digital assets mean potential risks—whether fraud, abuse, or volatility—but ignoring them or failing to regulate them effectively will not make those risks disappear. A legal vacuum only increases the risk of criminality and injustice, while a clear, modern legal framework empowers the honest majority, boosts confidence and supports innovation. This Bill is measured, cautious and essential. It provides legal clarity, upholds property rights, and ensures that our laws remain relevant in the digital world. It is supported by the Law Society, by legal practitioners, and by the Liberal Democrats. I hope everyone in this Chamber supports it, too.

2.42 pm

Sarah Sackman: With the leave of the House, let me say how grateful I am to those who have contributed to today's debate, in a rare expression of consensus. I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) and of the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster). The quality of the discussion, both in this House and in the other place, reflects the significance of the Bill that is before us. As I have said, it is the product of rigorous analysis and wide consultation. I pay tribute to the Law Commission for its landmark report, and to the many practitioners, academics, businesses and organisations that have engaged so constructively throughout the process.

At its heart, the Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill is about ensuring that our legal system keeps pace with technological change. It is a clear, confident step into the future, one that reaffirms the UK's place as a global leader in legal innovation, financial services and digital commerce, and it is a central part of this Government's plan for change and for growth. For those reasons, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

PROPERTY (DIGITAL ASSETS ETC) BILL **[LORDS]: PROGRAMME**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

Standards

2.43 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I beg to move,

That this House approves the Third Report of the Committee on Standards, Session 2024–25, HC 943, on Register of Interests of Members' Staff, subject to any transitional arrangements agreed by the Committee on Standards, and amends the provisions endorsed by the Resolution of the House of 28 June 1993 as follows:

Members' staff who hold a permanent photo-identity pass or have been granted a Parliamentary network account are required to register in the Register of Interests of Members' Staff, subject to the thresholds set out in that Register:

“Any occupation or employment for which they receive over £470 from the same source in the course of a calendar year, if that occupation or employment is in any way advantaged by the privileged access to Parliament afforded by either a photo-identity pass or a Parliamentary Network Account;

Any gift (eg jewellery) or benefit (eg hospitality, services) they receive, if the gift or benefit in any way relates to or arises from their work in Parliament and its value exceeds £470 in the course of a calendar year; and/or

Any visit undertaken that has been paid for by a third party, if it in any way relates to or arises from their work in Parliament.”

The motion before us, which stands in my name, is moved on behalf of the Committee on Standards and relates to the Register of Interests of Members' Staff. I welcome the Committee's consideration of this matter and its report. If approved, the motion would widen the boundaries of who has to register their interests in the Register of Interests of Members' Staff to include all those who have a parliamentary network account, as opposed to the current position, under which only staff who hold a photo-identity pass for the estate need to register their interests.

The Committee's report, which is available to the House, outlines that the intention behind this expansion of the register is to reflect current working practices. There has been a significant increase in the number of staff who have full access to parliamentary information and materials without needing to be present on the estate. As the Committee's report has outlined, that has resulted in more than half the staff employed by Members not being required to make a transparency return. I am grateful to the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), and to its members for all their hard work on this matter.

I know that the Chair will want to contribute to this debate to outline some of the background to the Committee's work, and how it intends to implement this measure should the House approve it today. I can assure the House that the intention is to provide time for the Committee to make any transitional and technical arrangements necessary for the introduction of the change, and that details will be provided to all Members and staff. On that basis, I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Leader of the House.

2.45 pm

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for those words. I would like, in supporting the motion, to add one small cautionary note. It has been relayed to me, both by constituency staff and by other bodies, particularly the trade unions, that there is a concern that it might be possible to connect the names released in the official public register with the email addresses used by staff. I would be grateful if the Committee devoted some consideration to that concern, among the other issues that it will wish to reflect on further, to ensure that this ruling is as good and effective as possible.

2.46 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I, too, thank the Leader of the House for so quickly coming forward with a proposal to enact the sole recommendation of my Committee's third report of this Session. The Committee agreed its report on 12 June, and here we are, barely a month later, seeking to put its recommendation into practice. The change we propose is straightforward and quite confined, but none the less it is a real pleasure to see our proposal make such quick progress.

As today's motion makes clear, the Register of Interests of Members' Staff—those whom we as MPs employ to help us in our work—has been in its present form since 1993. At that time, it was considered that Members' staff had privileged access to the parliamentary estate and its facilities because they held a pass allowing them physical access. It was therefore those staff, and those staff only, who were required to register any relevant interest. Times have changed, as times are wont to do. The arrival in the intervening 32 years of such minor innovations as the internet and mobile telephony have enabled remote access to the estate in a way that was not envisaged when the register was first created. There has also been a substantial growth in the practice of working from home, and it is now entirely possible—in a way it was not then—for our constituency-based staff to have access to parliamentary information and facilities without ever setting foot within the precincts of the Palace of Westminster.

In a sense, we are acting quickly to catch up slowly on the way that work and working practices have altered. At the time of our report a month ago, around 2,000 passes had been issued to our staff, but around 4,200 members of staff had parliamentary network access. The change the Committee proposes simply means that all those who have such access will be required to register any interest arising from the list set out in the motion. It will be a small, but important, reinforcement of the transparency that the House properly seeks in how the parliamentary community does its vital work.

The change, as the Leader of the House suggested, will not happen instantly if the House agrees to the motion. The Committee has sought to include a transitional provision in the motion to enable the Standards Committee to press “Go” once the Registrar of Members' Financial Interests has satisfied us that the IT solutions required, of which we have seen examples, are robust and ready to go.

I thank the shadow Leader of the House for his comments and the concerns that he noted in respect of the motion. The Committee is aware of the concern,

raised via Unite the union and by some staff, that a new requirement to register interests will place their names on a public register, and the Committee and I have offered to meet staff representatives during the transition period to hear those concerns and also, if necessary, to consider whether ameliorations may be required, and I will report to the Leader of the House if that proves to be the case. I am grateful to Unite for raising those concerns with the Committee, and I am also grateful to it for saying that it approves of the principles behind the change.

With that caveat in mind, the Committee hopes that the new arrangements will be in place in the autumn, and, in conjunction with the Registrar, we will seek to publicise the change to ensure that all Members are able to encourage their staff to register as required. Let me again thank the Leader of the House for responding so promptly, and I thank the shadow Leader of the House for noting the concerns that have been raised by some. I trust that the House will feel able to approve these new arrangements.

2.51 pm

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Standards Committee for explaining the background to the report. I have given him this commitment, both privately and publicly: I am keen to bring the recommendations of Standards Committee reports to the Floor of the House as soon as possible, and I hope that I have shown willing by doing that so quickly on this occasion. I also thank the hon. Gentleman for his reassurance to the shadow Leader of the House and to the trade unions—particularly Unite—which I know fully support the principles of this measure and the intention behind it, although I think that, as the shadow Leader said, there are some concerns about the creation of an entire register for staff members with nil returns that could perhaps be “farmed” by those trying to lobby people and gain access to them, with their names and email addresses out there for public view.

I look forward to the hon. Gentleman consulting and working with the unions in the coming weeks on how this can be delivered. If any changes are necessary, my door, as ever, will be open. I thank him and the whole Committee, and I thank the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for all his work with the Committee on this issue and many others.

Question put and agreed to.

Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life

2.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of giving every child the best start in life.

This Government have a mission to break down the barriers to opportunity for children and young people, so that background does not determine a child's future and successes. After 14 dark years under the Conservative party, we are restoring to our communities the hope that, in too many places and for too many families, simply faded away. What this Government inherited was a truly shameful legacy. The Conservatives had 14 years in government, and their record speaks for itself: 1,300 children's centres closed or hollowed out, early years childcare costs spiralling way above the rate of inflation, and providers closing year on year. I know that Conservative Members, very few of whom are present, will bleat that in their manifesto they promised better, but the people of Britain judge politicians by what they deliver, not what they promise.

At the heart of Labour's ambition for a better Britain is bringing change to the first few years of every life, so that opportunity is not the privilege of a few but is common to us all. Children's early years are crucial to their development, health and life chances, and it is there that we can make the biggest difference. On average, 40% of the overall gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers has already emerged by the age of five. It is in those early years that so much of the inequality that today disfigures our society is entrenched. If we want to build the fairer and more equal society that Labour Members want to see, that is where we lay the foundations. If we want to see change—change for good—the transformation that we seek to bring must be part of a wider approach that covers every aspect of education and health, and every facet of opportunity.

That is why the Government have published our vision for the future of early years. This landmark strategy, which will bring together early years and family services, and will put children's first years at the heart of work to improve life chances, is backed by nearly £1.5 billion over the next three years to raise quality, close gaps and break down the barriers to opportunity for every child.

“Giving every child the best start in life” sets out the first steps to delivering on our plan for change commitment for a record number of children to be ready to start school by 2028. We will make early education and childcare more accessible and affordable, improve quality in the early years and reception, and expand and strengthen family services. This builds on the progress that we are already making: funding new and expanded school-based nurseries across the country, funding new breakfast clubs in 750 early adopter schools and offering places to nearly 180,000 children, including 79,000 pupils from schools in the most deprived parts of the country.

From September we will be rolling out 30 hours of funded childcare for working parents, saving eligible parents using their full entitlement an average of £7,500 a year. It should be the case that all parents who want it can obtain the high-quality early education and childcare that they need, yet four in 10 parents with children

[Stephen Morgan]

under five say that there are not enough places locally. Disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs and disabilities have the most to gain from high-quality early education, yet more affluent areas often have more places.

We will improve the system, setting out a long-term vision for improving access to early years education and childcare to ensure that all families can benefit. We will create tens of thousands more places in new and expanded school-based nurseries, backed by more than £400 million of investment. We will roll out the expansion of funded childcare hours available to working parents, saving eligible families an average of £7,500 a year. We will work closely with local authorities to increase the take-up of the 15-hour entitlements, so that children from low-income families, those with SEND and those in care receive the support they need.

As a result of the decisions made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Government will soon be funding about 80% of the early education and childcare hours in England. Whenever the Government buy a service, they have an obligation to use that purchasing power in the public interest, to shape the market, improve standards, and support and develop the workforce. That is what Labour believes, and that is what we will do. We think we could do more to guarantee the benefits of that investment, and to ensure that they are realised where they are needed. We will look across the early education and childcare support provided by Departments to find ways in which to make it simpler, to improve access, and to increase the overall impact of Government spending on children and families.

I have the privilege of being able to see at first hand the impact that our passionate early years staff have in many settings across the country during my regular visits. They have worked brilliantly to deliver for families at every stage of the expansion of Government-funded childcare, and they continue to do so ahead of September. Families know the difference that access to a place that meets their needs can make. That is why we are investing more than £9 billion in early education and childcare, and why a diverse and thriving early years sector with a brilliant and valued workforce is absolutely key. We will work with the early years sector to support brilliant settings to grow and spread their expertise, and that will include working alongside philanthropists and social investors to encourage new not-for-profit providers to open.

We want early years careers to be ones that people are proud to start and that are rewarding to pursue. That means having more opportunities to gain qualifications, enter the workforce and build fulfilling careers. Childminders play an integral role in our early years landscape and are treasured by many families, which is why we will keep working with Jobcentre Plus to encourage people to become childminders. However, having listened to the sector, we will also make sure that childminders and other providers can be paid monthly for funded hours, making their income more stable. Alongside a strong market, we want to drive higher standards through a strengthened improvement and accountability system that supports and drives high-quality provision for settings and families. That includes funding for Ofsted to inspect settings more often and to inspect new settings within 18 months of opening.

The early years workforce is at the heart of this Government's mission to give every child the best start in life. We are making sure that a high-quality start transitions into starting school by making reception year a national priority for the regional improvement for standards and excellence—RISE—teams. We want high-quality evidence to underpin the training, support and development of people working in early years settings, from the baby room to the reception year. This will mean that passionate people can grow their skills and careers, and help every child to thrive.

Together with educators and leaders, we will drive high and rising standards by working with providers and schools to equip to them with the tools, training and support that they need to meet every child's needs. Alongside raising the standards of early years educators by introducing a professional register, we will increase the number of qualified early years teachers, and we aim to more than double the number of funded early years initial teacher training places by 2028. We will also offer financial incentives to attract and keep early years teachers in nurseries serving the most disadvantaged communities, so that every child, no matter where they live, can benefit from high-quality early education.

The SEND system we inherited from the Conservative party has totally lost the confidence of families, and this Labour Government are absolutely committed to restoring that confidence. The last Conservative Education Secretary labelled the system that she left behind as “lose, lose, lose”, while current shadow Ministers say that they did not do enough on SEND and should hang their heads in shame. We agree—the difference is that we are doing something about it.

We will make inclusive practice standard practice in the early years by embedding an inclusive approach in our workforce education, training and leadership opportunities, and by funding evidence-based programmes that are proven to improve children's development. We will drive improvements in the quality of teaching in reception and ensure that schools have access to the right tools and tailored improvement, including by helping each parent to play their part and be confident in their child's progress.

This renewed vision for the early years goes hand in hand with a national approach to family services—one that brings together health, education and social care around the needs of families, children and babies. That is why I am proud that this Government have established Best Start family hubs that will be funded across all local authorities, building on the best of Sure Start, family hubs and Start for Life approaches.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The Minister mentioned family hubs, which I welcome, but he stated that they will be delivered by local authority area. In my area of Surrey, we are going through local government reorganisation. How will the roll-out be impacted by that reorganisation? Does he expect to roll out a plan over the next couple of years, and then to reorganise it after a new council has been created?

Stephen Morgan: We are obviously working through the detail of our commitments as I speak, but I will certainly take his point back to the Department—I know that officials are working very closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local

Government. What is really powerful is the fact that we will roll out family hubs to every local authority in the country to make sure that they make a real difference to every child's life.

We are investing over £500 million to expand Best Start family hubs to every local authority in England, ensuring that wherever they live, families can access joined-up, high-quality support from pregnancy through to the early years. As part of this investment, we are providing dedicated funding to deliver evidence-based support for the home learning environment, with a particular focus on disadvantaged families and the quality of parent-child relationships. We want to support parents to create rich and nurturing home environments by encouraging them to chat, play and read more with their children, because we know that those everyday interactions are the building blocks of early development.

In order to help meet our ambition for 75% of children to achieve a good level of development by the age of five, we will fund more evidence-based parenting and home learning programmes so that more families can access those services before their children start school. That will be supported by a new national Best Start digital service, linked to "My Children" on the NHS app, which will bring together the trusted advice and guidance that all parents need in one place, and link families to their local services.

The Labour Government are committed to breaking down the barriers to opportunity, and the early years are where we do that most powerfully. Our ambition is clear: to make early years education the best it can be for children in all settings. This is the start of a decade of national renewal for families and the support that they receive. We will go further and faster to ensure that every child has the best start in life and the chance to achieve and to thrive.

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

3.5 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Everybody wants to give children the best start in life. That is why we increased spending per pupil in schools by 11% in real terms in the last Parliament, and why we doubled real-terms spending on the free entitlement for the early years. More importantly, it is why we pushed through difficult reforms to schools, which were often opposed by the Labour party. It is why we brought in the knowledge-rich curriculum, why we brought in stronger accountability, and why we pushed through the academies revolution and more parental choice.

The Minister said that our record speaks for itself, and it does. Labour's record speaks for itself as well. Between 2009 and 2022, England went from 21st to seventh in the programme for international student assessment league table for maths, while Wales—spending the same amount as before—went from 29th to 27th. *[Interruption.]* Labour MPs clearly do not like hearing this, but I am afraid I am going to carry on. In science, England went from 11th to ninth, while Wales—with same amount of money as before but run by Labour, with no reforms—slumped from 21st to 29th.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): On that point, will the shadow Minister give way?

Neil O'Brien: I am happy to take an intervention.

Chris Vince: I thank the shadow Minister for taking my intervention; he is always very generous with his time. I will give him a friendly intervention. I was going to criticise the Conservatives for a lack of attendance in this debate, but he said the words "no reforms", and I notice that there are no Reform MPs present for this important debate. When I spoke in the general election campaign about education and it was the turn of the Reform candidate in Harlow to give us his views on the party's vision for education, he did not have an answer. Does the shadow Minister agree that we do not want the Reform party anywhere near education?

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is completely right, and it is not the first time—it is generally the case that no one from Reform is present. On this issue, I am afraid that Reform MPs are chronically absent, as we say in education.

I will continue with my theme. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out that the huge difference in performance, and the divergence in performance, between England and Wales cannot be explained by poverty rates or ethnicity. It is to do with the reforms that were not undertaken because of trade union pressure in Wales.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I agree that it is crucial to measure the progress of our children in key subjects to give them the best opportunities in life, but does the shadow Minister not accept, as I and many others do, that the climb up the international league tables was caused by restricting the breadth of the curriculum? That has come at the detriment of many opportunities for children over recent years.

Neil O'Brien: I do not think that is true. Looking at the evidence pack produced by the Government's curriculum review, it is clear that some of the arguments are overstated. It is true that we reversed the decline in the number of young people taking double and triple science; that had been falling for years, and it went back up again because there was more focus on science. It is true that there are a limited number of hours in the school day, but I do not accept that we had some sort of Gradgrindian educational agenda. There continues to be a broad and balanced agenda. If Labour Members want to say that much more time should be spent on a particular subject, they should at least be clear about where it will come from.

Children in England were ranked the best in maths in the whole western world in the 2023 trends in international mathematics and science study, and they moved into the top five in the global rankings for science. What happened in Wales and Scotland? We do not know, as their Administrations removed themselves from those competitions because they do not like accountability. It is the same at all levels.

Whereas we favoured parental choice and autonomy for schools, balanced by strong accountability, the current Government take a very different approach. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is currently in the Lords, dilutes parental choice, and it gives local politicians more control over pupil numbers for the first time since 1988. The greater autonomy for schools that we brought

[Neil O'Brien]

in has been replaced by a tide of micromanagement of curriculum and staff, and the absurd situation where if someone wants to put up a bicycle shed they have to apply to the Secretary of State. On the other hand, the ultimate form of accountability—placing schools under new management via academy orders—is being slowed down and stopped, which has been criticised even by Labour MPs such as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh).

The Labour party's attempts to mess around with Ofsted to please the trade unions have watered down accountability for parents and made things more complicated, but they have not made anybody happy; nobody is happy with what has been proposed in the end. The Government have axed all the forms of support that we were making available to schools for subjects from advanced physics to maths, Latin and advanced computing—they think they are elitist. They have also axed the behaviour hubs, even though there is clear evidence that they were working and schools that went through them were twice as likely to be good or outstanding afterwards. The reform agenda is just not there.

At one point, the Government's big answer was that they were going to employ 6,500 more teachers: they were going to increase VAT and employ all these extra teachers. The Chancellor said at the end of last year that every single penny of that VAT increase would go to education, but then, confusingly, the Prime Minister said that the money had been spent on social housing instead. It has been a long time since I studied formal logic, but we cannot spend every single penny on education and also spend that money on housing; we cannot spend it on two things. As it happens, we now know that actually there are not those extra teachers; there are 400 fewer teachers. We added 27,000 teachers under the last Government and under Labour there are 400 fewer teachers.

At the point when the numbers came out showing that there were fewer teachers, the Government suddenly declared that primary school teachers do not count—that the fall of 2,900 in primary school teacher numbers did not count. Ministers implied that that had always been their intention—they said, "How dare you say that wasn't our intention?"—but they announced this policy in a primary school, and they said they would hit their targets for early years through an increase in primary. Now they say, "Oh, numbers are falling in primary," but numbers are falling by a lot less than when they made the pledge in the updated forecast. If we apply the same logic, half of secondary schools have falling numbers, so perhaps that will be the next way they try to monkey around with the numbers to pretend that the opposite is happening. I would not mind so much if we did not get these chirpy press releases from the Department saying, "We're doing so well; we've got all these extra teachers." There are fewer teachers—that is the bottom line in what has happened here.

Chris Vince: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way again; he is being very generous with his time. I have to say, as a former teacher who left the profession because of the way we were treated by the previous Government, that I always feel a little bit gaslit by the Conservative party. I would just point out to him that during the previous Government's time in office, a third

of new teachers were leaving the profession within five years. Does he not recognise that the pressure put on teachers by the previous Government, the lack of support and the general lack of faith in teachers made a number of them leave, and we lost so much experience that it has been very difficult to get back?

Neil O'Brien: There are several things to say about that. The first is that the overall number went up: the hon. Gentleman said that some were leaving, but the overall number went up by 27,000. He makes a good point about early career teachers and that is why we put in the early career framework, which I do think is a big improvement. It is not that there is nothing in what the hon. Gentleman said, but I do think it is funny for him to stand up and talk about gaslighting when the Government are pumping out glossy propaganda saying that there are more teachers, even though their own Department for Education website says that there are 400 fewer teachers. So do tell me all about gaslighting.

My broader worry about the Government's approach to giving every child the best start in life is that it misses the wood for the trees. Ministers like to talk about some of the small interventions they are making, such as the £33 million they are spending on breakfast clubs and the "best start in life" centres and the increases in spending there. But on the other side of the ledger, how is this being paid for? It is being paid for with a £25 billion increase in national insurance, and, unbelievably for a notionally social democratic Government, that national insurance increase is brutally targeted on the lowest income workers. It is incredible.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving way—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I should say that the hon. Member is a shadow Minister, before you give him with a promotion.

Iqbal Mohamed: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I ask the shadow Minister how his party would fund the investments in early years proposed by the new Government?

Neil O'Brien: I am very grateful to be put right back in my box by Madam Deputy Speaker, and rightly so.

I would not fund that by increasing taxes on low income workers by £25 billion. That means that someone who is earning £13,000 a year loses £500. It means someone earning £9,000 a year is losing 5% of their income. Ministers like to talk about the distributional impact of things like breakfast clubs and so on—they say 100,000 kids will be lifted out of poverty by something they are doing—but they will not produce any poverty analysis or any distributional analysis of the £25 billion. They are happy to talk endlessly about the distributional impacts of tiny measures, but not the £25 billion takeaway from low income working people in this country. I think it is astonishing—and I think a lot of Labour MPs will regret it later—that this is the way they have chosen to raise all this money.

Let me ask a few specific questions while we are here. The Department for Education has confirmed to the specialist media that it does not hold any information on the number of children who will lose entitlement to

free school meals as a result of the end of the universal credit transitional protection, yet it claims to be confident that it knows that the changes it is making will reduce child poverty by 100,000. How can the Department not know how many kids are going to be on free school meals yet be confident that it will have a positive effect? I ask the Minister to answer the question very simply: what proportion of pupils will be eligible for free school meals this year and in all future years across the forecast? How much will we be spending in real terms in each of those years? I like lots of things about the “best start in life” programme—it is a continuation of our family hubs programme—and I wonder whether the Minister could set out exactly how much will be spent on that programme in the '26-27, '27-28 and '28-29 financial years. It is not a bad programme at all and we do not dislike it at all; the only thing that is not right is to pretend it is a completely new thing, when in fact it is a continuity of something that already existed.

Something that is new that Ministers promised was two weeks of work experience for every child at secondary school. Can the Minister tell me how that pledge is going? It was made by the Prime Minister and was the big highlight of his '21 conference speech. How many schools currently offer two weeks of work experience each year?

Finally, I have a question of principle really. The Minister quite rightly talked about SEND, and we had an important report from the Education Policy Institute this morning about the overlap between SEND and school achievement, and the Government have said two things. We heard from a Health Minister that the Government want to see a smaller proportion of children in special schools, and we have heard from the Minister's adviser on SEND that she thinks that they are having a conversation at the moment about not having education, health and care plans for children outside special schools, which covers about 300,000 children at the moment—60% of all children with an EHCP.

Those are huge changes, but is it not the case that those two policy reforms are potentially in tension? If we tell people that they cannot get an EHCP outside a special school, more parents will want to go to the special school. Ministers have talked about there always being some kind of legal right to support for special needs, but what does that mean: if the support is not being delivered by an EHCP, how will it be delivered? I ask these questions because a lot of special needs parents are worried about that; they are concerned about what the Government are planning. Maybe they are wrong and maybe the Government have a brilliant plan on all this, and we are not against reform, but at the moment, there are big questions about the ideas that are now sloshing around in the public domain, worrying people. I encourage Ministers to move quickly to certainty on these questions so that people's minds could be put at ease.

To conclude, we are all in favour of giving each child the best start in life. We have a proud record, we made great progress, and we wish all the Government all the best, but we worry that they are too often missing the wood for the trees.

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

3.17 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Giving every child the best possible start in life should be a driving mission of every Government. Investment in the early years and in a high-quality education for every child delivers among the highest returns of any area of public spending; they are literally building the foundations of a child's life. Governments who get policy right in these areas reap benefits in health and wellbeing, in economic growth and in lower crisis-related costs.

The previous Labour Government made huge strides in this area. The longitudinal studies now confirm that children who lived close to a Sure Start centre did better in their GCSEs, and that hospitalisation of children was reduced and so was the need for specialist support in education. But a year ago this Government inherited the legacy of a previous Government who had not prioritised the needs of children for 14 years. Sure Start had been largely dismantled and school and further education budgets cut, early years funding had not kept pace with inflation, key services like health visiting and midwifery were scaled back, and SEND provision and CAMHS—child and adolescent mental health services—were stretched to breaking point, with increasing numbers of children in the care system, who are all too often being failed.

Our children have been buffeted by the multiple blows of austerity, Brexit, the covid-19 pandemic and the Liz Truss mini-Budget bearing down on public services that support children, young people and their families, resulting in more of childhood being left to chance, with existing disadvantages and barriers to opportunity remaining in place and being allowed to perpetuate.

The Education Committee recently published our report on children's social care. Children's social care is a good place to start thinking about this Government's opportunity mission, because it is where some of the most egregious barriers can be found—for the children whose families need the most support, those whose lives are scarred by abuse or neglect, and those for whom the state has both the gravest responsibility and a huge opportunity to make a difference.

The independent review of children's social care commissioned by the previous Government described the system they presided over as in need of a “total reset”. Spending on early help and support services—the preventive, nurturing support delivered by Sure Start centres, health visitors, community nurses and early years practitioners—has plummeted, while spending on crisis interventions, including out-of-area residential placements often at great cost, have spiralled.

The number of children entering the care system has been rising, and perhaps most telling of all is that the outcomes for care-experienced people are absolutely dire. This failure is so significant that, if the Government are serious about tackling homelessness and about tackling the crisis in the criminal justice system, they must turn their attention to the plight of care-experienced people, who are so vastly over-represented in both those populations. They are far less likely to be in education, employment or training than their peers, and far more likely to have poor mental health.

Iqbal Mohamed: Before coming to the Chamber, I attended a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on care-experienced children and young people, where I learned that, in the 2023-24, over 15,000 children in care moved home, which is 34%, and nearly 5,500 in care moved school, which is 12%. Does the hon. Member agree with me that, as part of the Government's strategy, we need to support children in care and minimise the disruption to their lives that we can control?

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. Member very much for his intervention, and our report, which we published last week, says exactly that. We have a system of children's social care that is under so much pressure that it all too often fails to put children at the centre of the services that are supposed to be delivered to give them more stability and security in life, and many things about that system urgently need to change.

I welcome the Government's commitment to invest in Best Start family hubs, providing better early help and support services in more areas of the country. We need investment that can tip the balance over time from crisis spending to spending on more preventive services that can deliver genuinely good outcomes for children. Our Committee's report, which I was proud to launch last week, points to some of the further steps that are needed, including creating a national offer for care leavers, improving mental health support for looked-after children and addressing the practical barriers, such as housing, that currently prevent the effective recruitment of foster carers.

On early years, the Government inherited the previous Administration's commitment to expand funded hours of childcare, predominantly for working parents. This is a very challenging commitment to deliver. We know that quality early years education has the most potential to break down barriers to opportunity, yet the previous Government's approach was designed to deliver more hours of care, without any specific focus on quality. The early years sector is fragile and fragmented, and providers continue to close. The expansion of school-based nurseries is a very welcome first step, but there is undoubtedly a tension between a funding system designed to support working parents and the early years sector's ability to reduce the impacts of disadvantage for the poorest children. The Government must address this tension in the forthcoming child poverty strategy.

Our Committee's second big inquiry is on the system of support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. The SEND system is the single biggest crisis in the whole of the education system, routinely letting down children and families, putting professionals working with children in an impossible position, and driving more than half of local education authorities to the edge of bankruptcy. Children with SEND should be able to thrive in education, and education should equip them well for the next stage of life, yet for far too many children, the failure of the SEND system results in absence from school, poor mental health and low attainment.

There have been many rumours about what the Government may do to reform the SEND system, and I must say that these rumours are really unhelpful and traumatising for families who already have far too much to contend with. My Committee will report after the summer recess, but I am clear that the Government

should be setting out a clear process and plan for SEND reform, and that any reforms must engage parents and professionals and ensure clear and effective accountability mechanisms. I think the Government are right to start with increasing the inclusivity of mainstream schools, but if they are to do that effectively, there must be proper investment to resource mainstream schools to become more inclusive, with clear definitions of what an inclusive school is and strong accountability.

Finally, a priority that runs through all these issues is tackling child poverty, which rose to shamefully high levels under the last Government and is perhaps the biggest barrier to opportunity of them all. I am delighted that the Government have announced an expansion of the eligibility criteria for free school meals to include all children whose families receive universal credit. As a local councillor in Southwark, I was proud when we introduced universal free school meals for primary children in 2010, and over many years we have seen the benefits of providing children with a nutritious hot meal.

Universal free breakfast clubs will also make a big difference. Hungry children cannot learn, so together these measures will ensure that no child has to start the school day hungry, and that the children who need it most get a nutritious hot meal at lunch time. They will boost learning while also easing costs for parents. However, our Committee has recommended that the Government implement auto-enrolment, so that every child eligible to receive the new expanded free school meals offer receives it automatically and no child misses out.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): One of the drivers of child poverty that has come through in my casework is the Child Maintenance Service's lack of enforcement powers to hold to account parents who refuse their duties. Does the hon. Member agree with me that greater enforcement powers and greater scrutiny of the Child Maintenance Service are essential for reducing child poverty?

Helen Hayes: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Over my 10 years in this place, I have seen how it has become harder and harder for families to get resources and accountability out of the Child Maintenance Service. I agree that there is further work to do in that space, and I am sure the Government are similarly aware of the challenges.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for giving way, especially as she is making such a powerful speech. Yesterday, I went to an event with Health Equals, which has shown that where a child is born can lead to a 16-year discrepancy in life expectancy due to poverty. Does she agree that some form of legally binding poverty reduction target scheme could be put in place, as in Scotland, so that we can measure our progress?

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and it is devastating to hear about those disparities across the country. Recently, I was at a secondary school in a very deprived area of my constituency, and a teacher told me that she noticed at an event for those from across the whole of her academy trust that her children were smaller than children who went to schools in more affluent areas of the country. That is an intolerable disgrace.

We expect the Government's child poverty strategy to be ambitious and far reaching, and if it is to do so, it must have clear targets and there must be clear accountability in the strategy. I look forward to its publication, and my Committee, along with the Work and Pensions Committee, will play our part in scrutinising that important piece of work.

I am heartened to see this Government putting children and young people at the heart of their priorities after 14 years during which they were an afterthought. There is much more to do, and my Committee will continue to play our part by scrutinising the Government and making evidence-based recommendations. I want to see a clear vision for children and young people with real ambition for every child, and a plan for all parts of our education and care system, so that we can start to see the promise, in this Government's agenda, of transformed lives and life chances being delivered in every part of our country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Jogee, are you now finally comfortable in the Chamber? Before, you wanted to swap. *[Interruption.]* Marvellous. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.28 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I welcome this opportunity to talk about giving every child the best start in life. I suspect there are not many people in this Chamber who would disagree that every child, no matter their background or needs, deserves the very best start in life. It is our duty as elected representatives and policymakers to ensure that parents and carers have access to the help and support they need to ensure that every child gets that best start in life.

The Best Start family hubs announced last week are very welcome and present a great opportunity for the Government to address the growing inequalities across our education system that were left behind by the previous Government. If resourced properly, the Best Start family hubs expansion could help to achieve many of the things that we on the Liberal Democrat Benches have been calling for, including: the early identification of special educational needs and disabilities; contact time with mental health practitioners; and access to nutritional advice. However, the Government's ambitious aims must be matched with effective delivery. Children and families cannot afford for the Government to get this wrong, after many years under the Conservatives when early years provision really started to disintegrate.

The strategy states that

"high-quality early education and childcare boosts children's life chances and enables parents to work".

I warmly welcome plans to invest in training and qualifications to raise the skill levels of the early years workforce, but I am afraid that the Government's rhetoric does not quite meet the reality on the ground. The funding promised by the Conservative Government for their 30 hours childcare proposals fell far short of what it actually costs to deliver that provision, and I am afraid that Labour's current proposals are also insufficient for nurseries.

Labour's ill-advised national insurance hike has not only hampered economic growth, but put hundreds of charitable and private nurseries at risk of collapse. Indeed, the Early Years Alliance reports that nearly one

third of providers are at risk of permanent closure in the next year, and that four in 10 would reduce the number of funded places for three and four-year-olds. When coupled with damaging new guidance to local authorities on funding agreements, the Government risk expanding the childcare deserts left behind by the Conservative Government. What is the point of expanding early years entitlements for children if parents are not able to access them because providers are simply unable to fulfil them?

With the expansion of childcare provision, keeping our children safe is paramount. I welcome confirmation last week that the frequency of Ofsted inspections of early years settings will increase and that work is being done to develop an effective approach to group inspections. However, as the Minister knows from some of our conversations, if we are to prevent tragedies, such as the case of baby Gigi Meehan in Cheadle and the recent shocking case in my own constituency that last month saw a nursery worker convicted of 21 counts of child cruelty at Twickenham Green nursery, Ministers must go further and they must go faster.

The early years foundation framework urgently needs to be strengthened, and better guidance needs to be put in place for how we keep babies in particular safe in early years settings. That is particularly important as we see the expansion of childcare provision for the under-tuos. I hope we will see clearer guidance on safe sleep practice, but also on the use of CCTV, which proved critical in the cases I cited, and on the regular review of that CCTV footage. The strategy points to a

"golden thread of evidence-informed practice",

so I hope the Minister tell us whether she will work with health authorities and expert charities to co-ordinate national safe sleep standards for use in early years settings. We must ensure that that goes hand in hand with multi-agency safeguarding training.

Giving children the best start in the early years also means giving parents genuine choice on whether to spend more time at home or go back to work full time. I am immensely proud that it was the Liberal Democrats in Government who introduced shared parental leave—yet, years later, take-up remains far too low because of low rates of statutory maternity and paternity pay, and shared parental leave pay. I am aware that the Government have started their review into parental leave and pay, which I warmly welcome.

The Liberal Democrats have long called for statutory maternity and shared parental pay to be doubled to £350 a week, and for fathers to be entitled to a month of paternity leave, as well as a "use it or lose it" month of shared parental leave, because we know just how valuable the first months of a child's life are and the importance of the involvement of both parents. I hope the Minister and his colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade will heed our calls. I also want to press him again on the strong economic and moral case for granting statutory paid leave for kinship carers, so many of whom are forced out of work when they take on caring responsibilities to provide a safe and stable home for children.

We must acknowledge that despite all efforts, some children simply will not get the best start in life due to unimaginable trauma, which can mean that the only safe course of action is to separate them from their

[Munira Wilson]

birth parents. It therefore falls to us collectively as corporate parents to ensure those children get the very best second chance at life. Family hubs must be more than signposting services; they should offer trusted relationships and trauma-informed practice embedded within staff training and service design as part of the Government's commitment to rebuilding trust with families.

Continuing on that theme, the adoption and special guardianship support fund, as many Members will know, provides funding for vital therapy to help the most vulnerable children to process their trauma. These sessions are not easy, with some children taking months to even step through the door, but it is vital that these children are given the space, time and support to relearn how to trust adults. Slashing the funding for each child from £5,000 to £3,000 means that many will stop their therapy sessions just as they get through the door and start to make progress. Not only is this incredibly frustrating for the adoptive parents and special guardians; it sadly compounds the child's tragic belief that all adults do is let them down.

Both the Minister who opened the debate and the Minister for Children and Families, who is sitting next to him on the Front Bench, know that I am determined to see the full £5,000 grant funding restored for every eligible child. I press the Minister again to go to the Treasury and demand the additional funds to meet the growth in demand for those grants so that the next generation can believe that there are adults, and even Governments, worth trusting. I have pointed out previously that halving the Department's advertising and consultancy budget would enable the ASGSF to grow by 50% from £50 million to £75 million to meet that additional demand.

Short of that, I urge the Minister not to leave parents, carers and children in limbo again by waiting until the last minute to announce whether the fund will continue next year. Instead, I hope that Ministers will commit to announcing the future of the fund by September, now that we have had the spending review, so that families and providers can plan and have certainty for the future.

Finally, parents and carers have for far too long been subjected to an adversarial special educational needs system where they have had to fight tooth and nail to secure their children's right to learn. A good education helps children to discover who they are and what they are good at, but sadly far too many have been denied the help they need. As the Chair of the Education Committee has pointed out, the rumours that have been swirling have left many families up and down the country deeply concerned. We met a number of those families in Parliament yesterday, and I know that the inboxes of Members across the House have been filled with worried emails on this matter.

It is clear the system is broken and needs reform, but any change must have children at its heart, not a Treasury drive for savings by removing rights in a vacuum. I am glad to see that inclusive practice for children with SEND will be embedded in early years teaching; early identification is crucial in ensuring that children can get the help they need when they need it. However, it remains to be seen just what that help will be. The Government have failed continuously to communicate

with those directly affected by their decisions, but they have the chance today to tell parents whether education, health and care plans will be removed from any child.

I reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) said to the Prime Minister last week, and what my right hon. Friend and I said in the letter we sent to the Education Secretary and the Prime Minister, in which we set out the Liberal Democrats' five principles for SEND reform. We are very happy to work constructively with the Government on that reform, because we know that all these children—whether they have special needs and whatever their background—deserve the very best start in life.

3.38 pm

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Every child, no matter where they are born, deserves the very best start in life. The first 1,000 days of a child's life are absolutely critical, paving the way for the rest of their lives. That time has a direct impact on how they perform in school and in their work life; it affects all their life stages.

My first job after leaving Keele University 20 years ago was working for a local Sure Start centre in Stoke-on-Trent. I loved working there because I saw at first hand how those centres completely transformed the lives of families across Stoke-on-Trent and Kidsgrove. That is why the plans of this Labour Government to roll out family hubs across the country fill me with complete pride.

Twenty years ago, so many parents were given the helping hand that they needed to give their kids a better start in life, and it was so devastating for me personally to watch how Conservative cuts absolutely decimated our local centres. The Conservative-led city council in Stoke-on-Trent gutted our centres by removing our most crucial preventive services. The council claimed that it did not actually close any centres, which was partly true, but it took out all the services that operated from the centres, effectively leaving empty buildings with no offer to the families in my local community.

Long before I was involved in politics, it seemed obvious to me that those cuts would result in more kids living in poverty and more living in care. I went to meetings—not when I was involved in politics, but when I worked for the YMCA—and when I raised concerns, they were laughed off by Conservative and independent councillors who said that they knew best. But the facts on the ground said different. Stoke-on-Trent sadly now has among the highest numbers of children living in care anywhere in the country, and more children are living in poverty. This was completely avoidable; it was a political choice that the Conservatives made.

As the children impacted by the cuts grew older, they were confronted by a new hurdle. They were hit by the massive cuts to youth services in our local community. Conservative austerity led to over 90% of the money being taken away from our local councils, which funded the youth clubs—the youth clubs that I went to when I was young, where I met friends and learned new hobbies. Those clubs were then no longer available for young people in our local communities.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab) *rose—*

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab) *rose*—

David Williams: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee).

Adam Jogee: I am very grateful to my constituency neighbour for giving way to me over my other constituency neighbour. My hon. Friend makes an important point about the vital role that county councils and local authorities can play in providing services to my constituents, his and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham). Will he join me in calling on Staffordshire county council to get its act together and deliver the services that our young people deserve?

David Williams: I completely agree with that sentiment. My hon. Friend and I often discuss this issue, so I welcome his comments.

Leigh Ingham: I am grateful to see so many Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent MPs in the Chamber today. I am especially pleased to be here today, because I have a group of brilliant young people from my own constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages participating in my first ever summer school; they are up in the Public Gallery. They have been learning about how Parliament works and how they can use their voices to make change happen. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are serious about giving every child the best start in life, we need to ensure that that includes youth services and comprehensive citizenship education, where they are able to see the difference they can make?

David Williams: I welcome and echo my hon. Friend's comments. I have supported citizenship over many years—certainly from when I worked for the YMCA locally.

The Conservatives unforgivably turned their backs on our children and young people when they needed our support the most. I am so proud to be a Labour MP, working alongside a Labour Government who are firmly on the side of children, young people and their families. We are beginning to see the righting of the past 14 years of wrongs.

I have been to Milton and Greenways primary academies in my constituency and visited the breakfast clubs that are being rolled out. I have seen at first hand how the kids arrive tired and hungry, but then they start their day ready to learn and full of energy—no longer with hungry bellies.

I am proud, too, that this Labour Government are extending free school meals. That will feed more than 6,700 children across Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove from next year. Being well fed means that children learn better, and it is also a critical step in lifting kids out of poverty—something on which I have focused my whole working career.

I am so pleased also that Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove has one of the very first school-based nurseries, which is being rolled out at the brilliant Smallthorne primary academy. This will not only ease pressures on hard-working families who need a helping hand; it will help kids to prepare for the transition to school, and will help to close the development gap early on. This is exactly what a Labour Government are all about: supporting our kids and young people to thrive. I am

proud to be playing my role in helping to transform the lives of families across my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I will now announce the results of today's deferred Divisions.

On the draft Enterprise Act 2002 (Definition of Newspaper) Order 2025, the Ayes were 334 and the Noes were 54, so the Ayes have it.

On the Enterprise Act 2002 (Amendment of Section 58 Considerations) Order 2025 (S.I. 2025, No. 737), the Ayes were 333 and the Noes were 54, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today's debates.]

3.45 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams); it has been a while since I have heard the words “Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke”, which used to be bellowed out by our former hon. Friend and his predecessor Jonathan Gullis, who was a great schools Minister—briefly—in a previous Government. I pay tribute to him and his memory—much lamented. I also pay tribute to David Johnston, another former Member, who was children's Minister in the last Government and was responsible for many of the important reforms that my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) mentioned.

I welcome this debate on what I think is a cross-party agenda. I recognise much of what the Minister said about the importance of early years and the sorts of interventions that the Government are talking about. I welcome the impending child poverty strategy, which is an important step forward for us.

I want to make a simple and straightforward point. I have heard a lot in this afternoon's debate about the importance of investment and support for the different professionals who support children and families. That is all absolutely right, and I agree that that is important. Nevertheless, surely the most important resource available to us to support children and young people is their families and the communities that they grow up in. I implore the Government to think very seriously in preparing their strategy to support the conditions for success in childhood, which is about not simply the public sector professionals, agencies and institutions that are available but the strength of the informal social institutions that children and young people grow up in.

I welcome the Minister's mention of the importance of social investment, philanthropy and civil society in providing support for children and young people. This is a big boast, but I can claim some credit for the announcement that the Chancellor made on Monday. She happened to be at a charity called AllChild in Wigan, which I claim credit for having founded—although that was not on the press release, I note. The charity began life as the West London Zone, which supports children and young people and which I started back in the early 2010s, having visited the Harlem Children's Zone in New York with the then Secretary of State Michael Gove. The Harlem Children's Zone is a tremendously successful project aiming at much of the agenda that we are debating this afternoon, including early identification of children at risk, the provision of

[*Danny Kruger*]

intensive support for those children and their families on a community basis, and a place-based model for support for children and families in disadvantage.

We set up the West London Zone with the help of significant philanthropy from Paul Marshall, noted philanthropist and founder of the Ark school chain, who said that we should start one here. We did it on a slightly different model from Harlem's, which is a monolithic, single entity that provides all services for children and young people. The model we introduced in West London and is now being expanded across the country under the banner of AllChild. I pay tribute to the AllChild team, including Louisa Mitchell, who I got in early to deliver the project, because I would not have been very good at actually running it. Louisa has been a genius, and she is still running it now. This goes to the point I am trying to make: what Louisa did was recognise that in our communities there is an enormous array of really amazing resources in the form of local projects—large and small, formal and informal—that can help with the great task of bringing up a child as a village should.

The mission of the project is to identify in schools—with the help of teachers and, crucially, by using the data available on attainment and attendance—those children who are likely to struggle later. Then it is about ensuring that they get the support that they need, and very much on a personalised basis. That support should come not just from the statutory system around the school—because that will never be adequate for the range of needs and different challenges that a population of children will have—but draw on the resources of the community. We started in west London, which obviously has lots of pockets of wealth but significant pockets of disadvantage as well. Even in those disadvantaged places, and certainly across the country—the project is working in Wigan and elsewhere now—we see tremendous institutions that can support children and young people. The challenge is to do so in a co-ordinated way.

There is a huge opportunity not just to look to the state, schools, local authorities or health—even though bringing all those agencies together around children is important—but to think about the real resource we have, which is in our communities. We should put in place real support and resource for those foundations, whether faith groups, professional bodies of all sorts or community organisations.

Iqbal Mohamed: Does the hon. Member agree that the foundation of early years starts in the home with parents and the mother's antenatal and post-natal health, and that the Government should include in their strategy a review of current services and what support can be provided to improve children's outcomes?

Danny Kruger: It is funny; I often find myself in agreement with the hon. Gentleman, which is great, and not what I expected when he was elected to this place.

I was about to come to my final point: the importance of family life. I do not know to what extent that really is on the Government's agenda when it comes to the child poverty strategy. There will obviously be lots of talk of families, maternal health and so on, but the crucial determinant of success for children is the quality of the relationships they grow up in.

We know that from all the research done into children's brain development. Human beings are unique among mammals in that we emerge very unformed: our brains are really blank as we emerge from the womb. The strength and health of our brains and our futures are laid down in those early years by the quality of the relationships we grow up with and experience. I know the Government recognise that because of their emphasis on early years, but the quality of the relationship in the home matters so much. I really hope that the Government will be brave enough to recognise the value of stability in the home and the value of two-parent families as a source of real strength. They are a protective factor and a predictor of success for children and young people.

We should, of course, do all we can to support single-parent families—they are crucial and necessary and do amazing work, and we should give them all our support—but to tackle child poverty we must do more to support family formation and family stability. That means recognising the household as a unit. We are way too individualistic in our approach to public policy. We need to think about family health and family strength, and that means supporting couples. I welcome what the Government are trying to do, and I hope that there will be recognition of the importance of community and family life in the child poverty strategy.

3.52 pm

Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Before I came into politics I spent about 20 years working in and with communities, a significant part of which was in early years, so this area is of real importance to me. Through the Sure Start programme, I helped set up a children's centre and saw firsthand how early years provision lifts up families, supports parents and gives children the solid foundation they need. The centre that I worked with offered not just childcare but an essential early years services hub to benefit families.

We know, and the evidence shows, that the impact of high-quality early years support lasts a lifetime. The earliest years of a child's life are critical. The nurturing and love received in those early days can shape their chances for the future in school, in work and in life. Since 2010, however, we have seen a hollowing out of early years support. Sure Start centres closed in their hundreds and early years intervention services were cut to the bone. Our early years provision lost a significant amount of funding, as did many others in Sheffield, with £3 million of cuts city-wide. I became involved in the campaign to save early years, which argued that failing to invest in those services led to our paying a price in school achievement gaps, health inequalities and lost potential. We argued back then, when the cuts were made, that the cost of late intervention to communities and public services is higher than the cost of getting it right from the start.

I therefore welcome the Government's recent initiatives, such as the expansion of free school meals, free breakfast clubs and the recent £500 million investment into Best Start family hubs. It is important that we catch the problems earlier on, before they escalate, with evidence showing that when we invest earlier on, we reduce the long-term cost for the NHS, social care and the criminal justice system.

It is important, however, that we see additional investment in existing family hubs, which have worked tirelessly to provide vital early years support despite years of funding

cuts. It is also important that we keep the independent, voluntary and community sectors involved in discussion, as many participate in the delivery of early years services and family hubs in their communities.

Investing in family hubs is not just good policy; it is the right thing to do. If we want to tackle child poverty and ensure every child can thrive, that is where we start, with families right at the heart of our communities.

3.55 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): The best start in life means a good education; good education means a good school; and a good school necessarily means a learning environment in which children can thrive. Tiverton high school in my constituency should not be an exception to that, but because of the decisions of successive Governments, it has been. I will focus my remarks on the plight of that school, and perhaps it will serve as a microcosm and an example to which other members may well relate in the communities they represent.

Upon visiting Tiverton, one could be forgiven for being sucked into a sense of complacency, with the rolling hills and period buildings in and around the area. Yet hidden there are serious pockets of deprivation, economic and social poverty, and we can feel it. Tiverton high school has been promised a rebuild since 1999—yes, that is 26 years ago—but time after time, successive Administrations of different stripes did not deliver, reneging on those promises.

Since my arrival in this place, I have pushed relentlessly to secure a concrete commitment on Tiverton high school's rebuild. Indeed, I was filled with optimism because in November last year, the Department for Education confirmed Tiverton high school's inclusion in the school rebuilding programme, with work set to commence as early as April 2025. Finally, it seemed that the Government had grasped the nettle. Finally, they had heeded the calls, for they had grown impossible to ignore. It was going to happen, I thought; perhaps this was it.

The long-standing promises of a rebuild, which dissipated each time, have meant that Tivvy high, as we affectionately call it, saw routine maintenance and refurbishments fall by the wayside. A culture of "Keep calm and carry on" set in, with the anticipation that the cavalry, or the diggers, would arrive to get the rebuild underway.

The 1970s sports hall is riddled with asbestos, rendering it entirely unusable for many months of the year and depriving students of essential physical education. To make matters worse, the school was built on a floodplain, which is a crucial detail that is blithely skipped over and which was not acknowledged in the pre-assessment conducted by the Department for Education. The Environment Agency has also reported the regular flooding of multiple school buildings to be a risk to life, particularly if someone is under five foot. That is utter madness in 21st-century Britain.

The school is dilapidated and not an environment that is at all conducive to learning. Instead, such an environment leads pupils to feel unnurtured, thrown on to society's scrapheap and simply forgotten about. What kind of message does that send to children? If the Department for Education rowed back on the promise of a rebuild, it would be not just a political misstep but would see a whole community shunned again. It would be a cruel volte-face. To be clear, we are talking about

the hope of a community that has been strung along for a quarter of a century being reduced to a line in a ministerial briefing.

They say that politics is the art of the grey, and I will not walk away empty handed on this. I am absolutely sure of that. After all these years, the community needs this pledge to be honoured.

3.59 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a privilege to contribute to today's debate on giving children the best possible start in life. As a father, this is an issue that matters deeply to me, not just politically but personally. We all understand that our experiences in our first years shape the adults we go on to become. The memories formed in those formative years, whether of joy and love or challenge and neglect, stay with us for life. They shape our confidence, our relationships and our view of the world.

I am sure all of us in this Chamber have had the privilege of going into schools and speaking to children about what they want to be when they grow up. What a privilege that is, and what a responsibility it gives us to ensure that today's children can dream just as big as we did, and feel just as supported in reaching those dreams. That is why it is vital that we do everything we can to make sure that every child, no matter their background, gets the same sense of possibility, the same support and the same opportunities to thrive. I know that I want that for my children.

I am proud that this Labour Government are committed to rolling out Best Start family hubs. These hubs, along with the children's centres that already exist such as the fantastic West Chads Moor family centre in my constituency, provide vital wraparound support for families, offering everything from early education to parenting advice and mental health support. The announcement earlier this year of a new school-based nursery at Heath Hayes primary academy is another proud example of how we are supporting children in my towns and villages.

As an adoptive parent and foster carer, I want to take a moment to speak directly to the needs of some of our most vulnerable children—those who grow up in the care system. In Staffordshire alone, the county council supports over 5,000 children, of whom 1,345 are in care. Because of the sadly increasing demand, the council has faced dramatic financial pressures, overspending by nearly £3.8 million, largely as a result of the costs of placing children in care. These figures underline the scale of the demand and the commitment needed to meet it.

I am an evangelical advocate for fostering to adopt, also known as early permanence, and I should declare an interest because that is the path that I have taken in adopting my children. Fostering to adopt allows vulnerable children to move into stable, loving homes as soon as possible, avoiding the uncertainty and disruption that all too often characterise life in care. I would like to put on record my personal thanks to the Minister for Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), for also being a strong advocate on this, and for giving her time to me today to discuss early permanence and support for fostered and adopted children.

Evidence shows that early intervention, especially when speech and language support is provided before six months old, leads to lasting gains in expressive

[Josh Newbury]

vocabulary, social and emotional development, and communication outcomes. Enrolment in support before three months, for example, delivers measurable gains in vocabulary at 18 to 24 months and even helps to close gaps with hearing peers by age five. Children in care are just as full of potential as any other child, but they need us in this place to fight a little harder for them, to make sure that they too, when asked “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, have the support they need around them to achieve whatever those dreams might be.

Labour is delivering the biggest overhaul of legislation to protect children in a generation, because where others dither and kick political footballs, we on this side of the House will always act decisively to look after the most vulnerable.

Adam Jogee: Just before my hon. Friend comes to the end of his important remarks, I am sure the whole House will want to thank him and his family for leading by example, not just by showing care and compassion but by bringing that life experience to this place.

Josh Newbury: Thank you. I really appreciate that from my hon. Friend. I think that everybody who puts themselves forward to be an adopter or a foster carer does so with a huge amount of compassion. It is a journey that is often fraught with difficulty, and it certainly presents its challenges, but I think that all parenthood does. Sometimes we need to recognise that parents, no matter how they come to their parenthood, are doing an awful lot to make sure that the next generation thrives—which is, after all, why we are all here today.

This Government are putting in place massive support for kinship carers, with £44 million invested in kinship and foster carers and a new kinship allowance being trialled to provide financial stability to those stepping up to care for children in their wider family. Our national kinship care ambassador is working with local authorities to improve support and permanence pathways, and that is very welcome. Together with the child poverty taskforce, which will report in the autumn, and the expansion of free school meals, these measures underpin our mission to lift 100,000 children out of poverty, because no child should go hungry into their classroom.

By investing in family hubs where families in Cannock Chase and beyond can access wraparound support, by rolling out early intervention programmes that build children’s language and confidence from birth, and by prioritising early permanence and fostering to adopt for children in the care system, we can deliver on the promise of giving every child—not just some—the best possible start in life and the opportunity to make the most of their potential. Every child deserves love, stability and opportunity. Whether they dream of becoming a doctor, a teacher or even a Member of Parliament, it is our duty to ensure that those dreams are possible and to allow every child to make the most of their gifts and potential.

4.5 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this crucial debate. I welcome the announcements by the Secretary of State and the Government on the investment and the

work they plan to do. We all agree that every child in this country—regardless of postcode, parent or circumstance—deserves the best possible start in life. That is not just a slogan; it is a moral duty and a political choice. It is the foundation for a fairer, stronger and more prosperous Britain, and a critical contributor to the Government’s growth mission.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunities afforded to me when I was a child. I am the eldest of six. My mother was a homemaker, and my father worked in a factory. He then fell ill and was supported by the state. I had free school meals and free school uniforms, and I had the opportunity to go to university without incurring tens of thousands of pounds of debt. I wish for those same opportunities and more for every single child in our country going forward. Yet today, far too many children are being failed by a system that is stretched, fragmented and underfunded. We are the sixth largest economy in the world, and yet we have rising child poverty, overstretched early years services, and a widening attainment and life expectancy gap between the richest and the rest. It does not have to be this way—we can and must do better.

If we are serious about giving every child the best start in life, we must start before birth. A child’s life chances are shaped long before they take their first breath. The health and wellbeing of pregnant women and new mothers is critical for not only safe delivery, but the emotional and physical development of the child. Yet, across the UK today, midwife staffing levels are dangerously low. Prenatal and post-natal support is patchy and inconsistent. There are real maternity service inequalities for ethnic minorities and in areas of deprivation, and maternal and health needs are too often ignored.

I urge the Government to take a holistic view and review the current state of maternity services across our nation and regions, and to put in the required investment to equalise those services and make them fit for purpose. This is not just a health issue; it is a social justice issue because the poorest women, who are often at the highest risk of complications, are least likely to receive the care they need. Investment in maternal care is investment in stronger families, healthier babies and a better future for all.

To continue where life continues—the early years—the science is clear, as has been mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members. A child’s brain develops faster from birth to five than at any other time. These years shape everything from health and happiness to educational success and economic opportunity, so why is it that access to high-quality early education is still a postcode lottery? Why are childcare workers, who do some of the most vital work in our society, paid less than supermarket staff? We must deliver universal high-quality childcare from the end of parental leave to the start of school, and I welcome the Government’s announcements and investment in this area. I fully support the Government’s plans to invest in the early years workforce, and we must make quality, not just quantity, a measure of success.

Family is the first and foremost influence on a child’s life, yet support for families has been dismantled over the past 14 years. Health visitors have been cut and Sure Start centres closed, and too many parents have been left to struggle alone. I welcome the Government’s plans to rebuild—rebuild family hubs in every community, rebuild our health visiting service, and rebuild trust by giving parents real support and not judgment.

Two of the biggest determinants of how well a child will do in life is where they are born and the income of their family. Across the UK, child poverty has been rising. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, 1.6 million children are now affected by the two-child benefit cap. That means 1.6 million children whose futures are being limited by a Government policy—not by anything they have done, or by anything their families have failed to do, but by a decision to deny them the support that they need to grow and thrive. In Dewsbury and Batley, over 11,800 children are growing up in poverty. More than half of them live in working households. Those families are doing everything asked of them—going to work and trying to save—but they are still unable to meet their children's basic needs. One parent told me:

“We live in a two-bed flat with three children. I have to cycle to work because travel costs would push us into deficit. An extra £50 a week would make a huge difference.”

That £50 could mean a warm coat, a school trip or proper meals for a week. It could mean a child arriving in the classroom ready to learn, not hungry and anxious.

What kind of country does that to its children? We say that we want every child to have the best start in life, but how can that happen if policies deliberately push them into hardship from birth? Reducing child poverty is not just a moral obligation; it is a smart investment. It leads to better health, better educational outcomes, higher future earnings and increased tax revenue. Children are not a cost to be capped; they are our country's future.

We must also tackle the mental health crisis affecting our children and young people. CAMHS, as we know and have heard many times in this Chamber, are overwhelmed. Children are waiting months, sometimes years, for help. We need in-school mental health support teams in every school. We need early intervention, not crisis firefighting. We must train staff across education and early years in trauma-informed practice.

Let me move on to education. I was blessed with the opportunity to go to school and cannot remember ever going on an empty stomach. The work that my father did, and the support that the Government provided in welfare and benefits, ensured that I did not go to school hungry. I had free school meals and came home to a warm meal. That, I am sure, made a huge difference to what I have been able to achieve in life. Education should be the great leveller, but in reality the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers is growing, not shrinking. We must strengthen the pupil premium, restore funding for early literacy and numeracy, and, yes, expand free school meals to every primary pupil, because no child should learn on an empty stomach. I welcome the Government's announcement on providing free school meals to every child whose family is on universal credit, but I gently encourage them to consider expanding that benefit so that it is universal.

This is not about short-term fixes; it is about long-term nation building and solutions. It is about a country that invests in its youngest, supports its mothers and refuses to accept inequality as inevitable. When we give children the best start in life, we all benefit, through lower crime, better health, stronger communities and a more productive economy, so let us rise to the moment. Let us stop managing decline and start investing in potential. Let us give every child, in every corner of this country, the best start in life.

4.13 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I commend the Government for their mission to give every child the best start in life. It is critical that all children, no matter where they are born, have every opportunity to achieve their potential. I must mention at this point the number of Staffordshire MPs who are here for the debate, which just shows the importance of this topic to the children in our county.

Adam Jogee: Inspired by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), does my hon. Friend agree that team Staffordshire hunt as a pack?

Dr Gardner: My hon. Friend is right that we hunt as a pack: when the three Stoke MPs get together with our Staffordshire colleagues, we make a formidable bunch, and I am very proud to be part of the team.

I am incredibly proud to work for a Labour Government who are breaking down the barriers to opportunity, tackling child poverty and improving early years development through our plan for change. This is certainly a nationwide issue, but I wish to stress the critical importance of this mission in Stoke-on-Trent South and Stoke-on-Trent more widely. Our children were neglected time and again by the previous Government, and we now have some of the worst outcomes for childhood development, health and wellbeing in the country. Before I list the statistics, I want to point out that Stoke-on-Trent is also the best place in the country to live and that the people are fantastic. We have been let down and that is by no means the fault of the wonderful people of Stoke-on-Trent.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point. My constituency of Stratford and Bow, in east London, was recently scored second best in the country on the Sutton Trust opportunity index, for opportunities for children to advance in life, and the neighbouring constituency, East Ham, scored top. London has severe inequalities in giving children the best start in life, but we also have opportunities. It is important that kids in Staffordshire get the same opportunities. That is why this Government are working to spread that opportunity far and wide, so that they all have the best possible start in life.

Dr Gardner: I commend my hon. Friend and her neighbour for those wonderful outcomes, although I am sure she still has issues in her constituency that we need to battle against.

As I have said in the Chamber before, child poverty in some parts of my constituency is as high as 76%. In 2022-23, 13 children in every classroom of 30 were living in poverty in Stoke. Stoke-on-Trent has the highest rate of infant mortality in the country, and between 2019 and 2021, babies born in Stoke were nearly twice as likely to die before their first birthday than the national average.

In addition, Stoke-on-Trent has the highest number of children in care per head of population in England, and our children face successive delays in early years development. In 2023, Stoke-on-Trent was in the bottom 10 of all English local authorities for the number of children with the “expected” level of literacy, communication

[Dr Gardner]

and language, and numeracy skills by early years foundation stage. I know that these figures will shock many, but Stoke-on-Trent must be a priority region for tackling child poverty and our related missions. There are children in my constituency who start school unable to speak, use the toilet or brush their teeth, and there are children in our high schools who are still learning phonics, which should have been taught in primary school, as they are struggling with such severe delays in their development.

Infant mortality, a topic that is very close to my heart, is explicitly linked to socioeconomic inequalities and persistent inequalities in health. As has been mentioned, the first thousand days of a child's life are the most important. What happens during those days can, in many cases, predict a child's entire life course. It is devastating that for so many children in our city their first few years are marked by deprivation, poor quality housing and incredibly low living standards.

Labour Stoke-on-Trent city council is doing excellent work to support our children. It has made major improvements to children's social care services, focusing on early help and new front-door arrangements, and the family matters programme is a multi-agency programme delivering prevention and support services to give our children the very best start in life. Local organisations, like Thrive at Five and Stoke Speaks Out, have also run incredible programmes to facilitate a thriving early years network in Stoke-on-Trent to improve children's early development.

However, our city council and our local services have had to work incredibly hard against a backdrop of successive cuts over the past 14 to 15 years that have decimated so many services and forced many to close altogether. Many of our holistic early intervention programmes, where families could get advice, health visitors supported families from pregnancy onwards, and staff could identify families in need and offer early support, have now closed their doors.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for her brilliant speech. Is not much of this issue about the history of our communities? These are industrial heartlands that were let down, left behind and forgotten for many, many years. We need not just joined-up thinking as we address these results, from the early years right through the journey to higher education and beyond, but joined-up results. That is how we will be able to deliver for communities in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent and right across Staffordshire.

Dr Gardner: My hon. Friend quite rightly points out the complexities and histories of the issues that we face, which we need to solve with a holistic approach.

In the absence of amazing services such as Sure Start, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams), the predominant policy route has been to fund reactive services that reach families only at crisis point. Not only is that incredibly costly, but it results in so many children with developmental delays or safeguarding concerns going unnoticed until it is far too late. Early years services provide a lifeline to so many families; in their absence, inequalities have risen and our children have suffered. Stoke's children deserve better. I am deeply grateful to the Minister, who

is in her place and who has agreed to have a meeting with me to discuss the difficult problems that we wish to solve. The Government are absolutely working hard to address those.

As I said, I am incredibly pleased that this Government are expanding the early years offer through the Best Start family hubs model. I am so grateful that the Government have committed to further support the family hub in Normacot, which the community has fought so hard to save, but families in Meir also deserve a Best Start family hub. Residents in Meir are proud of where they live, but they are aware of the challenges in their community, and they too deserve support. Children in Meir would benefit hugely from a centre in their neighbourhood.

We know what works. We know that high-quality early years education and support networks for families can completely transform a child's life chances. We know that early intervention is far more effective and affordable than trying to fix problems later down the line. We need policies that improve neonatal and post-natal health, provide parents with the knowledge and support to give their children the very best start and provide children with support to achieve their early learning and development goals. I am therefore so grateful for the expansion of early years support through the Best Start family hubs and our targets for early years development under the plan for change. This Government will bring about much-needed change for children across the country, and it is critical that that investment is received in Stoke-on-Trent South.

4.22 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Although the Minister for Early Education is not in his place, I congratulate him on his speech and thank him for all his work, particularly on getting mental health support workers in our schools.

As the Member of Parliament for Redditch and the villages, I see every day how vital the issue of child aspiration and opportunity is. I have seen the powerful impact that early support and investment can make on a child's life, whether they are growing up in Winyates, Woodrow, Batchley or Matchborough or in villages such as Astwood Bank, Feckenham, Norton or Dodderhill.

This week I have had the pleasure of meeting Rhys Elliot, a young boy in Harvington who is awaiting his GCSE results and has a clear aspiration and dream in his head of what he wants to be. I have also seen the other side, where children are held back not because they lack the talent or ambition, but simply because they did not get the same start as others. Why is it that in some schools, children speak confidently about becoming doctors, lawyers or engineers, while in others they cannot imagine a life outside the limits placed around them?

This is not about ability: it is about opportunity, and opportunity starts early. That is why I commend the Government on expanding breakfast clubs, such as the one at St Stephen's in my constituency, which are making a real difference. Having spent a morning with the children and parents, I truly appreciate the calm and nourishment that these clubs provide. They set children up for a positive start to their day and ease the pressures on hard-working families. That is why

I also welcome the Government's plans to increase the number of children in my constituency who will receive free school meals.

I am pleased that Redditch will receive central funding for the first time to roll out Best Start family hubs across my constituency. The hubs will provide wide-ranging support for families, from parenting advice to early development services, offering a vital lifeline for many. They are a true successor to the legacy of Sure Start.

When I listened to the Secretary of State talk about the roll-out earlier this week, I was struck that the Prime Minister came to my constituency on his final stop of the general election campaign. He gave his speech in a Sure Start centre that had been abandoned by the previous Government, in a constituency in one of the most socially and economically deprived areas in the west midlands that had been forgotten. I am delighted that this Government are taking action to reverse 14 years of decline.

I am also happy to see investment making a difference locally. At Matchborough first school academy, funding is being used to convert unused classrooms into nursery spaces, providing high-quality early years places where they are most needed. That is exactly the kind of practical, place-based solution that helps to level the playing field from the very start. My constituency has also seen significant increases in SEN support for my county council—although there is so much more work to do in that area—and the benefits of mental health support workers entering our schools.

However, we must go much further. In my day, I was taught in a class of nearly 40, in draughty temporary buildings. Those days should be behind us, but because of disastrous decisions such as the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme, schools such as Ridgeway secondary school are facing the daunting challenge of having to raise millions of pounds to remain fit for purpose. I do not want to see that school—one of the most improved in the country—have tents and temporary buildings forced on it. That is not levelling up; it is letting down our children.

I want to say something very clearly: I have never met a family in Redditch or the villages who wanted an easy ride. I have only ever met families who want a fair shot for their children, a level playing field, and the chance to give their kids the opportunities that they never had. That is why I found yesterday's debate on the two-child limit so troubling. The official Opposition decided to make children a political wedge issue, condemning their parents for whatever reason or for whatever circumstances they might find themselves in, but that decision will only impact children. That is why I am so pleased that this week, we have seen the announcement of the better futures fund—a decision by this Government to invest in real, outcome-based delivery opportunities alongside the private sector, in order to lift children out of poverty.

We cannot talk about giving every child the best start in life without confronting the reality of poverty in all its forms, including furniture poverty, which is something we do not talk nearly enough about. In my constituency, there are children who go to bed without a bed. Some do not have a desk to do their homework on or a table to eat at, and some do not have a cooker with which their parents can cook a nutritious meal. Despite working all the hours they possibly can, some parents still go without meals just to make ends meet. In his brief

speech, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) talked about families; I would like to put on record that not all families contain two parents. Families come in all different sizes, and we should be supporting all of them, regardless of whether it is two, one, three or four. This is not just about income—it is about dignity, stability and the very basics of a secure home environment, in which a child can sleep properly and study in peace.

David Williams: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend's comments about furniture poverty. In Stoke-on-Trent, we have Emmaus—it is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell)—which has a “beds for kids” project, because so many kids in Stoke-on-Trent do not even have a bed to sleep in at night. It is important that the issue of furniture poverty is picked up in Government policy.

Chris Bloore: I agree with my hon. Friend—furniture poverty is a stain on a society that we have failed. I totally understand the rights and responsibilities of individual parents and families, but when we know there is a problem, we should deal with it. Unfortunately, voluntary groups have taken on that challenge where the state has rolled back support.

When we have the financial capacity, we should throw everything we have at reducing the number of children in poverty, because this is about their dreams. There can be no better investment than in the future of our children, and those of us who believe in social mobility and in the transformative power of education and aspiration must never sacrifice those principles on the altar of desperate attempts at political relevance. Rightly, we often debate passionately in this place how life begins and how it ends, but what about what happens in between? What about the lives that children are living now, those whose families are struggling to afford school shoes or skipping meals to make ends meet? I am glad that this Government are taking on those real challenges, and are refusing to adopt the Opposition's mantra of condemning parents for their choices or the circumstances they find themselves in.

If we are serious about giving every child the best start, we need more than warm words; we need investment, compassion, and a commitment to early years as a national priority. I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who have made that commitment in our first 12 months in office, because those first days, months and years are those in which futures are forged, and for which our responsibility as lawmakers and public servants is at its greatest.

4.29 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a genuine pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore). He and I have worked together for the best part of a decade, and his commitment to seeing a real improvement in the lives of the children he represents is commendable. We should all take a leaf out of his book.

Like many people in this place, I spend a lot of my time visiting primary schools. I meet the teachers, I am shown around the classrooms, and, being six foot four, I have to try not to take out a row of paintings or some bunting that is hanging across the room.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend gets to visit lots of primary schools. During the debate I have heard about so many schools all over the country. However, the people of Bidwell West, in my constituency, are still waiting for a primary school. It was promised in plans and brochures when they were buying their new homes more than a decade ago, but it still has not arrived. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is so important for councils to work constructively with the Department for Education to ensure that these promised schools finally open?

Gareth Snell: How could I not agree? Those facilities in communities are what turn them from housing estates into homes, and turn the communities into something special.

At this point, I should declare my interests. I am a governor of a special educational needs school in Stoke-on-Trent, and I chair the all-party parliamentary group on children's literacy, which, with the Minister's support, is running the national year of reading. I will get on to that later.

When I visit primary schools and talk to the young people in reception and year 1 classes, and see those bright young faces, full of vim and vigour and expectations about what kind of life may lie ahead of them, I think about the statistics, which, as was ably explained by my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), are quite stark. Stoke-on-Trent ranks—or did rank—142nd out of 151 for key stage 2 attainment. Although I accept some of the points made by the shadow Minister about the national increase in achievement across certain parts of the education sector, the last Government failed to reduce the attainment gap across the country, and there are still parts of the country, like Stoke-on-Trent, where that gap has not closed.

Cities that are economically and socially challenged—I will not say “deprived”, because I do not like that word—have not seen the improvements that have been seen in other parts of the country. As a result, there are generations of young people whose futures have been essentially stunted because the opportunities available to them are hampered by the absence of the early education and investment that they should have received, which means that their later life attainment is also hampered.

Every time I speak to primary school teachers or headteachers, and even some in secondary schools, the first thing they say to me is “It's tough.” They say that because, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, there are young people arriving at those schools who are unable to hold a pen or a fork, or are unable to articulate what they are thinking and feeling because their oracy simply is not good enough. That makes communication in early years education almost impossible to achieve. Children are arriving who are not appropriately potty-trained, which means that teaching staff are engaging in a basic level of parenting.

Adam Jogee: I thank my other constituency neighbour for giving way. Last week I held a headteachers' forum at a school in my constituency that my hon. Friend knows well for various reasons. What was clear to me

from that conversation—and I am grateful to all those who attended the forum—was that teachers are now undertaking a journey from educating to social work. One shared the story of a nine-year-old child who was not potty-trained, which meant that the teacher was required to help with changing and making the child clean and safe. The morale challenges that teachers face, coupled with the challenges that my hon. Friend has mentioned, illustrate the crisis that we face. That is why it is so important for the Minister's work to extend not only to Stoke-on-Trent, but to Newcastle-under-Lyme as well.

Gareth Snell: When we have local government reorganisation, we will be one big happy family in north Staffordshire. Whether it is Stoke-on-Trent or Newcastle-under-Lyme, we will get there.

Adam Jogee *rose*—

Gareth Snell: No, I will not give way a second time.

My hon. Friend is correct, in that the teachers I speak to say that it is hard. They talk about the societal impacts that are affecting children, through no fault of those young people themselves—there is nothing they can do about it—and impeding their ability. It is the teachers, and also the teaching assistants and support staff, who are having to do the social work. They are helping parents to sort out access to benefit claims, and in some cases they are helping to arrange childcare for parents who are doing shift work. They are stepping into a void that, in some parts of the world, is filled by extended families. In other parts of the world, such tasks are carried out by statutory services. But as a result of cuts to support services, and of social workers having huge caseloads, they are simply unable to do that, so it all falls on people whose primary motivation in life is the education of our young people.

Dr Gardner: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning the extra work that so many of our primary schools do. I particularly want to comment on the headteacher of Alexandra infants' school in Normacot, Adele Lupton, who has for many years had a community room that is open to the community. She has worked so incredibly hard to support children in incredibly difficult circumstances, and has managed to keep her teams together. She is a shining example, as are so many of the wonderful headteachers in Stoke-on-Trent who fight to deliver the services that are so sadly lacking sometimes.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend has made the point excellently. Although she and I will talk passionately about the experiences that we see in our own city, I am sure that in every city like ours across the country—including, I would wager, Bradford, Madam Deputy Speaker—there are good teachers who go above and beyond to support local communities, and schools that act more as hubs for social support, community involvement and neighbourhood engagement than simply as places for young people to be educated.

We are very fortunate in Stoke-on-Trent, because we already have some family hubs. I have two in my constituency. There is one at Bentilee, which does exceedingly good work, supported by Simon French and the Alpha Academies Trust, and Thrive at Five;

multi-agency activity there is genuinely looking at the direct causes of the attainment issues and at what can be done practically to support families. We also have the hub at Thomas Boughey children's centre.

The family hubs model is not particularly revolutionary, because it replicates what happened with Sure Start. My daughter is now 14, and her mother and I had to access the Sure Start system when she was born. There were things that, as new parents in our mid-20s, we simply did not know. My family and hers both lived far away, and our network of support was really quite small, so we naturally turned to our Sure Start centre, which was based up the road in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), who is no longer in his place—I have denied him the opportunity for another intervention. We walked into the Sure Start centre, spoke to a lovely woman and explained our problems, which were about latching and trying to understand routines.

Unless people have someone who can sit them down and talk them through it, they do not really know what they are doing. As a new parent who did not really know what I was doing, my instinct was to think, "I'm probably doing it badly and wrong." We went to the Sure Start centre, and it was lovely and welcoming. We sat down and had a conversation with somebody. We went through what we were worried about, and we were reassured that the anxiety we were experiencing as new, young parents was perfectly normal and in line with everybody else's expectations and understanding. Somebody there was a lifeline for us, and we were signposted to a room down the corridor and told when we could pop by again and have another conversation with somebody who had a level of expertise and who could offer support.

The model that we are now rerunning in Stoke-on-Trent has benefits. Looking at some of the data coming out of Bentilee in particular, we can see that there are improvements in the attainment levels of children starting school who have been through the programme, who have interacted with some of the schemes and who have accessed the maintained school nursery at the same site. I know the Minister will be aware of the importance of maintained nursery schools—those teacher-led facilities that really get to the crux of the problem in some of the communities that are the hardest to deal with.

Alongside the family hub, I welcome all the work that the Government are doing in this area. There is a breakfast club at the Co-op Academy Grove school in Northwood. Mrs Carrigan and I were there one morning as it was starting, and I noticed not just that children were coming in to have a hot breakfast, which was reassuring and welcome, but that they were interacting and talking to each other. In fact, the staff told me that the most popular thing that the young boys do after they have their breakfast is to go and play with the playdough. They do not want to play electronic games; they want to build and model stuff. As a result, the staff are looking at setting up a science, technology, engineering and maths group, because they can see that that is where some of the young people want to go.

Mrs Carrigan told me that the children were also more settled; because they have come into school slightly earlier, have had their breakfast and taken off their coats, when the day starts they are ready to start learning from the moment the bell goes, which means those vital

minutes in the morning are used for teaching, not for trying to calm down a class of 30 children who are a little bit all over the place. We cannot underestimate how much those minutes accrue over the course of a year and how much time can be brought back for education purposes.

Fundamentally, the challenges I face in Stoke-on-Trent, and that other Members have eloquently articulated in their own communities, stem from the fact that the attainment rate for the best start to life in places like Stoke-on-Trent is not as great as for children in other areas because of the poverty levels. Whether we call it furniture poverty, food poverty or child poverty—whatever we call it—it is poverty: young people growing up in households that simply do not have enough coming in to meet all their outgoings.

The best start in life is not only an educational issue. I appreciate that this debate is being led by the Department for Education because that is where the policy area sits, but if we want to give a child a good start in life, they need a safe, warm home that is not draughty; they need somewhere where they have the space to grow, develop and learn; and they need secure play areas where they feel comfortable to socialise and interact with their peers. They also need access to good-quality dentists, as the huge levels of tooth decay in Stoke mean that children are missing school; access to those vital health services is crucial.

Let me turn to the parenting aspect. Too many of my constituents tell me that they had a really bad experience at school, so they do not want to go back into school to get help, advice and support. For them, school was a moment of trauma—a time that they did not particularly enjoy—so being asked to go back to school, in some cases to see the same members of staff who taught them 20 years earlier, gives them the sense that they are being judged.

We need to think much more holistically and about what levers we can pull, through Government and local government, to see our aspiration of improved outcomes for young people. Education is one of those levers, but we also have to make sure that parents can access good-quality support for their own health and mental health, and good-quality jobs so that they can afford to have a good work-life balance and to spend time with their children. We need to have a think about the way in which we establish networks for young people so that, as well as the formal education setting, they can access necessary social activities, whether through formal organisations like the scouts or through sporting clubs. There has to be an opportunity for young people to socialise in the way that they are happiest to do.

Fundamentally—I know the Minister gets this because I have spoken to her about it—we have to think about the nuances for individual groups of young people, who need specific support. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) rightly pointed out that the removal of the adoption and special guardianship support fund is a particular challenge for a small but high-need group of young people. I have made my views on that known to the Minister, and I hope that her Department will look at what more can be done to support children growing up in kinship care arrangements, like I did, because they face specific challenges. This is not necessarily a poverty-related issue, but it is about accessing support services that allow them to live a fruitful childhood.

[Gareth Snell]

Finally, on SEND, I am proud to be a governor of the Abbey Hill special school, which is in the constituency of my neighbour my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South. One of the biggest challenges we face relates to EHCPs and how to give young people a particularly good chance in life. Under section I, parents can identify the particular school they want their child to go to. I agree with the Government's plan on this; if we can keep children who have additional needs—whether that be SEND or social, emotional, and mental health requirements—in the mainstream setting with the right help and the right support, we should do so. That frees up places for the children who need that specialist, bespoke support in special schools, to a level that means everyone is in the right place.

We need to stop those mainly alternative providers, which are running huge profits, marketing their schools to children and families who are desperately in need of help and support, and saying to them, “Tell your local authority, under section I, that you want to go to this particular school”, because that means the money flows out. Hundreds of thousands of pounds are spent on alternative providers, normally outside of the area, and those providers get that money through marketing; they sell young people and their parents a dream of a particular type of education that they can access, regardless of the standard of that education.

Munira Wilson: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches tried to put forward an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to extend the profit cap that the Government have proposed for children's social care homes run by private equity firms to the special schools creaming off profits from our local authorities and denying vulnerable children the education they need. However, I am afraid that Labour Members voted against it, so will he join me in convincing Ministers to think again while the other place is considering the Bill?

Gareth Snell: I would not say that the hon. Lady's intervention was helpful to me, but she has made her point. The Government have been quite clear that we must look at how some alternative provision and specialist independent providers are making huge profits off the back of some of the most desperate and vulnerable children in our society, and at how local authorities need the tools to tackle that. In a new programme opening in my own city, one of the trusts that runs one of the special schools is looking to do mainstream work with some of the other trusts' schools, but that is about getting trusts to work together. I do not remember her amendment, but I have absolute faith in the ministerial team—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but I cannot honestly say that I read everything that the Liberal Democrats produce.

To move this forward slightly, I do know, and the hon. Lady will know, that the Government have been quite clear about the need to tackle the profiteering and price gouging happening in the sector. I am almost certain that the Minister will have a better answer for her than I can give her while I am speaking. That is obviously something we all agree on as a principle, and I am sure we can have a discussion another time about how we get there. However, in places such as Stoke, the

higher needs budget is being blown because thousands of pounds are being taken by these glossy brochure schools that are making huge profits, and that does not give the young people in my city the best start in life. I think it gives them false hope.

Finally, I would say to the Minister that the best start in life is about the first 1,001 days. I am very proud to chair the APPG on literacy, and I am really glad that the Department for Education has announced the year of reading. The bond of reading to your child is so important. Early years literacy, which also helps with oracy, means young people can start school with a set of skills that will help them thrive throughout their education.

The other part of this that we need to think about is how we help parents who do not have a level of literacy necessary to start reading to their children. Again, all too often in my constituency I talk to parents who want to talk about literacy, but their confidence in their own literacy skills is such that they do not feel able to do that. It would be welcome if, as part of the National Year of Reading, the Department not only helped young people and children get more into reading and enjoying books—enjoying reading for pleasure, as opposed to having to read for work as most of us do—but ensured that parents were supported to improve their literacy in a way that allows them to interact with their children for longer as their own education progresses, I know that would be a huge benefit not just in my constituency but across the whole country.

4.48 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), although I feel I am breaking a run of excellent speeches from the Staffordshire massive. I very much welcome this debate on giving every child the best start in life. I think one thing we can agree on across all the Benches is that that is not just the title of the debate, but a moral duty. It is the measure of a Government's values, and it is also the foundation of a thriving and fair society.

In my constituency of Southampton Itchen, the unfortunate truth is that too many children are still being held back—not by the lack of potential, but by the lack of opportunity. It is high time that that changed, and I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who are making that change happen. My constituency is in the much vaunted London and the south-east, which we usually hear about for its wealth and prosperity, but the reality is often different in Thornhill and Weston, where one child in every three is growing up in poverty. That is not the picture of wealth that we are often lumped in with. Many children arrive at school already behind in language, health or emotional development.

There are dedicated teachers and early years professionals who do everything they can. I pay tribute to all those I have met and worked with over a number of years, first as a councillor and then in the past year as an MP visiting schools. I do not face the same height challenge as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central when visiting those schools—indeed, in some secondary schools the pupils are taller than me these days. Dedicated teachers and professionals—I know colleagues across the Chamber will also be meeting them—are working against a legacy of underfunding and fragmentation of services.

That is why I welcome the Labour Government's plan for change and our focus on a number of policies that will help to give every child the best start in life. They include: expanding high-quality early years education; the new nursery places for children aged two to four; and the schools-based nurseries in my constituency launched at St Mary's Church of England primary school and at Valentine primary school. I am grateful to see policies like the rolling out of free breakfast clubs in every primary school. The pilots established at St John's primary and nursery school and St Patrick's Catholic primary school are hugely welcome. I have visited and helped to serve breakfasts to the children. I have seen the benefits they are already enjoying of a solid start to the day. Yes, that is through the food, but also through socialising, being with their friends and getting ready to learn.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. As a fellow southern MP, I share his concern about the importance of explaining that there is real poverty across the south of England, as well as in many other parts of the country. He makes a point about the breakfast clubs, which are outstanding and he is right to say how valuable they are on a number of fronts. We have two in Reading. My fellow Reading MPs and I are very proud of them and we look forward to seeing more soon.

Darren Paffey: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I wish him every success in his constituency with the pilot breakfast clubs.

We have all welcomed in the last week a restoring—let us be honest—of Sure Start-style family hubs which will provide wraparound support for parents. From the hubs I have seen in my constituency over recent years—I know that work will build back up again—the potential for mental health support, childcare advice, toy libraries and work support are all there in those places.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is setting out, in a very eloquent way, the amazing work of the Labour Government. I am proud—I hope he agrees—of the previous Labour Government's achievements in setting up and rolling out Sure Start. Independent research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed what amazing outcomes children had later in life, with higher GCSE scores, reduced hospital admissions, improved physical health, the early identification of special needs, maternal employment and better mental health outcomes. I hope we will see the same from the new Best Start family hubs, too.

Darren Paffey: My hon. Friend paints the picture of the crowning glory of the previous Labour Government, in the Sure Start centres, not just because they were a nice feelgood thing but because of the strong evidence of the benefits they brought. What a disgrace that year after year the Conservatives cut council budgets and shut those very centres. Despite Tory austerity that hit Southampton hard—we lost 60% of our Government grant at Southampton city council—we made the often tough decision financially but the right decision in purpose, to keep those buildings open across the city, because they were crucial centres of support for local families.

I cannot pretend that the range of services offered in those centres was the same as it was a quarter of a century ago when the previous Labour Government set them up under our admired and much-missed colleague, Tessa Jowell, but those buildings still served a purpose. That meant that when the Conservative Government, having shut so many Sure Start centres, experienced an amazing epiphany—a revelation that, actually, they were a really good idea—and reinvented them under the badge of family hubs, our former Sure Start centres were there and ready to be built back up again. I would gently remind the shadow Minister that the family hubs, while welcome, were not new, either. In the lost years between those Conservative budget cuts to children's services and their later U-turn, far too many families in my constituency and across the country were left without those crucial services.

The Government are also investing in school improvement, particularly in areas with long-standing underachievement and where attainment gaps have remained stubborn. My view is that the upcoming curriculum and assessment review is a huge opportunity to introduce a refreshed and inspiring curriculum with manageable assessments, rather than over-assessment and high-stakes exams, and links to exciting training opportunities in the reality of jobs in the 21st century economy into the future.

As other hon. Members have said, the special educational needs and disabilities system is absolutely broken. I commend the Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who is no longer in her place, for leading our Committee's inquiry on this subject. As I am sure is the case for other Members, I hear a lot from constituents in surgeries and through my inbox about situations that are in many cases avoidable, and which we must certainly work hard to avoid in the future, with children's needs not being met because of a system that needs to be fundamentally rebuilt, described by its own architects as "lose, lose, lose". A reformed SEND system must give every child the support they need to access school and ensure they are not excluded from the potential for success in life that every single child deserves and is capable of.

Numerous schools have fantastic and innovative practices going on, including Bitterne Park secondary school, which I visited last week, which is establishing a variety of units, specialist rooms and particular provisions within the mainstream, working towards a truly inclusive school. In reforming the SEND system—I do not underestimate or envy the task of my hon. Friends on the Front Bench here—I have asked Ministers to consider how we can scale up the good practice in many of our constituencies to end the postcode lottery and guarantee consistency across our country. These are the kinds of policies that have been announced—these are the building blocks of a much better future for children in my constituency and across the country.

If we are serious about change, we must not only welcome and consolidate the significant changes this Government are making, but commit to continual improvement. In the wind-up, I ask the Minister to address the Government's commitment to prioritising areas like Southampton Itchen. As I have said, we may be located in the south—often assumed wrongly to be a magnet for wealth—but child poverty is

[Darren Paffey]

entrenched and multi-generational. We must not have a blind spot to need that is based on geographical assumptions.

Will Ministers ensure that our new Best Start family hubs are truly integrated with schools, NHS services and local councils so that they do not simply replicate past silos? Will Ministers also guarantee long-term funding? I think I know the answer, but it is always worth asking. Long-term funding that goes beyond a single Parliament—the Prime Minister has spoken for a long time now about a decade of national renewal—is not just desirable, but absolutely necessary. We need investment that ensures change is deep, not just fast.

Will Ministers have regard to support for the families that children are growing up in? We have heard from hon. Members about better parental leave. I commend the work of The Dad Shift, among others, in raising awareness of that issue.

Will Ministers also ensure that they look well down the line to not just the early years, which are a crucial foundation, but the years ahead? We must ensure that our children and young people who grow up in care have long-lasting support to thrive in life, guaranteed by meaningful and strong corporate parenting responsibilities in our public services and a national care leaver offer to close the attainment gap experienced by those who are care experienced, even up to support into training or university.

In closing, children growing up in Southampton Itchen can be hopeful about the building blocks that are going in under this Labour Government. However, they do not want or need just charity; they need a chance—a chance to thrive in life. If we get this right, and I believe that we are absolutely setting out in the right direction, we will change not just individual lives, but the future of whole communities. Therefore, when we are giving every child the best start in life, that has to mean in every single postcode in this country.

5 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Ind): We understand on this side of the House that the wealth of our country does not lie in the bank accounts of casino capitalists or the title deeds of billionaires. It lies in nature, with each chalk stream and ancient woodland a national inheritance to be cherished; it lies in the bonds of community that held strong even through the years of politically imposed austerity; and, perhaps most importantly, it lies in our young people—in their talents and their hopes that shape our collective future. The benefits of a Labour Government have been most pronounced when translating into policy the belief that, for Britain to succeed, we must give all young people, whatever their background, the opportunity to fulfil their true potential.

I welcome the fact that Hormead Church of England first and nursery school in my constituency is among the first to benefit from our breakfast club programme. Together with the expansion of free school meals, these policies go some way to ensuring that no child's learning or health is held back by hunger.

Just as central to early years development is the vital importance of every child having decent housing. We need to take a holistic approach to health, welfare and

education, which recognises that a secure and stable home is the foundation for everything else in life. Currently, there are 164,000 children in temporary accommodation across the country—a record high. This means families in overcrowded conditions, children forced to travel long journeys to school and a situation which, all too often, is anything but temporary.

I welcome the Government's £39 billion funding announcement for the affordable homes programme. The commitment to allocate 60% of this to social housing could make a real difference. To ensure that children growing up today have the best start in life, it is vital that as many of those homes as possible are built during this Parliament. Above all, we need a new generation of council housing, built to meet the needs of those that a profit-led sector will never provide for.

This will require upfront investment and difficult choices about other projects that must fall by the wayside, but we cannot ignore the human cost of delay. This is not a static problem—a building simply waiting to be repaired. Childhood does not pause. Leaving hard-working families to raise their children in cramped, mouldy accommodation with precious little space to play or learn is no way to nourish the future of our country.

Shelter is clear: we need 90,000 social homes a year for 10 years to address the affordable housing crisis, and I will keep making the case to relevant Ministers on the need to frontload this funding package. This is not just the right thing to do morally; the Centre for Economics and Business Research found that hitting the 90,000 homes a year benchmark would return billions to the public purse through lower spending on temporary accommodation, reduce benefits cost, result in less crime, and raise nearly £3 billion from the improved life chances of children. By escaping the desiccated logic of the Office for Budget Responsibility and the old lie that cuts to people equal savings, we can instead invest in our young people and, in doing so, enrich the future of our nation for all of us.

In my first year as the MP for North East Hertfordshire, I have enjoyed visiting schools and meeting students in Royston, Baldock, Letchworth, Standon, Weston and other places across my constituency. The students' talent and optimism is always a powerful antidote to the cynicism and pettiness that can all too often pervade our politics.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): On Friday, I visited St Katharine's primary school, where I met young people from my constituency who emphasised two really important points: first, that they want to be global citizens and a part of wider humanity focusing on the world, and, secondly, that they care deeply about nature and want to be conservers of it. Does my hon. Friend agree that our children are at their best when they are able to play the role of global citizen and can take care of the nature on our doorstep?

Chris Hinchliff: I wholeheartedly agree and have heard exactly the same thing from students in my constituency. Each and every one of the children in our country deserves a safe, healthy and stable home that is genuinely affordable and does not leave families struggling to make ends meet month after month. If we give the next generation the security to thrive, they will do the rest. The true legacy of this Government will be found in the laughter, learning and achievement of the nation's children.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

5.5 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I am grateful to be closing this debate on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. I thank colleagues from across the House for their passionate contributions, and I am going to attempt to list them all: my hon. Friend the Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), and the hon. Members for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed), for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). I also have it on good authority that the MPs from Staffordshire hunt in a pack, and after today I can confirm that they do indeed. Before I begin my speech, I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Ensuring that every child, regardless of their background or circumstances, has the opportunity to thrive is something that cuts to the very heart of why many of us were drawn to politics in the first place. We know that in those crucial early years the foundations of health, learning and wellbeing are laid for life, so it is right that we ensure that those foundations are as solid as can be.

I want to first reflect on the Conservative record on early years and families, starting with childcare. It was Conservative Governments who introduced and expanded free childcare entitlements, not just for parents of three and four-year-olds but for parents of younger children. It was a Conservative Government who launched the family hubs and start for life programme, investing £300 million across 75 local authorities to provide parenting and breastfeeding support to families when they need it so that problems can be addressed before they escalate.

We fully recognise that stable and secure families ensure the best start in life for children. That means ensuring that support is more broadly targeted than just at the child. Family hubs are a vital part of achieving this. For 14 years, our model was to have targeted investment, early help and a determination to move away from a system where postcode determines life outcomes. Nowhere is that approach more vital than in the first 1,001 days of a child's life—from conception to age two. The science is clear: a child's brain develops more rapidly in these years than at any other point in their life. Attachment, stimulation, nutrition and the emotional environment during this time all have lifelong implications for learning, resilience and health. Interventions in these early days can literally change life chances, and we know that failure to act compounds over time. I pay tribute to Dame Andrea Leadsom for all her excellent work on this subject.

Earlier this month, the Government published their "Giving every child the best start in life" strategy. The House will be aware that the strategy's name, scope and substance owe much to the work begun by the Conservative Government. There is much to celebrate when a new Government build on the good work of the previous one—and as the old saying goes, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The strategy identifies the very early years as a priority for the Government, which is welcome,

but I must echo the Institute for Fiscal Studies in suggesting that this strategy is a first step, not the finished article.

The Government's approach to family hubs is a good example of what I mean by that. It is welcome that the Government are continuing the programme, with a further £69 million announced in the autumn Budget and £57 million in Start for Life funding for 2025-26. The goal of rolling out Best Start family hubs in every local authority is certainly ambitious and something to be welcomed, but there is one important point I want to make. Even with this new funding, spending on integrated early years services will remain at less than one third of what was spent on Sure Start at its peak. Family hubs are being asked to do more, serving children up to the age of 19, but with far fewer resources per child. If this Labour Government want it to be Sure Start 2.0—and I truly hope they do—they may need to be more ambitious with their funding plans. If the Government want to build on the solid foundation they inherited from their Conservative predecessors, they must guarantee long-term investment, retain high-quality staff and ensure that hubs are universal in reach but suitably targeted in mission.

Before I move on from hubs, I welcome the fact that each one is promised a SEND-trained staff member who can deliver practical and well-informed help to families navigating what is a complex system. As we in the House all know, SEND is a big issue. I am all too aware from casework in my constituency that the families of SEND children are too often left fighting against the very system that should be fighting for them.

Early identification of SEND is still inconsistent, and when that diagnosis is eventually made, EHCP needs assessments and much needed support are often delayed too. Disappointingly, Ministers have refused to rule out scrapping ECHPs outside special schools, despite over 300,000 children currently relying on them in mainstream settings. That has triggered real fear among families and professionals alike. More than 110,000 people have signed a petition opposing these changes, yet to date Ministers have offered no firm reassurance that no child will lose the legal right to the support they need. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity today to provide some clarity and reassurance to those worried parents.

Looking at the Government's approach in the round, the "best start in life" strategy contains much that the Opposition welcome in principle, such as more family hubs, the expansion of funded childcare to 30 hours a week for working parents of children from nine months old, thousands more nursery places and the development of a digital offer. However, if we are seeking to ensure that every child has the best start in life, a key ingredient must be the provision of high-quality education: the very provision that the Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill seeks to sabotage.

Far from ensuring that schools can serve as a foundation for success in the early years, Ministers have led an attack on school standards by undermining the academies that have led the way on school improvement for decades. If the Government get their way, academies will no longer be able to recruit teachers without qualified teacher status from non-traditional backgrounds and will be forced to follow the same national curriculum as other schools. Those measures will risk the progress

[Rebecca Paul]

made during three decades of cross-party consensus on academies. It is nothing less than educational vandalism. If any Member of the House doubts that fact, they need only pay a visit to Labour-run Wales. After 26 years of Labour in power, Wales finds itself at the bottom of the rankings for the whole of the UK in maths, English and science.

The Government cannot even bring themselves to ban smartphones in schools—something so simple yet so effective in improving a child's wellbeing and educational outcomes. The hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) introduced a Bill that would have done just that. I applaud him for doing so and for the strong cross-party consensus he built up. It is shameful that much of his work was undone by a Government who insisted on watering down his Bill and burying their heads in the sand to the harms. A Government who refuse to act against that danger give me cause for concern about their commitment to offering children the best start in life.

I will conclude by making an observation on nurseries, which face extreme financial pressure because of decisions taken by the Government. The lack of compensation for the employer national insurance contribution increase is forcing nurseries and childcare providers to either hike fees, opt out altogether from offering funded places or close down entirely. I ask the Minister to ponder what use any number of policies aimed at supporting nurseries and increasing funded places will be if the Treasury is driving nurseries into the ground with tax hikes before those policies have even started.

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I am grateful to the many hon. Members who participated in this debate on such an important subject. I will refer to hon. Members as I progress through my closing speech. It would be remiss of me if I did not mention the strong representation from Staffordshire.

The passion and enthusiasm that came through in hon. Members' contributions demonstrates the importance of early years and the Government's plan for change. We know that we have an obligation to break down barriers to opportunity. The Government will not stand by while families, parents, carers and children are indeed struggling.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Breaking down barriers to opportunity and giving children the best start in life is one of the Government's defining missions, so I welcome the steps that have been taken to expand free school meals, roll out free breakfast clubs and establish the child poverty taskforce. Does the Minister agree that when that taskforce reports in the autumn, it is really important that it recommends things like lifting the two-child limit, which would make such a difference to so many families?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the significance of the Government's work, the important issue of poverty, and the need to keep on making sure that the Government drive out poverty and meet the needs of children across our country.

As we have set out today, our "best start in life" strategy outlines the immediate steps this Government are taking to expand and strengthen family services, to make early education and childcare more accessible and affordable for parents, and to improve the quality of early education and childcare. However, those are just the first steps in putting the early years back at the heart of how we deliver stronger outcomes for our children, our families and our society.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) spoke about righting the wrongs of the previous Government. He spoke about the cuts to Sure Start services and youth services and a little bit about the deep-rooted cuts of the previous Tory Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) spoke about Sure Start and her close connection to it. I applaud her for all her work in that area and for her campaigning work as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) also spoke passionately about meeting children's health, physical and psychological needs, and I look forward to meeting her.

I hope that Members are reassured that the long-term vision we have set out will transform life chances and give our children better opportunities than we had. We know without doubt that Sure Start worked; it raised exam results, improved early identification and boosted physical and mental health. It reached disadvantaged families and made a difference to their lives. Our Best Start service will honour its proud legacy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) spoke about Sure Start, the evidence of its success, children's achievements and how it had been stripped away by the last Government. I could not agree more. This Government will introduce a new Best Start family service delivered through Best Start family hubs. That will be the first step towards a national family service to ensure families can get the right support for their children.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that access to the creative arts, particularly music—I speak as a musician, so I am biased—should be available to everybody and especially young people, and that such access could be provided through the Best Start family hubs? The evidence is abundant of its positive effect on cognitive ability, hard and soft skills, teamwork, and joy within life, and it could have a profoundly positive effect on our young people as they grow up.

Janet Daby: I do not know anybody who does not enjoy some type of music. Children must have the experience of enjoying music, and I cannot imagine a family hub that does not have some type of musical instrument. This Government encourages the creative arts and music, and will continue to do so. Indeed, my own daughter is learning how to play the guitar.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) mentioned that every child deserves the best start in life, and the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) said that this is a cross-party issue. I could not agree more. I also reassure the hon. Member for East Wiltshire that we support, and will support, parents, including single parents, and carers. This Government want to give children the very best start in life, hence the strategy and what we are introducing and speaking about this afternoon.

Matt Rodda: Is it not the point that there should be a shared national mission to invest in young people? As was rightly pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), the evidence is clear that £1 invested in a very young child, aged less than five, is worth £16 invested later in their life. The purpose of our work in this field in the public sector, and with partners in the voluntary sector, should be to support very young children to have the very best start in life.

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; there is nothing to disagree with there.

Hubs will be open to all, with funding for these services in every single local authority. They will work with nurseries, childminders, schools, health visitors, libraries and local voluntary groups to provide joined-up support to parents in the community. Each hub will have trained professionals to support parents and children who have additional needs. A new Best Start digital service will mean that parents can instantly access all the trusted advice and guidance that they need, whenever they need it.

David Williams: The Minister rightly identified that voluntary sector groups are in the mix. Many of those organisations have been rooted within their communities for many years, and they continued to deliver high-quality services even when the cuts came along. Can we please look to ensure that the work of those groups really forms part of the offer and does not get replaced, because they are rooted in the communities and often know their communities best?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I remember that, soon after becoming a Minister, I met many voluntary and community organisations, and one of the first things I did was to really thank them for all of the services and support they provided during really tough times under the previous Government. Some people had watery eyes as I acknowledged the significance of the work that they had been doing and that they continue to do as they contribute to the needs of our society and some of our most vulnerable children.

Darren Paffey: I am delighted to hear that each of these Best Start family hubs will have a fully trained and professional SEND co-ordinator to support families. Could the Minister say a bit more about how she envisages those co-ordinators working in partnership with local education, health and local authority partners to avoid silo thinking?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he connects up the various agencies and Departments and points out the significance of working in close partnership. That is absolutely the right way forward.

This Government are delivering our promise to parents, providing more support to working families than ever before. We are delivering the entitlement of 30 hours of childcare a week for working families, backed by Government funding, which we expect to reach £9 billion from next year. This will save families an average of £7,500 a year and give parents, especially mothers, the freedom and choice to work. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), I have visited many primary schools in my constituency,

and I am sure many Members have done the same, but I want to encourage them to visit their new Best Start family hubs as well.

Quality matters when it comes to early education and childcare. A high-quality setting is what all parents should expect for their child, but a great early years education starts with great people, and that is why we are backing the people who care for and teach our youngest children. We will raise the status of our workforce and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central mentioned, all staff matter. We will introduce a new professional register. We will train more early years teachers, because we know that their impact is significant. We will double the number of stronger practice hubs and build strong links between settings and schools, so that educators can share best practice and provide the best possible care.

Tom Hayes: When I talk with parents and guardians in Bournemouth East, they described the EHCP process as being adversarial and almost designed to exclude. They want a greater role earlier on in the design of their child's EHCP. Does the Minister agree that that is an important thing that we should be seeking to achieve? Would she also agree that, as we take forward SEND reform, it is important to have families at the heart of that process?

Janet Daby: Absolutely; we need to make sure that there is full consultation and involvement so that people and parents feel that their voices are being heard. My hon. Friend has pre-empted me: I am now moving on to EHCPs, which is convenient.

This Government are clear that the current SEND system is difficult for parents, carers and young people to navigate and is simply not delivering the outcomes we want. While we have announced that the details of our long-term approach to SEND reform will be set out in the schools White Paper in the autumn, we are clear that any changes we make will improve the support available to families, stop parents having to fight for support, and protect the effective provision that is currently in place.

We know that many parents feel the only way their child can get the support they need is through EHCPs. However, independently commissioned insights published last year showed that extensive improvements to the system using early intervention and better resourcing of mainstream schools could have a significant impact.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I am grateful for the Minister stressing the importance of support for children with SEND. At Dorset studio school in West Dorset, 52% of children have SEND—children who would struggle in mainstream education. Funding for improvements to its site was agreed in 2023, but has still not been released. Could the Minister say anything about that?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for sharing that information. I will ask the Minister for Early Education to contact him.

There will always be a legal right to the additional support that children with SEND need, and it will be protected. This Government are prepared to grasp the nettle and reform a broken system set up by the Conservatives, which, as we heard, they themselves

[Janet Daby]

described as, “Lose, lose, lose.” We will ensure that every child in this country gets the opportunity to achieve and thrive at school and to get on in life. We are carefully considering how to address and improve the experience of the EHCP process for families and are reflecting on what practices could or should be made consistent nationally. We are fully committed to working with families, experts and the sector to ensure that our approach is fully planned and delivered in partnership with them.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for giving way; she is being generous with her time. One area of concern that parents of children who have an EHCP have raised with me is where there are multiple and complex issues—for example, there is a health issue under one criterion, an education issue under another, or a behavioural or developmental issue under the third criterion—the EHCP will only fund the primary driver of need. Therefore, children sometimes may get the support they need for one particular element of their additional needs, but not the support elsewhere. Will the Minister assure parents in my constituency and across the country that when the Government look at the review and in whatever system that may come next, that holistic view of the child and how their complex and interdependent needs are looked after are at the centre of that?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for raising a significant point that I am sure parents find difficult to grapple with. I will ensure that the points he has raised are passed on to the relevant Minister.

We are reviewing early years SEND funding arrangements to assess how suitable the current arrangements are for supporting the needs of children with SEND. As I have already mentioned, details of the Government’s intended approach to SEND reform, including early years, will be set out in the schools White Paper in the autumn.

Improving health and education go hand in hand, as alluded to by the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed). My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) was absolutely correct when he talked about health, wealth, education and accommodation. The previous Government left no light task, and despite what the Conservatives say and how they say it, this Government are getting on with the job of fixing the foundations and putting right what is broken. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) spoke about mental health, breakfast clubs and other areas to do with health. He also spoke about the crowning glory that was Sure Start, which was pleasing to hear. Again, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) spoke positively about breakfast clubs and free school meals. We know that healthier children are more able to learn and that children who achieve in education go on to live healthier lives.

The change outlined in the “best start in life” strategy is firmly aligned with the three radical shifts set out in the Government’s 10-year health plan—hospital to community, analogue to digital, and sickness to prevention. The Best Start family hubs are an important part of the move to neighbourhood health.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) spoke about the inheritance of a poor school building from the previous Government. Again, I will raise that with the Minister for Early Education.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) spoke passionately about the welfare of children, wraparound support and advice, to which the Government are committed. We are committed to achieving the best start in life for children.

Let me end by saying that the hon. Member for North East Hertfordshire spoke so eloquently about wanting children to laugh, to learn and to achieve. I absolutely agree.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of giving every child the best start in life.

PETITIONS

5.30 pm

Horspath Outreach Post Office

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): I rise to present a petition about Horspath outreach post office and to urge the Government to take urgent action following its closure in March 2025 and the retirement of the postmaster in nearby Great Milton. The outreach post office served as a vital community hub for residents. Many older and more vulnerable villagers now face significant barriers to accessing essential postal and banking services.

Over 600 residents—over half the village—have signed the petition, which shows just how important this is to them. I was happy to join Judy, Rebecca, Sheila, Shelagh and Anna to present this petition to 10 Downing Street. They join Sue and Derek in the Public Gallery today. I thank them, among others, for their hard work and dedication in bringing forward this petition.

It cannot be right that the retirement of a long-serving and dedicated postmaster is used as an excuse to cut services. The Post Office has a duty to residents of Horspath and should fulfil it. I hope that the Government and the Post Office will now take notice of the residents of Horspath and work together with them to ensure that residents can once again access those postal services.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to reopen Horspath Outreach Post Office.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Horspath Outreach Post Office should be reopened, further notes that since its closure on 28th March 2025 there has been a significant negative impact on residents who previously used the post office services; further declares that it has impacted elderly people, parents and those with mobility issues or without a car’s ability to access services; further declares that local businesses including Horspath Hub and the Senior Residents Club have been impacted; notes that the Outreach Post Office ran alongside successful community events like coffee

mornings; and provided a central community for locals; further notes that the two sub Post Offices 3 miles from Horspath are insufficient to deal with the needs of the community; further notes that a Sub-Postmaster has been found to run the Outreach Post Office; further declares that the Post Office Ltd. should review its reasons for closing the Post Office.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to reopen Horspath Outreach Post Office.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003085]

Operation Brock

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents, who are deeply frustrated by the regular deployment of Operation Brock. The decision by Kent county council and the Kent and Medway resilience forum to queue freight lorries on the M20 during the school holidays causes severe disruption for local residents and businesses, and is hugely expensive. My constituents do not object to Brock being deployed in emergencies, and reassurances were given that that would happen. However, it is still being regularly deployed as a precautionary measure, and it will come into force once again later this week.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Transport Select Committee to launch an inquiry into the decisions taken by Kent County Council and the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum to regularly deploy Operation Brock, and into what work is being undertaken to find a long-term alternative.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Ashford in Kent,

Declares that the deployment of Operation Brock by Kent County Council and the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum to queue freight lorries on the M20 causes severe disruption for residents and local businesses; further that although reassurances had been given that Operation Brock would only be deployed in emergencies, it has been used regularly as a precautionary measure; and further that a better, long-term solution needs to be found.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Transport Select Committee to launch an inquiry into the decisions taken by Kent County Council and the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum to regularly deploy Operation Brock, and into what work is being undertaken to find a long-term alternative.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003095]

Sherston Surgery

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I rise to present a petition on the continued existence of a GP surgery in the village of Sherston, in my constituency of South Cotswolds. I thank the 1,695 local residents who have signed a similarly worded petition, and I hope that this demonstrates to the Government this rural community's

strength of feeling about the need for a new GP surgery to replace the existing one, whose lease will shortly expire.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Sherston and the surrounding villages,

Declares that the future of Sherston surgery remains uncertain; that the existing Tolsey surgery in Sherston is no longer fit for purpose; a new purpose-built facility has been offered by a developer; the integrated care board has, to date, refused to commit to operating NHS services from the proposed new premises; further declares that, without such a commitment, many residents in Sherston and its neighbouring villages are in real danger of being left without reasonable access to essential NHS primary care services.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to support the establishment and ongoing operation of a new healthcare facility in Sherston, in order to ensure continued access to NHS services for the local community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003094]

School visits to Parliament

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Maymi, James, Caleb, Riley, Noah P, Kadie, Louisiana, Mylo, Sienna, George, Penny, Ethan, Isla, Noah G, Harry, Ruby, Faye, Brad, Joe and Oliver are all children in year 6 at Stoneraise school. Like many of my constituents, they are conscious of how far away Cumbria is from Westminster. As they leave primary school later this week, their similarly worded petition calls on the Government to do more to help children like them to visit and learn about Parliament. I wish them well for the future.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Stoneraise school is over 300 miles from London; that it is very expensive for schools in Cumbria to take their children on a residential to our capital city; further that the Government provides funding through the pupil premium and to local authorities which can help schools plan education visits, but that currently only a small proportion of pupils have the resources to be able to visit Parliament each year; further notes a petition started by Stoneraise school in Cumbria, which 155 pupils and teachers have signed, supports more Government assistance to enable them and school children across the UK to visit Parliament.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure transport, accommodation and food provision for every child to be able to visit Parliament during their time in school, so that all children can see how Parliament works for us.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003097]

Adults at risk due to gambling addiction

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the family of Marc Spalding. Like too many families, their lives have been devastated as a consequence of the harm caused by gambling addiction. I am incredibly moved that through their pain, Marc's mother and sister are advocating for others who may be experiencing a similar situation.

Currently, families are not empowered to raise concerns with the appropriate authorities on behalf of a loved one struggling with a gambling addiction. This lack of

[Maureen Burke]

agency often leaves them feeling helpless. This petition, in addition to one that received 3,280 signatures, calls for legislative reform to strengthen the rights of family members in these circumstances.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure NHS and local authority advocacy services allow for families to advocate for their ‘at risk’ adult members and improve GP training in the area of gambling addiction utilising the proposed gambling operator levy.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the family of Marc Spalding,

Declares that legislation should be strengthened to allow family members to advocate for ‘at risk’ adults who pose a risk to their own health and safety through gambling addiction with GPs and local authorities where existing advocacy services do not currently apply; furthermore the training for GPs and other agencies around identifying the signs of gambling addiction and understanding the appropriate referral routes should be enhanced using the proposed gambling operator levy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure NHS and local authority advocacy services allow for families to advocate for their ‘at risk’ adult members and improve GP training in the area of gambling addiction utilising the proposed gambling operator levy.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003096]

Commemoration of Matchgirls’ Strike

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

5.39 pm

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): May I say how wonderful it is to have you in the Chair for this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker? You were in the Chair for my maiden speech, and this is my first ever Adjournment debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who is also proudly wearing the ribbon that we are wearing today.

I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate and to pay tribute to the women and girls of the matchgirls’ strike of 1888. I am proudly the very first Member of Parliament for the new constituency of Stratford and Bow. The boundaries may be new, but it is a part of east London with a rich and radical history that I am so proud to represent. As the granddaughter of one of Jaffna’s first ever trade unionists, I am proud to be here to speak about this subject.

In my maiden speech, I paid tribute to some of the well-known and illustrious figures who were residents of Bow. Some were household names, like Gandhi, Attlee and Annie Besant, but today I pay tribute to some lesser-known but equally powerful figures in British history: the matchgirls—the young women of the Bryant & May match factory in Bow. I am proud to have residents from Bow here in the Gallery to hear the debate, and I pay tribute to the Chisenhale ESOL Bengali ladies, who visited me earlier today.

The matchgirls were mostly very young girls—some were as young as six, but they went up to the age of 13 and beyond. They endured long hours, pitiful pay and appalling working conditions. They were fined for being late, for being untidy and even for talking. Worst of all, they were being poisoned slowly and painfully. The white phosphorus used to make the matches made them sicker by the day, giving them a condition called “phossy jaw”. The girls would dip the matches into sulphur, then into the white phosphorus mixture, and that led to that horrible disease, which caused painful abscesses, facial disfigurement, the loss of their jaw and, in some cases, a slow and painful death.

When this came to light via work with Annie Besant and in a news article, factory bosses tried to force the girls to lie. Instead, they fought back and took their futures into their hands. Some 1,400 of those brave young women walked out on strike in July 1888, and they sent a delegation right here to Parliament. Some 56 matchgirls marched from Bow to Parliament, and a group of 12 of those women met with two MPs, right outside this Chamber in Central Lobby. Their courageous act is recorded in *Hansard*, as Mr Cunninghame Graham asked the Home Secretary to investigate the strike and the factory’s punitive practice.

I am proud that this week, working with the Matchgirls Memorial team, who are also here in the Gallery, and my union, the GMB, we have an exhibition in this very place, which the matchgirls walked to. The strike was exactly 137 years ago this week, and it lit the spark of the new labour movement and the new trade union movement. It was a spark that ignited the fire of modern trade unionism in Britain—the same movement that

fighters for our rights at work, and a movement that I am very proud to be a part of as a member of my union, the GMB.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on bringing forward this debate. She is absolutely right to celebrate the strike of 1888. Does she agree that the spirit of the matchgirls lives on in our women today? An example of that in my constituency and in hers is that of the WASPI women, who refused to take the wrong done to them lying down, and fought for recognition and fair compensation. The fight that began with the matchgirls' strike in 1888 clearly still lives on in 2025.

Uma Kumaran: This is the first Adjournment debate that I have secured, and I am delighted to be a recipient of one of the hon. Gentleman's famous Adjournment interventions—I have finally made it as a Member of Parliament. I certainly think that the spirit of the matchgirls reminds us that unionism and collective action have long been in the domain of women, regardless of how male-dominated the union movement or the struggle for workers' rights may be.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that commemorating the struggle of workers, particularly women workers, is key to understanding working-class history—our history? Does she also agree that the matchgirls should be commemorated alongside industrial struggles across the country, not least those of the 19 teenage girls who were killed in the disaster of 1922 in the Dudley Port factory, the Wednesbury “Tube Town” strikes of 1913 and the 1910 women chainmakers' strike in Cradley Heath, all of which helped to form our modern-day trade union movement?

Uma Kumaran: I thank my hon. Friend for that powerful intervention. All Labour Members have stories of women who have shaped the struggle for working people's rights in British history. Too often, those stories do not get told, so I am really pleased that we have a chance to hear them today.

As I was saying, the strike took place exactly 137 years ago this week, and I am proud to be in the Chamber speaking about it. The union movement is still fighting for dignity and fairness at work, and standing up for workers' rights against mistreatment and malpractice. We owe so much to the women who came before us—the pioneers of the rights we enjoy today. They stood up against injustice, took power into their own hands, and won all the concessions they demanded from greedy factory bosses. Those women changed the course of history, and I and many other women would not be here without them. I come to the House today in that same spirit, to ask the Minister whether we will finally formally recognise the matchgirls' role in the British trade union movement and in the advancement of the rights of women and girls in Britain.

I mentioned Mr Graham, one of the MPs who met the matchgirls in Parliament. Those MPs' names are recorded in *Hansard*, but the names and voices of the matchgirls are absent, because it would be decades more before a woman first sat on these green Benches. The matchgirls' contribution to the story of new trade unionism, British labour history, and the struggle for

rights and dignity at work is too often forgotten. That history is too often overlooked; working-class stories are left untold, and are under-represented in our curriculums and our history books. It is a history that belongs to all of us, and that we all have a responsibility to keep telling when we have the chance.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very strong case for the importance of history. As my parliamentary neighbour, she will know that our part of east London has an incredibly strong labour and industrial history, but does she agree that it is so often forgotten that much of that history involved—or was led by—strong working-class women? Those women had to overcome not only class prejudice, grinding poverty and difficult social conditions, but the sexism of the time. We must do far more to shine a light on their successes and achievements, from which we all benefit today, to make sure they stay in the public memory.

Uma Kumaran: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. As neighbouring MPs, we are struggling together to get our voices heard in this place and make sure those women are recorded in history. He is a powerful advocate, and an ally in the fight for improved conditions for workers. Many descendants of the matchgirls live in my hon. Friend's constituency today, and some even work in the Tate & Lyle factory that he is proud to represent. I take this moment to pay tribute to our joint predecessor, Lady Brown of Silvertown, who held a debate about matchgirls over a decade ago.

The history I am talking about belongs to all of us, and we have a responsibility to keep telling it. I am sad to say that the Conservative Benches are completely empty this evening. Conservative Members might try to talk down our trade unions when they are in the Chamber, but we on the Labour Benches are so proud of our industrial heritage. As such, I ask the Minister whether the Government will look at how that history is taught in schools, so that working-class stories such as those of the east end matchgirls and so many others that we have heard about today are finally heard, and that these people's contribution to Britain is finally recognised.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): This is an important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend so much for securing it. The matchgirls' strike played a really important part in the whole of labour history and the struggles of women. In Durham, we had the Durham Women Against Pit Closures, who sustained the miners in their strike. They joined the picket lines and were key figures in their areas, and they are still around today—we saw them last week at the gala. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is so important that the struggles of women of the past are remembered, and that they empower women of the future?

Uma Kumaran: I could not have put it better myself. Durham is rooted in the fight for workers' rights, and I am proud that that tradition is still continuing. My hon. Friend has long been a powerful advocate for working people's rights and union voices in Britain. She has made a powerful point, and I thank her for her intervention.

As we honour these women and celebrate how far we have come, we also know that—in the words of another incredibly powerful woman—great is the work yet to be

[Uma Kumaran]

done, particularly for women in today's workforce who still struggle disproportionately with low-paid and insecure work. There are 3.9 million working women in the UK who are in severely insecure work—insecure work that creates a culture of fear and uncertainty, isolates employees, and so often leaves young women struggling financially.

Young women are more likely to work in sectors with high job insecurity. They are paid less, work fewer hours, and face last-minute shift changes. All that puts them under greater financial and emotional pressure. Young women are paid less, and are stuck in roles that are far below their potential. Over time, this chips away at their confidence, their mental health, and any sense of self-worth. When they do not feel safe to speak up about poor treatment, they start to believe that being treated unfairly is just part of the job. What is worse is that many young women do not even know their rights at work. I have worked with the Young Women's Trust, which has told me that nearly half the women it surveyed did not know their rights in insecure jobs.

This follows women throughout our lives. When women return to work after pregnancy, their wages stagnate and they are crippled by the costs of childcare. Women are still struggling today, and that must change—which is why I was so proud to be a member of the Bill Committee considering this Labour Government's Employment Rights Bill, a Committee to which the Minister was integral. We are delivering the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation, rolling back Tory attacks on workers' rights to have their voices heard at work, cracking down on fire and rehire practices, banning non-disclosure agreements that prevent people from speaking up about harassment and discrimination, delivering sick pay for 1.3 million of our lowest earners, enhancing workplace protections for pregnant women and new mothers, and taking on the gender pay gap. In all those ways, we are boosting living standards and workplace protections for millions.

Now, 137 years on from the matchgirls' strike, those landmark reforms will deliver rights and dignity to a new generation of women and working people, but we must ensure that young women know their rights and that those rights are enforced. We must therefore give the fair work agency the power and resources to do its job well and ensure that the workers most at risk of exploitation and discrimination are helped to access their rights, so that our economy can finally gain from the skills and talents of young women.

I have covered a lot of ground today, and it has been a bit of a history lesson: the story of the matchgirls, pride in Britain's working class history, pride in the story of my constituents in Stratford and Bow, and the security and dignity of young women in today's workforce. If Members want to learn more, I encourage them to visit the Upper Waiting Hall off the Committee corridor, where the Matchgirls Memorial is hosting an exhibition right here in Parliament.

I want to thank the brilliant women in my team who have helped me to put this speech together, and who have been integral to the work we have been doing to shine a light on this subject. I pay tribute to Anna Gorrell, Niamh O'Brien and Sameeah Ahmad. Let me also thank Barbara Plant of the GMB, who is in the

Gallery today, and Penny Robinson from GMB London region, who have played an integral role in helping me along my way as a Member of Parliament.

I want to end by honouring the inspiring legacy of the women and girls of the matchgirls' strike of 1888 by ensuring that the names of the strike and union committees are recorded in *Hansard*, and that their contribution to the fight for the workers' rights that we all enjoy today is remembered.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the brave actions of the matchgirls, like those of so many women trade unionists and, indeed, women throughout history, should serve as an inspiration to girls and young women in constituencies such as mine, and that they can be inspired to take action to gain the justice that they need in their lives and we need in all our lives?

Uma Kumaran: Absolutely. My hon. Friend has made a very important point.

As I was saying, I would like to ensure that the names of the strike and union committee members are recorded in *Hansard*, so that their contribution to the fight for the workers' rights that we all enjoy today is remembered. They were Eliza Martin, Mary Naulls, Louisa Beck, Kate Sclater, Julia Gambleton, Ellen Johnson, Jane Wakeling, Mary Driscoll, Jane Staines, Alice Francis, Eliza Price, Mary Cummings and Sarah Chapman, whose great-granddaughter Sam is in the Gallery and has done so much to honour the incredible legacy of the matchgirls.

There is a saying: "If you want a job done right, get a woman to do it." Never has this been truer in the fight for women's rights than for the matchgirls, and I pay tribute to these extraordinary women.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It might just help Members if I explain that because the debate started early, we have time for them to make speeches without having asked the Member in charge or the Minister for permission to do so. The hon. Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) is right to say that there is an excellent exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall.

5.55 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) for securing this important debate on a topic that needs a greater light shining on it. I find the debate similarly emotional, having worked with women and girls throughout my career to help them find their voice. The matchgirls used their voice to uplift so much more than just their own fight; they inspired a movement behind them. I do not think that the dockers would have gone on strike the following year without the inspiration of those young women and girls, so I thank my hon. Friend deeply for bringing forward this issue today. I will be incredibly brief, because she has covered everything that needs to be said in great detail.

Without the matchstick girls, we would not have the labour movement and the Labour party that we have today, so their legacy lives on strongly. I am really proud

that young people from my summer school have been in the Gallery today. I am doing my first summer school, because one thing that really mattered to me when I got elected was making sure that the door behind me was open for working-class girls and boys. What really matters is that they saw the best of this place today. They were able to witness proceedings in the Chamber, and they were able to speak to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and hear what someone who had a modest upbringing was able to achieve in life. That inspiration comes directly from the matchgirls, some of whom were as young as 13, who went on strike in a really brave move. They risked so much—their jobs, their pay and their safety—but they were not just fighting for better pay. It was about dignity, and it was about justice for their future and for us, so I thank them deeply for keeping their resistance alive.

Every time any of us speak in here, cast a vote or try to challenge an injustice, we do so not just for today, but for those who will come after us. I think particularly of the members of my summer school, some of whom are just learning about politics and what their voice can achieve. They are spending a week devising a campaign that can change their community, which is my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages.

In closing, I would like to say that if we keep fighting for fairness, we can change the world for today, but also for those who come after us. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow for securing this debate.

5.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) on securing her first Adjournment debate. She has chosen a topic extremely well and, as she highlighted, it is really important that we draw attention to the incredible courage of the women who participated in the matchgirls' strike. It is important that this House acknowledges and recognises this very important piece of British history.

As my hon. Friend touched on, these young women, many of whom were teenagers, worked in absolutely appalling conditions. We have made great advancements in working conditions in recent decades, but it was a particularly horrendous set of circumstances, even for the time. Women working at the match factory suffered from what was described as phossy jaw, a painful and disfiguring disease caused by exposure to white phosphorus. They endured 14-hour working days in overcrowded and poorly ventilated conditions, and their strike was a watershed moment. It garnered widespread public support, and ultimately forced Bryant & May to concede to their demands. It is right that the names of these courageous women are included on the parliamentary record, and I thank my hon. Friend for doing that.

As hon. Members will know, the matchgirls' strike took place a year before the more famous London dockworkers' dispute of 1889, which was so formative in the growth of trade unions, including of course today's GMB union. For the record, I draw attention to my proud membership of the GMB. The organised female workforce showed those working on the docks just what was possible when workers stand up for their rights; they showed that insecurity and unfairness at work never have to be tolerated.

The labour movement is a living, breathing one and we can take inspiration from each other, including those who have gone before us in the struggle for improved working conditions. I was pleased to be able to visit the exhibition on the Committee corridor mentioned by my hon. Friend, and I highly recommend that other Members take the time to visit it and learn more about the history of these struggles. The legacy of these women is wholly remarkable. They were part of a trade union movement that achieved so much, as we can see when we look back now: discrimination protection, paid holiday entitlement, paid maternity leave, and the right to request flexible working. So many advances have come from those beginnings.

However, as has been touched on, there are still many issues of unfairness that need to be addressed today. A recent survey by the Young Women's Trust found that 67% of women said they had faced discrimination, 37% believe they have had to endure unsafe working environments, 26% have experienced sexual harassment at work, and 50% had not received pay when off sick. I am pleased to say that we are hoping to address all those matters. My hon. Friend raised an important point about young women's awareness of their rights at work, and it is crystal clear that we need that in order to be effective in enforcing our rights. I hope that we, as a Labour Government, will be able to trumpet that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford (Leigh Ingham) spoke with great passion and made the important point that the courage that these women showed was instrumental in and inspirational to the formation of the Labour party. It was not yet formed at the time of the strike, but the growth of the trade union movement and the belief that Governments at the time were not representing the interests of working people led to the formation of the Labour Representation Committee and then the Labour party itself.

We are proud to be a part of that tradition. As a Labour Government, we want to continue the work done by the matchgirls and ensure that workplaces are safe for women. The Employment Rights Bill is helping us achieve exactly that by tackling non-disclosure agreements used to cover up sexual harassment, in a development that only this week has been called world leading. We are strengthening dismissal protections for pregnant women and new mothers, and expanding gender pay gap action plans. As has been touched on, the pivotal role that the fair work agency will have in ensuring that existing and new rights are enforced cannot be overstated.

The Employment Rights Bill also addresses insecure work such as exploitative zero-hours contracts and the heinous practice of fire and rehire. We know from research that women are more likely to be in insecure work, with an estimated 650,000 women on zero-hours contracts, compared with 519,000 men. So the struggle continues: the work never ceases but the determination of this Government to address workers' rights and improve protections in the workplace is undimmed.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow for her assistance on the Employment Rights Public Bill Committee. She has carried on her keen interest in this area, helping to push for improved rights at work, as well as rightly celebrating those who have had to fight for their rights in the past.

[Justin Madders]

The Government's plan to make work pay is delivering real change for millions of people. The work this Government are doing on our transformative agenda, which is led of course by a woman—the Deputy Prime Minister—shows that we are staying true to the spirit of the matchgirls and the trade union movement, and we are renewing our country so that it once again serves the interests of working people. The Employment Rights Bill is a generational leap forward in workers' protections, and I believe it will be one of the proudest achievements of this Labour Government.

I will turn to my hon. Friend's points on education. She will know that the Department for Education provides a statutory national curriculum that sets out the subjects and broad content to be taught in maintained schools across England. Within that framework, schools have a degree of flexibility, especially in subjects such as history. There are parts of the history curriculum that lend themselves to teaching about the matchgirls' strike. In key stage 1, there is teaching about

“the lives of significant individuals in the past who have contributed to national and international achievements”,

during which

“aspects of life in different periods”

can be taught. In key stage 3, there is the theme of ideas, political power, industry and empire in Britain between 1745 and 1901. It can also be taught as part of any local history content in the curriculum, which is particularly pertinent in my hon. Friend's area.

By coincidence, when I spoke to my parliamentary assistant just before I entered the Chamber, he told me that he was informed of the matchgirls' struggles during his education, and I hope that that is repeated up and down the country. Oak National Academy offers a resource on the matchgirls' strike for year 8 pupils, and resources are also available from the Historical Association, English Heritage and the National Archives.

Turning to my hon. Friend's points on commemoration, this country has a long and well-established tradition of commemorating its national and local individuals through statues and memorials, which serve as a long-lasting reminder of individuals and their efforts for this country and help to bridge the gap between the past and the present. As she will know, it is not normal practice for central Government to fund such monuments, but there is a long history of memorials and statues being funded by public subscription, and the Government support that approach.

Experience has shown that investors, including from the private sector, are often happy and willing to fund new memorials. Many organisations—public and private—

are rightly able, subject to the relevant permissions, to freely propose, fund, develop and deliver memorials marking a variety of incidents and historical moments in a way that they are best placed to deem appropriate and sensitive. Many successful memorials are created by a wide range of authorities and organisations, which are able to respond sensitively to the particular circumstances that they seek to commemorate.

Mary Kelly Foy: Will my hon. Friend congratulate those from Redhills in County Durham, the home of the Pitman's Parliament—and where I have my office—which has been given money for a huge refurbishment to make it into a living heritage site? The Redhills building will provide young people with an education about what happened in the past, but will also, by showing them how to live out their heritage of the struggles of the mining communities, empower them to go on and fight as the men and women in the north-east did before them. It will be open to the public in the autumn, but I want to congratulate them on the wonderful thing they have done.

Justin Madders: I am certainly happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Redhills on that achievement. If it is opening in the autumn, I hope it will be ready for when I come and visit her in her constituency. Perhaps those involved would like to work to that as a target.

As we know, a great many people and organisations are interested in establishing memorials, and as a general rule it is for those groups to work with the relevant local planning authority and other organisations to identify a suitable site and obtain the necessary planning permissions. That said, the Government provide indirect assistance through the memorial grant scheme, which is administered by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The scheme makes grants towards the VAT incurred by charities and faith groups in the construction, repair and maintenance of public memorial structures, including war memorials. The scheme has a fixed budget of £500,000 a year for this spending period. I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow to correspond with the DCMS if she wishes to seek further advice on the commemoration process.

In conclusion, I once again thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the House, and for providing the opportunity for the names of those truly courageous and inspirational matchgirls to be forever immortalised in *Hansard*. That is a fitting tribute, which my hon. Friend has delivered for this House today.

Question put and agreed to.

6.9 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Divisions

COMPETITION

That the draft Enterprise Act 2002 (Definition of Newspaper) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 26 June, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 334, Noes 54.

Division No. 270]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Charters, Mr Luke (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Abbott, Jack	Chowns, Ellie
Abrahams, Debbie	Clark, Feryal
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Coleman, Ben
Akehurst, Luke	Collier, Jacob
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Collinge, Lizzi
Ali, Tahir	Conlon, Liam
Allister, Jim	Coombes, Sarah
Anderson, Callum	Cooper, Andrew
Anderson, Fleur	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Anderson, Lee	Cooper, rh Yvette
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Costigan, Deirdre
Arthur, Dr Scott	Cox, Pam
Asato, Jess	Coyle, Neil
Asser, James	Creagh, Mary
Athwal, Jas	Creasy, Ms Stella
Atkinson, Catherine	Crichton, Torcuil
Atkinson, Lewis	Curtis, Chris
Bailey, Olivia	Daby, Janet
Baines, David	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Baker, Alex	Dalton, Ashley
Baker, Richard	Darlington, Emily
Ballinger, Alex	Davies, Jonathan
Bance, Antonia	Davies, Paul
Barron, Lee	Davies, Shaun
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	De Cordova, Marsha
Baxter, Johanna	Dean, Josh
Beales, Danny	Dearden, Kate
Beavers, Lorraine	Denyer, Carla
Bell, Torsten	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Benn, rh Hilary	Dickson, Jim
Berry, Siân	Dixon, Anna
Betts, Mr Clive	Dixon, Samantha
Billington, Ms Polly	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Blake, Olivia	Dowd, Peter
Blake, Rachel	Downie, Graeme
Bloore, Chris	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Eagle, Dame Angela
Bonavia, Kevin	Eccles, Cat
Botterill, Jade	Edwards, Lauren
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Edwards, Sarah
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Efford, Clive
Brickell, Phil	Egan, Damien
Bryant, Chris	Ellis, Maya
Burgon, Richard	Elmore, Chris
Burke, Maureen	Entwistle, Kirith
Burton-Sampson, David	Esterson, Bill
Butler, Dawn	Evans, Chris
Cadbury, Ruth	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Caliskan, Nesil	Farage, Nigel
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Farnsworth, Linsey
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Campbell, Irene	Ferguson, Mark
Campbell, Juliet	Ferguson, Patricia
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Fleet, Natalie
Champion, Sarah	Foody, Emma
Charalambous, Bambos	Fookes, Catherine
	Foster, Mr Paul
	Foxcroft, Vicky

Francis, Daniel	Madders, Justin
Frith, Mr James	Mahmood, rh Shabana
Gardiner, Barry	Martin, Amanda
Gardner, Dr Allison	Maskell, Rachael
Gelder, Anna	Mayer, Alex
Gemmell, Alan	McAllister, Douglas
German, Gill	McCarthy, Kerry
Gilbert, Tracy	McDonnell, rh John
Gill, Preet Kaur	McEvoy, Lola
Gittins, Becky	McFadden, rh Pat
Glindon, Mary	McGovern, Alison
Goldsborough, Ben	McIntyre, Alex
Gosling, Jodie	McKee, Gordon
Grady, John	McKenna, Kevin
Greenwood, Lilian	McKinnell, Catherine
Griffith, Dame Nia	McMorris, Anna
Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	McNally, Frank
Hack, Amanda	McNeill, Kirsty
Haigh, rh Louise	Miliband, rh Ed
Hamilton, Paulette	Minns, Ms Julie
Harris, Carolyn	Mishra, Navendu
Hatton, Lloyd	Mohamed, Abtisam
Hayes, Helen	Mohamed, Iqbal
Hayes, Tom	Moon, Perran
Hazelgrove, Claire	Morden, Jessica
Healey, rh John	Morgan, Stephen
Hillier, Dame Meg	Morris, Joe
Hinchliff, Chris	Mullane, Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Murphy, Luke
Hopkins, Rachel	Murray, Chris
Hughes, Claire	Murray, rh Ian (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Hume, Alison	Murray, Katrina
Huq, Dr Rupa	Myer, Luke
Hurley, Patrick	Naish, James
Hussain, Imran	Nandy, rh Lisa
Ingham, Leigh	Narayan, Kanishka
Jameson, Sally	Nash, Pamela
Jermy, Terry	Newbury, Josh
Jogee, Adam	Niblett, Samantha
Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Norris, Alex
Johnson, Kim	Norris, Dan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Jones, rh Darren	Onwurah, Dame Chi
Jones, Gerald	Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Jones, Lillian	Osborne, Tristan
Jones, Louise	Owatemi, Taiwo
Jones, Ruth	Owen, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh	Paffey, Darren
Joseph, Sojan	Patrick, Matthew
Kane, Chris	Peacock, Stephanie
Kane, Mike	Pearce, Jon
Kendall, rh Liz	Perkins, Mr Toby
Khan, Afzal	Phillips, Jess
Khan, Ayoub	Phillipson, rh Bridget
Khan, Naushabah	Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Kinnock, Stephen	Platt, Jo
Kirkham, Jayne	Pochin, Sarah
Kitchen, Gen	Pollard, Luke
Kumar, Sonia	Powell, Joe
Kumaran, Uma	Powell, rh Lucy
Kyle, rh Peter	Poynton, Gregor
Kyrke-Smith, Laura	Prinsley, Peter
Lamb, Peter	Quigley, Mr Richard
Lavery, Ian	Qureshi, Yasmin
Lewin, Andrew	Race, Steve
Lewis, Clive	Ramsay, Adrian
Lightwood, Simon	Ranger, Andrew
Lockhart, Carla	Rayner, rh Angela
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Reader, Mike
MacAlister, Josh	Reed, rh Steve
Macdonald, Alice	Reeves, rh Ellie
MacNae, Andy	

Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes

Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tice, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Aquarone, Steff
 Bennett, Alison
 Blackman, Bob
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Cane, Charlotte
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Dean, Bobby
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dyke, Sarah
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Goldman, Marie
 Heylings, Pippa
 Jarvis, Liz

Jones, Clive
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Martin, Mike
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Milne, John
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Sollom, Ian
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Cameron
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

COMPETITION

That the Enterprise Act 2002 (Amendment of Section 58 Considerations) Order 2025 (SI, 2025, No. 737), dated 26 June 2025, a copy of which was laid before this House on 26 June, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 333, Noes 54.

Division No. 271]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Tahir
 Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Anderson, Lee
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Chownes, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farage, Nigel
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry

Question accordingly agreed to.

Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Jameson, Sally
 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
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana

Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Platt, Jo
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rache

I
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair

Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tice, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Aquarone, Steff
 Bennett, Alison
 Blackman, Bob
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Cane, Charlotte
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Dean, Bobby
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dyke, Sarah
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Goldman, Marie
 Heylings, Pippa
 Jarvis, Liz

Jones, Clive
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Martin, Mike
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdoch, James
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Milne, John
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Sollom, Ian
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Cameron
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 16 July 2025

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

Credit Unions

9.30 am

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role and future of credit unions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. At the outset of this debate, I wish to place formally on the record that I am a long-standing member of the NHS credit union, an organisation I first joined as it was my workplace credit union. It provided me the opportunity to save directly from my salary before I ever had the chance to spend it. When I received a pay rise, I would increase my contributions. I remain a proud member today, now paying in by direct debit. IPSA, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, has not got quite as far as doing payroll deduction for credit unions.

The NHS credit union is now one of the largest in Scotland, but it did not start that way. It began at the Southern General hospital in Glasgow, founded by Robert Rae, a Unison branch secretary and hospital porter, to help some of the lowest-paid NHS staff—the cleaners, porters and clerical workers—to access fair, affordable finance and build financial resilience through saving. The credit union has grown remarkably since then, with more than 24,000 members, including staff and their families across NHS Scotland and parts of the north of England. Its common bond extends down to Sheffield. It now employs 18 staff and is an inspiring example of how credit unions grow not only in scale, but in purpose, deepening their role in communities and the economy.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating many of the credit unions in my constituency, where the Southern General also sits, and indeed where I trained for many years? In addition to the NHS credit union, we have the Penilee credit union, the Levern credit union, the Greater Govan credit union and of course the Pollok credit union run by local legend Jim Garrity and his wife, who have given out £70 million of loans in that time.

Does my hon. Friend further agree about the imbalance between England and Scotland? In England, dormant assets from the Bank of England can be used as capital to fund credit unions, but that is not the case in Scotland. Is that an anomaly she wishes to see changed?

Katrina Murray: My hon. Friend is reading ahead in my speech about some of the things that the Government could do to extend and support the sector.

Before joining the NHS credit union, I was a regular visitor to my local community credit union—staffed entirely by volunteers—until I moved house and moved out of the common bond. For nearly 30 years, until it sadly folded in 2017, it was a source of savings and small loans for a community that was mostly cash

based. It inhabited the premises that the Royal Bank of Scotland vacated when it closed the branch. Often, small community credit unions remain in places where commercial banks have pulled out. That closure reflects a wider challenge: some credit unions have scaled up and professionalised; others have struggled, in particular those volunteer-led credit unions serving working class and rural communities.

In that unique community-based role, credit unions can offer a vital partnership to support underserved or excluded communities, whether they are excluded by poverty or by geography. All too often, we have heard Members raise the swathes of local bank branch closures in their constituencies. Mine has been particularly affected, as commercial lending evolves and the local footprint of lenders diminishes. Credit unions have to be on both sides of that bridge: at the forefront of innovation but still able to provide traditional, accessible services in the community.

It is vital that we have an alternative to expensive credit, and credit unions have a strong role to play. When a household is financially vulnerable, one fault in their car or one failed fridge or freezer can be the difference between staying afloat and facing a downward spiral of increasingly costly credit. The resilience of having £1,000 in savings is the firewall that stops that spiral.

We have often discussed the positive impact of no-interest loans. Credit unions can play a vital part in the design and delivery of a no-interest loan offer, providing an alternative to financially vulnerable households who cannot rely on commercial lending. Pilots by Fair4All Finance show notable success when it comes to meeting emergency costs for white goods, such as a broken-down fridge, cooker or other essential household appliance. Over 70% of customers in the pilot were in the rented sector, either social housing or renting privately.

As the UK Government's own materials acknowledge, credit unions offer basic savings and loan services, but increasingly they do much more. Large credit unions such as the Glasgow credit union, which grew out of the Glasgow city council credit union, offer mortgages. They offer financial inclusion, especially for people who may not feel served or welcome in the commercial banking sector. They are not for profit, member-owned and designed to be run with communities, not over them.

Despite all its strengths, the credit union sector faces significant headwinds. I will start with regulation. In recent conversations with the NHS credit union, a number of serious concerns were raised that are shared across the sector. Most notably, the Financial Ombudsman Service has begun applying the commercial lending standards known as the CONC—consumer credit sourcebook—rules to credit unions, despite the fact that they are exempt from those by law. The use of “good industry practice” by the ombudsman without transparency or a legislative basis has left credit unions exposed to a growing number of frivolous or opportunistic claims, often driven by predatory claims management companies.

When credit unions have challenged that with the Financial Conduct Authority, they have been referred back to the ombudsman, creating a regulatory echo chamber that shuts down scrutiny and ignores the fact that the CONC was never intended for mutuals. A superficial

[*Katrina Murray*]

search of decisions of the ombudsman using “credit union” as a search term shows that it is the same credit union names that come up. For each case where a decision is listed, there are many more going through the process, with many cases being reopened, and it is an overwhelming burden for these small organisations to process them.

This matters, because it introduces risk and cost into organisations that exist to serve, not to profit. It creates uncertainty, stifles growth and undermines the Government’s ambition to support the co-operative and mutual sector. I urge the Minister to engage with those concerns and ensure regulatory clarity that supports, rather than stifles, credit unions.

Regulation is not the only challenge. Despite some growth, credit union penetration in Great Britain remains low. Just 4% of adults hold a credit union savings account, compared with 25% in Northern Ireland and 73% in the Republic of Ireland. While membership is rising, the number of credit unions continues to fall. To thrive, credit unions need to modernise. Many want to expand their digital offer, working with fintech providers to offer budgeting apps and even current accounts, but innovation costs money. Small unions—especially those still run by volunteers—lack the capacity to upgrade systems or train staff.

I welcome the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, which gave unions more freedom to offer services such as hire purchase and insurance distribution, but more must follow. I support the proposals to allow investment in credit union service organisations, which could help unions to share IT, compliance and admin systems.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate; many of us have been involved with credit unions for a number of years. She has spoken about the diversification of credit unions. Last night, the Chancellor said she is trying to encourage more people into market-based savings products. Does the hon. Lady agree that credit unions could embrace that concept, provided that they have the capacity and willingness to do it? That would allow everyone involved with credit unions to benefit over the longer term.

Katrina Murray: The Chancellor’s speech last night was very timely. Credit unions are particularly well placed to benefit thoroughly from that if they have support, and I hope the Minister will expand on that. We need to update the law in Northern Ireland so that the strength of the credit union movement there is able to match progress that has been made in GB.

The perception that credit unions are the poor man’s bank is a harmful stereotype that limits the sector’s growth. Credit unions are for everyone and should be seen as an act not only of charity but of good sense. They are member-owned, community-rooted and democratic. This is finance as it should be.

Credit unions are more than just lenders; they are educators, community builders and the agents of financial justice. But they are at risk from burdensome regulation, under-investment and a lack of understanding at the highest level of Government.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She has mentioned financial burdens a couple of times. The average credit union has fewer than seven employees, and is run nearly entirely by volunteers. Smaller credit unions are under the same dual regulatory burden as larger ones, and have to report to both the FCA and the Prudential Regulation Authority. Does she think that there should be proportionality, and that lighter regulation for smaller credit unions would give them the capacity to innovate?

Katrina Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his helpful intervention. We need a joined-up approach to our support for the sector’s unique role. We must particularly support small credit unions with few staff members who are predominantly volunteers, because when it gets too much, volunteers may move away and services may close. We need regulatory reform, but we also need practical backing so that credit unions can modernise, merge where appropriate and scale sustainably.

I repeat my call to the Minister: please investigate the regulatory ambiguity that credit unions face, and particularly the application of the CONC by the Financial Ombudsman Service. I ask him to please consider measures to strengthen, not weaken, one of the most community-focused financial tools that we have. Let us not allow credit unions to wither on the vine. Let us invest in their future and, by doing so, in a more inclusive, more resilient economy for all.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members to bob if they wish to speak.

9.43 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I commend and thank my Gaelic cousin, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray), for setting the scene so very well. It is also good to see the Minister in his place. He is certainly becoming a regular in Westminster Hall—he is here almost as much as me.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Not quite!

Jim Shannon: That was meant as a compliment, by the way. I look forward to the Minister’s contribution. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), brings a wealth of knowledge to the debate from his previous employment. I know that the debate will be greatly enhanced by the contributions of all.

I have long been an advocate of credit unions, and I have been thinking about how long I have been involved with them. The credit union in Greyabbey was run by the Orange lodge, which was the instigator. It made its hall available and managed the credit union under the auspices of credit unions elsewhere as the governing body.

I became involved to support credit unions and to start an account for my three boys. Only last week, I realised that moneys in that account had been gathering for some time and had been sitting in the transfer, because the account was transferred from Greyabbey to

Newtownards credit union. My three boys have a bonus coming, which I will let them know about one of these days. I hope they will not spend it on wasteful living, but whatever they do, they do.

The credit union instilled in my boys and in me from an early age the value of saving and of ensuring that the saver can afford to pay back loans. That is the great thing about the credit union; we can put money in and borrow money out, but it is controlled in a way that means someone can live and borrow at a rate they can repay. That is a lesson that I learned from my mum and dad—of course, as we all learn from our mums and dads—and that has stayed with me these many years.

It is said that every pound is a prisoner to a Scots woman or man, but I think it is equally a prisoner to some of us in Northern Ireland; we are no different. As the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch said, there has been substantial growth of credit unions in Northern Ireland, particularly in membership and assets. Membership has doubled in the past decade, with 34% of the population now saving with a credit union, which is a massive figure.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): It was good to hear the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) mention Northern Ireland. I, too, am a member of the credit union, and I have a savings account for my little boy as well. Does my hon. Friend agree that in Northern Ireland, where so many people bank with the credit union, the numbers could grow if the credit union were able to do more? The legislation in Northern Ireland is quite antiquated, and we are only able to bank with loans and savings. Does he agree that we should learn from what happens in GB and address it from there?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The 34% growth of the credit union in Northern Ireland indicates its success. She is correct that there is certainly more it could do.

Total assets have passed £1.9 billion, having increased by 1.6% in the third quarter of 2022. Lending is also strong, with the loan book increasing by 8.3% year on year. Membership of credit unions in Northern Ireland stands at 571,000. To put that in context, Northern Ireland's population is 1.96 million. That is a success story. It is lovely to tell everyone about what we are doing in Northern Ireland, and the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch was generous in her comments and acknowledged the good stuff we do.

The figures represent a 30% increase over the past 10 years. With the rise in membership comes the need to ensure that the institution is financially safe and sound, which is always important. I am thankful for the credit unions in my constituency; I can think of three straight away. The one in Kircubbin, which took over the premises of the Northern bank, or Danske bank, is an offshoot of the credit union in Portaferry, which I have supported the whole way through. There is also an active credit union in Newtownards that provides a wonderful service to get people on the road to financial stability. That is what credit unions do: they help people to save and ensure that they borrow and spend their money wisely.

There are over 2,200 credit unions providing ethical financial services to more than 1.5 million people, holding £2.71 billion in assets, £2.33 billion in savings and

£1.83 billion in lending. Their differences mean that they can lend responsibly with good rates to those who are classified as excluded communities, with 31% of the community development credit union pathfinder members being “cash-strapped families”, and 21% falling into the “hard-up” or “challenging circumstances” categories. Credit unions are often the only fair option for such individuals and it is really good to have them on board.

Some 56% of credit unions offer payroll savings, and “save as you borrow” schemes turn 67% of previous non-savers into regular savers. Prize-linked savings also incentivise saving behaviour. I understand that in this day and age it is always that wee bit harder to save money. My mum and dad instilled in me a saving culture at an early age, and I remember saving from a very early age. Not everybody can buy their house today, as they perhaps would have whenever I was younger and houses were much cheaper. Credit unions like Serve and Protect offer dividends of 3.5% to 4.5%, returning £3 million to members, while for every £1 invested, the Clockwise credit union generates £11 to £19 in social value. Credit unions reduce financial leakage and build community wealth. I am sold on credit unions. I think they are great and I hope my speech has illustrated that. I think everybody else will say the same thing.

I will conclude, as I am conscious that others want to speak and that time will be limited. I am a strong advocate for credit unions simply because they work. Let us support and encourage them. As my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) said, let us try to do more so that we can bring them along. I encourage reasonable regulation that allows the freedom to spend locally and not to be drawn into more centralised investment—if someone borrows from a credit union, they are more likely to spend their money in the local area of their credit union, and more likely to borrow or buy from the area where they live—and I know that the Government, and the Minister in particular, would like to advocate for and support that.

I wish my local credit unions every success as they continue to help people to learn financial principles and responsibilities while sowing deeply into the local economy. That can only be a good thing, so it is a pleasure to speak today about credit unions. I could wax lyrical until about 10.28 am, but you would not let me, Mr Twigg—others will do that for their own constituencies.

9.52 am

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for securing this important debate about credit unions, as they play a crucial role in providing affordable financial services and promoting economic inclusion, particularly among those underserved by the traditional banks. As co-operative, member-owned institutions, credit unions focus on servicing their members' needs rather than maximising profits.

In my constituency, we are fortunate to benefit from the Wolverhampton City credit union, which serves over 10,000 members, manages more than £4.1 million in savings and has issued over £3.7 million in loans. It provides vital support for working people, pensioners, young savers and those on all incomes, by offering

[Mrs Sureena Brackenridge]

accessible credit and encouraging responsible saving. This helps families to avoid the traps of high-cost lenders and builds financial security across Wolverhampton North East.

What truly sets Wolverhampton City credit union apart is its commitment to practical, member-focused initiatives. For example, its school uniform savings scheme is a simple but powerful way to help families to prepare for the financial pressure of each school year by encouraging parents to save small amounts regularly. The scheme ensures that they are not forced into debt when faced with the up-front cost of uniforms. That is just one of many community-driven initiatives that the credit union runs; others include budgeting advice, payroll savings partnerships with local employers, and junior saving clubs, all aimed at fostering long-term financial wellbeing.

Despite the great work of credit unions, including Wolverhampton City credit union and others across the country, the sector in the United Kingdom has not reached the scale seen in other countries such as the United States, Canada and Ireland, where credit unions are more mainstream and serve a much larger proportion of the population. For example, the US Navy Federal credit union alone serves over 14 million members, showing what is possible when credit unions are given the room to grow.

One structural barrier to growth is the common bond requirement, which restricts the potential membership base of credit unions. While the principle of shared connection, whether geographical or associational, is sensible, the current rules limit geographical common bonds to areas with up to 3 million potential members, making it impossible to operate a credit union that covers all of London or the midlands, for example.

I therefore welcome the Government's current consultation on reforming the common bond rules, which could allow credit unions in Great Britain to serve wider geographies and expand sustainably. That reform, alongside investment in digital infrastructure and proportionate regulation, will certainly benefit credit unions so that they can fulfil their potential. Credit unions tackle financial exclusion, supporting working people and strengthening communities, so I call for practical reforms and tangible support.

9.55 am

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for securing the debate and for her speech highlighting the importance of credit unions, both now and in the future.

As financial co-operative organisations, credit unions are a force for good in many communities and workplaces. They exist to support their members, not to maximise profit. They encourage savings and provide financial education and affordable loans, all the while circulating the money within their membership communities, which are bound together through a common bond, often based on a workplace or location. More than ever, it is vital for that type of organisation to be available in communities that are currently struggling with the cost of living crisis and are vulnerable to predatory credit and debt organisations. It is the place of responsible

Government to support these organisations and their efforts to promote financial inclusion, wellbeing and stability.

As already mentioned, there is variety and diversity in credit unions. There are large credit unions, such as Scotwest credit union in my constituency, which is one of the largest in the UK. It has over 36,000 members and, as of September 2024, a loan book of £68.9 million. It describes its mission as being focused on broadening financial inclusion, supporting members' financial wellbeing and security, and strengthening local communities, all while promoting environmental sustainability through responsible lending and consumption. There are also local, community-based credit unions, such as Ruchill credit union, which was set up in my constituency, and workplace and employment-based credit unions, such as the Transport credit union in my constituency.

The diverse range of credit unions offers responsible lending while promoting co-operative values. That is why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch mentioned, it is concerning to hear reports that the Financial Ombudsman Service, which is responsible for resolving disputes between financial institutions and their consumers, is using commercial lending rules to make legally binding judgments on credit unions.

The sector has raised concerns that credit unions are now being held to the Financial Conduct Authority's consumer credit sourcebook rules, even though they do not legally apply to credit unions. As our credit unions are already under pressure and often based in low-income communities, that weakens the legal certainty and operational viability of the sector at a time when it is more necessary than ever.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate my close friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray), on securing this important debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) made a powerful point about what happens in communities when credit unions go bust because they face huge regulatory burdens. My town, Redditch, has lost three credit unions over the last decade, meaning that because people cannot access financial support from the mainstream banks, they fall prey to speculative and very high-interest financial products from companies that should know better. Credit unions protect some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Martin Rhodes: I agree that although we need robust regulation, we need to ensure that it is supportive of credit unions, particularly at a time when many communities need them more than ever and the challenge of organisations that seek to exploit vulnerable communities is very much at the fore.

Credit unions as institutions act as important protections against pernicious credit and debt systems such as buy now, pay later schemes. Since 2020, the market for buy now, pay later has more than quadrupled. There are reports of many in the UK getting into unsustainable debt because of balancing multiple buy now, pay later services to pay for essential groceries and other supplies. Unlike the work of credit unions, buy now, pay later schemes can use the cost of living crisis to market aggressively, targeting vulnerable consumers. They are often debt traps for the worst off in society.

While I support the Government's planned new rules, which will ensure that buy now, pay later users will gain stronger rights and clearer protections, we must also do more to promote positive alternatives such as credit unions. These not-for-profit organisations exist to support their members, not to extract profit. They are local financial institutions that provide responsible lending and financial health advice, and they are safely regulated. In a world with loan sharks preying on the vulnerable, and tech companies creating debt prisons through unregulated consumer debt, we must support credit unions. If we do not, not just individuals but our economy and society will be worse off without them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. If Members can keep their speeches to five or six minutes—we are doing okay—then everyone will get a chance to speak before the wind-ups.

10.1 am

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for securing this important debate. I am delighted to join colleagues to speak about the essential and valuable role that credit unions play for many of my constituents in Glasgow North East.

Across Britain, non-profit credit unions provide financial services to their members, but they are much more than just financial institutions; they are community pillars. Historically associated with increasing access to banking facilities and supporting those who are excluded from other financial institutions, credit unions continue to adopt a community-first approach to the services they provide.

Multiple credit unions are accessed by my constituents, including New Easterhouse, Ruchill and Carntyne credit unions. All those unions have shown time and again how valuable they are. They provide affordable loans and savings options to families and individuals who might otherwise face challenges in accessing mainstream banking. They help individuals gain confidence in managing their money, building savings and accessing credit, often on much fairer terms than banks.

However, this is not just about money; credit unions are about dignity, empowerment and opportunity. One thing they are known for is loans. For many, they are a safe, ethical and affordable alternative to high-interest payday lenders and loan sharks. I know from stories that constituents have shared with me how those types of loans prey on poorer members of society and trap vulnerable people in a cycle of debt. Credit unions, on the other hand, operate on a simple but powerful principle: they are owned by and exist for their members. In the case of loans, that results in annual percentage rates being capped at fairer rates compared with the alternative. More generally, it means that every pound saved or borrowed stays within the community, helping people manage their money and improve their lives.

It is unsurprising that the number of credit union members has grown in the last decade. With that said, the sector is still much smaller than in countries such as Ireland, the USA and Canada. That presents an exciting

opportunity for it to grow. It is by listening to voices in the sector that we can understand what can and should be done to support growth efforts.

I am supportive of the Association of British Credit Unions' call to expand the common bond requirement so that more people can be served by a credit union. I am also interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on the potential benefits of legislating for auto-enrolment payroll savings, which could be a great source of empowerment for people.

Credit unions are a force for good in our society. We should work with them to unlock financial opportunities for our constituents. Ultimately, supporting credit unions is about supporting people. I hope that together we can ensure that the credit unions in Glasgow North East and across the UK continue to be a beacon of hope and fairness for all our communities.

10.5 am

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on securing this important debate.

At a time when we are all looking for practical ways to support our communities, a simple but powerful action stands out to me in relation to credit unions: for public bodies to support credit unions not just by promoting them, but by banking with them. When I was leader of Stirling council, I saw at first hand how prudent financial management rightly led councils to place the bulk of their reserves with established banks and large institutions. That approach is, of course, sound and responsible, but allocating even a very small proportion of those funds—small by council standards—to a credit union could have a disproportionately positive impact on the credit union and the community it serves.

Credit unions are community-based, member-owned financial institutions that offer affordable loans, promote savings and provide an ethical alternative to high-cost lenders. I have seen their real-world impact in my constituency, where they help families to avoid exploitative borrowing, build resilience and stay afloat during hard times. However, many credit unions operate at the margins of the financial system and struggle to scale. Local authority deposits, even modest ones, would help with the stability and capital that credit unions need to grow, and would send a powerful signal to the public that credit unions are valued, supported and used by institutions. Depositing local authority funds in a credit union could also deliver modest returns while maintaining strong safeguards for public funds, because deposits are protected under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. It would be a secure, responsible option that also delivered social value.

Every pound placed in a credit union is a pound that can be recycled into low-interest loans for local people and small businesses. The money does not disappear into a distant financial centre; it stays local and supports the very communities that we are elected to serve. This approach would align with many local authorities' wider goals: it would help to tackle poverty, support inclusive economic development and contribute to building community wealth. It would also align with wider goals across the public sector, including in the UK Government.

[Chris Kane]

I urge the Minister to consider what more central Government can do to overcome the barriers to this practice in the public sector and by local authorities, including through updated guidance, best practice examples and formal recognition of the social value that local authority deposits in credit unions can generate. We need to look at the barriers to public bodies placing money in credit unions without changing the broader scope of member ownership. Even very modest deposits in credit unions—modest by departmental or council standards—can work harder and go further when invested locally. By supporting credit unions, we invest in people's lives, in communities and in the resilience of our local economies.

10.8 am

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for securing this important debate. I declare an interest: I am excited to begin working with the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd on forming the new all-party parliamentary group on credit unions, which will meet for the first time in September.

We have heard a lot today about why we need credit unions. Now more than ever, it is important that people have access to affordable loans and do not get trapped by payday loans, expensive hire purchase or even predatory loan sharks. Credit unions are a fantastic example of people working together to make finance more accessible.

Many credit unions welcome volunteers. My very good friend Catriona Currie, along with Nancy, volunteered for the credit union in Stevenston, in my constituency, for many years—I think more than 20. Nancy was a founding member of the local credit union and was key in making sure that the service thrived and survived. Until covid, they provided a service every Saturday morning in Stevenston library. Catriona and Nancy knew most members who came in and made sure they had set up the account they needed, including Christmas savings, which many people relied on to get good toys and so on at Christmas time. They often helped with a range of other issues outwith the remit of the credit union. Savers knew and trusted the service provided in their community and very much relied on the credit union.

The Association of British Credit Unions describes its vision of credit unions becoming “the primary source of affordable, high quality and ethical financial services for the people of Great Britain.”

As we know, many people on low incomes are often excluded from accessing a range of bank accounts. Credit unions can ensure that people can access a degree of financial freedom, allowing them greater control of their finances and a say in how the union is run. It is vital that we encourage membership and ensure that people are aware of this excellent local service.

The 1st Alliance community bank in Kilwinning, in my constituency, provides those excellent services to my constituents and the wider west of Scotland. It offers a range of much-needed facilities, including savings, low loan rates, standing orders and online services. I look forward to hearing from other Members and the Minister about what we can do to further support credit unions.

10.10 am

Kenneth Stevenson (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for bringing this important matter to the attention of the House.

In my constituency we are lucky to be served by organisations such as the North Coatbridge credit union and the Newmains credit union. These are not distant financial giants; they are member-owned, community-run mutuals that put people before profit. For decades, they have quietly gone about their work, offering people a safe place to save, fair and affordable loans, and practical help with budgeting. They make a world of difference to someone who might otherwise be driven into the arms of high-cost lenders or high-cost credit cards. Credit unions are run by people who know your name, who listen, and who guide you through difficult times, whether by helping with a loan for urgent car repairs or assisting a family with a funeral grant in their time of grief.

More widely, credit unions circulate money locally. It is not siphoned off to faraway shareholders; it stays in the community, helping neighbours and strengthening the local economy. Credit unions are democratically run on a one member, one vote basis, so every decision is about what is best for the community, not what is best for a balance sheet. At a time when many face barriers to accessing mainstream banks, credit unions are a lifeline. They offer financial inclusion, ethical lending and real human support.

We must not take credit unions for granted. They need our support. They need us to raise awareness of them so more people know they exist. They need partnerships with local employers to set up payroll deduction schemes, helping workers save effortlessly each month. And they need help modernising their digital services, because in this day and age we should be able to access these great community services from our phones as easily as we can from a high street bank.

When credit unions succeed, they are not just about finances; they provide dignity, security and opportunity to people in Airdrie and Shotts and across North Lanarkshire. Let us celebrate them, talk about them and, most importantly, use them. Together, we will build a stronger, fairer community for all.

10.13 am

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch East (Katrina Murray) for securing this very important debate.

I must give some credit to my friend, Councillor Beth Rowland, at Wokingham borough council for helping with some of the detail for this speech. Beth has worked in the credit union sector in Berkshire for over 20 years, and it is unlike any other job in finance. People like Beth do not go to work for credit unions to make big money—not for any company, and certainly not for themselves. Instead, it is about dedication to the local community, a desire to help people, and an uncompromising desire to be a force for good in the world for those who need a bit of extra support. That is what drives people like Beth who make a career out of working in this industry. That speaks to Liberal Democrat values

instinctively. I thank Beth, not only for helping me with this speech but more importantly for her long record of public service.

In my constituency of Wokingham, we are lucky to be able to call upon the services of Boom community bank. When I was leader of the local council, we began a relationship with Boom. It provides non-profit finance and banking services to more than 12,000 members, not only across Berkshire but across west Sussex, Surrey, parts of Oxfordshire, Hampshire, London and Buckinghamshire. It is not traditional high street banking. For many of its 12,000 members, Boom provides a lifeline service. Credit unions certainly provide loans if people need one and a place to store savings safely, but their real value does not come from offering those financial basics. It comes from the continuous support that is on offer.

Members of credit unions are often in more vulnerable positions than the average high street banking customer. That could mean that they are simply more financially vulnerable and consequently unable to access more traditional forms of credit. However, it can also mean they are vulnerable in other ways. For example, they might, for whatever reason, struggle to navigate technical language and complex arrays of products, or need extra help to create the structure in their lives that allows them to put money away regularly for a rainy day. Access to a friendly face who is on their side, and not looking to make a profit from them but willing to talk about their needs and goals, is invaluable for such people. Frankly, it is the kind of community support that we are sadly losing in our society as it becomes more distant from us as individuals over time. The people I have described cannot afford to lose the service of a credit union.

One case study on Boom's website refers to a man who was experiencing a debt crisis, with some of his loans imposing an eye-watering 1,295% annual interest burden. I am not sure how we as a society are supposed to read that as anything other than a profound failure. How did we ever allow that kind of exploitation to happen? The man that Boom refers to as John, although that is not his real name of course, could not refinance his debt on the traditional market; he was simply too high-risk. However, the credit union sector was there to help. John's monthly costs were more than halved and within three years he was debt-free.

It is hard to imagine a version of John's story that ends well without the support of a credit union and without its willingness to identify a person in genuine need, and to offer help, support and security. Traditional finance viewed John first as a target for high-profit, personally crushing credit and then as a risk—someone to be avoided, in case he could not swim in the choppy waters that it had stirred up for him. Instead, the credit union sector viewed him as a person. I do not know John, but I am certain that that was more valuable to him than just the money on offer.

We know that membership of credit unions is rising, having increased by a third between 2014 and 2024. Over the same period, however, the number of credit unions fell by about the same proportion. That can partly be explained by smaller credit unions—in 2023, the average credit union employed only seven people—seeking to merge and become larger organisations, in order to streamline their operations, but it must be a

cause for alarm whenever we see demand rise and supply fall at the same time. What are we doing wrong on a policy level, such that this vital industry is not growing, even though people clearly value it? I ask the Minister to ponder that question carefully.

In bringing my remarks to a close, I make a plea to the Government: bring forward a fair banking Act, which is something we have been calling for for some time. Financial exclusion in the UK is worse than in most other comparable economies. High-cost lenders—or worse, loan sharks—prey on that to target some of the most vulnerable. In 2022, an estimated 1 million people turned to illegal lenders. When people need help, there is usually a credit union they can turn to, but too many people do not realise that. With better legislation, they need not be put in that position in the first place. A fair banking Act could improve the lives of millions and could also help ethical lenders such as credit unions to deliver vital support. Will the Minister say whether the Government might consider introducing such an Act?

10.20 am

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): It is always a great pleasure to serve under you, Mr Twigg, and I apologise for nearly knocking you over on my bicycle first thing this morning.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I forgive you.

Mark Garnier: Thank goodness I was called to speak after all.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on securing this debate. It has been fascinating to listen to all the great words used to describe credit unions. We have heard them described as lifeline services, community builders and financial educators that help to get people on to the road to financial stability, and as engines of economic inclusion. There is no doubt about it: credit unions are truly remarkable institutions. At their heart, they represent, in its simplest form, how and why the financial sector drives growth. They are the first rung on the ladder in the financial system. They take the savings entrusted by members, brought together by a common bond, pool those funds and turn them into everything from very simple loans, to pay for school uniforms, as we have heard, all the way up to mortgages. Those loans often go to individuals and families who would otherwise find the doors to mainstream financial institutions closed. Credit unions' commitment to financial inclusion and community values are an example that many parts of the wider financial sector could definitely learn from.

I am pleased to note that over the past decade, under the previous Government, credit unions have consolidated and grown. In Great Britain, the number of members rose by a third between 2014 and 2024. More than 2.3 million people are members, up from 1.5 million in 2014, so while the number of credit unions in operation has decreased, that reflects strategic mergers that have created larger, more resilient and more professional institutions. Their asset base has also expanded—it now totals nearly £5 billion in the UK—and their lending book stands at £1.83 billion as of the fourth quarter of 2024. The impact of credit unions stretches far beyond the balance sheet. Studies show that £1 invested into a credit union can translate to between £11 and £19 of

[Mark Garnier]

value generated in the wider community, yet despite these strengths, it is clear that further growth is being held back.

A major barrier to growth is a geographical common bond, as we have heard one or two Members mention. That prevents credit unions from serving large city regions such as London, the west midlands or Greater Manchester as a single entity. I welcome the Government's publication of a call for evidence last year on common bond reform. However, the call for evidence is unclear about the Government's position on expanding the geographical common bond, so I would definitely welcome the Minister's views on raising the cap from 3 million to at least 10 million people, as called for by the Building Societies Association and others. That would not only unblock the growth of credit unions in major urban areas, but allow for strategic mergers and expansions, helping the sector to respond to local need at scale.

From my own meetings with the credit union industry, I know that consolidation has improved professionalism, resilience and standards across the board. However, to truly unlock growth potential, we must enable greater investment into credit union service organisations. It is positive that the Prudential Regulation Authority recently clarified that credit unions can own these service organisations. However, further Government support, especially relaxing ownership and capital restrictions, could unleash digital transformation and help credit unions to modernise their services.

I note and appreciate that the Minister has also asked the Financial Conduct Authority and the PRA to publish a report on the mutuals landscape by the end of this year. That is a welcome intervention, but can the Minister confirm whether it will deliver a root and branch review of credit union legislation, and in particular the Credit Union Act 1979? As we have heard, credit unions in the USA, Ireland and Canada have flourished under a very different legal framework, which I hope the Government will scrutinise and learn from. I also hope the review can look at central facilities. By pooling liquidity through a central facility, credit unions could manage risk more effectively and provide an even stronger backbone for local lenders. Similarly, do the Government have appetite to allow credit unions to access Bank of England reserve accounts and the sterling monetary framework, bringing them into line with other financial institutions of a similar size?

I will draw my words to a close in a second, but first I gently remind the Minister that the Government were elected last year—quite wholeheartedly—on a pledge to double the size of the co-operative and mutual sector. It is the morning after the night before, when members of the Treasury team are no doubt nursing hangovers from a fantastic dinner last night at the Mansion House. It is notable that during the Chancellor's Mansion House speech, which I think was very much welcomed by the City of London, the co-operative and mutual sector was not mentioned. I would be grateful if the Minister put that wrong right by addressing these points.

All the evidence suggests that credit unions are a potential growth engine for communities. By introducing a modern legal framework, progressive common bond reform and investment into service organisations, we can help this sector to continue to flourish.

10.26 am

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I start obviously by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) on securing this important debate and speaking so powerfully about the role of credit unions. The interest in this topic, particularly on this side of the House and for some parts of the country, shows how important credit unions are in supporting individuals and communities. The same commitment and motivations underpin the Government's strong support for credit unions and the mutuals sector more widely, as the Opposition spokesperson just mentioned.

As a country, we have a rich history of mutuality. In 1775, Richard Ketley founded the world's first ever building society in Birmingham, and that continues in the west midlands today, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge). The modern co-operative movement was also British-born, albeit slightly further north, in Rochdale.

Today we are here to discuss credit unions, which are deeply embedded in our local communities. Everyone in this Chamber passes on our thanks to Beth, who the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) talked about so powerfully in his remarks. Before I turn to the important points that colleagues have raised specifically about credit unions, let me say a few words about the Government's strong support for the mutual sector, as the Opposition spokesperson has raised it.

Mutuals have a footprint in high streets around the country and they provide jobs. They strengthen their communities, and they support people to build savings habits and access affordable credit and mortgages. Growth in the mutual sector means growth that touches all levels of society, aiding economic participation in the broadest possible sense, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) set out. That is why the Government have committed to doubling the size of the sector.

I am glad that the Opposition spokesperson has been paying attention to all the Government's commitments and the change that we were elected to bring. In south Wales, building society branches are expanding in some areas, even as banks are stepping back. We have already begun to make our commitment a reality, not least when it comes to credit unions, whose lending is growing, even though, as several hon. Members have mentioned, the number of credit unions has fallen in recent years.

In her November Mansion House speech, the Chancellor announced new measures to support the growth of credit unions and mutuals. The shadow Minister would be keen to have the Chancellor give an even longer speech at every Mansion House, but she cannot reiterate all her greatest hits at every single one. We did not let people away till after 10 o'clock last night as it was, and there is such a thing as decent human behaviour. The measures included publishing a call for evidence on the potential to reform common bonds for credit unions in Great Britain, asking the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority to produce a report on the mutuals landscape by the end of this year, which is now well under way, and welcoming the

establishment of an industry-led mutual and co-operative business council, which has a live workstream specifically exploring the role of the credit union sector.

The common bond is a unique feature of a credit union. It fosters trust and accountability among members. However, there has been a long-standing request from the sector that the Government review the common bond, and that was reiterated by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East this morning. That is why we put out the call for evidence. I thank everyone who fed into that process, including individual credit unions, trade associations and some Members here today. We are now engaging with the sector and the regulators on those responses and are considering next steps. The Government and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury will provide an update on that work in due course.

More widely, all Members who have spoken today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Kenneth Stevenson), recognise the role that credit unions play in achieving financial inclusion, more broadly considered. They provide access to financial services and products and allow people to participate in the economy.

The hon. Member for Wokingham asked about the long-standing calls for a fair banking Act. I gently note that there was little progress on that in the five years in which the Liberal Democrats were part of the UK Government. That tends to get slightly forgotten. When I spend time here in Westminster Hall—as was pointed out earlier, I do spend a lot of time here—I am told about long-standing Liberal Democrat policy in a whole range of areas.

The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that our focus is on taking forward a financial inclusion strategy under the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. I know she will want to work with my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) in her new role—I congratulate her on it. That work is being supported by a committee of consumer groups and industry representatives, including Fair4All Finance, which has a key role in supporting the sector. That strategy will be published later this year and will seek to tackle a range of barriers facing individuals in accessing financial services, including banking and affordable credit. More importantly, it will consider what more the industry and the Government can do to address these issues.

The financial inclusion committee has recommended that the financial inclusion strategy focus on helping people build an emergency savings buffer—a pot of money that could help them replace a household appliance or repair a car. One area we are exploring is payroll saving schemes, which several Members have called for, which are offered by employers to staff. In my day job of dealing with the pensions landscape, people are talking about learning from the experience of automatic enrolment, and a number of credit unions already deliver such schemes. We talked about the role of a particular credit union earlier.

The Government are directly encouraging those on lower incomes to save via help to save, introduced under the previous Government. Although the scheme has been effective for those who use it, I think we would all say that take-up has been low. In April, eligibility was

extended to all universal credit claimants in work, meaning that about 3 million people will be able to benefit from the scheme.

More widely, we are continuing to monitor the availability of affordable credit as part of that financial inclusion strategy work. The Treasury engages regularly to understand the current barriers faced by the mutual sector and credit unions specifically, and to identify opportunities for growth. There have been several discussions about credit union service organisations. That is an important development. The PRA is consulting on how we can facilitate that, given its role in the growth of the sector.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked about growth. He is obviously well aware that the policy area is devolved to Northern Ireland, but he can see the legislation that is being progressed here. We are always happy to engage with our opposite numbers in the Northern Ireland Executive, and we do indeed do so. I join him in celebrating the growth in Northern Ireland. He might not like the progress on the legislative side, but on actual lending and members' engagement, those of us in other parts of the United Kingdom have a lot to learn.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) asked wider questions about bank finance regulation—not least about buy now, pay later. I hope he is happy that the legislation that has long been promised was introduced just a few weeks ago. A few Members who are taking part in this morning's debate were present in that Committee.

More widely, hon. Members rightly said that credit unions have a different regime from mainstream providers when it comes to regulation. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch that we are really clear about the differential requirements, including capital requirements and exemptions from consumer credit regulations. We maintain those different regimes for good reasons: we want a proportionate system for different parts of our financial sector.

My hon. Friend has consistently raised concerns about the Financial Ombudsman Service's approach to handling certain complaints against credit unions, and about the volume of complaints more generally. Although they are a very small part of the Financial Ombudsman Service's work, I appreciate that is not how it feels for the credit unions wrestling with them. We have heard those complaints, and we recognise the risk of a chilling effect on credit union lending. That is why we have acted. In the March regulation action plan, the Government announced that the Economic Secretary would lead a review of the FOS to examine whether it is delivering on its role.

Today's debate is well timed. Yesterday the Chancellor launched a consultation on a significant package of policy proposals. That will run until October and I encourage all Members to engage with it. As the Chancellor set out at the Mansion House, the Financial Ombudsman Service will be returned to its original role as a simple, impartial dispute-resolution service, which quickly and effectively deals with complaints. Directly addressing the central point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch, the Government propose to reform the legislative framework that the FOS operates in to stop it acting as a quasi-regulator. We will take steps to provide greater regulatory coherence with the FCA. Consumers and industry will

[Torsten Bell]

benefit from a more consistent and predictable regulatory environment, and I encourage my hon. Friend and credit unions with recent exposure to and experience of the ombudsman to feed into the consultation over the summer.

In conclusion, the Government recognise the important role that credit unions play in our economy: helping individuals, strengthening communities, and as a major player in any attempt to make our society and economy genuinely financially inclusive. I see that in Swansea, not least in the work of the Celtic credit union. We remain absolutely committed to supporting the growth of the credit union sector now and into the future. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in today's important debate.

10.35 am

Katrina Murray: I feel honoured to wind up the debate. I thank all colleagues who have contributed to a thoughtful and constructive debate.

We heard that credit unions are not just financial institutions; they are community institutions. They offer dignity, access and inclusion where commercial lenders often do not and, as the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) reminded us, credit unions step in when commercial-led banks step out. From local volunteer-run unions to large workplace models, such as the NHS credit union, their role in tackling financial exclusion, supporting resilience and anchoring community finance cannot be overstated.

As we have discussed—I very much welcome the Minister's comments—we might be in a place to remove the burden of over-regulation and inappropriate regulation arising from outdated perceptions. I thank the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Kenneth Stevenson) for reminding us that credit unions will take the risk to lend to people, to their members, because they know them. They know the financial situation that those people are in. That does not necessarily meet an affordability question from a spreadsheet. The importance of the role of small, local organisations is that money will stay in the community. A risk that might have been seen as too big a risk by a wider organisation is not, because everything is done locally.

On the devolved nature of Northern Ireland, I am sure that all the parties there are on the same page on credit unions. I hope that, now we realise that something has been missed and that we need to make that reform, we will be in a good place for it to happen.

Let us ensure that the sector not only survives but thrives. We have all talked about the absolute benefit of mutuals and the credit union sector, and how we want to increase their numbers. I hope that the sector continues to serve those who need it the most.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role and future of credit unions.

10.38 am

Sitting suspended.

Information Commissioner's Office: Relocation

11 am

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the relocation of the Information Commissioner's Office on Tatton constituency.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. The Information Commissioner's Office plays a crucial role in safeguarding the public's information rights. The ICO is headed by a commissioner. It is a non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, that is tasked with promoting openness from public bodies and ensuring data privacy for individuals. Those are principles rooted in transparency and openness, yet those principles have in recent months been somewhat absent from the ICO itself. That is why I called for this debate.

Last month, I was surprised to learn that the ICO's head office, which has been based in Wilmslow for 40 years, will be relocating to the new Circle Square development on Oxford Road, Manchester, in autumn 2026, following the expiry of a current lease at Wycliffe House. I read this in a newspaper article and did not receive any official notice. It came as a shock not only to me but to the whole community.

Let me explain the history. The ICO first moved to Springfield House in Wilmslow in 1985. It then had just 10 employees. That figure rose to 80 by the end of the year, and the ICO now employs more than 1,000 individuals across the UK, the vast majority of whom are based in Wilmslow. The ICO is a significant employer in the town. The organisation is staffed by skilled professionals, from investigators and policy experts to technologists, lawyers and frontline support staff. All have played a critical role in delivering data protection. On top of that, this year, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 celebrates 20 years since the Act came into force, and the ICO is central to delivering that service to hold public authorities to account.

Like any well-established organisation that is rooted in a community, the ICO has become part of Wilmslow's identity over the decades. Some 800 staff are based there. Many multi-generational families who have built their lives around the town have worked there and contributed to the ICO's success.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady. The word is used often, but she is a champion for her constituents, who will today be impressed and proud of what she has done. On those 800 jobs, does she share my concern that there been no consultation about the impact on the local economy and the community? That is incredible. How can that happen without Government having some oversight and say in what happens?

Esther McVey: The hon. Member gets to the nub of the issue. The impact of the removal on the local community is huge, and the fact that a quango seems to be unaccountable to a sponsoring Department is incredible.

For the people I have mentioned, the decision to relocate is not a minor disruption. It affects livelihoods, housing, community patterns and personal finances.

Wilmslow, the town that helped to build up the organisation and helped it to flourish, will suddenly and inexplicably have it removed, depleting the area of jobs and local trade for local businesses.

Despite the scale of the relocation's impact, there have been no explanations or answers about it, and the questions that I have put to the Minister about the specific details of the move remain unanswered. Can you believe it, Mr Twigg? I have been reduced to submitting freedom of information requests about the ICO, the body that oversees freedom of information requests when an organisation does not answer questions—the irony. Therein lies the major issue with quangos—their unaccountability—for no answers have come forth from the Minister or the ICO, the public body tasked with upholding information rights.

I am now attempting again to get answers in Westminster Hall. First, residents want assurances that the decision was thoroughly considered and that there was a full assessment of the impact of moving the ICO out of Wilmslow. They want information about the consultation, if one was carried out at all, in the local area with local businesses. The Minister advised, however, that that is not required by the commissioner, but I want to ask: why is it not required? He did confirm that the commissioner carried out a consultation with its employees, but I want to know what sort of consultation and what was its outcome. What were the questions asked? What were the responses? What were the percentages?

Surely, in making its decision to uproot and leave Wilmslow for Manchester, the ICO must have done some impact assessments. I know that the Government do not like impact assessments, but quangos should be doing them. The ICO should have drawn up the costs and made some calculations about the move. If those calculations have been done, where are they?

Interestingly, the Minister explained that the move was based on “access to...skills” and the “age and diversity” of the workforce in Manchester, but those answers are nonsense. What was the problem with the skills, diversity and age of the people and staff in Wilmslow? What are the Minister and the ICO saying about Wilmslow and Cheshire in those comments? Let us remember that it was Wilmslow where the organisation grew from 10 employees to 1,000 employees, hundreds of them from in and around the Wilmslow area.

What exactly do the Minister and the commissioner mean when they say the “diversity” of the workforce? That sounds discriminatory to me against the people of Cheshire, Wilmslow and Tatton. In fact, I have heard that the Government are trying to include a socioeconomic duty into the Equality Act 2010, basically discriminating against the UK's middle classes. I would say that this is a case in point. If not, can the Minister explain why it is not? I am hoping that the Minister has some information today about the staff who will remain in Wilmslow after the move. In response to my written question, the Government said that “76 desks” will remain there until 2030—not people, desks. Is that how they view the staff of Wilmslow and Cheshire? How many staff is that, what roles will they be covering and how long will they remain in Wilmslow?

What we do know is that the office in Manchester will be smaller, so people will be working from home. That is another question. On the day after it was exposed that an extraordinary Ministry of Defence data breach

[*Esther McVey*]

led to the Afghanistan relocation, surely tighter controls must be brought in to prevent such calamitous data breaches. If that is the case, why are staff at the ICO going to be working from home at all?

The new Manchester office is smaller, and it will house approximately 250 people. Do not be shocked, Mr Twigg, but you should know that there are smaller offices in Wilmslow, in the Wilmslow area and in Cheshire too. Let us look at the cost implications of the move, just for the office space. The average cost of an office on Water Lane, where the ICO is currently based, ranges from £15 to £25 a square foot. An office in Manchester's new Circle Square development is between £30 and £45 per square foot, plus a service charge of £7.50 per square foot. For 250 employees, each needing about 100 square feet, the expected cost in Wilmslow would have been anywhere between £375,000 and £625,000, yet in Manchester, with the added service charge, we can expect the office to cost somewhere between £937,000 and £1,312,000. That is an increase in cost ranging between £562,000 and £687,000, which is a large discrepancy. Manchester is more expensive than Wilmslow. Although the commissioner and the Minister might not care about wasting taxpayers' money, I do, my constituents do and the taxpayer picking up the bill does.

Those questions matter to staff and the local area but getting answers has been an uphill battle. Since the Minister confirmed limited details to me late last week, it appears that he has changed his mind. In a separate reply, he advised me that his Department has "no formal role" in the relocation, and that questions should be put to the ICO directly. Does he now think that the process was sped through, and is he distancing himself from that process?

The Minister says that the move was decided by the ICO, in line with the Treasury's Green Book principles—really? Because one of those principles is value for money, which we know has just had a hole blown through it. It seems the move was approved by the Cabinet Office, but as the sponsoring Department knows nothing about the decisions, and as the ICO has not provided a basis for the move, how on earth did the Cabinet Office sign it off, and know what it was signing off?

The claim that it is not the responsibility of DSIT simply does not pass the test. The Department is responsible for the ICO's strategic direction and financial management. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House understand why so many people feel frustrated about buck-passing, which Departments so often do, and which simply avoids answering legitimate questions. What is the point of a sponsoring Department if it claims no role in such a significant strategic move? If the Minister overseeing the ICO cannot provide answers, who can?

The Minister advised in his answer to written questions to take queries "directly to the ICO", but that ignores the role of the sponsoring Department as the link between Parliament and the ICO. There are no specific avenues for a Back-Bench MP to take questions to the ICO on behalf of constituents. The Information Commissioner appears before the Select Committee as and when, with the last appearance in 2023 on promoting and enforcing the Freedom of Information Act 2000, and looking at the backlog and complaints.

There is no requirement for the commissioner to reply to MPs' correspondence or to meet set response deadlines. In essence, there is no clear or guaranteed route for a parliamentarian to scrutinise an ICO decision. That is further complicated by the structure of the ICO, which operates as a corporation sole, meaning that the commissioner holds the office individually rather than through a board.

I understand that the ICO is going through a governance reform and has appointed an interim chief executive officer, meaning that the commissioner will become the chair of the new information commission. Those reforms must come with improved mechanisms for scrutiny. If there is such confidence in the decision to relocate, why is no evidence being produced for that move? Equally, for an institution grounded in accountability and transparency, why is there no direct access for parliamentarians to question the ICO? I have to ask: why the secrecy?

Questions about the organisation's operational moves are not limited to the office relocation. There have been growing concerns about financial stewardship. The ICO's expenditure grew by 15% in 2023-24, and the organisation faced a deficit that was only recently alleviated by a change in fee structure. People had to pay more because the ICO was spending more—again, where is the accountability? Put together, these concerns paint a picture of a public body lacking clear financial constraint—or restraint—and public accountability.

Here lies a problem we see all too often in our political system: arm's length bodies that receive significant sums of taxpayers' money going without proper regulation or oversight. The ICO is just one of more than 300 arm's length bodies in the UK, collectively employing around 397,000 staff. These organisations carry significant public responsibility and receive billions of pounds in taxpayer funding, yet they operate without adequate transparency and, unlike ministerial Departments, are not uniformly regulated.

The Public Bodies Act 2011 requires a management agreement between a body and its sponsoring Department, but the exact terms are left for them to decide. I understand that DSIT became the ICO's sponsoring Department in 2023, and that a new management agreement is currently being finalised. Can the Minister provide an update on that process and confirm whether it will include stronger provisions for parliamentary scrutiny and public transparency?

The concerns I bring to the House are not complex ones about the move and accountability, nor are they unreasonable. The simple fact that these questions go unanswered undermines public trust in these organisations and brings into question the control and oversight of these bodies. Residents of Wilmslow and the ICO's employees deserve to know this information and the reasons for the move.

We must not forget that, when decisions of this scale are made, they will not go unnoticed. It comes back to the very simple principles that the ICO was founded on and continues to serve: transparency, openness and upholding trust in our public institutions. It is not good enough merely to talk about those issues; they deserve decisive action.

I am putting all these questions on the record. I fully understand that the Minister might not be able to answer all of them today, and I will accept as many

answers as he can give. But what I would appreciate—no, I will go further: what I expect following this debate is a letter with all those answers. I see the Minister's civil servants seated behind him, so I should be assured that that can and will be delivered, as everyone who needs to be here for those answers is present.

11.18 am

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): As usual, it is a great delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

I warmly commend the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for doing something perhaps intrinsic to our political system—because, unlike in many other systems around the world, we have a constituency model—and standing up for her constituents. I laud her for doing so.

I think the right hon. Lady over-egged the pudding a bit and emphasised rather too much; she was creating some conspiracy theories in there about the supposed secrecy around the ICO. She said that there are some governance changes going on at the ICO; I gently say to her that there was a Bill that went through the House of Commons in this Session, and also in the previous Parliament, when her party was in government. A large chunk of that Bill was specifically devoted to the structure of the ICO, and I do not remember her taking part in the debates at any point, although she could have done. She could have tabled an amendment if she wanted to make the ICO more accountable to Parliament, but I note that she did not choose to do so. That may be because she trusted that the system was perfectly adequate—

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will not give way to the right hon. Lady for a moment, because she has posed quite a lot of questions that I need to answer.

The right hon. Lady asked about funding. A statutory instrument was laid to change the ICO's funding arrangements, because successive Governments have loaded it up with more and more work, and there are more and more freedom of information requests, which has inevitably led to a larger body of work for the organisation. That is why we consulted prior to increasing the fees, leading to the statutory instrument—which of course could have been prayed against, although I am not aware that anybody chose to do so—that brought in the increase in fees. I do not think that the ICO is deliberately trying, as she seemed to suggest, to increase its remit or to do unnecessary work: we have given it a job of work.

The right hon. Lady also asked about the ICO's accountability to Parliament. She is quite right that it would be perfectly legitimate for the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee to invite the Information Commissioner to give evidence, and for that matter, of course, the Public Accounts Committee has a responsibility to scrutinise the ICO.

I am happy to give way to the right hon. Lady now.

Esther McVey: I thank the Minister very much for giving way. I would recommend that he did not shoot from the hip with his answers. I said that I would allow him to write to me, because some of these matters were

complex. Trying to suggest that this is a conspiracy theory adds another layer to the cover-up that I have not have responses from him or from the ICO about. Also, he should not question what I did or did not know, or do, when I was in my previous role, because I did not have oversight of this issue in my role in the Cabinet Office. Again, I say to him, "Don't shoot from the hip." I would prefer a written reply; in fact, it would only be right for me and the residents of Wilmslow to have a proper, considered reply.

Chris Bryant: It would be easier for me to respond to a lot of the right hon. Lady's questions if she was not attacking me quite so much. The point I am making is that this is a body based in her constituency, and for the whole of the past year we have been debating the Data (Use and Access) Bill, now an Act, which refers specifically to the ICO, and I do not remember her taking part in those debates at all.

The other point I would make is that the independence of the ICO is really important—it is vital. I am not making that point to pass the buck; I am making a point about how important it is that we have an independent person adjudicating on freedom of information requests. I am sure that when the right hon. Lady was a Minister, such requests would come across her desk, and it is important that people have trust in the independence of the Information Commissioner.

Basically, what has happened is that the Information Commissioner's Office has decided what is the best value and the best place for it to be based. I will come on to give the precise numbers, which I think will answer most of the questions that the right hon. Lady has put to me.

Since its establishment in 1984, the ICO has grown significantly in size and importance, and alongside reforms in the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 the regulator is delivering a transformation programme to enable it to continue to perform as an agile and forward-looking regulator. It is crucial that the ICO has the right expertise and skills within the organisation to make this transformational change a success.

In addition, the ICO is retaining a presence in Wilmslow, as the right hon. Lady said, until at least 2030, and staff were consulted as part of the process. I note the point she made about wanting to know more about that consultation; I am quite happy to write to her about how it was engaged in.

The ICO continues to offer its staff flexibility in where they work and internal surveys showed that relocating to Manchester city centre would not negatively affect staff attendance in the office. Economic analysis commissioned by the ICO also showed that average commuting costs across all modes of public transport to and from a Manchester city centre location were lower than travelling to and from the current Wilmslow office location. That is one of the reasons why I think the right hon. Lady is on the wrong side of the economic argument here, and why I support what the ICO has done.

In response to this debate, the ICO has also told me that the decision to relocate to Manchester will provide it with a strong talent pipeline for the future, which will continue to diversify its workforce and provide technological skills for its long-term success. The right hon. Lady

[Chris Bryant]

asked about diversity—I think that she is on some kind of Trump line here—but the point is a simple one: 8.2% of the ICO's workforce is at or approaching retirement age. That is one of the issues that it must consider in making sure it has a pipeline of people into the future. The Oxford Road corridor will support that pipeline through its concentration of universities, research institutions and businesses in the health, technology and creative sectors. That will give the ICO access to the workforce of one of the fastest-growing tech hubs in Europe, and that access will be better in Manchester than in Wilmslow.

In undertaking its own analysis, the ICO reviewed a range of locations, including remaining within Wilmslow—that option was considered. Locations were assessed against objectives such as access to skills, demographics, proximity to existing stakeholders, cultural diversity and proximity to transport hubs. The ICO's economists developed a locations option tool, underpinned by the Treasury's Green Book principles, which used Office for National Statistics data to support an evidence-based decision. Using that tool, Manchester city centre was evaluated as the top-scoring location and Wilmslow was ranked second.

There was no role for DSIT in the ICO's decision to relocate. I was not asked, and we did not take part in that decision. The ICO involved the necessary Cabinet Office approval processes and engaged early with the Government Property Agency and the Office of Government Property, allowing scrutiny and challenge of the business case. I am sure that the right hon. Lady would agree that that is an important part of making sure we are getting value for money for the taxpayer.

Both Manchester city centre and Wilmslow were considered, with Manchester city centre identified as the top-ranking location. I am afraid that the right hon. Lady's figures, which are imaginary, are not accurate and therefore cannot be relied upon. The 3 Circle Square office location in Manchester was chosen over Wycliffe House in Wilmslow due to its alignment with strategic objectives and its value for money. Importantly, the lifecycle costs for Circle Square stood at £19.1 million, compared with £21.5 million for Wycliffe House, based on Green Book principles.

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will in a moment. I throw this point back at the right hon. Lady; I am sure she would not want to waste taxpayers' money.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I remind the right hon. Lady that interventions should be short.

Esther McVey: I made it clear that the office size was shrinking, so I gave the Minister the cost per square foot. Those are the raw data and information that we need. It would have been much cheaper to stay in Wilmslow per square foot and reduce the headcount down from 800 to 250. That is the difference, and we do not have the raw data for that.

Chris Bryant: I am afraid it would cost £2.4 million more to stay in Wilmslow than it would to move. All the right hon. Lady's statistics are purely imaginary and speculative, and therefore cannot be relied on. That is why we have to go through a proper process and not simply put things together on the back of a fag packet.

Additional benefits include improved sustainability credentials, moving from an energy performance certificate C-rated building to an A-rated one, which importantly reduces energy costs. Through the approval process, the main challenge from the Office of Government Property centred on the utilisation of wider public estate options, notably in Salford, where the council has a lease. However, that option was dismissed due to accessibility concerns over the existing staff commuting to Salford—I am sure the right hon. Lady would agree with that decision at least.

According to the ICO, Manchester city centre also offered future lease commitments that provided best value for money, and it did not leave unoccupied or underutilised space. Shared space facilities at 3 Circle Square enable a reduction in contracted floor space, further enhancing the cost efficiencies. Yet again, I make the point to the right hon. Lady that this is a matter of us saving money, not wasting taxpayers' money, which is a key injunction that she herself was making. The ICO carried out the necessary consultation and analysis conditions as required by the Cabinet Office, and received approval on 7 May. The ICO needs to maintain its position as a world-class regulator. To address that, we encouraged it to seek out the best talent and technological expertise while providing value for money to the taxpayer, and we recognise that location is an important part of that process.

The right hon. Lady asked me one other question, right at the beginning of her speech, about whether this matter was thoroughly considered, and the answer is very firmly yes. The ICO went through a rigorous process internally—

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I am not, I am afraid, going to give way now—[*Interruption.*]

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. The Minister is not giving way.

Chris Bryant: The ICO went through a thorough process. It had to gain approval at the end of that process, although it had been speaking to the Cabinet Office from the very beginning. That is why I believe it has come up with the best solution to ensure it has the talent it needs into the future, bearing in mind that nearly 10% of its staff are near retirement age. It is also the best value for the Government and therefore for the taxpayer—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

RAF E-7 Wedgetail Programme

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the RAF E-7 Wedgetail programme.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. Victory in the battle of Britain means we are having this debate in this place in English, but how was that aerial triumph secured? Of course, it had much to do with the pilots of the RAF—Churchill's famous “few”—who risked all at long odds to blunt the Luftwaffe's talons. Key, too, was the workhorse Hawker Hurricane, which bagged most of the kills. There was also the show pony Supermarine Spitfire, which grabbed most of the glory, to the extent that German pilots would lie about being brought down by a Spit and not the deadly but less elegant Hurricane.

I would contend that the unsung hero is the world's first organised radar early warning system, code-named Chain Home and strung like pearls around the British coast, with particular emphasis on the English south and south-east. It meant Britain could see the enemy coming and marshal our meagre fighter resources to best effect. Radar allowed us to vector our squadrons against the bomber streams and their escorts for, had we to rely on the “mark 1 eyeball”, as RAF pilots call it even today, or imprecise Royal Observer Corps listening devices that were more great war than great efficiency, suffice it to say the world would be a different and much worse place.

Soon radar was miniaturised and put aboard aircraft, and aerial combat was transformed, so that today it is less Biggles battling the Hun in the sun and more BVR—beyond visual range—spotting our enemy long before they spot us and taking them out at a remarkable distance. Airborne radar and comms are today's air war essentials, as vital to modern air forces as the Rolls-Royce Merlin engines that powered both our Spitfires and Hurricanes in the second world war. But the RAF has a problem: a capability gap—and for capability gap read “credibility gap”—because it cannot offer the complete integral mission package.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate on the RAF E-7 Wedgetail programme. A fortnight ago, our Defence Committee raised concerns about the E-7 programme with the Secretary of State and is looking to carry out further scrutiny. As the hon. Member just mentioned, there have been perennial procurement issues. It is wholly inadequate that there is a capability gap in the airborne early warning and control coverage, and there was a lamentable decision to reduce the fleet by 40% to save just 12% on the cost. Does he agree that somebody needs to get a grip on this programme, close the capability gap and finally deliver the capability that our fleet forces deserve?

John Cooper: As the Chair of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member is very knowledgeable about this subject, and I hope that we will tease out today much of what he raised—we may actually get some of the answers we seek.

As I was saying, the RAF has a problem: it cannot offer a complete package, and we could be reliant on NATO allies to give us extra cover. That is because the venerable E-3D Sentry aircraft has retired, so we entirely lack an airborne early warning command and control aircraft providing situational awareness of the battlespace—that is the real-time 360° view of what is out there, so that our top guns know who to salute and who to shoot.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On the matter of top guns, will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Air Marshal Harv Smyth on today being appointed as the new Chief of the Air Staff designate? He is what the Americans would call a warfighter. He and the new Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Rich Knighton, will provide a powerful team in the defence—including the air defence—of the United Kingdom. Does my hon. Friend welcome both appointments, as I do?

John Cooper: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention and I do indeed welcome the fact that, given the situation we are in, we are welcoming warfighters into these senior positions. It is worth reflecting, yet again, that the military likes a TLA—three-letter acronym.

The replacement for the Sentry, the E-7 Wedgetail, is already combat-proven with the Royal Australian Air Force, but it is still not in service with the RAF; indeed, it is already two years late. I hope that the Minister can give the House some assurance that it is not the Ajax of the skies, because that unhappy armoured fighting vehicle programme has become a byword for ruinously expensive waste.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the positive economic benefits of the E-7 programme, particularly for constituencies such as mine, where Thales has been charged with developing the threat warning system for the platform? As a fellow Scottish MP, will he celebrate the contribution of Scottish firms to the defence of our realm and our increasingly vital defence industry across the United Kingdom?

John Cooper: I thank the hon. Gentleman, my near-constituency neighbour, for that intervention. There is something of a hostile environment for defence companies in Scotland, because the SNP Government refuse to put money into what they call “munitions”, which is scarcely credible in the current circumstances. Most recently, Rolls-Royce wanted to build a welding centre of excellence on the banks of the Clyde, close to where Thales is based, but incredibly the Scottish Government will not put money into it. To their credit, the UK Government have said they will back it to the hilt, which has to be good news, but it is very strange that the Scottish Government are taking an almost fifth-columnist view of the defence of the realm; indeed, it is quite remarkable.

As I understand it, the delays to the E-7 Wedgetail programme are not costing the taxpayer more money because the contract with Boeing insulates the taxpayer from price surges; I hope the Minister can confirm that. Although one Wedgetail—complete with plug-ugly but lethally effective MESA, which is the multi-role electronically scanned array, perched atop what is basically a Boeing 737

[*John Cooper*]

airliner—is due to fly in the Royal International Air Tattoo this week, none of the three RAF orders is fully certified for military aviation.

There are also worries that passion for Wedgetail is waning in the United States, where the Sentry aircraft are also designed to be gate guardians. US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth said that the “gold-plated” Wedgetail is:

“not survivable in the modern battlefield.”

The White House is said to be anticipating the arrival of intelligence, surveillance and target acquisition constellation satellites, which are expected by the mid-2030s at the earliest. Meanwhile, the Pentagon is looking at the venerable E-2D Hawkeye to fill the potentially decade-long gap until interlinked satellites, like Chain Home in the heavens, actually arrive overhead.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

John Cooper: I am happy to give way to my near-neighbour.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is indeed my near-neighbour—we are just divided by a bit of water—and I have very much appreciated his friendship and support over the years.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that Wedgetail is the most technologically advanced system available and will provide UK defence with eyes in the sky for at least the next 20 years, to see far beyond what ground-based systems and fighter aircraft sensors can see. However, does he agree that future-proofing—in other words, the vision, which I think is what he is talking about—is an essential tool? Will he join me in pressing the Ministry of Defence to continue its innovation drive, for example with Thales in Belfast but with other companies as well, to make sure that we are advanced in such a way that we can defend and protect?

John Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for that point. He is absolutely correct and he also referred to the fact that he, too, has Thales in his constituency, or close to it. That is the thing about the defence industry—it is intertwined with so many constituencies. In fact, I do not think that there is a single constituency that does not have some defence involvement. In my constituency, rural Dumfries and Galloway, we make the helmets for the F-35 Lightning II jets. Wherever anyone goes in the country, there is some defence involvement and we must back that to the hilt. We must also look forward, which is critical; I think that much of this debate is about looking forward, rather than looking backwards and raking over old coals.

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend’s speech is obviously provoking a great deal of interest in the Chamber. Can he confirm that in the defence appropriations Bill that the Pentagon put forward in late June, which asks Congress for money for equipment in the next financial year, the Wedgetail programme for the United States air force was deleted?

John Cooper: My right hon. Friend is correct, but I believe that a bit of a fightback is coming. There is a discussion going on, partly because fans of the space-based solution have to answer for the reality that it is some years away. That gap is difficult, and that is where Hawkeye comes in. Quite how this naval veteran—the prototype Hawkeye first flew in 1960, and Biggles would recognise its propellers, if not its frisbee-style radar disc—is more survivable behind the onion layers of modern air defences than Wedgetail is perhaps not for us in this debate.

How did we get here? Perhaps the Minister can give us some clue about any engineering or integration problems experienced by Boeing at its Birmingham facility—that is Birmingham, west midlands, not Birmingham, Alabama. He will certainly refer to the decision, as we have already heard, by the previous Government in 2021 to cut the RAF Wedgetail fleet from five airframes to three. The then Defence Committee, as we have also heard, called that an “absolute folly”, which traded a 40% cut in capability for a 12% cut in acquisition costs. But that was then, and this is now. Smoke billows over the battlefields of Ukraine. The restive Russian bear may next turn its eyes west. The Chinese dragon flexes in the South China sea. North Korea has nuclear weapons; Iran wants nuclear weapons.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): The hon. Member mentions the battlefields of Ukraine, which are key because the RAF has a large fleet of aircraft that covers all the fundamental air power roles, but our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability is particularly important to NATO. Does he recognise as I do that this gap is therefore particularly acute?

John Cooper: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for that, and for his service with the RAF. He is absolutely correct. In this country, our forces are highly prized for our superb technical abilities, as well as our warfighting capabilities. That gap is very serious: it has an impact on the RAF and on our allies. The lesson learned from Ukraine is that one of the great difficulties for the Russians—and hallelujah!—is that they have been unable to achieve air superiority. That shows how important air superiority is to this day, even in what is widely thought of as a ground war.

The Government appear committed to Wedgetail. Their strategic defence review recommended that further E-7s be purchased. Although heavily caveated by “when funding allows”—and that phrase does a lot of heavy lifting, let us be honest—that recommendation has been accepted. The SDR further dangles the prospect of potentially offsetting Wedgetail costs in conjunction with NATO allies. That is a good idea, but what discussions have we had with alliance partners on that? Will Boeing commit to Birmingham and the jobs there if we join with other NATO air forces to get meaningful orders for Wedgetail on its books?

UK Wedgetails directly support 190 high-skills jobs across the country, and Boeing is looking to expand to meet possible further demand, with perhaps another 150 jobs. There are 32 UK firms in the supply chain, stretching from Luton to Glasgow, providing everything from interior structures to threat warning and defensive aids. When Wedgetail does enter service, there will be ongoing jobs in sustainment and maintenance.

Separately, what discussions have we had with our closest ally, the United States? Would the Americans share information when and if satellites do finally fill the intelligence gap? Could we even buy their venerable Hawkeye at the eleventh hour? Perhaps the Minister might consider a meeting of interested hon. Members—and we can see the cross-party interest in this debate—to discuss the Wedgetail programme.

Our pilots remain at the cutting edge. The British-built Typhoon jet is a potent dogfighter, and the F-35 Lightning II strike fighter a peerless stealth weapon, yet both are nothing if our eyes in the sky—as vital to guiding and warning them as was Chain Home in the imminent peril of 1940—are myopic at best, or non-existent as now. The safety and security of these islands rest on the brave men—and increasingly, brave women—in our armed forces, but I am not alone in arguing that we need to throw our defence industrial infrastructure into high gear to equip those amazing people with the tools for the job.

“At pace” is the mantra of the machinery of government, but it cannot be a mere slogan; it must mean something. We need ordnance, complex war machines—such as submarines and frigates—drones, main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, armoured fighting vehicles, and innovative technology, such as laser and energy weapons. We also need to know what lurks over the horizon—what is on the reverse slope of that hill or beyond that cloud bank? We need all that at night and in all weathers.

The procurement gap is yawning as threats mount. Our commissioning and purchasing system is changing, but we may be marching to war, so bimbly along as we did when the cold war thawed, or when we were fighting gendarmerie actions, will not cut it. The scramble bell has been rung. We need, as Churchill had it, “Action this day”. Wedgetail ought to be more than just on the radar of the new national armaments director; it ought to be at the centre of their gunsight reticle—is it, Minister?

2.45 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) on securing this debate and on his well-informed speech. There were some fantastic world war two metaphors and terminology in it, which I will not be able to emulate.

I welcome the chance to debate the RAF’s E-7 Wedgetail programme, as it is such an important capability—and not just for the RAF, because it will serve all our armed forces when it comes into service. This is not about three aircraft—or, preferably, five; it is about a force multiplier that will have a huge impact on the ability of all our other military capabilities, across air, land and sea, to dominate the modern battlespace.

Wedgetail scans the battlefield using advanced radar and sensors. I am a bit perturbed by the idea that the venerable Hawkeye could somehow step into that; whatever the capabilities of the airframe, it has an older radar and does not have the kind of space inside it for command and control facilities that Wedgetail does. Wedgetail processes vast amounts of information to allow commanders to make informed and speedy decisions

about where to deploy their assets. As the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway said, it is a proven technology that has been successfully used in combat in the middle east by Australia.

The only production line for Wedgetail globally is here in the UK, at Meriden, between Birmingham and Coventry. The number of jobs involved is not huge—it is 190 across the UK, perhaps rising above 300 next year—but they are highly skilled. There is also export potential, whether or not the US sticks with its order, as NATO has selected the E-7 to replace its shared E-3 Sentry fleet. As many as 100 jobs could be created at RAF Lossiemouth for the sustainment contract.

Everyone in this room—because we are all people who take a slightly geeky interest in this program—is aware that Wedgetail has been hit by a series of strange, unexpected problems, from the impact of covid to a hurricane hitting the site where the radar is produced. Most significantly, the 10-year gap between the order for the previous batch of Wedgetails by South Korea and their construction meant that some parts were no longer in production and had to be recreated from scratch. The production schedule was therefore wildly over-optimistic.

It is commendable, given its fixed-fee contract, that Boeing, the prime contractor, has stuck with the programme even though it is making a loss on it because it is not the off-the-shelf product that the contract envisaged. That commitment has been recognised by Andy Start, the interim national armaments director, who told the Public Accounts Committee in April that Boeing

“has leaned in with serious amounts of resource and stuck with that programme to make sure it is delivered.”

Sadly, some of the issues with the programme were self-inflicted by the previous Conservative Government. I am reluctant to be too partisan, because one of the better things about debating defence policy is that there tends to be quite a bit of bipartisan consensus, but the belief in 2019 that the previous Government could rush through the original contract process in just nine months, when it would normally take two or three years, was naive to say the least, and meant that many assumptions made during the planning of the programme were incorrect.

Mr Francois: I should declare an interest: I served on the Defence Committee in the previous Parliament, so I contributed to that report, which was critical of the decision to cut the number from five to three. I do not deny that, and I still would prefer that we had stayed with five. I thought that, to be transparent, I should put that on the record.

Luke Akehurst: I welcome the right hon. Member’s making that point. From my reading of the timelines of who was in office and when, I am very clear that this decision came after his time as a Minister and during the time in which he was scrutinising decisions by other Conservative Ministers.

The extraordinary, destructive and irrational decision, I believe by Ben Wallace, the then Conservative Secretary of State for Defence, to cut the order from five aircraft to three, came in 2021. I do not understand how that is supposed to work. Five aircraft were required for a reason: one to be in deep maintenance and repair, one for training and then at least two to sustain a single

[*Luke Akehurst*]

operation 24/7. Obviously, an aircraft cannot stay airborne permanently; they have to land to refuel and presumably to give the crew some kind of rest. How does that work with only three aircraft?

It was not even a sensible cost saving, as has previously been referenced. The axing of 40% of the fleet delivered only a 12% saving on the cost of the programme. The Defence Committee's 2023 report, in which I assume the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) was involved, described that as "perverse" and an "absolute folly". The United Kingdom had already procured not three but five sets of extremely expensive advanced radar from Northrop Grumman, so there are now two really expensive sets of radar sat around as spares for airframes that do not exist.

The decision to cut the order from five to three meant that the contract needed to be renegotiated and led to a further delay of six months, all the while leaving the huge capability gap that the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway spoke about in our airborne early warning and control due to the retirement of the E-3D Sentry—a gap described by the Defence Committee, as its Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), mentioned, as

"a serious threat to the UK's warfighting ability."

Really, this essential programme was vandalised by the previous Government. It is a stunning example of poor decision making. I therefore welcome the strategic defence review's recommendation that further Wedgetails "should be procured when funding allows".

Cameron Thomas: The reduction in the number of Wedgetails, which seems to have been a mistake, feels very reminiscent of the coalition Government's cutting of the Nimrod programme despite having already spent billions of pounds on it. That left us without a maritime patrol aircraft, and we had to go cap in hand to the French and the Americans for our—

Mr Francois: It didn't work.

Cameron Thomas: I thank the right hon. Member. It left us with a gap in our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability. I accept that that was a coalition issue, but I am glad to hear that there is consensus in this room on the importance of ISR capability.

Luke Akehurst: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention and agree with him about the importance of ISR capability.

Mr Dhesi *rose*—

Luke Akehurst: I am coming to my conclusion, but I give way.

Mr Dhesi: The recent US proposal to scale back the funding for its E-7 Wedgetail programme raises serious concerns about the long-term viability of the programme. In the light of that, does my hon. Friend agree that it is incumbent upon the Ministry of Defence to show the House that its defence procurement strategy is robust, independent and in line with the recommendations set out in the strategic defence review?

Luke Akehurst: I agree to some extent with the points that the Chair of the Select Committee makes. Given that the production line is in Birmingham, west midlands rather than Birmingham, Alabama, I do not think we are dependent on the US going ahead with its order. There are other international customers: from memory, the Koreans, the Australians and the Turks already use Wedgetail, and NATO is likely to go for it as well. It would be helpful in terms of economies of scale and leveraging American technological advances if the US went with the programme, but that is not, to my mind, a deal breaker.

I will now reach the conclusion that I was about to reach before the very kind intervention from the Chair of the Select Committee. I encourage the Minister to prioritise this programme and I would welcome any information he can give us today about when funding might allow the very sensible restoration, recommended in the SDR, of the programme to its proper scale. Will he also address the upgrade that I understand Australia is planning to its Wedgetails and, given that the programme has been delayed over the years, whether that means we are already looking at a technology upgrade for the fleet we are procuring? Finally, to echo what the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway said, there is a small number of hon. Members who take a close interest in this programme, so will the Minister consider convening an informal group of parliamentarians to update us and consult us on its progress?

2.56 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for securing the debate. He spoke incredibly eloquently not just about the programme, but about why it is so important. I will pull him up slightly, because he talked about Birmingham. The facility is in my constituency of Meriden and Solihull East, and Solihull is very different from Birmingham, as any Silhillian will tell us, but I welcome the case that he made.

I am very proud that these planes are being built in my constituency. I have had the privilege of going to see them at various phases of construction and, as they are Boeing 737s that are being restructured and refitted, seeing them in the different states of fitting, not least during various liftings of lockdowns, when I was able to do so. I went there with a lot of pride because, as has been alluded to and I know all the Members in the Chamber will agree, our paramount and first duty as Members of Parliament is defence of the realm. Across the world, whether it is in Ukraine or in the brief conflict between Pakistan and India recently, we see a real need for credible technology that is capable of dealing with modern warfare in the 21st century. For me, the E-7 Wedgetail is essential to that because, as my hon. Friend said, it provides a 360° capability with advance warning and strategic capacity to deal with movements in the battlefield way beyond our enemies' visibility. It would, should and ought to secure air superiority, so it is very important.

I thank STS Aviation Services, which is fitting out the plane alongside Boeing. I think we can all agree that we want this done. I would like to see the Wedgetail project, or at least the two planes, completed. I am happy to

work cross-party to make sure that we work with Boeing and STS to deliver that, not least because of the importance of the defence of our realm and the need to be ready. In this age of autocrats, when we see technological advancement from the Russians, the North Koreans, the Chinese and even the Iranians, we need to be ready for what might come our way.

The hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) chided the last Government for a number of their decisions, but what an excellent decision it was to have a fixed-price contract. That means that, despite the delays, there should not be an additional cost to the taxpayer. Once the project is completed, I hope it will be seen as value for money.

As has already been said, but I will put it on the record not least because some of my constituents will see this, Wedgetail will be, when completed, one of the most advanced strategic analytical planes to be built and to hopefully serve in our armed forces. It will be able to co-ordinate with joint forces and of course, most essentially in the 21st century, provide high-quality data. As I have already said, it will operate beyond visual range and secure strategic superiority and dominance. It should be stressed that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway said, overcoming the capability and credibility gap is absolutely essential if we are to be an air force capable of holding its own in the 21st century, with the challenges that will come our way.

As was mentioned earlier, the Wedgetail programme is also essential given advancements in space and space defence technology, about which there is clearly concern. I would like Wedgetail to be part of the multifaceted platform needed to make sure that those who would do us harm by taking advantage of space technology cannot do so. Wedgetail will be really important in that.

What is important for me is that Wedgetail creates really high value, highly skilled jobs. It caters for about 150 jobs at the moment, and that figure is predicted to double. Sadly, as a layperson, I was not able to convince the people responsible to give the maintenance contract to Birmingham airport, but I believe that Wedgetail is a product of great capability, including export capability. That means further jobs for my constituents in Meriden and Solihull East. I should say that in my part of the world, we have Jaguar Land Rover and the old factories that helped to build Spitfire. We have a great tradition and great heritage. My constituents are incredibly patriotic and will be proud that Wedgetail is being built there.

I have some questions for the Minister. Will he share his assessment of the export capability of this product? Where does he see the opportunities and value? He has already been challenged, so will he enlighten us on how he is working to ensure its faster delivery? Who is he working with and what conversations is he having in that regard? The offer to meet interested stakeholders has been put out there, and I would like to be part of that. The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry would be an important person to have around that table in that conversation. More broadly, what work are the Government doing to ensure that our defence products are exported across the world? Technological advancement in warfare has often separated the victor from the defeated. That is a really important part of the conversation, and I hope it will go beyond the strategic defence review.

Mr Dhesi: Given the retirement of the E-3 Sentry and the delays to the E-7 Wedgetail and Crowsnest programmes, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Ministry of Defence must ensure that the capability gaps in the airborne early warning and control coverage must be urgently addressed in our defence procurement? Otherwise, it will lead to long-term issues for the defence and security of our country.

Saqib Bhatti: Of course I agree with the hon. Member—anyone in the Chamber would agree that the capability and credibility gap has to be overcome. We know where the threats are coming from, or at least the visible threats. To quote a former US politician, there are lots of unknown knowns, known knowns and known unknowns—I am sure I have messed that up, but hon. Members know what I mean. We have to be capable of delivering on that. The hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) said that there had to be focused delivery of this product; I echo and double down on that.

In conclusion, the issue is about jobs, which matter, and our security, which matters too. It is absolutely essential.

3.4 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. I concur with the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois): the Liberal Democrats also welcome Air Marshal Harv Smyth to his new appointment as Chief of the Air Staff—congratulations to him. He will be a fine leader.

The E-7A Wedgetail represents a major update to the UK's airborne warning and control capability. Future-proofing our armed forces is something that the Liberal Democrats strongly support. Wedgetail's predecessor, E-3D Sentry, first entered service in the Royal Air Force around the same time as I entered the Royal Air Force, but fortunately it stayed at the cutting edge for a good deal longer. Indeed, the aircraft was still flying operational sorties and keeping the UK safe right up until it was decommissioned in August 2021.

Although Sentry has since made some extra flights over home soil, the UK has officially been without an airborne warning and control capability for several years. That is just one example of how the last Government allowed our armed forces to be hollowed out over time.

Cameron Thomas: To their credit, the Conservatives have been quite open in lamenting the drawdown of the Wedgetail project, but will my hon. Friend join me in asking the Government how committed they are to the Wedgetail programme and to the initial order of five?

Ian Roome: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am sure that the Minister will reply.

Unfortunately, Sentry's intended replacement, the Wedgetail programme, has already been through some major turbulence during its early years, from questions over the fairness of the MOD's procurement decision in 2018 to a two-year production delay and an order reduction from five airframes to three under the last Government's integrated defence review—a move that

[*Ian Roome*]

Boeing says slowed down the project, and a decision described as an “absolute folly” even by the then Defence Committee.

We now read news reports that the Trump Administration are seeking to cancel Wedgetail orders for the US air force over claims that it would be too vulnerable in contested airspace, casting doubt over the programme’s future interoperability and cost. I am sure that many hon. Members will also have seen the recent letter signed by 19 retired US four-star generals criticising that decision. The United States aspires to a fully space-based replacement, but that is still many years away. With hindsight, knowing what we know about Russian aggression in eastern European airspace, the timing of all this could hardly be more perilous.

Just a few weeks ago, my colleagues on the Defence Committee and I visited Allied Air Command in Ramstein, Germany. The UK is committed to a 24/7 NATO air policing mission, and the strategic defence review states that the UK’s defensive posture should be firmly “NATO first”. The Liberal Democrats believe that the UK should work as closely as possible with our European allies on our shared defence, and that our military should complement our allies’ capabilities.

In addition to raising the UK’s defence spending to 2.5% and beyond, it is essential that we co-ordinate our allied air forces in Europe, especially those of our Nordic and Baltic partners, to give more bang for buck. In the European airspace, this airborne capability is very specialised. Various NATO forces still operate old E-3 aircraft, including Germany, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Norway. France and some Scandinavian air forces also operate similar aircraft from rival manufacturers such as Saab and Northrop Grumman.

However, as has been pointed out before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services, the cost of repairs to the old E-3 fleet keeps increasing, and their availability to fly keeps decreasing. Australia, South Korea and our European allies in NATO, faced with the same choice as the UK, are choosing to replace their E-3 fleets with Wedgetail.

Next month, Australian Wedgetails will be deployed to Poland as part of efforts to support Ukraine. European Wedgetails are not expected to enter service until 2031. That may be six years of expensive repairs to ageing aircraft—six years during which UK Wedgetails could play an outsized role in European air defence, but only if the current Government work to rebuild our armed forces capacity, and only if our aircraft are ready to fly.

As the Public Accounts Committee keeps highlighting, large overspends are unacceptable. Long delays that leave this country’s Air Force without an essential capability are a sign of a procurement system that is badly broken. The strategic defence review recommends more Wedgetails for round-the-clock airborne surveillance, and says there may even be cost-sharing opportunities with NATO allies.

I put these questions to the Minister. First, do the Government plan to meet our defence commitments this way, either by ordering additional Wedgetails, in lockstep with our allies, or even seeking an alternative? Secondly, what steps will the Government take to improve

the Ministry of Defence track record on this kind of aircraft procurement, so that our defence of NATO airspace is never put in doubt again?

3.10 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Christopher, as we examine the progress—or rather the sheer lack of it—of the RAF’s E-7 Wedgetail programme.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) on introducing the debate in such an articulate manner, with a touch of humour to boot. As a battle of Britain buff, I enjoyed his historical analogies with that epic conflict in 1940 and the critical importance of radar and early warning. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), in whose constituency the valuable work of converting Boeing 737s into the Wedgetail variant is under way.

A couple of years ago, when I served on the Defence Committee—it is great to see the Chairman of the Committee in his place—I had the privilege of visiting the facility in Meriden where the work was being conducted. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East has been an assiduous constituency MP in standing up for the highly skilled workforce undertaking the conversion. I do have a number of serious concerns about the status of the Wedgetail programme, however, as he is about to hear.

I state for the record that none of this is aimed at the workforce in Meriden, but much more at the senior management of Boeing, a company now facing massive reputational issues in both civilian and defence areas. I would like to have congratulated the Reform MP who contributed to this debate but, as ever, they are not here because Reform don’t do defence.

We live in an increasingly dangerous world. The head of the British Army stated almost a year ago that we need to prepare for the possibility of a peer-on-peer conflict with Russia by 2027. If that is so, having a modern airborne early warning control aircraft, such as Wedgetail, in operational service would be vital. Moreover, if there were to be a ceasefire in Ukraine, Ministers have told us several times that it might involve not just boots on the ground but jets in the air. They also need eyes in the sky to protect them from a potential Russian threat. In short, we do not currently have any.

Part of the purpose of today’s debate is to elicit from the Government when E-7 Wedgetail will finally enter operational service with the RAF. That really matters. Experience in Ukraine shows the heavy propensity of Russia to attack targets with long-range cruise missiles. In the event of a peer conflict with Russia, it is highly likely that most of our fixed RAF radar stations would fall victim to cruise missile attacks within the early few days, or even hours, of such a conflict. At present, we can supplement those with a limited number of mobile radars. It is also unclear whether in wartime other airborne warning assets, such as via satellite and other overseas facilities, would also remain available for long.

In such a scenario—one which, as the international sky continues to darken, we are increasingly forced to contemplate—having mobile airborne early-warning such as Wedgetail would be critical to maintain the integrity

of the UK's air defences, plus covering RAF aircraft abroad. That brings me to the current sorry state of the Wedgetail programme, which is running years late and has now unfortunately been rated red by the Infrastructure Projects Authority. To remind hon. Members, a red rating is defined as a project that

“reflects serious concerns about the project's ability to meet its objectives. Immediate corrective actions are needed to address fundamental issues, as the project is unlikely to succeed without significant changes or interventions.”

So, where are we today? Three 737 airframes are being converted at Meriden, including retrofitting them with the MESA radar. One of those aircraft has been completed, while the other two are still in work. However, according to a freedom of information request answered on 12 June, the first aircraft has flown only three times—two of them to get painted—and MESA, which is the whole point of the aircraft, has not even been turned on yet in flight. Why?

Moreover, as the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), a member of the Defence Committee, revealed at a meeting of that Committee two weeks ago, the lead aircraft is struggling to achieve certification. He said:

“We were going to buy five, and then three, E-7s. They are horrendously late and overpriced. We have got one in with a special clearance, meaning that there is something that we do not know about that, which means that it cannot have a normal clearance.”

I appreciate that the Minister is likely to say that the previous Conservative Government should have made greater progress on Wedgetail, and I accept that we are not without blame in this field. Nevertheless, the new Government have now had a year to sort it out. The MOD and Boeing have been locked in complex negotiations over the so-called full business case that would allow Wedgetail to enter service, but those negotiations have still not been brought to a fruitful conclusion. Indeed, whereas the original concept was to service and maintain the Wedgetail aircraft in the United Kingdom, there are some media reports that it will now take place in the US instead. Can the Minister confirm whether that is true, and if it is—I hope it is not—will he say what the additional cost will be? To be clear, we need E-7 Wedgetail in RAF service, but we need it now, not in several years' time.

The US, which also has to replace a large number of its ageing E-3 aircraft, was planning to do that with E-7, but the programme is likely to be cancelled. As a stopgap, the US is now apparently even considering buying several dozen E-2D Hawkeye aircraft, which, as the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) said, originally entered service in the '60s. They were famously featured in “Top Gun: Maverick”, guiding the attacking F-18s into the target. What exactly has gone wrong with the programme in the United States? Why is the Department of Defence apparently going to junk Wedgetail in favour of Hawkeye, and later, space-based systems? If it does, what are the implications for the RAF Wedgetail programme?

Apparently, Boeing is now claiming that what was originally an off-the-shelf purchase of E-7 for the RAF is now turning into a development programme. Can the Minister explain exactly what that means? Can he reassure the House that if the US does withdraw, we are not

going to ask the Royal Air Force to pay a vast amount of money to develop E-7, when the United States has refused to do so?

The Government have been running a competition for a national armaments director—the NAD. If media reports are to be believed, they have now narrowed it down to two remaining candidates. As the NAD will have to deal with the problem of Wedgetail, can the Minister update the House on exactly where we are on the appointment? Who are the two remaining candidates? Is it true that one of them is holding out for more money? When can we expect a definitive announcement on the appointment? It would appear that, despite extended tortuous negotiations between the RAF and Boeing, the matter has still not been brought to a conclusion. It may mean that the incoming NAD has to knock heads together to finally achieve some progress, which the 12,500 employees at Defence Equipment and Support do not appear to have managed to do. If it were me, I would start as I mean to go on. I would tell Boeing that it will not be granted any further contracts with the Ministry of Defence, be it for more helicopters or advanced jet trainers, unless and until it has introduced its project—its product, E-7 Wedgetail—successfully into operational service.

On 25 June, when the House debated the new NAD role, the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), raised Wedgetail as a specific programme requiring more scrutiny. So concerned have I become while researching for this debate, and having considered the matter overnight, I asked this morning for a meeting with the Chair of the PAC, who wanted to be here this afternoon but unavoidably has to be elsewhere. He too was concerned, and he has authorised me to say that he is minded to write to the permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence to ask what on earth is going on—his words—regarding Wedgetail, and to request a meeting about the programme.

In summary, as someone who served on the Defence Committee for seven years and was consistently highly critical of the Army's Ajax programme—which I note in passing has still not entered operational service—I am afraid to say that, put bluntly, Wedgetail has now turned into the RAF's very own Ajax. Here we are with another example of a highly complex, exquisite programme that, like Ajax, has not run massively over budget, but which is nevertheless years late, and there is still no guarantee that it even works properly in RAF service. This is threatening to become a £2 billion white elephant in the room.

May I conclude by asking the Minister three direct questions? I hope he can provide clear and ambiguous answers, given that he is covering for the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry this afternoon, while the Minister for Veterans and People remains on resignation watch. Question one: what is the exact status of the flight trials programme of the E-7 Wedgetail aircraft, and when will active trials of the MESA radar commence and conclude? Question two: what is the issue regarding certification of the airframe? What is meant by “limited certification”, and when are the aircraft expected to be fully certified by the Military Aviation Authority? Question three: when is E-7 Wedgetail finally expected to enter operational service with the RAF, and when are the second and third aircraft anticipated, to provide full

[*Mr Mark Francois*]

operational capability? All experience suggests that if we are to maintain one aircraft consistently on task for any length of time, we would need all three aircraft in operational service in order to guarantee it.

I say again: when we were in government, we should perhaps have done more to accelerate the progress of this programme. But now that Labour is running the show, and has been for over a year, we need to know what the Labour Government are going to do about it. We cannot contemplate the possibility of war with Russia in which we would be virtually blinded within the opening hours. Wedgetail is now absolutely critical to the defence of the UK, so when, oh when are the RAF and Boeing going to get their collective house in order and bring this absolutely vital capability into service?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Minister, you have 35 minutes in which to respond.

3.22 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) on securing this debate. I have to warn him that he is sounding like a very good shadow Minister Padawan on these matters, so I expect him to be forceful in pursuing this type of stuff.

As hon. Members will have spotted, I am not the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry—I am the slighter camper version—but I hope to be able to answer some of the questions raised in the debate about what is a very important programme for the Royal Air Force. I will first give a little background and history, which a number of Members have raised, and then turn to a number of the questions and points that hon. Members have also raised.

May I, too, place on record my congratulations to Harv Smyth on becoming the new Chief of the Air Staff? Having worked with Harv for the past year, I know that the RAF will be in very good hands. With Sir Rich Knighton becoming the new Chief of the Defence Staff, we have an incredibly capable team, with very good RAF experience. Just to ensure a full house, I also welcome General Gwyn Jenkins as First Sea Lord—as a Navy brat, it would be remiss of me not to mention the senior service.

Ian Roome: Will the Minister also join the Worshipful Company of Engineers in congratulating Sir Rich Knighton on being the first engineer to become the chief of the Royal Air Force? Being ex-RAF, it is nice to have an engineer who has never been a pilot as the chief of the Royal Air Force.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It is worth noting, because to succeed we need people at the point of the spear and we need people who are the spear. All too often in our debates, we neglect those who support, who engineer, and who are the backbone of our military. Having Sir Rich in the new role as CDS will be a good encouragement to all those who find a career in our armed forces: there is a bright future ahead of them if they work hard and succeed.

At a time of increasing threats to our security and rapid developments in technology, it is essential that we upgrade our airborne early warning and control capabilities. Members have mentioned it, but when we say, whether from the Dispatch Box as a Government or when we were in opposition, that the last Government hollowed out and underfunded our military, it is precisely such capability gaps that we are talking about. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway, who secured the debate, described it as not just a capability gap, but a credibility gap, and those are precisely the kinds of gaps that we so critiqued in opposition. They are also the gaps that we have to fill, now that we are in government.

The UK's E-7 Wedgetail programme will provide the significantly improved performance that we are looking for, offering greater speed, range, endurance and crew capacity. By improving detection, it provides earlier warning of more challenging threats at greater distances than before, increasing the time available for offensive and defensive action, and so boosting the lethality, survivability and resilience of the joint force. Wedgetail is not only the most capable and effective airborne early warning and control platform in operation today; it also has the growth path to match the expected threat over the next 20 years and beyond. We will continue to fully prepare for the introduction of E-7 Wedgetail to the RAF fleet.

To support the introduction of E-7, a joint operational conversion unit, 42 Squadron, has been re-formed at RAF Lossiemouth. The squadron will train all aircrew and engineers to operate the Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and the Wedgetail airborne early warning and surveillance aircraft. The Lossiemouth development programme is delivering vital infrastructure, including a new engineering building, accommodation and squadron facilities, and the UK has been helped by Australia to prepare for Wedgetail. I put on record my thanks to the Royal Australian Air Force. Since its inception in 2018, 30 RAF personnel have undergone training on the E-7A Wedgetail aircraft, which is already in operation with the Royal Australian Air Force. We are extremely grateful to our Australian friends for their support.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) could put on record the difference between Birmingham and Solihull. As a Plymouth MP, I am forever making the distinction between Devon and Cornwall, although we are the best of friends at the same time. The hon. Member made the argument about the economic contribution that Wedgetail makes to his constituency, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) spoke about the wider nationwide supply chain. That contribution is vital.

Wedgetail is already bringing economic benefits to the UK. Three Boeing 737 aircraft are currently being modified at STS Aviation in the constituency of the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East, where around 100 skilled jobs have been created, in addition to 200 jobs supporting infrastructure at RAF Lossiemouth. He is right to say, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham did, that these are high-skilled jobs. They are precisely what his constituency needed supporting after the collapse of Monarch Airlines. It has meant that so many people could transfer into new roles at STS.

The work at STS, supplemented by Boeing and Northrop Grumman personnel who have worked on previous E-7 conversion programmes, is important. Boeing Defence UK expects a further 70 to 100 jobs to be added to support the aircraft in service at Lossiemouth. The Government's longer-term aim is to grow the UK industrial base in support of Wedgetail, including potentially to support NATO and other global customers as they commit to E-7 in future years. Members will know that the strategic defence review was clear that defence is an engine for growth, and we need to continue to support our allies in looking to E-7 Wedgetail to provide some of their long-range surveillance opportunities.

The hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East asked about exports. It is a priority for this Government to procure systems that are not only better value for money for the UK armed forces, but built in such a way that we do not make them so Gucci that they are available only for the Brits. That has been a flaw of previous procurements, and we are clear, in rebuilding and recapitalising our armed forces and many of their capabilities—including filling capability gaps that we inherited from the previous Government—that we have to ensure that those platforms are exportable, that there is a work share for British companies, and that defence can be a real engine for growth. He will be aware of the high-level ambition set out in the strategic defence review to deliver that.

Members will also know that we hope to publish the defence industrial strategy in due course and, towards the end of the year, the defence investment plan. That will set out what we are spending, not just on kit and equipment, as previous iterations of the equipment plan did, but on infrastructure and people. Those are what the MOD wishes to spend the increased amounts of defence funding on. Exports will be a key part of that, and I encourage the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East to continue to make that case.

However, disappointingly, the E-7 Wedgetail programme has experienced delays. These are due, first, to wider challenges faced by the entire global aviation industry—such as shortages of materials, parts and skilled labour—and, secondly, to more specific programme issues, including complex certification work that Boeing has had to undertake to meet assurance requirements.

The Ministry of Defence is working closely with Boeing to minimise the impact of these issues, and the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry has regular conversations with Boeing to emphasise the importance of delivering this capability.

As a result, E-7 Wedgetail is scheduled to enter service with the Royal Air Force in 2026. The RAF's mission system has been significantly upgraded, making our Wedgetail aircraft distinct from those of other nations. That has required substantial certification and safety checks to ensure the system meets the standards required. We are working flat out to get a fully compliant aircraft into service as fast as possible, and we are holding suppliers to account for their part in that. Since concluding previous flights in October 2024, the aircraft has continued its mission systems installation.

E-7 Wedgetail completed its fourth test flight last week and will perform a fly-past at the royal international air tattoo at RAF Fairford, which the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry will attend—I believe other hon. Members may be visiting as well. Test and

evaluation will take place across multiple sites in the UK, with the next phase starting this month. This is a detailed process to demonstrate that each system operates as designed. Subsequent phases will be running through to 2026.

Mr Francois: As the Minister has lots of time, will he give way?

Luke Pollard: I have lots of points to cover, but I will happily come back to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr Francois: I was just going to ask if you have turned the radar on yet.

Luke Pollard: I am happy to come back to the right hon. Gentleman in due course.

Mr Francois: Have you turned the radar on?

Luke Pollard: I am happy to come back to the right hon. Gentleman in due course. I have other hon. Members' questions to address first, and I will not be spoken over—thank you.

Mr Francois: So you have not.

Luke Pollard: The level of politeness that we saw in the rest of the debate has not been reflected in the right hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Turning to the costs, the original outlined business case approved the acquisition of five Wedgetail Mk 1 aircraft. Due to the wider fiscal challenges faced by the Department, the programme was reduced in scope by the last Government. That is what the officials have written for me, and I share much of the concern that hon. Members have expressed about the reduction of capabilities. Once again, the hollowing out and underfunding of our armed forces have led to capability gaps, not just in the early retirement of platforms but in the lack of procurement. It is precisely for that reason that the SDR sought to look at that.

The integrated review endorsed the reduction to three aircraft in 2021, and the fleet was then incorporated with the P-8A Poseidons at RAF Lossiemouth. The three new E-7 Wedgetails will still enable the UK to meet our key user requirements and honour both our domestic and international commitments, including our contribution to NATO—as outlined in the strategic defence review on page 115, recommendation 47. We have re-examined this decision and made a commitment to reassess the number of E-7s we have when funding allows. I encourage hon. Members who raised the ambition to procure more E-7s to consider how that case can be made in future spending decisions, and that could build on the defence industrial strategy.

To the point raised by a number of hon. Members—including the hon. Members for Dumfries and Galloway and for Meriden and Solihull East, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham—I know that the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry would welcome the opportunity to bring together a group of interested parliamentarians to discuss not only how we deploy E-7s into active duty, but how we can build on export opportunities and support their full introduction. We will take that as an action, and I look forward to my

[*Luke Pollard*]

right hon. Friend the Minister being able to invite colleagues into the MOD for further discussions on that issue.

We have been working with Boeing to achieve the best value for money across the programme. There will be no additional cost as a result of the delays, as Boeing is committed to delivering the three aircraft under a firm-price contract. That means the MOD will have no inflation risk in the aircraft modification programme. The programme is also benefiting from the use of common 737 spares with Poseidon, as well as shared support services with Boeing. This allows us to leverage efficiencies in spares procurement, repair, overhaul, maintenance costs and the training of engineering personnel to work on both sets of aircraft at Lossiemouth. The intent is to expand co-operative support across Wedgetail and Poseidon in future, to drive down costs further.

A number of Members, including the Chair of the Defence Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), mentioned the US position. E-7 Wedgetail is in operation with the air forces of Australia, Türkiye and the Republic of Korea. Additionally, NATO has selected E-7A as its replacement for the NATO E-3A aircraft that are currently flying. I understand that there may be some concern about the US plans due to media reports last month, but the MOD will continue with its procurement of Wedgetail to meet our national and NATO requirements for airborne early warning and control that is interoperable with allies. Procurement decisions by any other NATO nation are a matter for that nation, but they will not affect UK procurement of Wedgetail.

There have been some comments during this debate, and in the wider debate out there, about whether the UK should consider using E-2 Hawkeye instead. I stress again that Wedgetail has superior speed, range, persistence and crew capacity compared with alternative platforms. Furthermore, it has a powerful radar with increased detection capability, which will give us a significant operational advantage.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway, who secured the debate, for the tone of his speech. It is certainly right that we talk about this issue. Having previously sat on the Opposition Benches, I recognise some of his critiques of the previous Government. Indeed, I entirely agree that “bimbling along” will not cut it. That is precisely why we have seen a new energy and increased defence spending under this Government. There is more to do, but hopefully he will see that in the ambition set out in the SDR to do more and to fill capability gaps in this area.

A number of Members referred to the Select Committee report on procurement in the previous Parliament. It was absolutely right to look at the procurement system. We described it as broken when we were in opposition, and in government we are taking steps to fix it. The recruitment of the new national armaments director, being led by the Secretary of State, is a key part of that process. I do not have an update now, but I am certain that a parliamentary question on that subject will shortly be coming the way of the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry.

The new NAD will operate as part of a new empowered quad, leading the Ministry of Defence to make faster procurement decisions. We certainly need to make better

procurement decisions than those we have seen in the past. The delays in contracting are a key part of cost escalation across a number of programmes, albeit not with Wedgetail because of the fixed-price contract. It is absolutely right that we make better procurement decisions.

I agree with the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway on the need to invest in laser weapons. The SDR talked about rolling out the DragonFire directed-energy weapon system. The ambition of the last Government was to install DragonFire on one Royal Navy destroyer, as an uncoded programme. The SDR set out a coded proposal to install it on four Royal Navy destroyers, setting a date for when that will happen. Creating a structured, layered and integrated air and missile defence system will, in part, depend on looking at directed-energy weapons and similar novel technologies across a range of spectrums, in order to provide the air defence we require to secure homeland defence and operational defence for our allies abroad.

The picture painted by the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), of what might happen in the event of a conflict means that not only air defence missiles would have a role in such a conflict, and this new technology might well play a part. I am grateful for the way he introduced the debate in that respect.

The hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East invited me to talk about space, which is one of my nerdy passions. The term “defence geeks” was used earlier, and I am certainly a space nerd. Space is a huge opportunity for improving not only ISR capabilities but defence capabilities. However, we need to be realistic that if we are to move to a fully integrated approach, which is the intent of the SDR with an all-domain warfare approach, we need to invest in the right capabilities.

For the Royal Air Force, Wedgetail is absolutely part of that joined-up and integrated approach, which is why we will continue with it. Given the workforce in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, I hope he will strongly support the 2026 delivery timetable for the first aircraft in operation. And on defence exports, he will know that one recommendation of the SDR was to move an element of exports for defence from the Department for Business and Trade into the Ministry of Defence.

That work is under way at the moment, so that we can better align the opportunities of defence exports, because we believe there is a huge opportunity for British business to sell our technologies to allies around the world. That has the advantage of being an engine for growth, as well as making us stronger by making our allies stronger at the same time.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham for his work, and indeed for his praise for our friends from Australia. The Defence Committee report that he cited needs to be front and centre when we look at Wedgetail procurement so that we learn the lessons and make it work. As the last Government’s procurement of five sets of radar for three aircraft shows, the procurement system was neither working properly nor delivering value for money.

My hon. Friend asked about the Australian upgrades. Australia and the USA are working collaboratively on what is called the next-gen Wedgetail with improved radar, which they think will enter service in 2035. The UK is part of the trilateral group, but we are not

pursuing the advanced sensor at this time because we are focused on delivering the current capability without any further delay, as Members on both sides of the House have urged. As part of the trilateral agreement, we have the opportunity to upgrade in the future should we wish to do so. Doing so may be more cost-effective in the long term.

Luke Akehurst: Does the Minister agree that upgrading this fleet of aircraft would be easier if there were five airframes? That would allow one of the five to be taken out of service for an upgrade. It is logistically more difficult if we stick with three airframes.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend makes a strong argument. I support the wording of the strategic defence review, which talks of possibly buying more E-7 Wedgetails when the economic conditions allow. Of course, thanks to the decisions taken by the Prime Minister, we will be spending 2.5% of GDP on defence by April 2027, 3% in the next Parliament and 3.5% by 2035. For the first time in a very long time, there will be a rising defence budget in the next decade.

I am certain that my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham will continue to make the case for increased defence spending, which will mean more jobs directed at British companies—and Boeing, which is based and works in Britain, is precisely such a company, as are UK primes and small and medium-sized enterprises, which could benefit from that. His description of the programme as having been vandalised by the last Government is powerful, but I recognise that we now need to deliver the capabilities and make sure they work.

I will briefly respond to some of the interventions before addressing the Front-Bench contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough is, in his customary way, absolutely right that it is important that the programme is delivered and that we learn the lessons to improve procurement. That is the intention of the defence industrial strategy and will be the intention of the defence investment plan. The first of the RAF's Wedgetail aircraft will be introduced next year, which is a moment to make sure that the second and third aircraft can be delivered in the expected timeline.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), who is not in his place, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) praised the supply chain and mentioned Thales in Belfast and Glasgow. I am glad that the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway spoke about the importance of defence businesses in Scotland, which has a proud tradition of investing in brilliant defence businesses. Some of our cutting-edge capabilities are developed and built in Scotland, and we have a Government in Westminster who are proud of Scottish defence workers and of the supply chain there. It is just a shame that we do not have a Scottish Government who can be equally proud of the exceptional work to support our national defence that takes place not just in the shipyards and factories, but in the workshops and laboratories across Scotland. I am certain that there will be further opportunities for that case to be made forcefully.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas), who reiterated the need for ISR capabilities. The hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) spoke with real passion about the need to work

with more of our EU allies. That is precisely why the Prime Minister initiated the EU reset. We now have an agreement with our EU friends that opens the door to participation in more joint programmes and joint working. We have, in any case, cleared the air and improved the relationship with our European friends that might have existed under the last Government. They are our friends, and our NATO allies. We stand with them when we face a common threat, such as the threat from Russia, and it is absolutely right that we do so. The hon. Member for North Devon is also right to point out the gaps in procurement that we need to fill, and the retirement of the previous aircraft. I am grateful for his service, even if it was some time ago, at the same time as the Sentry was introduced.

I will turn to the remarks of the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford. In the 2025 NISTA report, the Wedgetail programme is rated amber, not red, but I think his critique is that the programme has been beset by delays for quite some time. I share the general concern about the procurement system. It must be a curious position for the right hon. Member, having been such a fantastic scrutineer of the last Government's woeful procurement system, to now be the Front-Bench spokesperson for his party. I am grateful that he did not fall into the trap of simply defending the last Government, and was honest about those failings. That is to his credit.

The Minister for Veterans and People is at Windsor collecting his Distinguished Service Order. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am sure that the whole House, instead of taking cheap shots at him, welcomes and thanks him for his service. Having someone with that much bravery and courage in the office next door to mine is a firm reminder to sit up straight in my seat every time we are in meetings together.

I have spoken about how we are going to get to Wedgetail's introduction in service, and briefly mentioned the NAD recruitment; that is being led by the Secretary of State so the question is for him, but I am expecting a parliamentary question on that. I am grateful that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford says that the last Government were not without blame. I wish that we were able in 12 months to fix every problem that we inherited from the Conservatives but, as he knows, some of those problems are long-rooted and will take a lot of time to resolve. I am hopeful that the Wedgetail programme will start delivering aircraft next year, as planned; that is the commitment that Boeing has given. That will make substantial progress on a programme that has taken too long to deliver.

Mr Francois: For the record, I was not quoting the NISTA report; I was quoting the IPA report. I asked the Minister three very specific questions, and he has 12 minutes left. I fear he is denial about the problems in this programme. To prove me wrong, with his 12 remaining minutes will he answer unambiguously the three very direct questions that I asked about the status of the programme?

Luke Pollard: I shall also deal with the earlier comment about where the aircraft will be maintained. I am happy to confirm that they will be maintained in the UK. I did not get all of the right hon. Member's questions down in detail. I do not want to give an incorrect answer,

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especially as I am standing in for the Minister for Veterans and People and out of my swimming lane, so I commit to ask my hon. Friend to write to the right hon. Gentleman to make sure that he gets the correct answers.

Mr Francois: That is unacceptable. The reason for this debate—I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for securing it—is that both Boeing and the MOD have been stonewalling on this issue for nearly a year. The Minister cannot just say, “I will write to the right hon. Gentleman.” He is in Parliament; he has had plenty of time to prepare and he has lots of civil servants to advise him. He must not fob me off with a letter, or fob off the Chairman of the PAC, who now wants to see the permanent secretary about it. The Minister has had plenty of time; he must answer now, in Parliament, the three very direct questions about the status of the programme. If he does not, the world will conclude that he has something to hide.

Luke Pollard: I know the right hon. Gentleman is trying to be aggressive and angry, but I do not want to give the wrong answer when I am standing in for another Minister. I am happy to ensure that a letter is written and shared with colleagues here so that the answers are given properly. I have been very clear about—

Mr Francois *rose*—

Luke Pollard: If the right hon. Gentleman interrupts each sentence, I will not get the full sentence out. I appreciate that he has a style that he has to maintain, but this is not helpful and not in the spirit or the tone in which the debate has been conducted. I will conclude briefly, so that my exchanges with him do not lower the tone.

We need to ensure this programme is delivered. It is important for the RAF and our national security. It has been beset by delays and the procurement system used to deliver it was not acceptable. The Conservative Government’s decision to cut the number of Wedgetails from five to three has correctly been criticised by Members on both sides of the House, including by members of the House of Commons Defence Committee.

As a new Government coming in, we committed to look at purchasing new E-7 Wedgetails, as part of the recommendation in the SDR, when the economic conditions allow. That is a vote of confidence in the platform, and it is part of our ambition to improve defence procurement. Boeing and the partners in the supply chain should be in no doubt that we expect the aircraft we ordered to be delivered, to be operational,

and to make a valid contribution to filling the gap that the last Government created when they axed the previous aircraft providing this capability. I am happy to ensure that a copy of the detailed notes are shared with the House, so that answers to the questions put to me are properly provided.

3.51 pm

John Cooper: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. There is obviously a great deal of interest in this very important programme. I also thank the Minister for stepping in; we realise that this is not his brief. We welcome his generous offer to talk to interested parties. That is quite an unusual approach, and I welcome it.

The hon. Members for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made adroit interventions. The hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) talked about our geeky interest. Those who are only geeks also serve, and we do what we can here to help with the defence of the realm.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) reminded us that accuracy is important in matters military. I apologise for my lack of geography of the area. He made a very important point when he said that we agree that we all want this done. That sums up the situation: we want to see this done because this aircraft is absolutely critical.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) set this issue in the context of the wider picture. This is the west standing up for itself. It is important that we do that. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) is doing great work with the Defence Committee. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), who is unfortunately not in his place, talked about defence in Scotland, and the Minister referred to that too. It is worth emphasising that under the SNP Government there is a hostile environment wherein young apprentices are denied access to Holyrood, and we are seeing defence structures and buildings under attack in Scotland. It is absolutely incredible and deeply, deeply worrying.

It is worth reflecting that the motto of the RAF is “Per ardua ad astra”—through difficulties to the stars. This aircraft is probably in the “ardua” section of that. It is going through some difficulties; there is no doubt about that, but—fingers crossed—it will spread its wings and eventually take its place in the RAF arsenal.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the RAF E-7 Wedgetail programme.

3.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Further Education Institutions

3.59 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for further education institutions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. Up and down the country, further education institutions are educating and training 1.6 million people, providing them with the skills they need. These colleges are the lifeblood of the British economy, serving as a vital bridge between compulsory schooling and higher education and employment. However, further education was cut to the bone under the previous Conservative Government, and colleges are crying out for more support. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, spending on adult skills and apprenticeships was 23% lower in 2024-25 than it was back in 2009-10. That is a huge cause for concern.

Many of us in this room have seen the great work that these colleges do at first hand, and I am sure we will hear that from colleagues during the debate. I pay tribute to Shipley college in my constituency, and I hope to draw attention to some of the challenges that it and others face, as well as their tremendous contributions. Shipley college is the local lead on health training, and has built a strong relationship with Bradford Royal Infirmary. They have developed a T-level cadetship programme, giving local 16 to 17-year-olds invaluable experience on hospital wards.

I recently visited Shipley college and met students and staff who were training on life-like robots with AI-generated voices to mimic a conversation with a patient. That was clearly giving the students confidence, and preparing them much better than traditional teaching methods. Government funding has enabled the college to invest in such amazing resources as Gaumard human simulators, Anatomage tables for learning anatomy and physiology, and an immersive classroom where students get to prepare to deliver skills in a real-life situation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady, who has made a reputation for herself in the Chamber by asking all the questions. I understand this is her first Westminster Hall debate, and I congratulate her on it and wish her well. Last year there were almost 19,000 UCAS applicants who self-identified as young adult carers. That is around 4% of all applicants. I spoke to the hon. Lady before the debate; does she agree that more support must be offered in further education settings to those who have caring responsibilities—from caring for a parent or being a parent themselves—so they can achieve educational standards?

Anna Dixon: I agree that we must open up access to education for all, including carers. Further education colleges require significant investment to upgrade and maintain their buildings and ensure that they can provide a modern learning environment and access to up-to-date technology. However, staff tell me that their ambitions for further capital investment are limited. Since colleges were brought back into public ownership, their ability to borrow money and invest in capital projects has been removed, and they must now seek permission from the Department for Education to borrow money, which is a

slow process. I would appreciate the Minister outlining what the Government are doing to address the capital funding needs of further education colleges.

I would like to move on to some issues around skills training. Every year, 3.8 million people aged 19 and over access skills education in England. That is a critical part of our education system, enabling people to build rewarding careers and fulfil their dreams. Yet, across the country, businesses do not have the right skills available to deliver the services they want and we need. According to the Learning and Work Institute, the UK could face a £120 billion loss by 2030, with a projected shortfall of 2.5 million highly skilled workers.

In Saltaire in my constituency, businesses tell me that they are struggling to recruit people with digital and tech skills locally. Is that any wonder when the Conservatives cut FE funding so significantly? With the right support, FE colleges can drive productivity gains across key sectors, such as engineering, healthcare, digital technology and construction. They can supply skilled technicians and specialists, enabling businesses to expand, innovate and compete.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Regional colleges such as the North West regional college and the Northern regional college in my constituency do exactly what the hon. Lady outlines. Particularly, the likes of apprenticeships are the future for many young people, especially those from disadvantaged communities. We should encourage and support that.

Anna Dixon: I entirely agree that the FE college apprenticeships—these other routes—are important for disadvantaged children. I will expand on that in a moment.

I am delighted that this Labour Government are committed to equipping the workforce with the skills they need to rebuild Britain, including through the establishment of Skills England. I hope that Skills England will encourage and facilitate strong partnerships between colleges and employers. Perhaps the Minister might like to say whether we could go further in empowering local areas and colleges to tailor their provision to local labour market needs and community demands.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that Institutes of Technology can play a valuable role in setting forward the workforce, especially in defence, which the country needs, and will she join me in wishing Darran Marks the best in his next career endeavours?

Anna Dixon: I am certainly happy to commend the leader of my hon. Friend's local IOT. I recognise the contribution that IOTs make to training the next generation in all sorts of careers; they prepare them for the demands of some highly skilled roles in defence.

FE colleges are not just about supporting our young people; they also give older adults opportunities to gain skills and retrain to access and retain good work. It will be vital, for example, to upskill and retrain people transitioning into jobs in the clean energy sector. I was disappointed to learn of the cuts to the adult skills fund, and a number of constituents wrote to me about it. I understand that the public purse is under huge

[*Anna Dixon*]

strain and there are many competing demands, but further education colleges provide an excellent education, and given the real-terms funding reductions that they have experienced over two decades under the Conservatives, I do hope that in future they will receive more sustained, multi-year funding that accounts for inflation and rising student numbers.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Beaumont college in my constituency provides excellent specialist education for young people transitioning from a specialist school into adulthood. Does my hon. Friend believe that part of that funding must be available for colleges such as Beaumont so that we can support young people with special educational needs and disabilities?

Anna Dixon: Indeed, and I note that FE colleges, on average, have a higher number of SEND pupils than others. They give really good opportunities for children with additional needs to thrive and to go on and educate, so I commend the work of her local college.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. One of the first things that I had to do after the general election was to ensure a funding guarantee of more than £20 million for a rebuild of Harrogate college. Due to the local authority dropping the ball, the planning expired and the funding period elapsed. I was grateful to work with the Labour Government to secure that funding. I do worry, though, about the £90,000 cut to Harrogate college's adult skills funding. The response that I got from the Government said that that is now devolved to the Labour mayor. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need more funding for our devolved mayors to ensure that we keep up adult skills funding?

Anna Dixon: I am pleased to hear that the Labour Government have secured the future of Harrogate college. I also agree that it is vital that, as the workplace changes, people keep their skills up to date with lifelong learning, so it is essential that we protect and maintain adult education funding. I would like to hear from the Minister on that. Will she outline the Government's plans to ensure sustainable funding for FE colleges, as well as the ongoing support for adult education as mentioned?

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for this excellent debate. Does she agree that colleges like mine in Shrewsbury have achieved their "outstanding" status because of the breadth of training and qualifications that they offer across a wide rural area? Do the Minister and the Department need to recognise those twin challenges? One challenge is offering qualifications from supported internships right up to level 4 degree qualifications, and there is a massive rural challenge as well. Those twin challenges must be considered.

Anna Dixon: My hon. Friend is a great champion for her area and for rural communities. I agree that there are particular challenges for colleges seeking to deliver such a breadth of education and many different sorts of qualifications, and I know that the Government are looking at review and reform of that.

Let me turn to T-levels.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Anna Dixon: I want to make some progress. There have been recent innovations in further education with the introduction of T-levels. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I contributed to the inquiry that found that T-levels are a great option for many students, and it would be great to see them rolled out further, but that there are significant teething problems. T-level students attend three full days at college and, generally, two full days in placement. It is, in my view, far more demanding than three A-levels. However, finding suitable work placements can be challenging. While colleges welcome the greater flexibility that is given in where and how these requirements are fulfilled, there is a clear need for employers to be incentivised to offer such work placements to students.

Teacher shortages are also a huge problem for colleges, particularly when trying to attract people from the high-priority skill sectors that we have mentioned, such as digital and construction. The Public Accounts Committee also looked at teacher numbers and concluded that further education teacher shortages put the achievement of the Government's missions for opportunity and growth at risk.

Edward Morello *rose*—

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green) *rose*—

Anna Dixon: I will give way first to the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello).

Edward Morello: The hon. Member mentioned two points relating to staffing that are extremely important. Often, further education colleges, such as Kingston Maurward college in my constituency, also provide higher education qualifications, but pay for staff, especially specialist staff, tends to be higher in higher education institutions than in further education, which makes it difficult for them to recruit. Does the hon. Member think the Government need to address that pay disparity?

Anna Dixon: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point—I was about to come on to the pay gap between teachers in schools and those in further education colleges. Teachers in further education colleges earn an average of £8,000 a year less than schoolteachers. I was not aware of the gap with higher education, but it is clearly important that there is a level playing field so that they can attract and retain teachers.

Adrian Ramsay: The hon. Lady has now pre-empted my intervention. I wanted to highlight that further education leaders I have spoken to, such as those from Suffolk New college, who run the Halesworth campus in my constituency, have highlighted that £8,000 to £10,000 gap in pay between FE lecturers and secondary education teachers teaching the same subjects. Does the hon. Lady agree that this needs to be addressed in order to tackle the challenge of retaining and recruiting staff?

Anna Dixon: I agree. Closing the gap in pay will be vital, particularly if we look at vocational areas where industry salaries are higher. In construction, engineering and digital, FE teachers earn around 11% less on average

than their peers who work in industry. Even when colleges do manage to recruit, they are quickly enticed back to industry, so it is not enough to just ask employers to release their staff to support the teaching of these in-demand skills. How does the Government intend to address the teacher shortages in further education, attract people and offer incentives for businesses to release people?

The final point I will touch on is social mobility.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): My constituency is one of 15 in the whole of England that does not have a sixth-form college or a further education college. That has huge repercussions for local young people and their potential. I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and sharing her point on the impact on social mobility. I have been campaigning for a sixth-form college at the Bolsover school site since I was elected, after the last Government offered the sixth form but left no funds to pay for it. Does my hon. Friend agree that areas such as mine must be the priority for Government support for a sixth form?

Anna Dixon: I commend my hon. Friend for being such a champion for Bolsover and wanting to secure opportunities for her constituents to get the education that they deserve. I am sure that the Minister heard her words.

By improving education across the board, including further education, we can increase social mobility and address the stark regional disparities across the UK. Social mobility is a core Labour value.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD) *rose—*

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab) *rose—*

Anna Dixon: I will take the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) first.

Leigh Ingham: I thank my hon. Friend for calling the debate. I am proud to represent the best FE college in the country—I am sorry to everyone else—because I have Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group in my constituency. The work that it is doing to increase social mobility is incredibly important, but by the end of this decade it is facing a shortfall of 30% of places to allocate to my constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that investment is given to colleges—not just revenue for lecturers' wages, but capital to build the spaces we need?

Anna Dixon: Absolutely; it is vital that we get more capital as well as more revenue funding into FE.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The hon. Lady is being generous with her time. I want to mention Haywards Heath college, which closed but was then able to reopen in 2020, thanks to the work of Mid Sussex district council and the previous MP. Does the hon. Lady agree that extending the pupil premium into further education colleges would make their financial sustainability more secure?

Anna Dixon: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. It is important that the general funding available in education for those taking on disadvantaged students is reflected in things such as the pupil premium. FE certainly plays a huge role in widening participation of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as by offering flexible schedules, part-time study and tailored support services that lower barriers to education. For many, further education represents the most affordable and practical route to upskilling and career advancement, or progression to university. College students are more likely to be from diverse ethnic backgrounds and to have special educational needs and disabilities.

Colleges are already supporting both the most deprived learners and those from most deprived areas. For example, 30% of college enrolments are students from the most deprived postcodes. Sadly, in 2023 only 39% of those who finished level 3 courses at FE colleges, which are equivalent to A-levels, went on to higher education. The equivalent rate in state school sixth forms was as high as 60%, so it is critical that the Government increase opportunities for those in further education and open up degree-level apprenticeships.

I would appreciate it if the Minister outlined the Government's plans to support new routes for disadvantaged children to go into higher skilled work and the role of further education colleges in helping to achieve that ambition. I will conclude in a moment, but I believe that further education colleges are a vital part of the UK's educational landscape.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous with her time. Fife college in my area does hugely important work, but it has had its budget slashed by 20% over the last three years by the SNP Scottish Government, who are actively moving funding out of my area and into Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh. Does she agree that such a cut is unacceptable, and that people in my area deserve the same opportunities to learn new skills as those in every other part of Scotland?

Anna Dixon: I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent intervention, pointing out some of the cuts that her constituents are experiencing at the hands of the SNP Government in Scotland. It is incumbent on them to ensure that all children and adults have the opportunities to learn and continue to update their skills.

In conclusion, I believe that further education colleges are vital to those skills; they provide vocational training, apprenticeships and essential skills for young people and adults who want to upskill and reskill. They play a crucial role in addressing skills gaps, boosting productivity and promoting social mobility. However, as we have heard, the sector is facing significant challenges, including real-terms funding cuts, workforce shortages and complex funding structures. In her response, can the Minister set out how this Labour Government are increasing both day-to-day funding and capital funding for further education? How do they plan to address teacher shortages in FE? How are they ensuring that those in further education have the same opportunities to progress?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): If the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) wishes to participate in this debate, I should say that

[Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair)]

there are only 10 minutes or so for the Minister to respond to the mass of points that have been made. I hope she will be brief.

4.18 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher, and I will be brief. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) on securing this important debate and for her excellent speech.

To improve living standards, we need to generate economic growth; to generate economic growth, businesses must have the skilled workforces they need to thrive. Further education institutions play a vital role in training the workforce we need for the jobs of the future. In my constituency of Scarborough and Whitby, we have some brilliant further education institutions that play a critical role in training young people with the skills they need, such as Scarborough university technical college.

Just last week, Scarborough UTC hosted Jürgen Maier—the chief executive officer of publicly owned clean energy company GB Energy—on a visit to its new Mainprize suite. The suite, named after a local service vessel company, will link employers with students to support them in their studies by providing valuable real-world knowledge and expertise to prepare them for careers in the renewables sector.

Offshore wind is a huge opportunity for Scarborough, and Scarborough UTC is a great example of how further education colleges can tap into opportunities to drive local economic growth, as well as provide career pathways. However, we need to ensure that young people in our most deprived communities have access to these new educational opportunities. Scarborough is the most deprived borough in North Yorkshire, and is rated in the lowest 30% of lower-tier local authorities in England, with three LSOAs—lower layer super output areas—within the most deprived 1% in the country.

Further education colleges in my constituency need the support of this Government to ensure that disadvantaged students can access good careers, and I would be grateful if the Minister outlined how the Government plan to work with local authorities and further education institutions to support pathways for disadvantaged students into high-skilled work.

4.20 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) for securing this incredibly important debate on further education colleges. Their importance and the passion for them have been clearly demonstrated by the number of interventions that she has skilfully taken, while also allowing for the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume).

It is a real honour to be representing my colleagues from the Department for Education; the Minister for Skills and the Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing speak on these issues in the House. Further education really is vital to our plans to develop the skilled workforce needed for all pillars of the plan for change, and for providing people with the skills that they need to thrive

in their life and work. It is key to unlocking their living standards and opportunities and to breaking down barriers to opportunity right across the country.

Let us not forget—all hon. Members have reminded us clearly of this today—that colleges are a unique part of the education landscape. They deliver such a wide range of provision at all levels and to all learners of all ages. From foundation-level qualifications to master's-level provision, they really do it all. We ask an awful lot of the sector, but we also know that it can deliver: it has shown that, and it delivers really well. As of 31 May this year, 86% of colleges were rated good or outstanding in their Ofsted reports. That really is a fantastic achievement, demonstrating consistently high quality across the sector.

I know that the sector is dealing with a whole range of challenges, not least those set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley in her opening speech. That is why we are continuing to invest and to provide support. We are really focused on delivering that where it is most needed.

My hon. Friend first raised a question relating to capital investment, because excellent further education colleges, with good quality buildings and facilities, are really foundational to the Government's opportunity and growth missions. In 2025-26, the Government are investing £6.7 billion of capital funding for education. That is a 19% real-terms increase from 2024-25, and includes £950 million for skills. The 2025 spending review announced continued capital investment to support further education providers' capacity to deliver high quality training, ensuring that learners have access to the facilities and equipment that they need along all their training routes. From 2026-27 to 2029-30, the investment will include £200 million for the new skills mission fund, to strengthen technical education and tackle those sector-specific shortages of skills that we know are right across England, including through targeted investment in technical education colleges, which I will come on to shortly.

Building on the £80 million of capital commitment in construction made at the spring statement, there will also be £1.7 billion of capital funding to help colleges maintain the condition of their estates, which will be risen in line with inflation, in terms of their annual allocation, and £375 million to support post-16 capacity to accommodate the increasing student numbers, which, of course, we welcome and are happy to support. More broadly, more than £7.5 billion of the 16 to 19 programme funding will be invested during this academic year, ensuring there is a place in educational training for every 16 to 18-year-old who wants one. That funds further education colleges and other institutions to provide study programmes or T-levels for 16 to 19-year-olds. Many Members raised how valuable access to T-levels is for young people. We used the 16 to 19 funding formula to calculate the allocation based on each institution, each academic year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley expressed significant interest in the adult skills fund, which fully funds or co-funds courses for eligible adults aged 19 or over from pre-entry to level 3. A number of other Members understandably have a huge interest in those opportunities. The Department will provide approximately £1.4 billion in funding for the adult skills fund in the coming academic year, ensuring that adult learners can access education and training that they need to progress

in their employment and work. The funding will be used by colleges, local authority adult education providers and independent training providers.

I want to be clear that the reduction to the adult skills fund for the 2025-26 academic year in no way diminishes our commitment as a Government to investing in education and skills training for adults over the life of this Parliament. We want to work collaboratively with the further education sector to make sure that these difficult decisions can be taken while still delivering in the way that the country requires. On sustainable funding, which I know many Members have an interest in, the Government are committed to ensuring that the further education sector is supported to achieve continuous improvement and, most of all, excellent outcomes for learners.

The Department has in place a really strong accountability system alongside college oversight, which holds colleges to account and encourages continuous improvement. We really want to see improved outcomes for learners. That involves both the Department for Education and the Further Education Commissioner. We have place-based teams with an overarching responsibility for maintaining these relationships. The system ensures accountability, quality and finance oversight; that we are monitoring performance, support and intervention; and that we work collaboratively with local stakeholders to deliver on the outcomes we need to see. That means we can hold colleges to account, but also support them when they need intervention to ensure that they are delivering.

Any organisation is only as good as its workforce. FE teachers and staff play such a vital role in colleges to break down barriers for learners and teach skills vital to economic growth. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) mention learners with special educational needs and disabilities, and ensuring that opportunities exist for them too. That is why the Government are committed to recruiting 6,500 additional teachers across both schools and colleges, to raising the quality and prestige of FE teaching as a career, and to offering effective training and professional development.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Catherine McKinnell: I am really sorry, but I do not think I will have time if I am to respond to all the issues that have been raised; I do not think I will manage even that.

We are offering targeted retention incentive payments to FE teachers, particularly in key science, technology, engineering and mathematics and technical shortage subjects. We have a national recruitment campaign called “Teach in Further Education”, which we cannot shout about enough, to help raise awareness and increase consideration for FE teaching among industry professionals. We are also ensuring our initial teacher education system is setting high standards for new FE teachers, ensuring they have access to quality training, that we have bursaries to attract more than 2,300 trainees, that they are achieving the level 5 or higher FE teaching qualification, and that we are promoting the role in industry associates. Industry practitioners can teach part-time in FE and help to spread construction skills and exchange of industry practice, to make sure we can pass that on to the next set of learners who will work in our industries.

I was going to talk about technical excellence colleges, but I am running out of time, so I want to say thank you again to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley for securing the debate. I thank all Members who have taken part. I think I have demonstrated excellently our passion and support for further education colleges. We know how important they are to employers, businesses and the country as a whole, and I share that passion. Our colleges are crucial to the education system, equipping young people with the skills they need to get on in life and giving some people the second chance that they might not otherwise have had. Our plans and investments will help to support, develop and transform our excellent FE system.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Blue Badge Eligibility

4.30 pm

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered blue badge eligibility for cancer patients and people with life-altering illnesses.

The issue that brings us here today was brought to my attention by Elli Hodgson, a local journalist with the *Kent Messenger* newspaper. Her paper recognised that cancer patients and others with life-altering conditions were being denied the vital accessibility afforded by the current blue badge scheme, because they do not fall within the eligibility criteria—namely, having an enduring and substantial disability, typically defined as likely to last at least three years.

Cancer treatment such as surgery and radio and chemotherapy can have significant side effects, including extreme fatigue, pain and mobility restrictions. Mental health can also be undermined by the fact that patients are often in a personal battle with life and death. Sometimes those impediments might not last for three years, but they can still reduce access to essential services during treatment and recovery. In many situations, the effects of the disease and treatment last longer than three years. Indeed, under the Equality Act 2010, the Government rightly recognise cancer as a disability from the point of diagnosis for the remainder of a person's life.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I spoke to her beforehand about issue, which comes up regularly in my constituency office, so I commend her for securing this debate. Does she not agree that certain illnesses should have an automatic blue badge entitlement? Saying that someone has nine months to live rather than six months because of cancer or a terminal illness does not take into account the havoc that is also caused when someone has fatigue and breathing problems. The current system is much too stringent and puts pressure on GPs to write in support of something that really is a no-brainer and should not be necessary at all.

Helen Grant: As usual, the hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I agree with him that certain illnesses should have an automatic entitlement, because at the end of the day we should be making it easier for people who are going through hell, rather than harder and more complicated.

It is not just the three-year rule that is out of step for people with shorter-term conditions. Blue badge applications take 12 to 15 weeks to be processed, which is far too long in terms of cancer timelines, and rejected applicants cannot reapply for six months. Again, that is incompatible with cancer treatments, where debilitating physical effects can quickly arise. So today I speak on behalf of the many thousands of cancer patients and people with life-altering conditions whose lives could be made so much easier if they had access to a fairer blue badge system.

The issue came to the *Kent Messenger's* attention through the experience of an employee, a lady called Sandy Burr, who is with us in the Public Gallery today. Sandy was diagnosed with skin cancer in 2024. She

applied for a blue badge when she found out that her toe needed to be amputated. Not long after the operation, she was rushed back into hospital with breathing difficulties. Doctors found blood clots in her lungs, causing embolisms. She is now undergoing immunotherapy, which has additional debilitating side effects. All those issues further impact how far Sandy can walk with her crutches. Sandy's blue badge application has been refused by Kent county council, and she told me that the rejection felt like a kick in the teeth. She said that her mindset was focused on being brave and trying to stay alive, and she did not feel she had any extra fight in her to deal with the rejection or to appeal.

Another lady, Bev Evans, also shared her story with me and the *Kent Messenger*. Bev fell downstairs and broke her neck in 2020. She now suffers permanent injury and has extreme mobility issues. She, too, has been rejected for a blue badge by Kent county council on two separate occasions. No reasonable explanation was given. Applications are made online, and in Bev's case the computer just said no, because it thought she might get better within three years. It did not say why it thought that. Bev cannot walk without crutches and has no realistic prospect of a full recovery.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. She raised the problem of applying for blue badges online. When the condition is unnamed or unrecognised, that receives an automatic no. The brother of my brilliant parliamentary researcher is in full receipt of accessibility benefit. He represents England as a visually impaired cricketer, yet because his condition has no name he is automatically denied a blue badge. When he speaks to someone, he can change that, but with an online system it is an automatic no. Does the hon. Lady think that is right?

Helen Grant: No, and the hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We can, and must, do better in these important processes.

Following strong public reaction to the stories about Sandy and Bev, the *KM* approached me, because I am a local Kent MP and because I am a recent cancer survivor. In 2023, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Later that year, I underwent the first of three surgical operations to remove the cancer and reconstruct my body. The first eight-hour operation was extremely invasive; I could hardly move, let alone walk, for several weeks. By the time I was able to walk, it was in a hunched fashion, due to the nature of the surgery. Extreme tiredness was also a significant factor for many months post surgery, while my body used much of its energy to mend me from the inside.

During all that time, I was very lucky to have the support of my family to access the goods and services I needed, but not everyone is so fortunate. On 19 March this year, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport explaining the position. I requested that the eligibility criteria for a blue badge be broadened to include cancer patients and those with life-altering conditions, with the badge issued for a shorter term and with more frequent reviews, or that a separate but similar badge scheme be introduced for those with cancer and other life-altering conditions.

Disappointingly, when the Minister responded on 9 April, she confirmed that the Government want only one class of blue badge and that there is no plan to

legislate to change the current system, but that local authorities have powers to promote locally determined parking concessions in their respective areas. Accordingly, on 19 June this year, I am proud to say that all 18 Kent MPs and the shadow Transport Secretary signed a letter to the leader of Kent county council, with further correspondence going to the leader of Medway council.

We asked both leaders to consider the introduction of a locally determined concessionary scheme for residents with short-term impairments. We await full responses, but the leader of Medway council has offered a meeting, and we hope perhaps to see him next week.

We still believe that there is a strong case for a national scheme, which would require only secondary legislation. I hope that the Minister, having heard all our representations today, will reconsider the position. A national scheme would avoid an inevitably unfair postcode lottery situation, with different local authorities having different local policies on the matter.

We need a fairer and faster approach to blue badge eligibility, which recognises that at the centre of these faceless application processes are highly vulnerable people who deserve care, dignity and respect. I am grateful to all my Kent colleagues, and to the *Kent Messenger* newspaper for bringing the issue to our attention and helping to drive this important campaign forward. I am also grateful, of course, to Sandy, Bev and others who have bravely shared their stories.

4.41 pm

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my colleague, friend and constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant), for securing this critical debate, and Kent colleagues of all parties—Liberal, Labour and Conservative—who have come together to support this initiative. There are colleagues in the Chamber from other areas where this problem is manifest. It is a concern across the country.

I also thank residents who have stepped forward to articulate their position. Going to a newspaper and putting their names out there is a brave thing to do, and they are setting in train something that could change the rules for millions of other people in this country. I say to them, “Believe you me, the work that you have done is making those changes. You are sitting in the Public Gallery today because of your efforts and your diligence.” I thank Bev, Sandy and all the others who have written to us and are getting involved in the campaign.

This campaign is personal to me. Like, I suspect, many others in the room, I have had a life-changing health issue. At 38, I had what became a pulmonary embolism due to a heart attack, at a very young age, and was completely unexpectedly taken into hospital. The post-recovery period lasted 12 weeks, for six of which I was almost unable to move without support and help—at the age of 38. It was a traumatising and scary personal experience, and there are many such stories around the country from people who have broken limbs, suffered trauma or had cancer treatment. We need a scheme that takes into account the different scenarios of people’s everyday lives. The scheme needs to change.

As a Labour Government, we have a proud legacy on this issue, because it was Labour that introduced the scheme and a Labour Government that modernised it to support people who face serious barriers in their daily mobility. It allows them to park closer to essential services, to visit GPs to get treatment, or simply to collect shopping—to many, that would seem a simple act, but to those with these disabilities it is extremely frustrating and difficult.

I respect the Department for Transport but, like others, I have had quite formulaic responses from it, saying that people need to demonstrate an enduring, substantial disability. I know from colleagues that it is difficult to do that in a written piece of correspondence and without an in-person interview. The Department’s response does not take into account the fact that people have different levels of fluency in English, might not have medical knowledge and might be unable to articulate their exact position.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I have constituents who are helping to support their children through cancer treatment. They applied for a blue badge; only after the child’s treatment was, thankfully, successful did the application come back with a no or yes. The focus should be on getting well, not battling a system. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) for securing this debate.

Tristan Osborne: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we all have to work within systems, but this one seems heartless and a bit cold. I think that is the general experience of many, that it seems to take a “computer says no” approach if someone does not have one of those specific physical mobility issues.

I fully accept that we need a system, otherwise there might be people who choose to exploit the scheme. However, there must also be a point where we accept that people’s health is not linear. It is not a case of someone having something life-altering and therefore they can get the badge, and no other conditions exist, because most people’s health will change.

In recent years, there have been changes to extend the scheme to non-visible conditions, so we have made concessions previously—autism and mental health challenges can be taken into account. However, those with debilitating illnesses and temporary conditions are the focus this afternoon. We know from the media that this issue is not just confined to Kent. The excellent work of *Kent Online* is helping to highlight this case, but it is happening across the country.

In other places, we have seen cases where people experiencing side effects from cancer have been refused, and where people in severe pain—who can prove that they are in severe pain—have been refused access because they are told their condition is not enduring enough. That is unacceptable. If someone can prove that their condition exists and that they are engaged in medical treatment, anyone would think that that was enough evidence.

People may concurrently suffer from mental health issues, fatigue and other challenges as a result of not securing this support. Some are recovering from major surgery that leaves them barely able to walk, yet they are refused this service, which seems completely counterintuitive.

[Tristan Osborne]

I can tell hon. Members from experience, as others can, that a six-month recovery, when someone knows that they will recover, which I fortunately had, is still an uphill struggle, because it involves dealing with the consequences. I ask that any scheme, especially this one, be a mechanism rather than an obstacle course. It feels as if we are on an obstacle course and, certainly in residents' views, that is the case.

I thank *Kent Online* and residents for raising this campaign, and I hope that, with the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling and others, we can bring this issue into the public domain on a cross-party basis. As a relatively inexperienced MP, I have learned many lessons about how to run campaigns properly, and I salute the work of the hon. Member across the aisle on this—because we can genuinely get some positive change.

This is also a sign of local leadership. I am pleased that the council in Medway has stepped up and is open to having this conversation. I hope that we can work to get Kent county council in the room, because it covers the large majority of constituents across Kent. I believe the work we are doing can lead to change and I am passionate about the outcomes.

I have some questions for the Minister. First, is there positive work going on in the Department to review the blue badge scheme? Could that conclude that we can extend eligibility? Secondly, has any guidance been provided to local councils about local schemes—using best practice from, say, some of the London councils—and could we extend that principle? There is a bit of inconsistency between councils in terms of examples of where this works well in practice.

Thirdly, I understand that the Government are absolutely committed to supporting the NHS through extra investment in our hospitals and frontline services—that is extremely welcome. Could cross-departmental work be done with the Department of Health and Social Care to facilitate blue badges for those leaving hospital as part of their discharge regimen? Could they get an automatic letter that can be submitted to a public body, allowing for a seamless service, rather than having to go through a regimented application process? We could use a bit of common sense across Departments so that people do not have to go through a bureaucratic process to apply for a blue badge. I am quietly confident that we can see change, working with campaigners on a cross-party basis. I thank everyone for coming this afternoon.

4.49 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) for bringing forward this debate today. It is lovely to see cross-party working on such a serious issue.

I am not from Kent—I am from Norfolk—but from listening to the debate, there are some clear similarities. We are a rural county in Norfolk, similar to Kent. We have a significant coastline, an older population and similar issues with accessing blue badges. I am halfway through my summer tour of the 72 villages in South West Norfolk, and I do not think I have been to a single village yet where somebody has not come forward to say, “I’ve got a real issue trying to get hold of a blue

badge.” It is coming up time and again, and there are dozens of cases locally. For example, I have a constituent who had been diagnosed with and undergone treatment for breast cancer. She is in her 70s. She is profoundly deaf and has a hearing dog. She has been rejected three times for a blue badge. As a result, she is reluctant to leave her village, and there is a real issue with isolation from that.

Another constituent was at the end stage of kidney failure. He is in the early part of having had a transplant, but there are post-surgery complications, anxiety and a whole number of other health issues. His application was turned down because it was considered that his mobility was only bad during flare-ups, rather than “more often than not”, his anxiety was not regarded as being bad enough, and toileting issues do not form part of the national guidance.

There is a real issue about cost, too. I am fortunate that at our local hospital, which is about an hour away, people can still get free car parking if they have a blue badge. Those in a rural community often do not have any public transport enabling them to get to hospital. They have to drive or rely on other people to drive them there. If they are having routine treatment for cancer, for example, the cost of car parking alone soon stacks up, as it does for any other regular hospital or medical appointments. There is a real cost aspect to this.

What arrangements are in place for monitoring councils on the time taken to process blue badge applications? Norfolk county council seems to spend an incredible amount of time processing applications, and there is an element of local criteria. I have not done the work yet, but I think there is a significant policy difference in Norfolk, where it is incredibly difficult for a whole range of reasons to be eligible for a blue badge. Clearly, people who would benefit from and need a blue badge are not receiving one. Can the Minister comment on what oversight and assessment there is of local councils amending their own criteria, making things difficult and ultimately denying people eligibility for blue badges?

4.53 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) on securing this debate, and her constituent, Sandy, on bravely campaigning on this issue. It is people like her who make a real difference to this world—thank you.

A cancer diagnosis does not simply change someone's medical needs; it changes the course of their life. Even the most basic tasks can become physically painful and emotionally draining. It may be a short-term issue during recovery or represent a permanent shift. In these circumstances, a blue badge can offer crucial support, making it easier to access vital services and maintain a degree of independence. The blue badge scheme provides essential parking concessions to help people with significant mobility challenges to park close to their destination, whether they are the driver or passenger.

Cancer treatment side effects, such as fatigue from chemotherapy, chronic pain or nerve damage, can all severely limit mobility. However, despite the profound and often sudden impact of such conditions, many people living with cancer or other life-altering illnesses, as we have already heard today, find they do not

automatically qualify for a blue badge. The cost of travelling to medical appointments is already high, and for those undergoing frequent treatments and tests, it quickly adds up. Research shows that 93% of young cancer patients and their families travel to hospital by car and need a place to park. Furthermore, 71% say they struggle to afford travel costs, with parking charges contributing to an extra £250 a month. Many also report that parking arrangements at hospitals are inadequate. The charity Young Lives vs Cancer cited one parent who described hospital parking as a lottery:

“I can probably win the lottery better than I can get a parking space.”

In my constituency, a resident contacted me about her 83-year-old husband, who has blood cancer and neuropathy, uses a wheelchair, and cannot walk. Despite that, Labour’s Merton council lost his blue badge application, forcing his wife to resubmit it. That is unacceptable, and it highlights the pressing need for the more seamless blue badge process that we are advocating.

In other cases, the criteria for blue badge eligibility fail to map neatly on to fluctuating conditions such as cancer. That is why the Lib Dems are calling for a comprehensive review of the legislative framework for the blue badge scheme, as is everyone in the Chamber, I think. Like my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) and the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), we want it to be more responsive to real-world need, more compassionate in its interpretation of eligibility and more efficient in delivery.

We also urge the Government to take advantage of their ambition for a single patient record. Much of the infrastructure exists already, particularly in cancer care. It is entirely feasible to implement an automatic offer of a blue badge where clinical records show clear mobility changes, as so eloquently argued for by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Chatham and Aylesford.

Smaller but important changes we could make include amending blue badge signage, which we support, to clarify that not all disabilities are visible. That would help to reduce stigma and the misunderstanding faced by many users of the scheme. We are also pushing to ban discriminatory practices by taxis and private hire vehicles with a clear national standard for what an accessible city should be.

We remain firmly committed to improving accessibility across society. Public transport in particular must work for everyone, and we are campaigning for train stations around the country to meet essential accessibility standards, such as step-free access, safer and more inclusive platform designs, and level boarding wherever possible. Things such as that and blue badge accessibility are crucial to a society that cares for everyone and has an inclusive approach to how we live our lives.

Ultimately, we need a system that is fairer, simpler and more humane, one that recognises the challenges posed by cancer and chronic illness, even when those challenges do not fit neatly into a tick-box form or an online mechanism. A blue badge can mean being able to go to work, to reach a hospital, to attend a support group, or simply to visit a friend. It is about dignity, independence and inclusion. The very least we can do is to ensure that the system works as it should. Cancer

and serious illness take so much from individuals and their families, access to parking should not be another burden that they are forced to carry.

4.57 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) on not just securing the debate and championing her constituents so well in her speech, but bravely telling her own story as part of it, just as the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) did.

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond for His Majesty’s Opposition on an issue that cuts to the heart of how we treat some of the most vulnerable people in our society, not least those facing the life-changing impact of cancer treatment. The blue badge scheme has long been a vital way in which we support people with severe and permanent mobility difficulties to live independent lives, to stay connected to work, community and family, and to access essential goods and services.

Under the Disabled Persons (Badges for Motor Vehicles) (England) Regulations 2000, local authorities are tasked with issuing badges in line with clear national eligibility rules. Those rules, rightly, focus on the practical impact of a person’s condition on their day-to-day mobility, not simply on their diagnosis. The principle is sound, but in practice, there is, as we have heard, a glaring gap.

People undergoing aggressive cancer treatment, for example, can suffer debilitating side effects that severely restrict mobility. Nerve damage, fatigue, pain and weakness can make walking even short distances impossible, yet because those impacts are deemed to be temporary, the people involved often do not qualify for a blue badge, as the impediments might not last three years. This is not a small oversight. It means that people who are in the fight of their life are too often forced to fight an additional battle just to park near a hospital, their local shops or community services.

Under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, local councils have powers to create local traffic regulation orders that allow temporary parking concessions for residents with short-term impairments. However, we know, and I am confident the Government must know, that in practice that is patchy and inconsistent. Some councils offer short-term medical parking permits; many do not. Some cancer patients are fortunate enough to find clear guidance and a fair process; too many others are left to navigate an opaque local system at the very moment when they are least able to cope with yet more paperwork, forms and stress. It is simply wrong that whether a cancer patient can access parking support depends on where they live and whether their local council happens to operate a discretionary scheme or chooses not to.

The previous Government rightly reminded local authorities of their powers to provide the concessions, but that was never intended to be the long-term answer. We need a fair, unified solution that does not depend on a postcode lottery of local good will. I hope that the Minister will correct this impression when she responds to the debate, but under this Government there seems to be no commitment to update the outdated 2000 regulations in order to recognise the reality facing thousands of cancer patients and others every single year. Nor is

[Greg Smith]

there any progress on national guidance to make short-term exemptions consistent, automatic and easy to access. It is not good enough to say, as the Government still seem to say, that councils can just sort it out locally. The evidence is clear: the local patchwork approach has failed. Cancer does not care about council boundaries.

We need a simple, nationally recognised exemption for cancer patients whose treatment has a severe short-term impact, or potentially long-term impact, on their mobility. That could mean a standardised temporary permit supported by NHS trusts, so that patients do not have to fight for evidence or explain themselves twice. This is not about changing the core principle of the blue badge scheme. It is about bringing it up to date with the real-world experience of people who urgently need that help. It is about accommodating patients living with cancer, which the Government already classify as a disability from diagnosis and as long as people live with its effects.

I urge the Minister and this Government to listen to charities, to NHS professionals and to patients themselves. My hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and Malling gave the powerful examples of Sandy Burr and Bev Evans, constituents living with severe, agonising mobility challenges because of this disease and because of injury, yet still falling outside the national blue badge criteria. Now is the time to work on a cross-party basis to close the gap once and for all. Our country prides itself on compassion. It is now time for the Government to show that in practice. That can happen by ensuring that nobody in the fight of their life is forced to fight for a parking space too.

5.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): As ever, Sir Christopher, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) on securing this important debate and on sharing her personal experience and the experiences of her constituents. I also pay tribute to Kent residents Sandy Burr, Bev Evans and others whose personal stories have led to this campaign and to today's debate; I thank the hon. Lady for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) spoke with passion and conviction in support of his constituents and those who face serious health concerns that give rise to some of the most difficult moments in our constituents' lives. I recognise the need for a system that is fair and consistent. It should never be heartless or cold, and it should not feel like an obstacle course. I am committed to listening and to considering carefully the points that have been made today. I will come to my hon. Friend's questions in just a moment.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) for his contribution to the debate and for highlighting the examples from his own constituency. He asked what arrangements there are for monitoring councils' processing times. The Department for Transport does not monitor councils' processing times; that is a matter for councils themselves. We recommend that they should process blue badge applications within 12 weeks, but of course that will vary according to the

local authority and the resources that it chooses to put into its blue badge team. These are decisions for local authorities, which are elected by local residents and are responsible and accountable to local residents. I absolutely recognise that when we allow local authorities to make local decisions, they will make different decisions, which sometimes leads to inconsistency between them.

The Department for Transport sets the legislation around blue badges and provides non-statutory guidance to local authorities, but it is local authorities themselves that are responsible for administering the scheme. I recognise the issue that hon. Members from across the House have raised about the potential that that creates for inconsistency; it is one that I have reflected on over the period in which I have been a Minister, and I have dealt with numerous pieces of correspondence about it from MPs on behalf of their constituents. It has caused me concern and I have discussed it regularly with my officials in the blue badge team. Today's debate is timely in making me consider again what more we can do to address the concerns that are being raised.

Let me come back to the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford. He asked whether work is ongoing to review the scheme. We constantly consider the scheme and look to improve it. I felt that it was somewhat rude of the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), to refer to things that were last changed in 2000 and then suggest that within my first year of being a Minister I should have conducted a review and made major changes; the last 14 years might have provided an opportunity to address some of those issues. Nevertheless, it is timely to think about the scheme and look at whether there is a need for review and further refinement. As I have said, there is guidance for local councils on best practice, and I know that local authority blue badge officers come together to talk about their experiences of administering the system and to share notes and best practice. I met a number of them when they last got together in Runcorn, which is where the blue badges are issued.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford also asked about the potential for cross-departmental work with colleagues in the national health service and the Department for Health and Social Care. I would be happy to explore that further with colleagues in those Departments; I hope that that will have the support of everyone who has spoken today.

It may be helpful to step back for a moment to talk a bit about the scheme as it was intended and to reaffirm its purpose. As has been acknowledged, the scheme was introduced in 1971 and has served the UK public for over five decades. It provides vital support for people with severe mobility difficulties, whether those difficulties are visible or non-visible—so-called hidden disabilities.

The scheme enables individuals to access goods and services by allowing them to park closer to their destination, whether they are driving or travelling as a passenger. The blue badge provides national on-street parking concessions, including the ability to park without charge or time limit in otherwise restricted areas and to park on yellow lines for up to three hours where loading restrictions do not apply, but it is important to note that the scheme applies only to on-street parking. Concessions in private or council-owned car parks are not guaranteed and may vary depending on the operator.

All car parking providers are required to provide disabled parking spaces, and quite rightly so. In local authority car parks it is very likely, but not necessary, that the council will not charge those who are using disabled spaces, but in private sector car parks that might or might not be the case. I think that that also applies to hospitals. The Lib Dem spokesman, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), spoke about hospital car parks; they are outside the remit of my Department, but would be a useful part of the conversation.

Although we recognise the changing landscape of local infrastructure and council-owned car parks—perhaps there are fewer of them, and more private car parks—we have to continue to ensure that the scheme remains effective and accessible for on-street parking. Each year, over 1 million blue badges are issued across England. The day-to-day administration and enforcement of the scheme rests with local authorities, which are responsible for assessing applications and for ensuring that badges are issued only to those who meet the eligibility criteria set out in legislation.

I would like to take a moment to recognise the efforts of the local authority teams who deliver the service. I hope I can assure hon. Members that I know at first hand the passion and dedication that many local authority blue badge teams have in helping those who need access to parking. I have spoken to many of them, and I know how committed they are to supporting those in need.

My first ask to colleagues today is that they encourage their constituents to provide as much detailed and high-quality information as possible when applying. I appreciate the points that have been made about how some people applying for a blue badge are doing so at a really difficult, traumatic and stressful time. However, providing detail helps local authorities to make informed and fair decisions in line with the guidance set out on the Government website. The Department provides non-statutory guidance to assist local authorities in implementing fair and consistent assessment and enforcement practices, but this is a matter for local authorities. We cannot intervene in individual cases, but we are committed to helping to support local authorities in delivering the scheme effectively.

I really understand the concerns raised in this debate about eligibility for people living with cancer or other life-altering illnesses. They are serious and heartfelt concerns raised in response to constituents facing difficult and distressing circumstances, but before I come back to those issues it is important that I set out the rationale behind the current structure of the scheme. The eligibility criteria are designed to ensure that the blue badge is reserved for those with severe mobility impairments, whether physical or non-visible, that significantly impact their ability to access services.

I know that the shift from the term “permanent and substantial disability” to “enduring and substantial disability” was a very deliberate change. It recognised that some conditions, particularly those affecting cognitive or mental function, might fluctuate or respond to treatment but still endure over time. I think the change was designed to allow for greater flexibility to recognise a broader range of disabilities, including those that might not be immediately visible. It also ensures that the scheme remains focused on mobility and the ability to access places and services safely and independently. Ultimately, a blue badge may therefore be awarded to

an individual with a disability that is expected to endure in some way for the three-year blue badge issue period.

Local authorities invest considerable time and care in assessing applications from individuals who do not automatically qualify in line with the legislation. Many authorities—including Kent county council, which is one of the largest issuers, if not the largest, of blue badges in England—work hard to ensure that their decisions are fair and evidence-based. In 2024 alone, Kent issued more than 33,000 badges, supporting more than 83,000 of its residents.

I have to be honest about the kind of structural change that people are calling for today; it would represent a significant departure from the scheme’s current purpose. That is not to say that it is not a legitimate question to raise, but it would place additional pressure on a system that is already under strain. Many local authorities report that they are operating the scheme at a financial loss, with the current £10 fee no longer covering the cost of administration. Expanding eligibility without providing additional resources could compromise the integrity of the scheme and reduce the availability of disabled parking spaces for those who rely on them the most.

I note that, in reaction to the recent campaign, many have understandably expressed support, but others have raised concerns about the potential impact on parking availability and enforcement, including those who are current badge holders. Nevertheless, the cases highlighted by the *Kent Messenger* campaign and taken up by Members today cannot be ignored. These are real people, facing real challenges, and the response requires both compassion and the determination to look for solutions.

There is already plenty of room for local innovation; local authorities already have powers under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to introduce locally determined parking concessions, which can include temporary permits or designated bays for individuals recovering from surgery or undergoing intensive treatment, such as chemotherapy. In 2012, the Department published an advice note encouraging local authorities to consider such schemes, and while they are voluntary and locally led, they offer a flexible way to respond to specific community needs, without altering the national framework of the blue badge scheme. Of course, local authorities may wish to explore options for hospital parking concessions for patients who require frequent access to treatment, which is a matter for discussion with local NHS trusts, but I recognise that such measures can make a meaningful difference to people who are navigating serious illness.

In response to points raised today, I will ask my officials to review and update our existing advice note to provide clearer, more practical guidance on how local authorities can use those existing powers to support residents facing temporary or fluctuating mobility challenges. That would not change the core eligibility criteria for the blue badge, but in the short term, it may help councils to better understand the tools at their disposal.

We have not really touched on this today, but it is important to note that blue badge schemes in England, Scotland and Wales are fully devolved, and each nation administers its own scheme, sets its own criteria and determines its own fee structure. In Wales, the devolved Administration has chosen to introduce a temporary blue badge option, allowing individuals to apply for a

[Lilian Greenwood]

12-month badge if they are recovering from or awaiting treatment for serious illnesses or injuries that have a significant impact on mobility.

While I understand the appeal of such a model, it is important to recognise the scale of the English scheme and the context in which it operates. England has a significantly larger population and a far greater number of blue badge holders than Wales. Introducing a temporary badge scheme on the same model could place a real strain on local authority resources, many of which are already under pressure, and it could risk reducing the availability of on-street disabled parking spaces for those with long-term and severe mobility needs.

Of course, a change could also lead to a big surge in applications, increasing administrative burdens and undermining reliability, processing times and the current operation of the scheme. That said, I remain open to learning from the experiences of the devolved nations. I note the Welsh Government's recent publication of their review into the blue badge scheme. Where there are lessons to be drawn, or best practice to consider, I want to do so carefully and constructively.

To conclude, I reiterate that the Government fully recognise the importance of accessible services for people with disabilities and serious health conditions. The blue badge scheme plays a vital role in enabling independence and dignity, and we are committed to ensuring that it continues to serve those in need. I am cautious about expanding eligibility in ways that could undermine the current scheme's effectiveness, but I am keen to reflect on the concerns raised today. I will continue to engage with my officials and ministerial colleagues to explore how we can support local authorities in delivering compassionate, practical solutions within the existing framework.

This is not the end of the conversation; I am listening, I will keep listening, and I look forward to continuing to work with hon. Members on both sides of the House to ensure that the blue badge scheme remains fair, effective

and focused on those who need it most. I am open to the possibility of change to address some of the concerns that have been rightly raised today.

5.20 pm

Helen Grant: I thank all hon. Members from both sides of the House who have spoken so meaningfully and passionately on this matter today. In particular, I must mention the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), who is working closely with me and the *Kent Messenger* on this matter. I know that the shadow Transport Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), will be meeting the Transport Secretary. I hope the Minister, who was listening carefully today, will also speak to the Transport Secretary about what she has heard from all hon. Members today. I am glad she said that she will reconsider certain matters, and I hope that she might agree to have a meeting with me and some other colleagues so we can go into more detail than we have in the hour allowed.

Lilian Greenwood indicated assent.

Helen Grant: I think that was a nod. We can and must do better. As I said in my speech, and I am repeating it again, we need a fairer and faster approach, which recognises that at the centre of these faceless applications are highly vulnerable people who deserve care, dignity and respect.

Finally, I pay tribute to the courageous Dr Susan Michaelis, who died of lobular breast cancer last week. Susan, with her husband Tristan, was a great campaigner for cancer patients, and she would have been so happy to see this cross-party campaign debated so sensitively today. May she rest in peace. Let us all keep working together to make a difference.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered blue badge eligibility for cancer patients and people with life-altering illnesses.

5.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 16 July 2025

CABINET OFFICE

Public Service Reform: Test, Learn and Grow Programme

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): I am pleased to announce an update on the next stages of the Cabinet Office test, learn and grow programme, and how it will work with local places across England.

The £100 million programme is a flagship part of the Government's reform programme and aims to model and scale a missions approach by bringing policymakers closer to the frontline. The next phase of the test, learn and grow programme will bring cross-Government teams together with those that use and deliver public services and experience the day-to-day barriers when processes are not working, in order to reform services together. New solutions will be built from the ground up, moving rapidly to learn and adapt based on what works. The accelerators will identify blockers and barriers to delivering people-focused, preventive public services, and work to make change in Government to quickly scale learning.

This test and learn approach, outlined by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in December, will help to tackle our biggest national challenges and make better policy with and for communities to deliver on our plan for change. The programme has already had impact through its work in four locations on family hub services and temporary accommodation.

Today we are announcing the 10 places in England that we will work with as part of the next wave of projects on the ground. In each case, we will test out new approaches to a specific public service challenge, bringing local and central teams together with common purpose on the frontline. In mayoral strategic authority areas, we will work with both MSAs and the relevant local authority creating a partnership approach across all layers of Government to deliver for people.

Challenges the teams will look at will include increasing the uptake of Best Start family hubs to support parents and young children, establishing neighbourhood health services, better supporting children with special needs, getting more people into work, rolling out breakfast clubs, and tackling violence against women and girls. The 10 places are:

Barnsley metropolitan borough council

Wakefield council

Manchester city council

Liverpool city council

Sandwell metropolitan borough council

Northumberland county council

Essex county council

Plymouth city council

Nottingham city council

We are working with the GLA and London councils to agree London borough involvement

Our approach to the programme has been designed in partnership with local government, and I look forward to continuing to work with a wide range of partners to ensure that the learnings and benefits of the programme are shared widely across the sector. The programme will build a coalition around test, learn and grow, and public service reform, bringing in external expertise and tech specialists, and partnering with public service innovators. We will work closely with other key initiatives and players, and continue to work in the open.

I look forward to engaging with hon. Members and local government leaders to make this a truly collaborative programme between local communities and the centre of Government. I am grateful for the ongoing support and collaboration of the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, and countless colleagues across central Government and local government who have helped to shape, design and challenge the programme so far, and who I hope will continue to lend their passion and energy.

[HCWS832]

TREASURY

Tax Exemptions: Grenfell Support Scheme and Horizon Convictions Redress Scheme

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government will legislate to ensure that payments made under the Grenfell Support (Restorative Justice) programme are exempt from income tax. This legislation will apply retrospectively from 5 June 2024, when payments from the scheme started.

His Majesty's Revenue and Customs will exercise its collection and management discretion and will not collect income tax that may have been due on any payments made from 5 June 2024 to the date the legislation takes effect.

Exempting these payments from income tax means that tax credits claimants who received a payment up to 5 April 2025 should not have seen a reduction in their tax credits award. While no tax credits awards would have been reduced automatically, claimants who reported this payment to HMRC as part of their income for tax credits purposes can contact HMRC to determine whether their tax credits award was correct. HMRC is exploring options to proactively contact those tax credit customers who have received any payments under the Grenfell Support (Restorative Justice) programme.

The Government will also legislate to exempt compensation payments in the expanded Horizon convictions redress scheme. This was expanded on 3 June 2025 to include postmasters with convictions overturned by a court, postmasters who were prosecuted for alleged offences committed while the Horizon system was in use but did not face criminal convictions, and postmasters who received a caution, or in Scotland received an alternative to prosecution or a purported alternative to prosecution from the Post Office, for an alleged offence involving the Horizon system.

The Government are committed to maintaining the tax treatment of the Horizon convictions redress scheme. Therefore, the Government will legislate to formalise

the tax exemption and ensure that no income tax, national insurance contributions, capital gains tax or inheritance tax will be payable for redress received under this scheme.

[HCWS827]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Media Mergers: Legislation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): As the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport set out in her written statement on 15 May:

“This Government are committed to a pluralistic media landscape, where citizens are able to access information from a range of sources in order to form opinions”—[*Official Report*, 15 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 16WS.]—

while ensuring that foreign states are not able to own, control or influence the policy of UK newspapers or news periodicals. The Enterprise Act 2002 (Mergers Involving Newspaper Enterprises and Foreign Powers) Regulations 2025 will permit foreign state-owned investors to hold up to 15% of shares and voting rights in a UK newspaper enterprise, as long as they are passive investors with no rights or ability to appoint directors or other company officers or to exercise direct or indirect influence over the newspaper’s policies. The changes balance the need to protect our press from foreign state influence with the need to allow newspaper groups the flexibility to attract inward investment from a broad range of sources that do not present a risk to their editorial and operational independence.

We have noted the concerns raised across Parliament that the regulations do not fully deal with the risk of multiple state-owned investors acting on behalf of different states, each being able to hold up to 15%. Although remote, this scenario is not entirely theoretical. Concern was also raised regarding the Government’s ability to review all relevant cases.

On 18 June, I gave a commitment in Parliament to address these concerns, so today we have published for consultation a further set of draft regulations to amend the Enterprise Act 2002. The consultation will launch today and will be open for eight weeks until 18 September. Following this consultation, the Government will lay, in draft, a second statutory instrument to make the necessary changes to the legislation later in the autumn.

[HCWS828]

EDUCATION

Relationships, Sex and Health Education: Guidance

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): I am pleased to share the publication of updated statutory guidance for schools on the teaching of relationships education, relationships and sex education and health education.

We have comprehensively updated the RSHE guidance to address the most challenging issues facing young people today, to make it fit for the digital age, and to equip teachers to support young people to build healthy, respectful relationships in an increasingly complex online world. The new guidance will come into force formally from September 2026. Schools can use it in the meantime to shape their RSHE lessons.

In updating this guidance, we have looked closely at all of the responses to last year’s consultation, which are reflected in the consultation response published alongside the new guidance. We have also spoken in detail to experts and to young people, and this guidance reflects their wisdom.

This updated guidance provides a practical framework that enables schools to teach RSHE in a way which puts children’s wellbeing and safeguarding at its heart. The guidance is clear about the importance of ensuring that all lessons are age appropriate. It is clear that parents should be consulted on the content of the RSHE curriculum and have a right to know what their children are being taught, while ensuring that teachers are able to teach about topics preventively, or to respond swiftly when a risk presents itself earlier than anticipated.

The guidance includes significant new content to ensure that RSHE plays its full role in the prevention of violence against women and girls, as part of our Government mission to halve VAWG.

This includes a focus on building healthy relationships skills from the start of primary. It includes an emphasis on opening conversations with young people about positive masculinity and femininity, and ensuring that nobody is stigmatised in these conversations. The guidance is clear that teaching about sexual ethics must go beyond teaching about consent, so that young people understand how to act with kindness and respect in all of their relationships.

The guidance includes new content on teaching about suicide prevention. It is clear that schools should have a plan for addressing suicide prevention safely with secondary school pupils, including ensuring that staff have the knowledge and skills to do so.

The section on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teaching content is also clear up front about the difference in rights based on sex and gender reassignment, to reflect the Supreme Court ruling on the interpretation of the Equality Act in the *For Women Scotland* case. The guidance is also clear about the need to avoid language and activities which repeat or enforce gender stereotypes, which is in line with the conclusions of the Cass review of 2024.

As these matters are devolved, the Department for Education will implement these proposals in England only. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different policies in place and my Department will continue to engage with each of the devolved Administrations to encourage a joined-up approach on this matter.

This guidance should help our young people to live healthy lives, build strong, respectful relationships and play their part as active citizens in our society.

[HCWS825]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Fusion Energy National Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is today publishing the Government's response to the consultation on the scope of the fusion energy national policy statement—EN-8. This progresses the Government's plan to develop a fusion NPS that will streamline the planning process and help break down the barriers to clean power projects of the future.

Fusion supports the Government's plan for change, industrial strategy and two of the Government's five missions:

Making the UK a clean energy superpower by developing technology for fusion, other clean energy technologies and adjacent sectors, and accelerating to net zero in the longer term through zero-carbon, abundant, safe, baseload energy; and

Kickstarting economic growth through innovation, highly skilled jobs and tech transfer.

The UK has a genuine global strategic advantage in fusion and is recognised as a world leader in the most promising fusion energy technologies. With countries around the world increasing support and investment into fusion, the UK's expertise and global standing cannot be allowed to atrophy.

That is why the UK Government have backed fusion research and development and commercialisation, making a record investment in R&D for fusion energy, investing over £2.5 billion over five years. This includes progressing the spherical tokamak for energy production programme, the world-leading fusion plant in Nottinghamshire, creating thousands of new jobs and with the potential to unlock limitless clean power.

The UK's STEP programme aims to develop and build a prototype fusion powerplant in the UK by 2040. Private fusion companies in the UK and overseas are also quickly developing demonstrator fusion facilities. To deliver these facilities, sites for fusion energy facilities will need to be identified and construction started this decade.

Recognising this need, the Government are taking a proactive stance, backing the industry by establishing a stable regulatory and planning environment that supports and encourages its development. The UK was the first country in the world to legislate for fusion regulation, confirming that fusion would not be regulated under the same framework as nuclear fission due to its lower hazard potential. By differentiating from fission regulation and breaking down a needless barrier to clean power projects of the future, this new approach has led to increased interest from international companies siting in the UK and has strengthened the UK's position as a world leader in fusion.

A fusion-specific NPS is essential for providing clarity to developers and streamlining the planning process for fusion. Not only does this ensure certainty for developers to bring forward their fusion designs and align fusion with other complex energy generating technologies, but, crucially, it will support local and national planning inspectors with guidance when assessing potential developments.

The consultation on the scope of EN-8 was undertaken between 7 May 2024 and 17 July 2024 and began the process towards designation of this NPS, seeking views from stakeholders on broad policy proposals. In response to the feedback of consultees, the Government have taken the following decisions:

The Government will continue the development of EN-8—the Government recognise the differences in technology between fusion and other technologies already covered by other NPSs, meaning that a fusion-specific NPS is the only option for properly considering the planning implications of this technology.

Technology inclusive—all fusion technologies, with the exception to fusion-fission hybrids, will be in scope of EN-8.

EN-8 will take a developer-led approach, underpinned by robust strategic criteria to ensure that suitable sites are selected, with the utmost consideration for environmental and local impacts. This approach would allow siting in more communities across the UK, subject to local support.

Output agnostic—amend the Planning Act 2008 so that all fusion energy facilities generating at least 50 MW in England are incorporated into the national significant infrastructure project, independent of thermal or electrical output.

[HCWS834]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Vaccination

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): His Majesty's Government is committed to protecting people most vulnerable to covid-19 through vaccination as guided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

On 13 November 2024, the JCVI published advice on the covid-19 vaccination programme for spring 2025, autumn 2025 and spring 2026. On 26 June 2025, the Government decided, in line with JCVI advice, that a covid-19 vaccine should be offered in autumn 2025 to those in the population most vulnerable to serious outcomes from covid-19 and who are therefore most likely to benefit from vaccination.

Vaccination will be offered in England in autumn 2025 to:

adults aged 75 years and over;

residents in a care home for older adults;

individuals aged six months and over who are immunosuppressed, as defined in tables 3 and 4 of the covid-19 chapter of the UK Health Security Agency green book on immunisation against infectious disease.

The Government will respond in due course to the JCVI's advice for spring 2026.

The vaccines that will be supplied for the autumn 2025 programme are the Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA (Comirnaty) vaccines.

Notification of liabilities

I am now updating the House on the liabilities HMG has taken on in relation to further vaccine deployment via this statement and accompanying departmental minute laid in Parliament containing a description of the liability undertaken.

As part of the contractual arrangements with covid-19 vaccine producers for vaccines pre-procured as part of HMG's pandemic emergency response the provision of an indemnity was required to enter into supply agreements. The agreement to provide indemnity increases the contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme, with deployment of further doses of vaccines purchased as part of the emergency response.

The adult Pfizer BioNTech mRNA (Comirnaty) doses to be used in autumn 2025 are the only remaining doses of covid-19 vaccines purchased as part of the emergency response. This will therefore be the last increase in the overall contingent liability arising from an additional deployment of covid-19 vaccines.

I will update the House as appropriate if any future decisions further impact the contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

[HCWS829]

Less Healthy Food and Drink: Advertising Restrictions Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): As part of our ambition to tackle the childhood obesity crisis and raise the healthiest generation of children ever, this Government made a manifesto commitment to implement advertising restrictions for less healthy food or drink on TV and online.

My statement on 22 May informed the House of the Government's revised approach to implementing the restrictions in response to stakeholder concerns with the Advertising Standards Authority's draft implementation guidance. Having secured agreement from broadcasters and advertisers to voluntarily comply with the restrictions from 1 October 2025, I laid a statutory instrument on 3 June to change the coming into effect date of the restrictions to 5 January 2026.

The next step is to bring forward regulations that will provide the explicit exemption for brand advertising. We have worked closely with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and I am pleased to update the House that today we are launching a consultation on the draft regulations. We are seeking stakeholder views on the draft text to ensure that it provides the clarity that the regulators and stakeholders have asked for and is fit for purpose in delivering the Government's policy intentions to restrict advertising for less healthy food or drink products. The consultation will only seek feedback on the drafting of the brand advertising exemption and will not revisit any other aspects of the policy that are already confirmed and set out in law. The consultation will be published on gov.uk shortly and be open until 6 August 2025.

The brand advertising exemption will provide legal clarification on the existing policy intention, as it was understood and agreed by Parliament during the passage of the legislation in 2021-2022, that brand advertising that does not identify a specific less healthy food or drink product is out of scope of the restrictions. It is not a change of policy. Setting this out in legislation will enable the regulators to deliver clear implementation guidance and mean that businesses can prepare advertising campaigns with confidence.

These actions demonstrate our commitment and progress to implementing this important policy for children's health. I will update the House once the consultation process has concluded.

[HCWS833]

Independent Review of Physician Associates and Anaesthesia Associates

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): In November 2024, I asked Professor Gillian Leng CBE to undertake an independent review of physician associates and anaesthesia associates in England, and to set out recommendations to ensure the safety of the roles and their contributions to multidisciplinary healthcare teams.

Today I want to update the House on next steps following the publication of the review.

Professor Leng sets out 18 recommendations that will give much-needed clarity, certainty and confidence to staff and patients. The Government are accepting these recommendations in full.

The overarching recommendations include: renaming the role of "physician associate" to "physician assistant" and "anaesthesia associate" to "physician assistant in anaesthesia" to reflect their position as a supportive, complementary member of the medical team; providing ongoing opportunities for training and career development; making it easier for others to identify these roles; establishing permanent faculties to provide professional leadership and set clear professional standards; greater clarity in the differences between the regulatory requirements of doctors and assistant roles; training in line management and leadership for doctors, with additional time allocated; redesigning models of multidisciplinary working; and improvements in safety reporting.

For physician assistants specifically, Professor Leng has recommended that their initial practice is clearly defined in line with job descriptions; they do not see undifferentiated patients (except within clear national clinical protocols); that newly qualified physician assistants should gain at least two years' experience in secondary care, to enhance clinical skills, prior to taking a role in primary care or a mental health trust; and that they should form part of a clear team structure and have a named supervisor.

For physician assistants in anaesthesia, the review recommends full compliance with the existing Royal College of Anaesthetists scope of practice; that any further expansion of the role should be taken forward in conjunction with the Royal College of Anaesthetists; and that there should be an ongoing national audit of safety outcomes in anaesthesia, to gain assurance around the safety of the physician assistants in anaesthesia role.

Implementing the recommendations will require organisations to work together and take action. Some actions will be implemented immediately, while others will require wider input, with benefits being fully realised over time. I have asked NHS England to move with immediate effect to implement those recommendations which most directly affect patient safety, including moving to the use of physician assistants and physician assistants

in anaesthesia titles and ensuring that physician assistants do not see undifferentiated patients, except within clearly defined national clinical protocols.

The NHS is its people, and physician assistants and physician assistants in anaesthesia can play a vital role in the delivery of the shifts set out in the 10-year health plan for England. The findings in this report demonstrate that, when integrated appropriately, physician assistants can improve access, enhance capacity, and provide continuity of care, while physician assistants in anaesthesia can help expand theatre capacity and flexibility in anaesthesia services.

However, the review is clear that change is needed. It sets out the fundamental issues that need to be tackled to effectively and consistently embed change into the NHS workforce. These recommendations provide a practical way forward on title, ongoing development and practice that we can all have confidence in.

I would like to express my immense gratitude to Professor Leng and her team for their effort and dedication in carrying out this considered, complex and comprehensive review. I also want to extend my thanks to all those who have engaged constructively with the review, including those resident doctors who have respectfully raised concerns, and physician assistants and physician assistants in anaesthesia who make valuable contributions across the NHS and have been subject to intense scrutiny.

We will consider Professor Leng's findings and recommendation in detail in conjunction with the 10-year health plan. The lessons learned in the review will be embedded into the upcoming workforce plan to improve how we effect change in the NHS, and ensure the mistakes of the past are not repeated in the future. We will work with key partners, including NHS England in advance of publishing a fuller response, setting out a clear implementation plan to make the required changes in due course.

[HCWS830]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Identification of Victims of Modern Slavery: Call for Evidence

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): The national referral mechanism is the framework used in the UK to formally identify and support victims of modern slavery and human trafficking, in line with the UK's legal obligations. Effective identification of victims of modern slavery in the UK is critical for ensuring that victims can be protected and provided with appropriate assistance and support towards their recovery from exploitation.

The Government are taking steps to improve this identification system, such as by recruiting new staff to reduce lengthy decision-making times, which has reduced the backlog to half the size it was at its peak. The Government have also updated the form used by first responders to refer potential victims of modern slavery into the NRM to make it easier to upload information and to include more trauma-informed language.

While progress has been made, the Government recognise the need to do more by designing an effective identification system that is fit for the future. That is why I am pleased to announce that the Government today are publishing a public call for evidence on identification of victims of modern slavery.

This was something that I committed to on 27 March 2025 in a House of Commons debate marking the 10th anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

The call for evidence focuses on definitions of a victim of modern slavery, identification and decision-making processes, and future-proofing the modern slavery system. A key aim is to strengthen the system, both now and for the future, ensuring that it effectively serves victims of modern slavery and is resilient to future changes.

The call for evidence on identification of victims of modern slavery—

<https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/identification-of-victims-of-modern-slavery>

—will run for a 12-week period and provides a valuable opportunity for the public and a wide range of groups with experience of the NRM to have their say, including victims and survivors of modern slavery, NGOs, police, local authorities and researchers.

A copy of the call for evidence will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS826]

Prevent Programme: Lessons

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Following the horrific attack in Southport in July 2024, I announced that a new, dedicated permanent oversight function for Prevent would be created. This would provide continual independent scrutiny of Prevent legislation, policy, and delivery, to assess Prevent's effectiveness and to ensure proper standards are met.

Lord Anderson KC was appointed as interim Prevent commissioner to provide that independent scrutiny. He was tasked specifically with scrutinising the Southport attack and the murder of Sir David Amess, examining whether Prevent had failed to intervene effectively in those two cases. Lord Anderson was also asked to consider the improvements that have been made since the perpetrators were referred to Prevent, and to identify areas for further reform. Today he has published his findings, and a copy of the report will be placed in the Library in both Houses. The report will also be available on gov.uk.

I would like to express my gratitude to Lord Anderson and his team for the progress they have made in a short space of time. The report clearly highlights the failings of Prevent in both the Southport case and that of Sir David Amess, while also recognising the energy and urgency that has been shown in making changes to strengthen Prevent.

Lord Anderson's findings

On the tragic murder of Sir David Amess, Lord Anderson has upheld the conclusions of the Prevent learning review—PLR—that was published on 12 February 2025. He explains that once the case was adopted into Channel

in 2014, several failures took place, including poor communication with the intervention provider and the lack of a six-month review.

With regards to the perpetrator of the Southport attack, Lord Anderson agreed with the findings of the PLR that was published on 5 February 2025. The first referral should have been passed to the local authority Channel co-ordinator for information gathering—the process in place at the time. He comments that

“it is hard to see how the test of ‘reasonable grounds to believe that there are no Prevent concerns’ could have been satisfied on the known facts of the case”.

Lord Anderson also agreed with the PLR finding that there were sufficient concerns to warrant progression to Channel.

Lord Anderson concludes that in both cases their schools referred the individuals to Prevent

“for the best of reasons—but Prevent failed to provide what might have helped them. Whether different decisions might have spared their victims will never be known: both attacks came years later, and many imponderables intervened. But wrong decisions were taken; more should have been done; and from these failures, lessons must continue to be learned”.

Lord Anderson also outlined the importance of having a prevention programme like Prevent in place for tackling radicalisation. While Prevent cannot stop every attack, we must continue to drive reform where it is found lacking.

Lord Anderson made a series of recommendations on how Prevent can be further strengthened or areas that require further exploration. These include:

Prevent should remain open to individuals falling within the existing category of “fascination with extreme violence or mass casualty attacks”. Alongside this, consistent efforts should be made to improve the quality of referrals and encourage those that are appropriate, including by providing clear and consistent messaging to potential referrers and to Prevent practitioners.

A task force should be established to lead exploratory work into the possibility of formally connecting Prevent to a broader safeguarding and violence prevention system.

Compliance with respective agency mandates to share information should be more closely monitored by their regulators and inspectorates. Consideration should be given to introducing a duty to co-operate with speed and candour in reviews after adverse incidents.

Public transparency about the structures and systems of Prevent should be the default position. The Home Office and CT Policing should adopt a proactive approach to the release of such information and be ready to publicise the successes of Prevent.

All feasible and rights-compliant avenues should be explored as a matter of priority to enable evidence of online activity to be more effectively used:

- to gauge risk factors, assess risk, identify clusters and escalation and activate and manage responses;

- to assist in the identification of potential subjects for Prevent; and

- to evaluate and address the risk factors attaching to individuals referred to Prevent.

The Government welcome the findings of this rigorous review and will immediately act on its findings. We will:

Clarify Prevent thresholds in guidance and training to ensure that frontline public sector workers subject to the Prevent duty understand that those “fascinated with extreme violence or mass casualty attacks” should be referred to Prevent. We will complete this work by the end of September.

Improve transparency and information sharing, including by upskilling and training Prevent practitioners, frontline workers, and civil society organisations. We will complete this work before the end of the year.

We will take steps to strengthen our approach to tackling online radicalisation, through work with tech companies, like-minded international partners, and considering new approaches to identifying and supporting susceptible people online. This includes developing new capabilities to better equip Prevent to manage online radicalisation risks.

Continue exploratory work on how Prevent connects into wider safeguarding and violence prevention pathways to ensure no one can fall between the cracks.

While we must look immediately at how Prevent works alongside wider safeguarding mechanisms to stop further missed opportunities, we also look forward to the outcome of the first phase of the Southport public inquiry, led by Sir Adrian Fulford, which will publish its findings later this year. Where Lord Anderson’s review has identified the need to explore broader and long-term reforms to safeguarding and violence prevention, we will consider this alongside the inquiry’s recommendations. The inquiry will comprehensively examine all aspects of the events that led to the Southport attack, and identify where further changes should be made.

Alongside the work we will take forward in response to this report, swift progress has already been made on the reforms to strengthen Prevent that I announced in December 2024:

Prevent has launched new guidance which is designed to ensure that repeat referrals to Prevent get the multi-agency consideration they require;

The end-to-end review of Prevent thresholds has concluded. Its recommendations will strengthen our approach to the assessment and management of Prevent referrals. It will ensure that clear and unambiguous policy, guidance, and training is in place, so that Prevent can offer the right interventions to the right people. It includes specific action to improve our approach on Islamist extremism and for those individuals who are being radicalised into extreme violence;

The first stage of the strategic policy review into how Prevent manages people with mental ill health or who are neurodivergent has also concluded. Action is under way to implement those findings;

Pilots are now running across the country to ensure that where people do not meet Prevent thresholds, they receive the support they need from wider services; and

From 1 August, we will pilot new practical mentoring interventions for people at risk of radicalisation in Channel, to enable Channel panels to better support individuals without a clear ideology.

Prevent training is being rolled out at pace to educate frontline professionals about the ideologies, such as Islamist extremism, that drive terrorism.

In addition, to enable the vital independent oversight of Prevent to continue while a recruitment process is under way for the permanent commissioner, I am delighted that Lord Anderson has agreed to extend his tenure as interim commissioner until the end of the year.

My Department remains steadfast in its commitment to keeping the public safe and safeguarding people at risk of radicalisation.

The victims, their families and those who survived the Southport attack but continue to live with the physical and emotional pain, and Sir David Amess’s family remain in our hearts and prayers.

[HCWS831]

Petitions

Wednesday 16 July 2025

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Online gambling platforms

The petition of residents of Glasgow North East

Declares that action should be taken to safeguard vulnerable individuals in regard to excessive and unusual spending habits on online gambling platforms; notes that such actions result in excess debts mounting up and recognises cases where individuals have tragically died by suicide under these circumstances; further acknowledges the role for banking institutions whose customers are spending excessive amounts on gambling websites.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to review with gambling companies and banking institutions what safeguards are put in place to protect vulnerable customers from spending more money than they normally would; and further assess what further work can be done to protect vulnerable people who may be misusing alcohol or substances while gambling.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Maureen Burke.]

[P003098]

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Location of the Torbay and South Devon NHS out-of-hours Primary Percutaneous Coronary Intervention Services

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the proposed temporary co-location of the Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust's out-of-hours Primary Percutaneous Coronary Intervention (PPCI) services at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital will lead to increased travel times and potential delays in emergency cardiac treatment for residents in South Devon; and further declares that the protection of timely, local access to urgent cardiac care is essential.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure NHS Devon reconsider the proposed co-location and to ensure that all PPCI services, including out-of-hours, remain accessible within the local area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Caroline Voaden, *Official Report*, 22 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 1299.]

[P003075]

Observations from the The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):

The appropriate NHS commissioner is responsible for delivery, implementation, and funding decisions for services—in this case, Devon Integrated Care Board (ICB)—rather than the Government. The Government believe that local health and care organisations are best placed to make decisions on commissioning services

for their communities, working with local authorities, stakeholders, and local populations to meet people's needs.

The Government are aware that the ICB was due to consider a proposal on 29 May 2025 to establish a short-term, fixed-length “test and learn” process for out-of-hours primary percutaneous coronary intervention services in Torbay and Exeter. The Government understand that the chair and chief executive of the board then decided to withdraw the paper setting this out, in light of feedback received from staff, clinicians, patients, the public, and elected representatives.

The Government maintain that any changes to services should be informed by clinical best practice following appropriate engagement with patients and stakeholders. Substantial planned service change and reconfiguration of services are subject to a public consultation and must meet the Government and NHS England's tests to ensure good decision-making and that proposals are demonstrated to be in the interests of service users and the wider public.

The Government understand that an update will now be presented to the board in July. The Government understand that a case for change will be developed that covers the whole cardiology pathway. The Government recommend that petitioners share their views directly with Devon ICB—as the commissioner of the regional healthcare services—who will be better placed to respond. Devon ICB's contact details can be found online at <https://onedevon.org.uk/contact-us/>

Potential closure of the Ladies Walk Centre

The petition of residents of the constituency of Dudley,

Declares that Ladies Walk Centre, and the health and library services it provides, are at risk of closure because no deal has been done to ensure that the lease for the property does not expire in March 2026.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urgently communicate with the owners of the Ladies Walk Centre property, Dudley Council and the NHS, asking that Ladies Walk Centre be saved from closure.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

—[Presented by Sonia Kumar, *Official Report*, 19 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 856.]

[P003069]

Observations from the The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):

The appropriate NHS commissioner is responsible for delivery, implementation, and funding decisions for services—in this case, Black Country Integrated Care Board (ICB)—rather than the Government. The Government believe that local health and care organisations are best placed to make decisions on commissioning services for their communities, working with local authorities, stakeholders, and local populations to meet people's needs.

The Government are aware that the Dudley Group NHS Foundation Trust's lease for Ladies Walk is due to come to an end in March 2026 and that the trust are currently working with NHS Property Services and other occupiers to look at options for future service delivery. The Government understand that, during this

time, the trust will also seek the views of local people and patients. The trust have informed the Government that they are committed to continuing the delivery of services locally and ensuring that patients can access the care they need.

The Government maintain that any changes to services should be informed by clinical best practice following appropriate engagement with patients and stakeholders. Substantial planned service change and reconfiguration of services are subject to a public consultation and must meet the Government and NHS England's tests to ensure good decision-making and that proposals are demonstrated to be in the interests of service users and the wider public.

The Government understand that a public meeting was held in Sedgley on 21 May 2025, which approximately 130 local residents and interested parties attended, as well as all health and care partners being represented. The Government understand that a further public meeting is expected in July, at which the trust will update on their progress with the landlord. The Government recommend that petitioners share their views directly with the trust and with Black Country ICB—as the commissioner of the regional healthcare services—who will be better placed to respond. The Dudley Group NHS Foundation Trust's contact details can be found at <https://www.dgft.nhs.uk/about-us/contact-us/> and those for the Black Country ICB at <https://blackcountry.icb.nhs.uk/contact-us>

TRANSPORT

Traffic calming measures on the slip road off Water Orton Road

The petition of residents of the Castle Bromwich Ward, Solihull

Declares that traffic calming measures need to be put in place on the slip road off Water Orton Road in the Castle Bromwich Ward to ensure the safety of local

residents; further that Solihull Council need to act on the concerns of residents, following several recent road accidents as a result of road users using the slip road to circumvent the speed calming measures on the main road.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Solihull Council to take immediate action to ensure that traffic calming measures are installed on the slip road off Water Orton Road, in Castle Bromwich, Solihull.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Byrne, Official Report, 1 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 253.]

[P003087]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

The Government recognise that traffic calming can provide a proven and effective way of saving lives and reducing casualties by reducing vehicle speeds in areas where inappropriate speed is a recurring problem.

Local authorities are free to make their own decisions about the design of the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. This includes provision of traffic management measures such as traffic calming and traffic signals.

LAs are also responsible for day-to-day management of their road networks, including any necessary road and street works, and ensuring that their actions are within the law and are accountable to local people for their decisions and their performance.

Local councillors are responsible for ensuring that local decisions about street infrastructure take account of the needs and opinions of local people. The Department for Transport has published guidance on the design of traffic calming measures in local transport note 1/07 "Traffic Calming" which is available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-transport-notes

Written Corrections

Wednesday 16 July 2025

Ministerial Correction

WORK AND PENSIONS

Welfare Reform

The following extracts are from the statement on Welfare Reform on 30 June 2025.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I recently met a support group in my constituency of those who suffer from ME, chronic fatigue syndrome or long covid. Their description of the devastating impact of those variable conditions was very affecting. If one of those people were to have an improvement in their condition, meaning that they were no longer eligible for PIP, and then to re-present for assessment, would they be entitled to return to the PIP level they were on previously, or would they be treated as new applicants under the terms the Secretary of State has described today?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, which is precisely what we want to look at in the PIP review, because it does not take into account fluctuating conditions. That is an important issue moving forward,

and we will be absolutely determined to involve him, his constituents, and organisations that represent those with fluctuating conditions in the process of the review.

[*Official Report*, 30 June 2025; Vol. 770, c. 36.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall):

Liz Kendall: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. **The PIP assessment takes into account fluctuating conditions.** That is an important issue moving forward, and we will be absolutely determined to involve him, his constituents, and organisations that represent those with fluctuating conditions in the process of the review.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I am sure that the Chancellor will be delighted that the flip-flopping of the Prime Minister means she has to find another £2.5 billion in taxation on people in this country. Does the Secretary of State think that it is fair that a two-tier system has been created? Why would anybody on the old rate seek work when they know that if they go into work, it does not work out and they claim again, they will get a reduced rate under her Government?

Liz Kendall: Because PIP is not an in-work benefit.
[*Official Report*, 30 June 2025; Vol. 770, c. 39.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

Liz Kendall: Because **PIP is an in-work or out-of-work benefit.**

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